Chapter 5

Conclusion

Most American historians paid little attention to the role played by African and Native Americans in making the New World. Alice Walker and Leslie Marmon Silko rewrote traditional American history, whose primary concern was with civilizing the savages. Eurocentric historians never considered the interaction between the whites and the Natives as a process of mutual give and take whereas Walker and Silko between them present historical experiences from the African American point of view and the Native American point of view. American historians never bothered about the unique cultural features of the African Americans or the Native Americans. Their view “transcends the evolutionary perspective, the evolutionary squeeze; they seek (to recall their) kinship with all of the power and life of creation, not just the human vessel that happens to contain some portion of it at that moment in time” (Martin 201). We observe a synergistic bond between human beings and nature in African American and Native American systems of life and faith, which help them to survive through a process of reconciliation and openness even after the European invasion.

The historians who venture to articulate the history of African and Native Americans are the new self-proclaimed champions of the collective consciousness of the oppressed people. They consider themselves as trustees
of the sacred memories, cultural traditions and beliefs of the colonized people. The novels of Walker and Silko subvert and critique the Eurocentric theories of narration. Native American history has been a history of hybridization since the arrival of Europeans, and this history is narrated by Walker and Silko in their works. Their novels capture the mood of the awakening of a renewed spirituality and holistic world view. Fanon says in his *The Wretched of the Earth:*

> We must shake off the heavy darkness in which we were plunged and leave it behind. The new day which is already at hand must find us firm, prudent and resolute. . . Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men every where they find men, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe. For centuries they have stifled almost all the whole of humanity in the name of a so called spiritual experience. Look at them today swaying between atomic and spiritual disintegration. (251)

We hear the same voice in the novels of Walker and Silko. Myth becomes reality in their writings, where stories and histories fuse. Silko’s *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead* deal with the concepts of carnival and show how the authority upsets the social order. The carnival–grotesque elements in the novels present a new perspective on the world.
There is a fundamental disparity between the European culture and the Native American culture in their perception of nature. The Native American ideology of living in harmony with nature is opposed to the European view, which looks upon nature as an investment of resources to be exploited. Instead of offering a sense of stability to society, what the Europeans offer is a “chaotic and extreme individualism, prevented from irrational excesses only by occasional government intervention” (Deloria, *For this Land* 247). The nationalistic perception of the writers discussed here offers a vision that vitalizes a society vitiated by the European colonialism. Walker and Silko interrogate the imperialistic paradigms of settlement, displacement and colonization by reconsidering the narratives of exploration and settlement.

The novels of Walker and Silko are polyvocal and signify multiplicity of meanings. Barthes etymologically traces the meaning of the word ‘text’ to cloth: (“Textus” from which the word comes, means ‘cloth.’) Barthes describes a text as stereophonic where each fabric carries the echoes of other texts. It makes the texts intertextual. This is quite true of the novels of Walker and Silko. Walker infuses the image of quilting in her novels to represent women’s creativity. Silko presents the Native American Spider Woman as the creator of the whole world. Silko, like the Spider Woman, creates a new world view by connecting history, tradition, people and their culture through the act of writing. That is the reason why Hertha Wong
considers Silko’s *Storyteller* as a “polyphonic autobiography” that links memories and experiences of a group of people and indicates the role of the past in the formation of the future. She says, “Her mythical, community and personal narratives, [continue] the Laguna tradition of spinning personal identity from communal stories. Just as Grandmother Spider (Thought Woman) sings creation into being, the storyteller spins words into stories like an autobiographer creating a present pattern from remembered forms” (Wong 188).

The early nineteenth century Cherokee had a different approach towards the political and cultural hegemony of the whites. They wanted to preserve their nation’s integrity and independence. Walker and Silko, consider writing as a means of getting away from accepted social and political representations. Writing becomes creation and recreation, as Barthes says, “a continual process of historicization, the ever renewable representation of instances of subjectivity and situation across time” (qtd. in P. Smith 111). The African American and Native American literary traditions, rooted as they are in historical consciousness and heritage, has been suppressed for a long time. The whites annexed the Native American land in the name of various treatises and policies. Later what were left to the Natives were deserts or semi-deserts. “After the physical displacement of Native Americans was complete, the Indian school system was developed as
a way to further institute alienation and forced assimilation that denied and decimated Native American culture and legacy” (Turner 110).

Walker and Silko create a legacy that counters the marginalization of the Third World culture. Their novels represent a revitalization of interest in African American and Native American culture, orally transmitted traditions, songs, stories and histories that have been obliterated by colonization. Through their ingenious narrative style, Walker and Silko attack the European demonization of the “other,” whether he/she is African American or Native American. Kate Shanley Vangen says:

Women and Indians share a vital connection to natural cycles that is devalued by the Gussucks [i.e. the whites]; thus the Gussuck must degrade himself (by picturing himself as [a] dog copulating with a woman in [a] pinned-up image) in order to interact with women or Native peoples. He must enter the devil’s domain, the heart of darkness, the “illegitimate” system of values, if he desires intercourse with “illegitimate” epistemologies. (4)

Silko in Almanac provides a picture of the relationship between the Native Americans and Africans. Clinton clearly links the African and Native American belief systems when the appearance of the giant serpent Damballah is described in the novel. He wanted the black people to know
their history. He wanted them to know how the great, powerful gods of Africa travelled to America with their ancestors. He wanted African Americans to realize the power of their blood which nurtured the white man’s colonies. Clinton speaks in detail about the holistic faith of the tribals, especially about Damballah. He says:

Certain of the African gods had located themselves in the Americas as well as Africa: the Giant Serpent, the Twin Brothers, the Maize Mother, to name a few. Right then the magic had happened: great American and great African tribal cultures had come together to create a powerful consciousness within all people. All were welcome—even everyone had been included. That had been and still was the great strength of Damballah, the Gentle. Damballah excluded no one and nothing. (Silko, *Almanac* 416)

Through radio broadcasts, Clinton wants to tell the people about the forgotten and suppressed history of Africa and Native America. He narrates how the slave masters tried to strip the Africans of their language and history. Clinton says that the slave masters, who had left their Christian God when they started their expeditions, are now trying to take African gods away from their people. He portrays not only the sad plight of Africa but that of the Caribbean islands as well. Clinton depicts how the black
Indians still keep in touch with serpent spirits like Damballah and Simbi. Later he renames the Army of the Homeless/the Army of the Poor, as the ‘Army of Justice.’ According to him “The great mountain and river spirits, the great sky spirits, all the spirits of beloved ancestors, warriors and old friends” (Silko, Almanac 425) will rise up and do their revenge against the oppressors.

Through his “Liberation Radio Broadcasts” Clinton wants to teach his people about the foul play of the whites and what they are doing in Mexico and in other Third World nations. He gives an elaborate talk about slavery, about its history and its evolution; and about the role of the spirits in Native America. According to Clinton, the dead souls in the New World always outnumbered the living. In the chapter “Sonny’s Secret Sideline,” Silko gives a clear picture of Tucson and how the whites exploit the Mexicans by engaging in drug trade. In Tucson money talks louder than bullets. Now Mexico is a boarding house of refugees. All along the US border one can see the sight of refugees and dispossessed people.

Silko’s description of snakes is far removed from the snake description in Christian mythology. Unlike the image of snake in the Garden of Eden, Silko’s snakes are the spirit messengers of Mother Earth. In Africa and Native America, they loved and respected the gentle giant, Damballah, or Quetzalcoatl, or Ma ah shra true ee (The giant serpent that appears in
Walker's *Meridian*. These spirits gain their sustenance from the Mother Earth. By protecting the land they save the Mother Earth. Silko makes extensive use of the arguments of Marx and Engels. Marxism is a philosophy that exhorts the dispossessed to take over the land. Both capitalism and Marxism demand exploitation of land and natural resources, and in a way both are in conflict with the Native American lifestyle which holds the earth sacred. Angelita La Escapia, the leader of the indigenous “People’s Army,” was captivated by the Marxist philosophy, but later she abandoned Marxism. Silko’s La Escapia, while comparing Cubans and Native Americans, criticizes the Cubans who didn’t want indigenous people to know their history.

La Escapia believes that Karl Marx got his notions of egalitarian communism from the Native Americans: “For hundreds of years white men had been telling the people of the Americas to forget the past;” now Marx exhorts his people “to remember . . . they must reckon with the past because within it lay seeds of the present and future” (Silko, *Almanac* 311). The white men who came to the Americas to colonize them told them to forget the past and promised them a wonderful future, because they had no past and no faith in the ancestral spirits.

*Almanac* offers a warning to America which does not remember that it has derived its wealth from Native America. The natives are the real makers
of the Americas. Before the arrival of Christianity and patriarchy to the
Native American lands, they had developed elaborate disciplines of science,
philosophy and art. Ceremony, which also deals with critical, personal and
cultural themes related to old and new world orders, considers stories as a
defense against evil. This novel deals with the idea that old stories are only
the beginning of new stories, and that stories are unending. The purpose of
the ceremony is to integrate the individual with his or her fellow beings. By
undergoing the ceremony the person sheds the isolated, individual
personality and integrates himself with the community, and the whole
world. It also looks at the centrality of environmental integrity. Tayo, the
protagonist of the novel, lives through the stories, as the stories are the best
communication devices of the land and the people.

In both Ceremony and The Storyteller, Silko talks about the significance
of the oral tradition. A great deal of thrust is given to the rough,
unsophisticated, and raw words that are not at all premeditated. Alan
Kathleen Brown says that the fusion of order and disorder in the Native
American tradition is related to the web with, “its random and yet cyclic
pattern, its strength and its fragility.” The world gets unfolded in the text
like a spider’s web, where “chaos and order become a part of a single
process, intertwining rather than dividing.” Silko’s narrative strategies
compel us “to set aside notions of linear progression . . . and to put in
abeyance the Christian dream of heaven, earth, and hell” (172).
Silko observes that “the storyteller’s role is to draw the story out of the listeners, which she is quite sure is possible if the shared experience grows out of a strong community base” (Fiedler and Baker 57). The Pueblos are organized gynocratic tribes that understand the functioning of universe as one based on the relationship between the inner and the outer world. Indian stories reveal that a dialogic construct based on complimentary powers is prevalent among Pueblo tribes, especially among the Keres people. They believe that it is the woman’s power that holds the universe together. For them the concept of power is related to the harmony between the human and the non human world. Silko reflects this idea in her novels by introducing the Spider Woman who is presented as the keeper of sacred traditional knowledge and culture.

Many American Indians believe that the primary energy in the universe is embodied in the female. American Indian women value their roles as vitalizers, which is what Walker examines in Meridian. Meridian’s experiences with the Native American sacred serpent annihilate her false notions regarding the body/spirit opposition and she gains a new awareness about the symbiotic relationship between the body and the spirit in the process. Meridian receives an understanding regarding animism; which is nothing but “a belief that makes it possible to view all creation as living as being inhabited by spirit” (Walker, Meridian 193). While she is inside the serpent’s tail, “she saw the faces of her family, the branches of
trees, the wings of birds, the corners of houses, blades of grass and petals of flowers rush toward a central point high above her and she was drawn with them, as whirling, as bright, as free, as they” (Walker, Meridian 58).

_The Color Purple_ is about various social forces including culture, sex, language and politics that exploit the individuals. Like all other novels of Alice Walker, this novel too is intertextual. Walker exhorts women to regain their creative spirit like quilting and writing to get themselves empowered.

The rural life of her ancestors and their traditions and values are emphasized in this novel. Through her characters Walker sews together the torn threads of her culture’s history and turns it into “herstory.” Remembrances of Celie and Nettie become a reconstruction and re-making of history. In The Third Life of Grange Copeland too Walker rewrites the myths pertaining to African and Afro American history. She questions the assumptions of Euro American history that has misrepresented the black women and portrays them as incredible human beings who suffered the cruelties and oppressions of a sexist colonial society. She believes that “We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, and, if necessary, bone by bone” (In Search 92). She values the folk heritage and the oral traditions of the African culture.
By the Light of My Father’s Smile is a novel that deals with the impact of racism and sexism on black women. This novel, which is a celebration of sex, also deals with spiritual healing and achieving wholeness against the Western, Christian and patriarchal notions of lust and sin. By celebrating one’s sexuality women gain knowledge about the power of their bodies. The boundary between myth and reality gets blurred during the holistic reunion of the dead and the living, the human and the non-human. The image of the animistic spirit that one can identify in By the Light of My Father’s Smile appears also in Silko’s Storyteller and Walker’s The Temple of My Familiar. In The Temple of My Familiar, Lissie says:

When you knew every branch, every hollow, and every crevice of a tree there was nothing safer, you could quickly hide from whatever might be pursuing you. Besides we shared the tree with other creatures, … They seem nearly unable to comprehend separateness; they lived and breathed as a family, then as a clan, then as a forest, and so on. If I hurt myself and cried with me, as if my pain was magically transposed to other bodies. (Walker, Temple 84-86)

Walker delineates the events in the novel like a memory game, in which Lissie the carnal character’s memory is the stepping stone to the past. Through a series of flash backs and flash forwards Walker explains the
therapeutic effects of remembrances. The characters in the novel achieve wholeness through these remembrances of things past. Memory has great powers, and often functions as the carrier of history, as the agent of the present, and as a messenger of the future. It has “Eucharistic,” “therapeutic/psycho therapeutic” powers. It is Eucharistic in that it “forces us to acknowledge our sacred bond with our past and with those that might be regarded as the prime limbs of that past” (Dieke 509).

Walker and Silko journey into the past to vitalize their characters. They have their life in the present only in relation to the past. For these writers the past is no more forbidden, instead the plot and the characters gain strength when related to the past. These writers gain in strength from the past story tellers and other connoisseurs of the art of storytelling. They always pledge their commitment to the present and the future by paying homage to the literary foremothers.

Even if the whites colonized and abused the black women, they created a myth to prevent any backlash from the black men. They depicted the black men as rapists and regarded the white women as goddesses who cannot be touched or looked at by the black men. They devalued the black women also; they considered them as whores or play things. These black women were victims of the whites’ racial and sexual exploitation and the blacks’ patriarchal hegemony. The white and black men culturally
reconstructed the black women. Walker tries to reconstruct the false myths regarding the black women thus created. Being a “womanist” African American writer, she considers it as her responsibility to speak the truths about African American women and men. This is the duty of a black writer, which Du Bois speaks has talked about:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, — this longing to attain self conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (2-3)

When we examine African spirituality and traditional religion, we realize that human beings are never considered as a separate entity in ancient religions, instead there is always a sense of unity and oneness. Walker takes utmost care to include these authentic ideas of spirituality in all her novels. Dominique Zahan speaks about it as:
Moral life and mystical life, these two aspects of African spirituality, give it its proper dimensions. They constitute, so to speak, the supreme goal of the African soul, the objective towards which the individual strives with all his energy because he feels his perfection can only be completed and consummated if he masters and surpasses himself through divinity, indeed through the mastery of divinity itself. (4-5)

Possessing the Secret of Joy deals with the story of two kinds of women; those from whom the joy of totality has been taken away, and those who forbid others this joy and the power to possess this joy. The whole weight of the novel is embodied in the second epigraph of the novel, “When the axe came into the forest, the trees said the handle is one of us” (Walker, Possessing ix). The novel speaks about trees, bodies, women embodiment and women dismemberment. Walker presents Tashi’s reminiscences and histories in the like an anthropologist’s transcript and interviews. This novel is also part of Walker’s campaign for the right of women’s bodies and sexuality. She claims that genital mutilation is a violation of a woman’s right to her body and elaborates her role as a preserver of tradition and culture. Her stories are her messages intended to save women and their lives. For her, “There is no story more moving to me personally than one woman saves the life of another and saves herself” (Walker, Living 19). Her stories
have the liberating power of the artists and their endeavor to save people 
and the land from the cruel clutches of colonialism, and the imperial powers.

Silko also believes in the healing power of stories which she can 
identify in fables and in grandmother’s kitchen stories. These stories only 
give life breath to one’s survival. Simon J. Ortiz says that her stories 
“substantiates life, continues it, and creates it” (11). She evinces an 
androgynous vision in her storytelling. This art of storytelling includes 
women as well as men. So in Native American tradition, storytelling 
becomes a communal process.

Walker’s novels and Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* and *The Storyteller* 
present a world where one can hear many voices simultaneously. This 
polyvocality expresses the spirit of resistance, which is the most significant 
political weapon used by the writers. These works reflect the writers’ 
commitment to the past and to wiped out histories. Walker and Silko parade 
such characters who have transformed their personal selves into political 
articulators. Their works reflect the intrinsic power of language to reflect 
their true selves. Through her art of storytelling Silko calls for a return to the 
past, to its rituals and oral traditions in order to regain the lost identity of 
Native Americans. The land as well as the characters work like historical 
documents in her novels where creativity and politics merge. Her novels 
demonstrate that “the Keres rituals and traditions have survived all attempts
to eradicate them and that the seeds for the resurgence of their power lie in the memories and creativeness of her people” (Ruoff 15).

From a nationalistic perspective Walker and Silko rewrite the national histories by re-inscribing “herstories,” which are not guided by the time frame or hegemony of the dominant discourse of Western historians. That is the reason why Bhabha argues, “Struggle against colonial oppression not only changes the direction of Western history, but challenges its historical idea of time as a progressive, ordered whole” (Location of Culture 41). By historicizing and politicizing the past, the two writers reclaim the past that has been taken away by the masters. In their fictional works the writers successfully resist attempts to erase the past by making the past events polyvocal and multilayered. These writers establish themselves as representatives of African America and Native America through their emancipatory impulse. The novels reclaim the past by articulating the historical and present realities that are suppressed by society. Walker and Silko use different strategies like letters, songs, pages from the dairy, historical documents, etc for this purpose. They probe into the manipulation of power and violence. Walker and Silko envisage a new political and social space, in which one can observe a reinvigorated social and cultural consciousness.
One can observe a shift from the particular to the general in the novels discussed. By narrating the stories of a Celie or a Nettie or a Tayo or a Lecha they represent the plight of a whole group of people, or, to be more precise, they represent the plight of a nation. There is always an element of continuity shared by the writers. They carry the memory of the past writers and their spirits with them. This consciousness of influence forces them to be committed to the community and the tradition. For them writing is an act of redemption, which they restore through their novels. They have a mission behind their art of articulation. Their writing is an attempt to “express,” an attempt “to be heard, to be seen.” They “construct the words,” “name the deeds,” “confront the risks,” and “write the history” (Hernton 144).

It is the historical sense of these writers that compels them to write not just with their “own generation” in their “bones,” but with “a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” (Eliot 262). Though this is an argument made on tradition and individual talent as they operates in the European tradition, it is equally pertinent to the writings of Walker and Silko. Their texts are sign systems, whose referents are social, cultural and historical factors and the experiences of the past. The novels which are expressions of the culture’s relationship with nature, look at the syncretism of Africanism
and Native American world views and speak about the dynamics of difference in terms of gender, race and ethnicity.

The unique configuration of historical and personal experiences related to slavery, the Atlantic middle passage, plantation work, migration, and northern settlement gives rise to an ambivalence that is reflected in the Afro American and Native American cultural reflections. It is from the “gaps and silences” of their sufferings in the previous era that “new narratives open up spaces in discourse” (Foucault, Order of Things 207). The texts analyzed here relocate women’s identity and power in reshaping a nation by looking at the “issue of cultural persistence,” focusing on how the “dynamic Native American cultures adapted and maintained the fundamental bases of their organization, especially their understanding of gender roles, to the new circumstances created by colonization and the attempts of reformers to bring about cultural transformation” (Lindstrom 255).

Walker’s recent works including The Way Forward is with the Broken Heart (2005) is an autobiographical work that echoes her belief that personal is what ultimately gets translated as political. The personal and the fictional are politicized in this work that recaptures the past with a view to gaining an optimistic vision about the future. Her 2004 novel Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart is the story of a successful author’s relationship with her former lover and the spiritual journey that the two undertake. The novel is a kind of
a dream fantasy that resembles *The Temple of My Familiar* in its discussion of personal and ethnic oppression.

Silko’s recent novel *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999) deals with the themes of patriarchal white culture and the Native American people’s life in the midst of oppressive circumstances. In this novel the novelist successfully knits together Native American history and the histories of Mexico, Africa, Italy and Black Africa. Silko’s most recent novel *The Turquoise Ledge: A Memoir* (2010) is a coalescence of memories and histories. It deals with the stupendous spiritual potential of the natural world in the context of memories.

The novels of Walker and Silko open up spaces that allow writers and researchers to look at issues that are often ignored by Euro-American anthropologists, historians, and literary scholars. Apart from their importance as specimens of literature, these works also act as places where common threads concerning culture and societal organizations can be analysed. Walker and Silko have opened up avenues for the future writers to look at issues concerning multicultural histories. They present how an individual moves from a fragmented and isolated life to a life of wholeness and perfection by engaging in a self-reflexive process of reformulating tales and traditions that are important in the culture in question.