CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

In the hierarchy of human values, aesthetic values hold a peculiar position. Their appeal is as broad as humanity itself. There is no age in human history, which has not enjoyed and cherished aesthetic values. The role of aesthetic values has been so great that sometimes these values are assigned absolute or intrinsic principles. With a suitable understanding of aesthetics from the reader’s perspective, the focus is on analyzing African American literature with reference to its fiction from the researcher’s perspective could be continued.

Afro-American novelists are the cultural heirs of Western and African narrative traditions. It is obvious that one can more clearly and coherently understand the roots of the Afro-American novel by looking some of its ancient forms and functions of oral narrative in Africa. Although, as literary historian Emmanuel Obiechina states, “the novel…has no strict equivalent in the oral tradition of West Africa”, (Emmanuel, 42) its rise and definition are mainly the result of social factors that mark the change of traditional, agrarian, oral cultures to modern, industrial, literate cultures and in further extent of corporate culture.

Black women have played a pivotal role in the struggle of freedom and equality both in USA and abroad, and in the minds of readers the most striking names are Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, Daisy Bates, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Coretta Scott King, Ruby Doris Robinson, Angela Davis, and others.
Black literature has always been concerned with freedom struggle and Black women almost by definition have always been involved in the generation and sustenance of Black literature and of its culture in general. One could, in fact, make the case that, the founders of Black American literature, in a formal sense, were women - Phillis Wheatley, Lucy Terry, and Harriet E. Wilson. Notwithstanding our knowledge of these things, the contradictions between knowledge and action that surfaced in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements forced sensitive and intelligent women to reexamine their own positions vis-à-vis the men and to conclude that they were the victims not only of racial injustice but of a sexual arrogance indistinguishable to dual colonialism—one from without, the other from within, the Black community.

What has happened in the past few years in a ‘revolution within the Revolution’, one that was initiated by and has been sustained chiefly by Black women. The impact can be felt in virtually all aspects of contemporary life, in the everyday world around them and in the special worlds of art and culture. It is particularly dramatic in literature, to which it has brought dimensions of feeling and analysis that were till then missing. In effect, as Black women have come into new awareness of their powers, as they have struggled to liberate themselves, they have enriched and expanded the international body of Black literature. This trend is announced as early as Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* in 1966 and surfaces dramatically in the 1970s with the emergence of writers like Ntozake Shange, and Gayl Jones, but others who emerged during the 1960s and were now turning inward to a more personal vision anticipate it. Some of these writers, Maya Angelou and Nikki Giovanni for example, had enormous popular appeal. Writers such as June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Mari Evans brought a human face to political writing; Sonia
Sanchez and Jayne Cortez brought subtle dimensions to personal statement; Alexis De Veaux brought a sense of ritual and mystery.

In the depiction and revelation of character, as writers and stylists, and as sustainers, women have made and are making very substantial contributions to the literature. From the first, one could notice the specific femaleness that Gwendolyn Brooks conditions into art in a poem like ‘Malcolm X’, or Sonia Sanchez depicts in her personal poetry, or Alice Walker reveals in *The Colour Purple*, (1982) or Audre Lorde expresses in *The Cancer Journals*. Black women have thus brought into the literature a special knowledge of their lives and experiences that is as different from the descriptions of portrayals of women by men, as the vision of Black writers in the sixties and fifties differed from that of whites writing on Black subjects. They braved the ideological structures of the sixties and freed themselves from the roles assigned to them in the writings of their male counterparts, where, depicted as queens and princesses, or as earth mothers and idealized Big Mommas of superhuman wisdom and strength, they were unrecognizable as individuals.

The process of correcting the portrayal of Black women has involved both the creative writer and the scholar-critic, and often one person serves both functions, as in the case of Trudier Harris and Thadious Davis, or Margaret Walker and Sherley Anne Williams. The creative writers employ all the major modes; including the personal essay, the novel, the short story, drama, and poetry stylistically, they extend the genres and bring fresh vitality to them. These efforts have led to a reexamination of the history and the texts of Black literature, to a rediscovery, for example, of Jesse Fauset, Georgia Douglass Johnson, Nella Larson, and, especially, of Zora Neale Hurston. Trudier Harris on Alice Childress, Sondra O’Neale on Phillis Wheatley and
other early writers; Joanne Braxton, on the slave narratives of women; Barbara Christian, on the novel—all of these efforts have created currents of uproar that are changing our entire way of thinking about and evaluating Black literature and culture.

Black aesthetics and art like their White counterparts must relate to the audience and the artist who created them. Though no one can say for sure that Black aesthetics was derived from the White, both Whites and Blacks have been influenced by it. What is certain is that the new Black writers have modeled their aesthetics somewhat on the White one, but have infused it with their own language, images and expressions.

Black literature in America is the literature of reality and facts and everything written in the name of Black literature refers to the Black community in the States. In addition, Black literature is literature of protest against White racism in American society. According to Richard Wright:

If White racism did not exist, then black literature would not exist, and he predicted the demise of the latter with the cessation of the former. (103)

Though African Americans are deprived, African American authors and artists present an important part of American culture and literature. Their works and contributions to culture in general were being rejected and overviewed for a long time. On account of the former slavery and racial segregation, they were regarded as inferior and so were their thoughts and works. Crucial and determining for making an appropriate attitude to African American English (AAE) should be knowledge of its origin and evolution. Nevertheless, like in most cases, there is no universal explanation of the roots of AAE. One of the theories claims that the beginning of
AAE is dated to the period where first African slaves were brought to America, when they were thrown into a place, people and language they did not know. In the need to understand and to be understood, they simplified and modified the language they heard, which was, of course, English. Another theory believes that the basis of AAE structurally comes out of West African languages and its similarity to English is only superficial. Other theory considers the basic role of African languages in structure and sound system in contemporary AAE, and assumes ‘pidgin’ (A form of speech that usually has a simplified grammar and a limited often mixed vocabulary, and is used principally for intergroup communication), ‘Jamaican Creole’ (Creole is a language resulting from the acquisition by a subordinate group of the dominant group, with phonological changes, simplified grammar and an admixture of the subordinate group’s vocabulary, and serving as the mother tongue of its speakers) and ‘Gullah’ (The language of the Gullahs one of a group of negroes inhabiting the sea islands and coastal districts of Southern Carolina, Georgia, and a small part of Florida) to be basic constituents of AAE.

The present status of AAE is also under investigation; approaches and attitudes vary and so does their justification. Although there are various theories that dispute whether AAE is slang, dialect, or language of its own, the most recent works tend to perceive AAE as a variety of English in which the slang plays an important role. As for as the development of African American Literature is concerned with reference to the main stream of development of fiction the researcher would like to provide an overall view of African American literature, on the background of historical and political events that marked its development.
Since the pseudo-independence of Afro-Americans in the late nineteenth century, missionaries, linguists, anthropologists, and folklorists have been collecting and publishing African stories. Oral narratives, which anthropologist William Bascom calls “verbal art” and Dorson “folklore” (19), are an important means of maintaining the continuity and stability of traditional African cultures. For the anthropologist, myths, legends, folktales, and other forms of verbal art have four principal functions. They transmit knowledge, value, and attitudes from one generation to another, enforce conformity to social norms, validate social institutions and religious rituals, and provide a psychological release from the restrictions of society.

Camara Laye’s *Dark Child* (1955), James Ngugi’s *Weep Not, Child* (1964), Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1959), and Amos Tutola’s *Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1953) are only a few of the modern novels that have their roots in the fertile soil of African folklore. They represent the sophisticated continuation of African storytelling conventions in dialectic tension with the most popular Western form of narrative, the novel.

Scrutinize into the slave past of people of African ancestry in the United States, one can easily perceive that the roots of Afro-American folklore, the unique blend of a significant number of African survivals with elements of white American culture, are embedded in the Old South, especially the Georgia Sea Islands and the Mississippi Delta. And they bloom perennially in the verbal, musical, and ritualistic expressions—the socially symbolic acts—of rural and urban black Americans.

It is not surprising that the early Afro-American novel reflects this great demographic shift from rural to urban America. Such different novels and romances as Frank Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), Pauline Hopkin’s *Contending
Forces (1960), and Dunbar’s Sport of the Gods (1902), in which the basic storylines unfold in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York respectively-draw on the romantic machinery of feudal South as their heroes and heroines search for a place to be somebody and come to grips with the myth of their Afro-American past.

Drawing on Afro-American folklore for inspiration and material, post-bellum black novelists such as Dunbar and Chesnutt were strongly influenced in style by Southern white local colorists like Irwin Russell, Thomas Nelson Page, and Joel Chandler Harris. But the values affirmed by Page’s and Harris’s fictive uncles are not identical to those affirmed by Chesnutt’s, and the white planter’s pastoral vision in Red Rock (1898) lacks the double edged irony of the black house servant’s vision in the Sport of the Gods. Because the difference in consciousness between white American folklore and black American folklore is difference in response to the New World and the evolution of institutionalized racism, it is not, as some historians argue, the same for all hyphenated ethnic Americans. For the total response of Africans to their experience in an alien and hostile environment included the new modes of interaction and communication, especially language, music, and religion, they developed among themselves along with those forged in the crucible of their experience with whites.

Forged, however, in a society based on the pragmatism of American capitalism and the idealism of the American Creed, both Euro-American and Afro-American folklore are marked by contradictions. In so far as both at some level champion the values of the Protestant ethic and are inspired by the American Dream, they are similar. But in so far as one is the lore of the oppressor, the white majority, and the other the lore of the victims of oppression, the black minority, they are antithetical.
Simply stated, traditional white American values emanate from a providential vision of history and of Euro-Americans as a chosen people, a vision that sanctions their individual and collective freedom in the pursuit of property, profit, and happiness. Radical Protestantism, Constitutional democracy, and Industrial capitalism are the white American trinity of values. In contrast, black American values emanate from a cyclical, Judeo-Christian vision of history and of Afro-Americans as a disinherited, colonized people, a vision that sanctions their flexibility of spirit and pursuit of social justice. A tragicomic vision of life, a tough-minded grip on reality, an extraordinary faith the redemptive power of suffering and patience, a highly developed talent for dissimulation, a forceful enthusiasm for life, an ironic sense of humor, and an sharp sense of timing are basic black American values. These values, mainly the product of the resiliency of African cultural survivals and the resistance to class, colour, and gender domination, are the major sources of tension in the themes, characters, and forms of the Afro-American novel.

The themes, plots, and characterization of the early novels in particular are frequently concerned with the myth and rituals of white supremacy and the omnipresent reality of evil perpetrated by whites. In many cases, white and black characters are idealized, but even in these, as well as the more realistic novels, the attitude of the author and narrator is ambivalence, and irony and parody are frequently at work. ‘God made us all,’ says the heroine in Chesnutt’s *House behind the Cedars* (1900), ‘and for some good purpose, though one may not always see it. He made some people white, and strong, and masterful, and - heartless. He made others black and homely, and poor and weak’.
The Afro-American novel has been concerned with illuminating the meaning of the black American experience and the complex double-consciousness, socialized ambivalence, and double vision, which is the special burden, and blessing of Afro-American identity. Contributing to the complexity and diversity of the Afro-American novel is the fact that the first generation of novelist did not rely solely on folklore for creative inspiration and form, but drew heavily on abolitionist literature - in particular slave narratives-the Bible, and popular fiction.

The primary unifying principle in the Afro-American novel is the quest for dignity as a free people of African ancestry and the fulfillment of individual potential by merging a divided, alienated self into a truer and better unified, literate self. This quest, derived from the collective experience of black Americans and usually projected with messianic and apocalyptic overtones, begins with bondage, physical or psychological, and leads to some form of deliverance or vision of a new world: moral or political awakening, flight, rebellion, or social reform. Highly rhetorical elements and historical documentation, idealization of character and representative types contended with each other in the novels of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hence, black novelists sought to achieve the appropriate blend of romance and mimesis for projecting their aesthetic view that true art is moral as well as social. Born in a perversely stubborn social arena where colour, class, and gender struggle are the major determinants of consciousness, they are generally ambivalent in their attitude toward both Euro-American and Afro-American values. Their view of history is usually cyclical, but occasionally shifts between progressive and apocalyptic. The shifting emphasis in the Afro-American tradition from romance to novel corresponds to the ever-changing social reality of blacks in America and to the symbolic and
folkloristic patterns of narrative that each novelist appropriates to structure his or her particular vision of reality.

The period of Harlem Renaissance is supposed to be the golden age of African American literature. This age is limited approximately by the years 1917 to 1935. As Johnson suggests, “...the term of “renaissance” - rebirth, is not as proper as it may seem, for it is in fact the first blossom of fiction (belles-letters) that resulted from various Social changes” (32).

The leaders of the Harlem Renaissance movement were young intellectuals, artists and writers of the new generation that had already the chance to attend courses at universities and gain degrees. Educated and aware of their roots, they desire to prove their qualities and confess the pride of being black. In comparison to the previous generation of writers and artists, there was a significant difference in their works. In contrary to what the old generation considered to be crucial and inevitable in works of black artists, the young generation was trying to stay out of the political issues and engagement. The young wanted to free themselves not only in the content but also in the form of their works. Some of the old generation went on with the young freeing and optimistic spirit, others, like W.E.B. Du Bois for instance, did not hesitate to criticize their works judging them as ‘immoral’.

The situation of Blacks in the South did not differ much from those of slavery times. As Rampersad puts it, legal separation and continuing lynching proved that in the eyes of many whites, black continued to be less than human. In spite of that, the South was the homeland of one of the most important writers of the Harlem Renaissance - Zora Neal Hurston’s *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) reflected the beauty of Southern vernacular and country
traditions. Although produced after the end of the Harlem Renaissance movement, these works are considered to be of the best that resulted from the Harlem Renaissance era. Other work that deals with South is Jean Tommer’s novel *Cane* (1923), which inspired and motivated many young authors by its new style rooted in modernism. Tommer’s novel was not only the new form, but also the atmosphere of its content that expressed author’s experiences from the life in South and in Washington D.C. According to T.S. Eliot:

*Cane* recovered both the beauty and the pain of African American life in the South and as celebration of racial self-discovery; it recuperated an identity that had been undetermined and distorted by racial oppression and economic victimization. (419)

Among other remarkable novelists during the Harlem Renaissance should be certainly mentioned Counte Cullen, Claude McKay and Wallace Thurman - editor, critic, and author of novel *Blacker the Berry*.

The Harlem Renaissance movement was drawing to an end in the mid thirties. The Great Depression which broke out in America in the early thirties hurried the process. When the Harlem Riot was busted out on 1935, people in Harlem were expressing their disagreement with the situation of those days. The writers and artists involved in the Harlem Renaissance were not all aware what the reality was. It is highly probable that most of African Americans who were not engaged in the movement, did not even suspect that the movement existed. The Depression Years with its problems and uncertainty violated the optimism set up by the young black generation of the Harlem Renaissance. Nevertheless, the benefit of the young and enthusiastic generation did not disappear, for the next generation would take on.
From the 1970s, writers and artists continue in tendencies, which were introduced by the previous generation and put up to their African roots. Literature opens to the flood of woman writers, partly probably as a reaction to mostly man-dominated last decade. Roland and Bradbury who claim that thanks to the fight for rights of black people, a larger group of population especially women realized that they were forced to accept their roles in mostly white, but man dominated world; so women decided to muscle in, too, propose other argumentation. One way or another, the most important break is in the reality that women writers picture in their works. For the first time, one could see a ‘monolithic’ black community, in contrary; literature reflects the real life with all the prejudice, hatred, and racism within the black community. Up to these years, it used to be only the white people who caused problems and was the originator of all the evil in black’s life. Reasons for the important change may be various, although one will prevail. In the past, from the beginning of African American presence in America till the success of the Civil Rights Movement, blacks were oppressed so hard and continuously. They needed to hold together very closely in order to gain a little progress in their rights and status. Though to fight against racial prejudice and discrimination has not ended till today, the seventies were already liberate enough to break down the tie.

As the outlook to the diversity of black community reveals relations between its members and as the literature is produced predominantly by female authors, it gets close to observe the role of woman, woman-mother and mother-daughter relationship, for example in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), June Jordan’s *His Own Where* (1970), and Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple* (1982). Another focus of the 1970s and 1980s literature is that on the sexual identity and partiality of African Americans.
It is probably for the first time when the topic is openly inquired in fiction. June Jordan’s *A New Politics of Sexuality* (1991) is one of works that represents this trend. If the sexual identity was being discussed, one can assume that it originated in or soon turned to question of identity in general.

One can assume that the search for the identity is natural for every human being. From the very beginning of their presence in America, the black were immersed into slavery, their basic human rights have been often violated as the African Americans were subject to constant humiliation. The search of identity is pictured in the literary works. One guideline can be contents of literary works, starting from slave narratives in the 19th century, through dreams of the 1920s and the following rage of the 1950s and the 1960s, reaching the inner diversity in the 1970s, and continuing in the New Millennium in fiction, poetry and prose that does not differ significantly from the mainstream literature for it is one of its constituents.

Another distinctive feature of search for identity can be the notion for black people. At first, black people referred to themselves in literary works ‘negroes’, the ‘Negroes’, later ‘Coloured people’, ‘Black people’, till the evolution reached today’s label ‘African American’. Today, ‘Negro’ is a highly offensive term, ‘Black’ is neutral and ‘African American’ is considered to be the only politically correct expression, although some people strongly disagree with the term. As Amir Baraka claimed in an interview:

“African American” is a term for specific nationality and not every black man you will meet will be an “African American”, in comparison with the term “black” which is common for all black people and is therefore right. (Amir Baraka, 3)
All the generations, their movements and streams had one common aim - the effort to picture their view of the world in which they try to find themselves. As with new blood comes, new spirit generations varied in their ideas on the world and relations covered under its lid. The majority of the black who escaped slavery felt hatred and wanted to forget this part of their people’s history generations after sought back though. They realized that the time of slavery must not be forgotten, because of the influence it has on contemporary society. Social changes can be usually observed in long-time period and therefore it is hard to believe that once the slavery and apartheid is over, the identity of black people will be overlooked as if the history has not existed at all. Still, there are black neighborhoods, schools with predominantly white or black pupils and students.

The way the literature changed during 1970s is beneficial mainly for its depicting the real present life of black Americans with all its problems and pathologies that are naturally present in every nation or culture. It can be seen as a declassifying message that black people have the same problems as any other society and want to be therefore taken as any other society. Simply, neither discrimination nor affirmation is desired from their side. Although the colour of their skin is different from that of the white majority, they want to be treated equal. Regrettably, this desired state is still not established in reality, though efforts have been made on both sides. Anyhow, it would be very naïve to hope that after more than three hundred years of slavery or segregation, all men will be treated equal within a flow of one single human generation.

Afro-American literature sets an identity and illuminates the essential structure of its literature from earlier to the present fame and power. Neither minimizes nor
reverence social circumstances and political forces, the research centers on the essential development of this literature out of the prevailing conditions of the blues into successive circumstances of self-veiling, solitude, kinship and intimacy. Each of these situations manifests its ancestor, with intimacy achieving an exemplary orientation of self-expression, courage, and ability in the Afro-American vision. ‘Intimacy’ is used to signalize a state in which the Afro-American protagonist (male or female, pugilist or philosopher, activist or ascetic) is depicted as realistically enjoying a sound and clear orientation toward the self and the world. It denotes a state of mind where one is, in Wordsworth’s paradoxical phrase, ‘free to settle,’ or, in other words, come and stanch in one’s own being as well as sensitive and effective in dealing with social entities and forces. More than this, it suggests at once a thorough involvement with the world and along with that a degree of immunity from and superiority to sociopolitical shibboleths, as a result of what Alice Walker has called ‘a wider recognition of the universe’. Here, then, in no easy ‘intimacy’ of gesture, but a full and unforced communication with the given, the available, and the conceivable in human experience in a particular time and setting.

The researcher has aimed at the greatness of Afro-American literature especially, in focusing in the even in a crude Darwinian sense the sheer fact of survival in an unfastening environment of strong positive capacities: recent evolutionary theory even goes so far to say that positive advances occur in pockets of adversity and afterwards disperse, as indeed black people have done, throughout the works of Alice Walker and her concepts of ‘womanism’. Before discussing on the concepts of ‘womanism’, it is necessary to explore the emergence and the development of ‘Feminism’.
Feminism is the name given to a political movement that gathered momentum in 1960s giving a call for ‘liberation’ of women from certain forms of gender-based discriminations that deprived women of the opportunities for self-promotion and equality with men simply because they were women. But the awareness that women are unjustly discriminated against and their inferior status against men has been deliberately constructed can be traced much earlier. This phenomenon of the twentieth century is a crystallization of all forms of social-political and psychological awareness that patriarchal society with its various structures and organizations essentially hostile to women’s freedom and interested in keeping them subjugated in order to perpetuate the patriarchal power and authority.

Most of the women writers’ modern as well as postmodern fictions have always had to work ‘against the grain’. Aristotle declared that ‘the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities’, (Cathia Jenainati and Judy Groves, 5) and St. Thomas Aquinas believed that woman is an ‘imperfect man’ (ibid. 5) When John Donne wrote ‘Air and Angels’, (ibid. 8) though Donne did not refute, he alluded to Aquinas’s theory that form is masculine and matter feminine: the superior, godlike, male intellect impresses its form upon the malleable, inert, female matter.

Feminist criticism, in all its many and various manifestations, has also attempted to free itself from naturalized patriarchal notions of the literary and the literary-critical. In this respect, feminism and feminist criticism may be better termed a cultural politics than a ‘theory’ or ‘theories’. Indeed, some feminists have not wished to embrace theory at all, precisely because, in academic institutions, ‘theory’ is often male, even macho - the hard, abstract, avant-gardism of intellectual work; and as part of their general project, feminists have been at pains to expose the fraudulent
objectivity of male ‘science’, such as Freud’s theory of female sexual development. However, much recent feminist criticism - in the desire to escape the ‘fixities and definite’ of theory and to develop a female discourse which cannot be tied down as belonging to a recognized (and therefore probably male produced) conceptual position - has found theoretical sustenance in poststructuralist and postmodernist thinking, not least because these seem to refuse the (masculine) notion of authority or truth.

In her *Feminist Literary Criticism*, Mary Eagleton draws attention to “a suspicion of theory . . . throughout feminism” (146) because of its tendency to reinforce the hierarchical binary opposition between an ‘impersonal’, ‘disinterested’, ‘objective’, ‘public’, ‘male’ theory, and a ‘personal’, ‘subjective’, ‘private’, ‘female’ experience. She notes that there is a powerful element within contemporary feminist Criticism which celebrates the ‘personal’ - ‘personal is political’ has been a key feminist slogan, since it was coined in 1970 by Carol Hanisch, the ‘experiential’, the Mother, the Body, jouissance.

Over the past twenty-five years or so, feminist critical theory has meant, par excellence, contradiction, interchange, debatable; indeed, it is based on a series of creative oppositions, of critiques and counter-critiques, and is constantly and innovatively in flux - challenging, subverting and expanding not only other (male) theories but also its own positions and agenda. Hence, there is no one ‘grand narrative’ but many ‘petits récits’, grounded in specific cultural political needs and arenas - for example, of class, gender and race - and often in some degree of argument with each other. This represents at once the creatively ‘open’ dynamic of modern feminist critical theories and something of a difficulty in offering a brief synoptic account of such a diverse, viviparous and self-problematizing field over what is, by
now, a considerable period. What the first chapter attempts, then - while sharply conscious of the charge of ethnocentricity - is an overview of predominantly White, European and American feminist theories from the pre-1960s seem to be the ‘first-wave’ critics through to the substantive achievements of the ‘second-wave’ theorists of the 1960s onwards.

Virginia Woolf’s fame conventionally rests on her own creative writing as a woman, and later feminist critics have analysed her novels extensively from very different perspectives. According to Mary Eagleton, Woolf is “founding mother of the contemporary debate” (49). She produced two key texts which are major contributions to feminist theory: *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938). ‘First-wave’ feminist, Woolf is principally concerned with women’s material disadvantages compared to men - her first text focusing on the history and social context of women’s literary production, and the second on the relations between male power and the professions. Although she herself abjures the label ‘feminist’ in *Three Guineas*, Woolf nevertheless promotes a wide-ranging schedule of feminist projects in both books, from a demand for mothers’ allowances and divorce-law reform to proposals for a women’s college and a women’s newspaper. In *A Room of One’s Own*, she also argues that women’s writing should explore female experience in its own right and not form a comparative assessment of women’s experience in relation to men’s. The research therefore forms an early statement and exploration of the possibility of a distinctive tradition of women’s writing / feminism.

Woolf’s general contribution to feminism, then, is her recognition that gender identity is socially constructed and can be challenged and transformed, but apropos of feminist criticism, she also continually examined the problems facing women writers.
She believed that women had always faced social and economic obstacles to their literary ambitions, and was she conscious of the restricted education she had received. Rejecting a ‘feminist’ consciousness, and wanting her femininity to be unconscious so that she might ‘escape from the confrontation with femaleness or maleness’ (A Room of One’s Own), she appropriated the Bloomsbury sexual ethic of ‘androgyny’ and hoped to achieve a balance between a ‘male’ self-realization and ‘female’ self annihilation.

One of Woolf’s most interesting essays about women writers is ‘Professions for Women’, in which she regards her own career as delayed in two ways. First, she was imprisoned and constrained by the dominant ideologies of womanhood. Second, the taboo about expressing female passion prevented her from ‘telling the truth about [her] own experiences as a body’. This denial of female sexuality was never consciously subverted in Woolf’s own work or life, in that she thought women wrote differently not because they were different psychologically from men but because their social positioning was different. Her attempts to write about the experiences of women, therefore, were aimed at discovering linguistic ways of describing the confined life of women, and she believed that when women finally achieved social and economic equality with men, there would be nothing to prevent them from freely developing their artistic talents.

Simone de Beauvoir - French feminist, lifelong partner of Jean-Paul Sartre, pro-abortio and women’s-rights activist, founder of the newspaper Nouvelles féministes and of the journal of feminist theory, Questions feminists - marks the moment when ‘first-wave’ feminism begins to slip over into the ‘second wave’. While her hugely influential book The Second Sex (1949) is clearly preoccupied with the
‘materialism’ of the first wave, it beckons to the second wave in its recognition of the vast difference between the interests of the two sexes and in its assault on men’s biological and psychological, as well as economic, discrimination against women.

The book established with great clarity the fundamental questions of modern feminism. When a woman tries to define herself, she starts by saying ‘I am a woman’: no man would do so. This fact reveals the basic irregularity between the terms ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’: man defines the human, not woman, in an imbalance, which goes back to the Old Testament. Being dispersed among men, women do not have no separate history, no natural solidarity; nor have they combined as other oppressed groups have. Woman is fascinated into a lop-sided relationship with man: he is the ‘One’, she the ‘Other’. Man’s dominance has secured an ideological climate of fulfillment: ‘legislators, priests, philosophers, writers and scientists have striven to show that the subordinate position of woman is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth’, and, à la Virginia Woolf, the assumption of woman as ‘Other’ is further internalized by women themselves.

De Beauvoir’s work carefully distinguishes between sex and gender, and sees an interaction between social and natural functions: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman . . . it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature . . . Only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as an Other” (289). It is the systems of interpretation in relation to biology, psychology, reproduction, economics, etc. which constitute the (male) presence of that ‘someone else’. Making the crucial distinction between ‘being female’ and being constructed as ‘a woman’, De Beauvoir can posit the destruction of patriarchy if women will only break out of their objectification. In common with other ‘first-wave’ feminists, she wants freedom
from biological difference, and she shares with them a distrust of ‘femininity’ - thus marking her off from some contemporary feminists’ celebration of the body and recognition of the importance of the unconscious.

In 1960, in the United States the women’s movement, which caused for second-wave feminism represents a renewed attempt to establish social and legal equality of women. Although second-wave feminism continues to share the first wave’s fight for women’s rights in all areas, its focal emphasis shifts to the politics of reproduction, to women’s ‘experience’, to sexual ‘difference’ and to ‘sexuality’, as at once a form of oppression and something to celebrate.

The second-wave feminism focuses on five focuses are involved in most discussions of sexual difference: biology; experience; discourse; the unconscious; and social and economic conditions. Mainly men to keep women ‘in their place’ have used arguments, which treat biology as fundamental and which play down socialization. The old Latin saying ‘Tota mulier in utero’ (‘Women are nothing but a womb’) established this attitude early. If a woman’s body is her destiny, then all attempts to question attributed sex-roles will fly in the face of the natural order. On the other hand, some radical feminists celebrate women’s biological attributes as sources of superiority rather than inferiority, while others appeal to the special experience of woman as the source of positive Female values in life and in art. Since only women, the argument goes, have undergone those specifically female life-experiences (ovulation, menstruation, parturition), only they can speak of a woman’s life. Further, a woman’s experience includes a different perceptual and emotional life; women do not see things in the same ways as men, and have different ideas and feelings about what is important or not important. An influential example of this
approach is the work of Elaine Showalter that focuses on the literary representation of sexual differences in women’s writing.

The third focus, discourse, has received a great deal of attention by feminists. Dale Spender’s *Man Made Language* (1980), as the title suggests, considers that a male dominated language has fundamentally oppressed women. If one accepts, Michel Foucault’s argument that what is ‘true’ depends on who controls discourse, then it is apparent that men’s domination of discourse has trapped women inside a male ‘truth’. From this point of view, it makes sense for women writers to contest men’s control of language rather than create a separate, specifically ‘feminine’ discourse. The opposite view is taken by the female socio-linguist Robin Lakoff, who believes that women’s language actually is inferior, since it contains patterns of ‘weakness’ and ‘uncertainty’, focuses on the ‘trivial’, the frivolous, the unserious, and stresses personal emotional responses. Male utterance, she argues, is ‘stronger’ and should be adopted by women if they wish to achieve social equality with men. Most feminists, however, consider that women have been brainwashed by this type of patriarchal ideology, which produces stereotypes of strong men and weak women.

The psychoanalytic theories of Lacan and Kristeva have provided a fourth focus - that of the unconscious. Some feminists have broken completely with biologism by associating the ‘female’ with those processes, which tend to undermine the authority of ‘male’ discourse. Whatever encourages or initiates a free play of meanings and prevents ‘closure’ is regarded as ‘female’. Female sexuality is revolutionary, rebellious, varied and ‘open’ in that it refuses to define female sexuality: if there is a female principle, it is simply to remain outside the male definition of the female.
Marxist feminists in particular have related changing social and economic conditions to the changing balance of power between the sexes, thus underwriting feminism’s rejection of the notion of a universal femininity. Certain themes, then, dominate second-wave feminism: the omnipresence of patriarchy; the inadequacy for women of existing political organization; and the celebration of women’s difference as central to the cultural politics of liberation. And these can be found running through many major second-wave writings, from popular interventions like Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970), which explores the destructive neutralization of women within patriarchy, through the critical reassessments of socialism of Sheila Rowbotham and psychoanalysis Juliet Mitchell, to the radical (lesbian) feminism of Kate Millett and Adrienne Rich.

In feminist literary theory more particularly, it leads to the emergence of so-called ‘Anglo-American’ criticism, an empirical approach fronted by the ‘gynocriticism’ of Elaine Showalter, which concentrates on the specificity of women’s writing, on getting better a tradition of women authors, and on examining in detail women’s own culture. In dispute with this, however, is the slightly later and more theoretically driven ‘French’ feminist criticism, which draws especially on the work of Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, and emphasizes not the gender of the writer (‘female’) but the ‘writing-effect’ of the text (‘feminine’) - hence, l’écriture féminine. It is worth noting here that this distinction between ‘Anglo-American’ and ‘French’ feminist criticisms are a significant fault-line in second-wave developments, and distinguish two dominant and influential movements in critical theory since the end of the 1960s.
Second-wave feminism in the United States took its drive from the civil-rights, peace and other protest movements. Millett’s *Sexual Politics* at once marks the moment when second-wave feminism becomes a highly visible, self-aware and activist movement, and when it itself became the cause-célèbre text of that moment.

Millett’s title, *Sexual Politics*, announces her view of ‘patriarchy’, which she sees as pervasive and which demands ‘a systematic overview - as a political institution’. Patriarchy subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as an inferior male, and this power is exerted, directly or indirectly, in civil and domestic life to constrain women. Millett borrows from social science the important distinction between ‘sexes’ and ‘gender’, where sex is determined biologically but ‘gender’ is a psychological concept which refers to culturally acquired sexual identity. She and other feminists have attacked social scientists that treat the culturally learned ‘female’ characteristics (passivity, etc.) as ‘natural’. She recognizes that women as much as men are responsible for these attitudes and the acting-out of these sex-roles in the unequal and oppressive relations of domination and subordination are what Millett calls ‘sexual politics’.

Socialist / Marxist feminism was a powerful strand of the second wave during the late 1960s and 1970s, in Britain in particular. It sought to extend Marxism’s analysis of class into a women’s history of their material and economic oppression, and especially of how the family and women’s domestic labour are constructed by and reproduce the sexual division of labour. Like other ‘male’ forms of history, Marxism had ignored much of women’s experience and activity. The Marxist feminism’s primary task was to open up the complex relations between gender and the economy. Juliet Mitchell’s early essay, ‘*Women: The Longest Revolution*’ (1966),
was a pioneering attempt, contra the historical work of radical feminists like Millett and Firestone, to historicize the structural control patriarchy exerts in relation to women’s reproductive functions; and Sheila Rowbotham, in *Women’s Consciousness, Man’s World* (1973), recognized both that working-class women experience the double oppression of the sexual division of labour at work and in the home, and that Marxist historiography had largely ignored the domain of personal experience, and particularly that of female culture. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosen felt argue in their introduction to *Feminist Criticism and Social Change* (1985), for a materialist feminist criticism which escapes the ‘tragic’ essentialism of those feminist critics who project an image of women as universally powerless and universally good.

A large majority of second wave feminists were young women and girls who were part of the massive baby boom generation (1946-1964) born during the period of economic prosperity that followed the Second World War. Many were the first in their families to receive university educations and were highly influenced and/or involved in civil rights struggles and radical youth cultural movements. Others were disenchanted with social conventions following the war that had forced women back into traditional roles, especially those that idealized women as full-time wives and mothers. At the same time, there were limited opportunities for employment outside of the home, for those in the usual feminized low-waged arenas.

Consequently, many women’s dissatisfaction with their societal and economic positions, as well as with a host of sexually discriminatory attitudes and policies provoked what many refer to as a new feminist wave of awareness and protest. Moreover, unlike the first wave, the politics of the family, reproduction, and sexual liberation of women became central concerns of second wave feminism. In fact, the
controversial ‘sex wars’ which addressed ‘political and cultural battles over sexuality’ in the 1980’s also characterized some of the key feminist debates (Duggan, 1).

Initially the term ‘third wave feminism’ characterized a feminism mediated by the terrains of race and multicultural alliances, rather than age. Often it ‘talked back to’ and challenged dominant and exclusionary forms of white feminism, while incorporating dimensions of ‘consciousness raising’ in powerful narrative and autobiographical style. This ‘coming to voice,’ many explained was a unique mode of ‘everyday theorizing’, which made apparent the importance of a central feminist idea that ‘the personal is political’.

It is this kind of rebellious feminism, which exploded in the 1980s, and examined not only the intersections between race, class, culture, sexuality, but also the celebration - and coalition politics - of difference. Within this context, the relevance of what has been called the ‘politics of hybridity’ was of central concern. Indeed, the ‘new hybridity’ is a term used to express the ‘multiple identities’ of many contemporary girls and women, especially in the United States. This concept has been central to describing a new generation of critical insurgent feminists - primarily women of colour - with multiple ethnicities, cultural and class experiences whom, in the early 1990s, began to describe their work as third wave. Many of these younger feminists had grown up during or after the 60s and 70s era of social movements and consequently had the advantages of either formal or informal feminist education. Translating from the theories and writings of their insurgent feminist predecessors, their own particular personal, socio-political and economic contexts are taken into account and mediate their feminist perspectives.
For example, contemporary issues related to immigration, class conflicts, multiculturalism, globalization and coalition politics as well as environmental matters, social activists for national and global human rights underlie much of their feminist theory and practice. Further, more radical notions of gender and sexuality have become a significant dimension of this kind of resistant feminism. The incorporation and advancement of ‘queer theory’ (which argues that sexual identities are not fixed, and questions the social construction of heterosexuality as the norm) has also become an important part of much of these kinds of critical feminist thought. As Alice Echols describes it: “Queer theory calls into question the conditions by which binary oppositions (male / female, heterosexual / homosexual) are produced” (132).

However, many conservative women, who were deliberately antifeminist, as well as a number of self-serving women who attained celebrity status, adopted the term ‘third wave feminist,’ (which was often used interchangeably with ‘post feminist’) to promote their own political interests. This popularized so-called third wave or post feminism often one-dimensionalized and demonized other feminism, and feminists associated with the second wave.

Susan Faludi has identified those who have been popularly misclassified as third wave feminists as media-made ‘pseudo-feminists’ or ‘pod feminists’ planted by the right. The ‘pod’ metaphor is one, which Faludi cleverly borrowed and translated from the classic 1956 science fiction film Invasion of the Body Snatchers that is a frightening and prophetic parable about the residents of a small town who are being mysteriously replaced by identical replicas of themselves, hatched by plant-like alien pods. As she describes her interpretation:
What is being celebrated is no natural birth of a movement – and the press that originated the celebration is no benign midwife. It would be more accurate to describe this drama as a media-assisted invasion of the body of the women’s movement: the Invasion of the Feminist Snatchers, intent on repopulating the ranks with Pod Feminists (Faludi, 32).

Indeed, the invasion of these ‘pod feminists’ is part of an alarmingly increasing movement of transparently self-serving women, who are inventing a generic ‘straw-dog’ type of feminism (composed of euphemistically ‘dog/matic’ women, I might add) which they, criticize, under a so-called feminist guise. Although their attacks center on a diversity of feminist dimensions (ranging from issues of date rape to university women’s studies programs) their shared deep-structural discourse is based on a one-dimensional, reductionist, binary, simplistic, mode of thought which reduces complex relations to either-or imaginary dilemmas which are treated as oppositions and/or opponents.

The false stereotype of feminists as anti-male, humourless, unattractive and out of touch with young women’s needs and values was actively promoted. An imaginary picture of an ultra leftist, evil feminist cult, which brainwashed young women through women’s studies programs, was invented and aggressively promulgated. Feminists involved in violence against women movements were especially attacked and accused of exaggerating these realities and promoting what was called ‘victim feminism’. Popularized media marketed feminism became a euphemism for what many feminists describe as ‘life style’ or ‘sex and shopping’ fake feminism which advocates ultra capitalist and consumerist values, self-centered materialism, and western ideals.
In fact, some of what is currently called ‘third wave feminism’ is indistinguishable from the popularized media marketed, a theoretical post feminism which Michelle Goldberg describes as “shopping-and-fucking feminism” (201). As she explains it; ‘This new shopping-and fucking feminism is so ubiquitous right now in part because it jibes precisely with the message of consumer society, that freedom means more-hotter sex, better food, ever-multiplying pairs of Manolo Blahniks shoes, drawers full of Betsey Johnson skirts, Kate Spade bags and MAC lipsticks’.

Meanwhile, conservative women’s groups and right-wing movements effected unfavorable shifts in government polices directed at assisting shabby women and children, reproductive freedom and abortion rights as well as social welfare programs which continue to escalate well into the new millennium. Even within the bastions of power, women continue to be dramatically underrepresented and underpaid, and the domination of white men continues, although the myth about western women’s empowerment persists (Dicker and Piepmeir, 6).

Although the notion of feminist waves is useful it is also controversial and the idea of a feminist third wave is especially complex and problematic. However, what an exploration of the so-called third wave reveals is that girls and young women are active in feminist theory and practice, and that feminisms - which is a plurality of visions, ideas and lives experiences - is especially relevant to, and alive within, contemporary youth.

Black feminism is a political and social movement whose aim the liberation of Black Women by ending the interlocking system of racism, sexism and classism. The fight for gender equality connects all feminists. Yet, in contrast to the feminists who fought against sexism, black women had to fight against both sexism and racism.
What makes Black feminist peculiar is the ‘act of resistance against patriarchy, fight for racial and class equality, as Black womanhood is not circumscribed solely by issues of gender’ (Gilyard and Wardi, 1141). Therefore, Black feminists speak about the ‘intersectional position of black women’ - being both black and female.

African American women were a visible presence in the second wave of American women’s movement. Many contemporary feminists build their theories on the ideas of their ancestors who raised their voice to speak of race and gender before 1960s - such as Sojourner Truth, Frances E.W. Harper, and Ida B. Wells.

As Showalter points out, for both Afro-Americans and feminists, the black woman is ‘the Other Woman, the silenced partner’ (Showalter, 214). This is not only true in general, but also more specifically for literary theory. Throughout the years, black women have protested against ‘the sexism of black literary history’ as well as against ‘the racism of feminist literary history’ (ibid. 214), finding themselves and their works irrevocably ‘excluded from both modes of inquiry’ (Smith, 315) and consequently situated in some kind of no man’s land. Yet, instead of remaining silent in this no man’s land, black women have claimed their own place, stating that they should be considered more than some sort of common denominator of Afro-Americanism and feminism. Instead, being both black and female, these women are ‘doubly marginalized’ (Ward and Herndl, 741), which makes their experience unique. As Smith argues, ‘the meaning of blackness in this country shapes profoundly the experience of gender, just as the conditions of womanhood affect ineluctably the experience of race’ (Smith, 317) or, formulated differently: ‘black women experience a unique form of oppression in discursive and no discursive practices alike because they are victims at once of sexism, racism and by extension classism’ (ibid. 317).
According to hooks, this puts black women in a privileged position to tackle questions of oppression of any sort. It is essential that black women recognize the special vantage point (their) marginality gives (them) and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony (Hooks, Evans, 128).

The modern Black feminism grew out of a sense of felling of discontent with both the Civil Rights Movement and Feminist Movement of the 1970s. The Civil Rights Movement marginalized women as it focused predominantly on the oppression of black men. Frances Beal explains, “the black male has exerted a more prominent leadership role in our struggle for justice in this country” (34). Many black women had to face sexism within Civil Rights groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Black feminists were sometimes considered by black men ‘as race traitors for speaking on behalf of gender parity’ (Gilyard and Wardi, 1143). In addition, women of colour and working-class women were neglected by feminists and their agendas since feminism was pre-occupied with the issues of gender and focused primarily on the problems faced by white middle-class women. For example, Bell Hooks points out that the feminist credo-'work liberates women’ - did not apply to African American women since most of them already worked to make ends meet (Hooks, 96). Another point of departure between Black feminists and feminists culminated around the issue of welfare since for the Black feminists “it was not just a matter of eliminating sex discrimination in white-collar employment but one of eliminating poverty” (Taylor, 248). Consequently, Black feminism developed into a parallel but separate movement.
Many Black feminists have preferred to call themselves ‘womanists’ because the term ‘feminism’ had implicit association with white feminism. Womanism is one of the theories which evolved out of Black feminism. Alice Walker, who has coined the term ‘womanism’ to mean specifically African American feminism - the unique experiences of African-American women, historically and presently, defines it. By definition, “Womanist theory is committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, female and male, as well as to a valorization of women’s works in all their varieties and multitudes” (Williams, 70).

Walker explains the usage of this term in *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, Womanist prose as:

A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually.

Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance 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.


In the first entry, Walker defines ‘womanist’ in reference to the origin and the original use and meaning of the term. This noun is derived from the black folk adjective ‘womanish’, which is primarily used in the black folk expression “You acting womanish”. Mothers say to their daughters and which means the same as another folk expression: “You trying to be grown”. As Collins argues, “by (t)aking
the term from the Southern black folk expression of mothers to female children …, Walker suggests that black women’s concrete history fosters a womanist worldview accessible primarily and perhaps exclusively to black women” (10).

The two folk expressions imply three internally connected meanings: First one indicates “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behaviour” (Walker, xi). These four adjectives all refer to doing/saying something that is not self-evident or easy, yet doing/saying it with strong determination and a lot of motivation. As Saunders argues, “(t)he emphasis is on ‘wilfull’ because for so long, so many black women have not been considered to be in possession of their own free wills, and no small part of the problem has resided in the psyche of black men” (10). Secondly, both expressions refer to an attitude that is characterized by “(w)anting to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for one” (Ibid. xi). This again implies the non-self-evident side of Womanism. Thirdly, the expressions indicate a mature, grown attitude. As Walker says in the beginning of the entry, ‘womanish’ is the opposite of ‘girlish’, which means ‘frivolous, irresponsible, not serious’. In opposition, ‘womanish’ (as do the expressions) means not only acting, but also being grown up. It is associated with being responsible, in charge and serious. This emphasis on the mature side of womanists may indicate that the zeal for the black woman’s case does not derive from a childish passion or a naïve whim. Instead, it is rooted in a feeling of responsibility, of being in charge of the fate of black women.

In the second entry, Walker defines ‘womanist’ by referring to the different types of relationships that can occur among women. Most importantly, womanists love other women, especially for those things that make them female, like their specific female culture, their emotional life, their strength. Besides just loving these
female characteristics, Walker adds that womanists should even prefer them (implying to those of a man). It seems that Walker not only means that women should love other women, but that, more importantly, they should also adore what is specifically female about them.

Although Walker refers to lesbian relationships in the first sentence of this entry already, she clearly does not despise of heterosexual relationships. Probably this feature constitutes the most striking difference between ‘Womanism and white feminism’. Although Walker overtly pleads with her audience to love themselves solely because of the fact that they are female, she is not all hostile towards men. In fact, ‘lov(ing) individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually’ (op.cit., xi) is even considered a characteristic of a womanist in her list. According to Collins, “womanism seemingly supplies a way for black women to address gender oppression without attacking black men” (11). Walker explicitly expresses this non-separatist attitude three times in the entry. First, according to her, a womanist is “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (op.cit., xi). With this statement, Walker makes clear that black feminism is not opposing race liberation, but will, instead, bring it closer. Secondly, she states literally that womanists are not separatists. The third way in which she gives vent to her non-separatist attitude is by saying that womanists are “(t)raditionally universalist” (Walker, xi). She illustrates this by means of the metaphor of the garden in which “the women and men of different colors coexist like flowers in a garden yet retain their cultural distinctiveness and integrity” (Collins, 11). In other words, Walker indicates that a tolerant attitude is not only needed among sexes, but also among races. In that way, she offers a philosophy here that is useful not only for black women, but for the whole of
humankind. As Davis says, Walker’s definition illustrates that “individuals are not separate from the survival of the earth, but instead act as extensions of the universe itself” (33).

Walker further refers to one specific relationship between women: the relationship between a mother and her child. The fact that her two examples in this entry involve a mother-child (presumably a daughter) situation suggests that she considers motherhood essential in the experience of being a woman. As Razak claims, Walker focuses on the “sharing and mentorship that are a traditional part of idealized Black mother-daughter relationship” (99).

Lastly, Walker uses a mild form of humour in this entry, for example when Walker says that womanists are sometimes separatist ‘for health’, or in the last dialogue between mother and child. Probably this is to create a positive atmosphere.

In the third entry, Walker defines ‘womanist’ associatively. In an enumeration, which lists things a womanist loves, she mainly considers the irrational side women are traditionally said to have (cf. the moon as a symbol of femininity). In her list, Walker includes music and dance, love, food and roundness as symbols for the worldly, bodily pleasures in life as well as the moon and the Spirit as symbols for the spiritual dimension of our being. Furthermore, she says womanists love struggle, which probably means that they do not give up to easily in their striving.

The fourth and last entry consists solely of the phrase “womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender” (Walker, ii) which has become famous by now. With this statement, Walker indicates that both has things in common, but in the end is undeniably different. By ending, she moreover closes the circle her definition is, as
she began with a similar observation in the first entry, namely that a womanist is a black feminist.

In her definition of Womanism, Walker indicates several different things that are not easily summed up. Most importantly, she sketches black women as beautiful and strong beings without denouncing men or white people in the process. As Davis puts it:

Through her four-part definition, (Walker) draws her reader’s attention to the importance of women’s intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual wholeness, and she stresses the need to create a global community where all members of society are encouraged to survive and survive whole. (33)

Therefore, it seems that it is this ‘universalist’ position that gives Walker more strength as a feminist. Talking about women ‘as such’, without vehemently criticizing others (men, white people.….) for whatever reason, she easily and very effectively proves what all feminists aim to prove, namely that women are worthwhile because they are women.

Aldridge discusses, for Walker, a ‘womanist’ is one who is “committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people” (192). The theory of Womanism is committed to the survival and wholeness of all people, including men as well. Rather than supporting separatism, Womanism promotes universalism. Womanism, like Black Feminism, provides a space for Black women and women of color to create dialogue in a non-threatening environment. Though Walker introduces the term ‘womanism’, it is not a new idea by any means; in fact there is evidence of its origins in the sacred texts of ancient Africa, especially the Husia of Egypt and the Odu Ifa of
ancient Yoruba land. Concepts from the Husia, such as the Divine inclusiveness of male and female principles, woman and man as the image of God and the concept of human customarily written with male and female characters in hieroglyphs, indicate the belief that woman and man were equal by nature and divinely and must operate as so.

Alice Malsenior Walker was born on Feb. 9, 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia to Willie Lee and Minnie Tallulah Grant Walker, a family of poor sharecroppers but wealthy of spirit and love. Her grandfather, Henry Clay Walker, as Walker herself puts it was “a man who charmed, even mesmerized me, when I was a child” (xiv). As the eighth child, she had experienced the stings of poverty in, her early life. Alice Walker’s experience of early life initiated her in to the knowledge of discrimination against women being practiced in her community. She often resented in her novel, The Colour Purple, how in her own family community the boys went ‘unfettered’ and the girls were tied to ‘domestic duty’. As a contributor, Walker has produced an acclaimed and varied body of work including poetry, novels, short stories, essays, criticism. Her works are praised for their insightful and enthralling portrait of black life in particular the experience of black women in a sexist and racist society. According to Barbara Christian, Walker is concerned with ‘heritage’, which to Walker is not so much the grand sweep of history or artifacts created, as it is the relations of people to each other: young to old, parent child, man to woman. Walker admires the struggle of black women throughout the history to maintain an essential spirituality and creativity in their lives and the achievements serve as an inspiration to others. Alice Walker says, ‘We must fearlessly pull out selves and look at and identify with our selves the living creativity some of our great grand mothers were not allowed to know’ (63). Her works deal not only with the problems of being black woman, but also with the possibility of change and progression.

The familiar themes of Alice Walker’s novels are compassion for the oppressed, the grief of the oppressors, and the acceptance of the unchangeable and hope for everyone and everything. In the words of Gloria Steinman, “Walker comes at universality through the path of American black women’s experience. She speaks it more powerfully for being able to pursue it across the boundaries of race and class” (318).

Walker describes herself as womanist, her term for a Black Feminist which she defines in her book of essays *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden* womanist prose as ‘one who appreciates the wholeness of entire people male and female’. Thus, it is clear from the themes of her works that she also focuses on the theme of the power of woman as she also conveys the same in her poetry *On Striping Bark Form Myself*

I find my own
Small person
A standing self
Against the world
An equality of wills
I finally understand
In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker portrays the stings of poverty, and the impact of racism. The novel is about the man and woman relationship portrayed against Grange Copeland, the protagonist. All the women characters in this novel suffer one way or the other. The married life of Grange and Margaret, Brownfield and Mem, is absence of healthy man woman relationship tends to be a scene of mutual clashes and family brawls, the racist society with white masters at the helm of affairs, exploits the blacks, which fills the latter with anger and frustration who in turn direct their bitterness on their women folk.

Walker’s second novel *Meridian* is about the story of black women, which represents a shift from a preoccupation with commemorating black women’s suffering to a concern with probing an individual black woman’s situation for its roots and possibilities. Meridian the protagonist, as a girl child due to naivety about sex became a victim of repeated rape at the hands of Dexter, the owner of the funeral home. Her early exposure to physical abuse develops in her a hatred for her body and alienates her from the pleasures and contentment of motherhood. She takes a leap and - brings herself to fight for the sexual, legal and political rights of black women. She becomes flag bearer in black woman’s onward journey to all round development and growth.

In *The Colour Purple*, womanism permeates through the novel. Though initially it unfolds a saga of dispossession and oppression of women like Celie and her mother at the hands of men like Alphonso and ‘Mr_ ad to some extent Harpo who slips into his father’s shoes and becomes a legitimate heir to patriarchal hierarchy and like his father starts believing in subjugating women but Walker through female bonding, sexual and emotional, between Celie and Shug and emotional boding in the hour of crisis between Mary Agnes and Sofia and later on amongst Shug, Celie, Mary
Agnes and Sofia shows how the pattern of women companionship helps women in overcoming hardships and recover themselves. As an essential part of her womanist strategy, Walker puts this womanist tendency in the context of sexism and racism where it serves as a defense against the various types of oppressions women are exposed to. The women bonding against suppression and oppression in the male dominated society also helps them rise above their narrow interests and work for their common cause. The magic fully works, the women, like Celie, united in thick and thin successfully counter all male aggression on their body, mind and succeed in retrieving their voice, identity and their self.

This was followed by *The Temple of My Familiar*, which is mesmerizing tapestry of human experience and emotion. The novel explores what happens - to an entire ‘family’ - when a daughter cannot forgive her father for a single, hypocritical, soul-crushing act. It explores the dangerous bonds of fidelity between sisters, lovers, memories… The novel challenges hegemonic history and memory in the very structure of the narrative as it confronts the importance of memory to personal and cultural identity. Miss Lissie, allow Walker to clarify the importance of the past to the reconstruction of repressed cultural identity. The past provides powerful and important connections that are essential to the historical and spiritual revision that Temple undertakes. Walker is consistent throughout the novel in her assertion that spiritual health is possible for all of those who listen to ancestral voices. She contends that the Western, industrial world has closed peoples’ ears to those ancestral voices, and it is the artist who must take his/her responsibility to carry on the messages that keep African American culture well and alive.
In *By the Light of My Father’s Smile*, Alice Walker depicts the oppressive patriarchal abuse of religion and biblical hermeneutics as a force inhibiting female, and male, body and spiritual development. Women suffer marginalization within patriarchal structures, deprived of opportunities to express their female individuality. Men, often unconsciously, are led to complex self-destruction as they involve themselves, as authoritarian figures, in hypocritical and unnatural performances. In the novel, the author references Western Christianity as the most conspicuous expression of religious oppressive patriarchy. At the same time, Alice Walker juxtaposes the manifestations of religious oppressive patriarchy with female cultural and spiritual sojourns towards womanist love. The womanist love as an alternative to oppressive patriarchal religiosity. In presenting the intricacy of the differences between these two standpoints, the author juxtaposes the fictional milieu of the Mundo and the reality of Western World. It also considers non-Christian belief systems as inferior, savage, and immoral. This religiously grounded conviction of superiority facilitates Western colonialism that not only involves missionary efforts to convert so-called heathens, but also entails usurpation and exploitation of the foreign peoples and lands.

The novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is a powerful condemnation of the practices of female circumcision. This is a ‘womanist’ novel as it lays bare the terrible customs like genital mutilation a trademark of ‘Olinkan’ glory. To keep woman submissive throughout their life, the black community has been practicing the custom of circumcision of female organ at tender aged girls of four or five and catching them ‘unaware’, causing unimaginable physical pain and suffering. The custom prevalent among Africans is probably as old as Africa and Walker shows how it continues to persist even in this age of reason and democracy. The novel graphically brings out its
painful and gagging effect on girls like Tashi, the protagonist of the novel, who with her bodily circumcision ends up in psychological, spiritual circumcision of lifetime.

As a prolific writer Alice Walker has dealt with the problems of Black Women in her novels the family relationship as well as black women’s relationship in society in her novels are very much affected by problems such as Racism, Sexism, Gender bias Inequality, Activism, Lesbianism etc., which caused for in compatibility in marriage, mal adjustment, been of understanding and suffocating loveless marriages causing psyche tensions and their eccentricities. Though she has received much critical attention and numerous articles and critical commentaries have been published in journals on her novels either individually analysed or comparing other novels of Alice Walker, no serious attempt has so far been made in studying all of her novels on applying her own theory of ‘womanism’ in the feministic perception with reference to her major recurrent themes, development of plot, her style and narrative techniques. This dissertation tries to fill this gap by discussing all the novels of Alice Walker, focusing on various themes - slavery of Black Women, sexual exploitation, stings of poverty, racism and physical pain and emotional trauma of Black characters in her novels. It is also a systematic interpretation and evaluation in comparing the themes and problems of her novels. Hence an attempt has been made in this dissertation to discuss all the novels of Alice Walker.

A judicious combination of the sociological, the formal and the psychological approach becomes necessary in the study of the Alice Walker and every effort can be made to bring to bear on this study all these approaches in a greater or smaller measure. In addition to this, references have also been made to the styles and narrative techniques of the writer. However, the prime focus of this study has been on the themes, motifs, characterization, and womanism in feministic concerns.