CHAPTER I

Introduction
The literary tradition of African Americans is meaningfully assessed in the context of the tension between their attitudes toward their dual African and European cultural heritages on one hand, and their oral and literary heritages on the other. Every American writer of African descent works within and against the dual tradition -- oral and literary, African and European, male and female -- that he or she inherits as part of his or her North American cultural legacy and in which, however marginally, he or she participates in the elusive quest for status, power, and identity. Each writer's contribution and significance is therefore influenced by his/her relationship to the past and present writers, as well as by the relationship of his/her texts to other texts in the tradition, both in the Eurocentric sense of literary formalism and in the broader Afrocentric cultural sense.

Culture signifies the constitutive social process by which people create specific ways of life as they adapt themselves to environmental conditions and historical circumstances. For black Americans this process of acculturation has been shaped by a distinctive history: Africa, slavery, the Middle Passage, the Southern plantation, Emancipation, Reconstruction, Post-Reconstruction, Northern migration, and urbanization, and most importantly racism. The unique configuration of these historical experiences generated the interrelated processes of double consciousness, socialized ambivalence, and double vision that best explain the complex, creative dynamics of African-American ethnic culture and character. Du Bois defines the African-American experience of double
consciousness as a complex socio-cultural and socio-psychological duality of Americans of African descent whose humanity and culture were institutionally devalued and marginalised by people of European descent.

The African-American novel is the product of social and cultural forces that shape the author's attitude toward life. In contrast to the Euro-American novel, however, the African-American novel has its roots in the combined oral and literary traditions of African-American culture. It is one of the symbolic literary forms of discourse that black Americans have borrowed from Western culture and adapted in their quest for status, power, and identity in a racist white, patriarchal North American social arena. The African-American novel, in other words, is not a solipsistic, self-referential linguistic system, but a symbolic socio-cultural act. Twentieth century Novelists like Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Ishmael Reed and others employ the novel and romance as symbolic acts to explore the disparity between Euro-American myths and African-American reality. But they do not approach the narrative tradition from the same ideological perspective as their white contemporaries or black predecessors. Nineteenth century black novelists tapped the roots of their indigenous ethnic culture for matter and method. Most modern and postmodern African-American novelists nevertheless share in a common tradition. Thematically and structurally, therefore, from Brown and Wilson to Reed and Morrison, the tradition of the African-American novel is dominated by the struggle for freedom from all forms of oppression and by a personal odyssey to
realize the full potential of one's complex bicultural identity as an African-American. This prototypical journey -- deriving its socio-cultural consciousness from the group experience of black Americans and its mythopoeic force from the interplay of Eurocentric and Afrocentric symbolic systems -- begins in physical or psychological bondage and ends in some ambiguous form of deliverance or vision of a new world of mutual respect and justice for peoples of colour. In short, the African-American canonical story is the quest with apocalyptic undertones, for freedom, literacy, and wholeness -- personal and communal -- grounded in social reality and ritualized in symbolic acts of African-American speech, music, and religion. Racism figures as a dominant theme in the works of black authors, irrespective of sex. But the double-edged persecution of the African-American woman finds its fullest expression in black feminist writings, especially in fiction. These writings depict the pain of being black and female, and at the same time, present the woman's desperate search for her genuine self. The entire African-American community was condemned to endless suffering, yet the black woman's condition was much more than the black man's, because of her colour and sex. "To be Black and Female" was to be in "Double Jeopardy". The black woman also suffered in the hands of her own man. The black woman's condition was no more better even after the civil war. Her predicament continued even after the contemporary feminist movement started in the US, as the middle-class women's movement to eliminate sexist oppression. Black women felt alienated from -- the mainstream of the white feminist movement which paid little attention to the problems specific to African-
American women. The result was the emergence of black feminism as a separate branch of the women's movement.

Black women novelists of the twentieth century have openly portrayed in their works experiences of exploitation. Driven by an overriding impulse towards self-assertion, they have succeeded in turning their identity into a source of strength. Their works of fiction reflect their version of the American experience that was excluded from both black male and white female writings. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a sentimental romance, celebrates the liberating possibilities of love, story-telling, and autonomy for black women. Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple*, the story of the most marginalized of heroines, the black lesbian, challenges patriarchal constructions of female subjectivity and sexuality and thus makes representation itself a compelling issue for all women, regardless of their ethnicity or sexual orientation. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a Gothic neo-slave narrative and post-modern romance, speaks in many compelling voices of the historical rape of black women and of the concord of sensibilities among the African-American people. Black women's writings present a completely different picture from that of the black male writings. The focus here shifts to the black woman as an individual struggling towards freedom and selfhood. Right from the slave narratives down to the present times, there has been a conscious or sometimes unconscious repudiation of the many myths that surround the black woman. Slave narratives are the personal accounts of physical and psychological bondage and freedom. These writers, while documenting the trauma and the
grief of sexual exploitation and physical abuse, portray themselves as far more than mere victims of rape and seduction and write to celebrate their hard-won escape from the system and their fitness for freedom's potential blessings. Black women under slavery passed on a legacy to free female descendents of their strength, self reliance, resistance and insistence on sexual equality. The renovation of the history of slavery recreated for black women a new standard of womanhood and it is the root of black women's strategy of difference in the women's movement.

Black women writers have spent valuable time in reconstructing the African-American literary tradition to include women writers. They took up the task of eradicating the stereotypes of Black feminity and myths of Black women's roles. The role of the mammy is carefully and continually moved from the level of a stereotype to that of a living human being with her own desires and needs. Further the relationship between black men and women is scrutinized. And most importantly, black women themselves are projected as thinkers and as human beings not merely used by others but as conscious beings. Writers like Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison undertook a total reassessment of black literature and literary history taking into account the cultural importance of Black women writers. In their attempt they also discovered multiple modes of Black feminine expression. In the field of Black feminist criticism Audre Lorde and Alice Walker have made significant contribution. To Lorde and Walker the study of the Black woman in literature is much better seen as part of that larger study of expression in Black behaviour.
They insist that Black feminist criticism requires a radical examination of how language operates in Black women’s history, how the Black women rework it, and how they create and support through language what becomes for them a flourishing culture.

Black women writers try to rejuvenate the past history out of the myth of alien or hostile narratives, and in this process they attempt to bring out their own tales in the present. They thereby celebrate the oral tradition of their fore-mothers because it is one of triumphant survival. Telling stories of their past is traditionally the principal method mothers use to educate their children.

The Great Migration lured millions of blacks away from the soil of sorrow to Northern and MidWestern America. Some remained in the small towns of the South that were nearly decimated by this mass movement. Of those who did remain, almost all tried to form a tight and cohesive community that would enable them to endure the hardships. Black women, working in fields or in some white woman’s home, tried to keep up their spiritual strength to see them through. Some were able to persevere; others, beset by racism, saw themselves and their families demolished by it. Yet, most managed to keep alive the sustaining rituals that were the basis of African-American life. Through song, sharing, sewing, quilting, gardening, cookery, planting, tale-telling, and abundant good humour, they brought beauty to a tainted land. These poor, black women were sustained by the richness of their culture, even if the larger world dismissed its existence. The only times they heard their voices ring out were in churches,
across a field or yard, in someone's kitchen or, quite often, in a small private place in their minds.

Through the literature of Alice Walker, a voice has been given to that small place, and those silenced women have been allowed to speak. Complex, contrary, battered and brave, the lives of those black Southern women instruct and inform us. Through her works Walker has consistently made known the intense and intricate essence of America's most "put-upon" women. With great clarity and painful honesty, she examines the degree of freedom afforded these women and explores how they develop and cope within their communities. She deciphers the patterns of racism which, when not fully comprehended by blacks, can destroy both self and family.

Alice Walker is not only a member of the oppressed race but is also a member of the oppressed sex of that race. She explores the history of Black women and through her fiction tries to dispel certain myths of black mothers that are in vogue. She probes deep into their lives and examines the reasons why black women, believing the myths to be true, have suppressed their identities and creativity. Walker in her *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* explores the autobiographies of Black women, describing them as rich and crucial sources in enlarging the field of Black literature.

Both Walker and Toni Morrison attempt to define an entirely new mode of expression of black women's revalidation while emphasizing on a speakerly voice within the text. These two writers endeavour to reject the white
hermeneutical circle and reconstruct black feminist ideology in terms of their
creative texts. Their literature is both “self-definition and redefinition.” Alice
Walker breaks the language-structure of the dominating culture and introduces
omissions and disruptions in an inverted process. She rejuvenates black myth,
metaphor, mysticism, and spiritualism in order to emphasize the reality of black
community life. She employs magical realism in her novel *The Temple of My
Familiar* to recreate the primordial sub-Saharan African mother of all black
women.

Walker rejects the white hermeneutical order of the text and creates a
new structure for her text in *The Color Purple*. It is the epistolary form. The
silenced black woman’s lost voice is evoked in terms of Celie’s speech with
God in the first person. In her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*,
she introduces a new language-structure and narrative strategy to invent the
racial reality within a far more dark corner of sexual reality of black women. In
her second novel, *Meridian*, Walker rejects the hermeneutics of narrative form
in order to emphasize the interior reality of Meridian’s spiritual regeneration.
In her collection of short stories, *In Love and Trouble*, Walker creates an encoded
language-structure introducing different signs of objects, metaphors, and images
to emphasize the inner struggle of black women against their subjectivity and
subjugation. Both Walker and Morrison, while linking the tradition of the present
struggle with that of the past, introduce within their narrative strategy a decoding
of disruption and omission, ambivalence and inversion within the image and
traditional concept of black women and thus establish different and pluralised
experience of black women. These women exist within the broken and
fragmented relationship of a family structure where all primal relationship are ruptured and erased. The complex conceptualisation of the incest theme is restructured in the texts of both Alice Walker and Toni Morrison in their peculiar context of survival as a black woman.

Walker's famous novel *The Color Purple* is the story of a victimized, benumbed lost woman who regained her spirit, even her speech, in a new experience — a re-enlivening, erotic, emotional and spiritual experience — with another black woman who is a strong 'blues' woman. Alice Walker as an artist is "preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women".¹ Both Alice Walker and Toni Morrison reinterpreted the 'literary text' of the novel in terms of a speakerly text within the context of a writerly text.

Incorporating the traditional black female activities of root-working, herbal medicine, conjury, midwifery into the fabric of their stories, the use of Black women’s language and the cultural experience of Black women as in the books of Zora Neale Hurston, Morrison and Walker achieve a rich coalescing of form and content and takes their writing far beyond the confines of white/male literary structures.

Among the Black women novelists the thematic, stylistic and linguistic commonalities are numerous. In the novels of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison the theme of thwarted female artist figures prominently. In Alice Walker's novel,
Meridian, Meridian's mother Mrs. Hill makes artificial flowers and prayer pillows too small for kneeling. Likewise, in Morrison's Sula, Eva Peace is forever ordering pleats in her dress. Her strange and destructive behaviour is explained as the consequence of an idle imagination. In Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Polly Breedlove is obsessed with ordering things. Pauline, tormented by a sordid life, escapes into a world of fantasy and derives great pleasure from identifying herself with white women in the movies. Similarly, Pecola, Pauline's daughter, realizing that physical beauty is a pre-requisite for being loved, accepts the Western notion of beauty and prays every night for blue eyes.

The use of clothing as iconography is central to the writings of Black women. The imagery of clothing is abundant in Zora Neale Hurston's novel Their Eyes Were Watching God. Janie's apron, her silks and satins, her head scarves, and finally her overalls, all symbolize various stages of her journey from captivity to liberation. In Jessie Fauset's short story "The Sleeper Wakes", Amy, the protagonist, is associated with pink clothing which suggests innocence and immaturity, while she is blinded by fairy tale notions of love and marriage. However, she no longer wears pink after she declares her independence from her racist and sexist husband. Similarly in Alice Walker's Meridian, Meridian's dress, railroad cap and dungarees are emblems of her rejection of conventional images and expectations of womanhood. In The Color Purple, Celie exhibits her liberated and independent mind by wearing pants.

Another theme that recurs in the novels of Black women writers is the motif of the journey. The Black woman's journey, though at times is political
and social, is basically a personal and psychological journey. The female character in the works of Black women is in a state of becoming part of an evolutionary, spiral, moving from victimization to consciousness. Janie, the heroine in Zora Neale Hurston's novel, makes a long journey from captivity to liberation. Velma Henry in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eater's* journeys her way from illness to health, from fragmentation to wholeness, from the act of taking her life to an act of reconstructing her life. In Walker's novels *Meridian* and *The Color Purple*, both the heroines Meridian and Celie make their way out to wholeness.

Concern with the politics of race and gender is central to the narratives of Bambara, Morrison, and Walker. Toni Morrison's fictional narratives are part of a largely ethnographic enterprise. Because she privileges the aesthetic in general, and the African-American mythology in particular, her insertion of feminine desire becomes an extremely complex narrative problem. Toni Cade Bambara's fiction involves a complex rewriting of Black nationalist discourse. Her fiction, structured by a totalizing nationalist ideology, develops a feminist position within a generally resisting social and cultural context. Bambara advocates a radical restructuring of male-female relationships, proposing the rejection of masculine and feminine roles and the construction of a selfhood/Blackhood that displaces gender differentiation, thereby enabling the whole "Black community" to move in unison against racial oppression. Walker's fiction is structured by a complex ideological position that oscillates between her
identity as a "Black feminist" or woman-of-colour and a generalized feminist position in which race is subordinated. Walker's primary emphasis is consciousness of herself as a Black woman empowered to narrate the stories of Black women who are past or present creators of a Black female culture. Her role then is one of enabling Black women, especially those most marginalized by race, caste, and class, to have their voices heard and their histories read.

Striving to have, to do, and to be more, and attempting the formation of an inner drive toward the assertion of selfhood are usually the dominant themes in the works of Black women writers. A constant attempt to bring out the reconciliation of a fragmented self and a synthesis of racial and gender politics is seen in their works. Walker's representation of Black life and culture in her works is strongly motivated by the belief that "the truth about any subject only comes when all the sides of the story are put to together, and all their different meanings make one new one. Each writer writes the missing parts to the other writer's story." In her discussion with Claudia Tate, Walker comments thus:

Twentieth-century black women writers all seem to be much more interested in the black community, in intimate relationships, with the white world as a backdrop, which is certainly the appropriate perspective, in my view. We black women writers know very clearly that our survival depends on trust. We will not have or cannot have anything until we examine what we do to and with each other. There just has not been enough examination or enough application of findings to real problems in our day-to-day living. Black women continue to talk about intimate relationships so that we can recognize what is happening when we see it, then maybe there will be some change in behavior on the part of men and women.
Walker views Zora Neale Hurston's works as embodying "racial health." In her essay "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View," Walker describes what reading about Hurston taught her of her own cultural inheritance. More important for Walker is the positive picture created by Hurston's sense of Blacks as complete, complex undiminished human beings, not as the victims so often found in white criticism. Zora's narratives stress the private and the domestic and are largely restricted to the explorations of the inner world of Black life. Although Hurston's novels explore the personal, internal struggles between men and women in the black community, her main focus is almost exclusively on the Black woman's quest for personal freedom. Hurston views Black folklore and folk tradition as fundamental elements constituting dominant existential modalities of Black life and she gives them a central role in her narratives.

Several writers including Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker, and Audre Lorde have described the bond between themselves and their mothers as an alternative and inspiring source of their aesthetic. By citing allegiance to their mothers, Black American women move closer to African ancestry. Mother myths have a great power and are a continuing part of many African cultures where motherhood is enshrined and traditionally venerated. A textual construction of a bond that exists between Hazel and her grand mother in Toni Cade Bambara's *Gorilla My Love* is grounded in a pretextual ideology that views mothers, as well as mother surrogates, as sources of wisdom for young Black girls. Commenting on this, Gloria Joseph writes, "Black women play integral roles in
Audre Lorde argues that the issue of Black matriarchy as a ‘social disease’ diverted attention in the sixties from the source of Black women’s strength. She stresses the value of nonverbal communication as an energising force beneath the language. This source of energy Lorde locates in the semiotic -- in mother-bonding. In “Of Woman Born”, Rich locates the female power in motherhood which men have mythically misinterpreted. Rich carefully distinguishes between motherhood as an institution creating a dangerous schism between the public and private lives of women and motherhood as a crucial experience for women. In her work Rich proves that when becoming mothers women enter into a more complex territory of emotional experience.

Walker expressed fears about the effect motherhood would have on her art. “I feared being fractured by the experience if not overwhelmed. I thought the quality of my writing would be considerably diminished by motherhood -- that nothing that was good for my writing could come out of having children.” In “One Child of One’s Own: A Meaningful, Digression Within the Work(s)” she emphasises that, “My first mistake was in thinking “children” instead of “child”. My second was in seeing The Child as my enemy rather than the racism and sexism of an oppressive capitalist society. My third was in believing none of the benefits of having a child would accrue to my writing.” But later she acknowledges that the birth of her daughter Rebecca, “was the incomparable gift of seeing the world at quite a different angle than before, and judging it by
standards that would apply far beyond my natural life." Walker realizes that in reality motherhood is the least of the obstacles to her writing. In the same essay she says thus: "We are together, my child and I. Mother and child, yes, but sisters really, against whatever denies us all that we are." Walker also constructed a piece of writing, which says, "You have Rebecca -- who is much more delightful and less distracting than any of the calamities."

African-American motherhood is traditionally viewed as a vehicle for preserving black heritage in the face of white cultural domination. There is a deep ambivalence attached to child-bearing and children in the fiction written by Black women. Ambivalence is the way women experience contradiction in heterosexual relationships. And as children are for the most part born of heterosexual relationships, they are the living embodiments of the contradictions that have shaped their mother's life, possibilities, and sexuality.

In Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* Pauline feels an "unsettling emptiness" within herself. She feels that her life has been one of emotional and economic deprivation even after marrying Cholly. Motherhood brings more trouble in her life: "... the daily needs of her children are like lighted matches to the fuse of her disappointment as a black woman denied beauty and romantic love." Pauline becomes an inadvertent breadwinner to support her family. Tormented by a sordid life, she escapes into a world of fantasy and derives great pleasure from identifying herself with white women in the movies. In Walker's *Meridian*, Meridian's mother Mrs. Hill also harbours a sense of frustration, having
sacrificed her career in order to raise her children. Meridian herself feels that motherhood for her has become a biological trap. The efficacy of the institution of marriage and family life, idealized by patriarchy and identified as the woman’s source of contentment, has been exposed by post-modern women writers as patriarchal myth. The myth of black motherhood as “sacred calling” is thus reversed in this novel.

In Morrison’s *Sula*, Sula throws Chicken Little, a small boy into the river and drowns him. The drowning of Chicken Little enacts the same ambivalence that Sula is made to feel about herself as Walker’s Meridian feels towards the babe in her arms. Sula’s accidental murder of Chicken Little and Meridian’s purposeful act and her decision to terminate her pregnancy are fraught with contradictions that heterosexuality and child-bearing bestow on women. In *Meridian* Walker illustrates the manner in which child-bearing makes women vulnerable to male control and manipulation. Tracing the history of the origin of the family, Engels observes, “The overthrow of the mother right was the world historic defeat of the female sex. The man seized the reins in the house also, the woman was degraded, enthralled, the slave of man’s lust, a mere instrument for breeding children.” Walker affirms woman’s ability to challenge the maternal role and achieve independence by breaking the patriarchal shackles.

Walker prefers to be known as a womanist rather than as a feminist. She states thus: “I just like to have words that describe things correctly. Now to me ‘black feminist’ does not do that. I need a word that is organic, that really comes out of the culture ... I don’t choose womanism because it is “better”
than feminism, ... I choose it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it, because I cherish the spirit of the women (like Sojourner) the word calls to mind..." Four definitions of womanist serve as epigraph to In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. The first definition locates the term within the context of "black folk expression of mother to female children" and establishes it as a sign of a “black feminist or feminist of color.” The second identifies the term with a woman, “who loves other women sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility...and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health. Traditionally a universalist.” The third definition celebrates the sensuality and spirituality of the womanist as one who loves “music, dance, the Spirit, love and food and roundness, struggle, the Folk, herself. Regardless.” The final definition is phrased in the form of an analogy: “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.”

Alice Walker gives a fine account of her mother’s garden which answered for her mother the question of what it meant to be a Black artist. Having discovered Hurston, Walker was able to link the survival of the artist to the survival of cultural heritage. Walker’s acute vision allows her to examine not only the relationships of people but also their relationship to nature. Walker feels that through their hardships African-Americans have managed to keep a part of their African heritage, which she describes as animism. She believes that the Black woman is intuitive about the fact that everything is inhabited by a spirit.
Further, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” records Walker’s discovery of her mothers’ art form. In this essay Walker draws her imagery from the impressive garden that was her mother’s particular means of keeping the creative seed alive wherever the Walkers went. Part of Walker’s understanding of herself as woman and as artist comes from her awareness that she is linked across continents and through generations with women who have exercised their creativity despite the racism and sexism that would deny its expression. In “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” Walker says, “To be an artist and a black woman, even today, lowers our status in many respects, rather than raises it: and yet, artists we will be.” Writing about her elders, she says:

For these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. They were Creators, who lived lives of spiritual waste, because they were so rich in spirituality -- which is the basis of Art -- that the strain of enduring their unused and unwanted talent drove them insane. Throwing away this spirituality was their pathetic attempt to lighten the soul to a weight their work-worn, sexually abused bodies could bear.

Walker mourns the gifts that were stifled within the artists of the past. One of the most valuable gifts Walker gains in discovering her literary ancestors is a sense of continuity with the past, a thread that binds her to a community of black artisans. Walker considers it as a duty for the artists and witnesses of the future to preserve the stories of those unknown men and women whose everyday lives constitute the communal past. She herself feels that, “In short, I could see that I felt Art was not enough and that my art, in particular, would probably
change nothing. And yet I felt it was the privilege of my life to observe and
“save” for the future some extraordinary lives.”

Walker is one of the first black writers to explore the problems of sexism, which apart from racism is the major cause of all ills of African-American people. Moving through the history and lives of many known and unknown black women, she confronts her own vulnerabilities and strengths. Walker considers the lives of black people and examines their triumphs, and trials, and their tenacious endurance. She finds inspiration for her writing from her mother’s stories. Some of the stories in Walker’s first collection of stories, *In Love and Trouble*, are based on tales told by her mother. “... so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother’s stories... that through years of listening to my mother’s stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories -- like her life -- must be recorded.”

The stories in *In Love and Trouble* are centred round the lives of Southern women, who, moved by an inexplicable will, often challenge the abuses they suffer and the restrictions placed upon them. Walker’s second collection of short stories *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down* continues the theme of the black woman’s fight against restriction and abuse. In these two volumes of short stories Walker illuminates the problems that have pervaded the lives of black women throughout history. In the first collection, the characters are trapped and they remain thwarted by their restricted options in life. In the second, the heroines push forward gaining a clearer understanding of themselves
and of a more liberated existence. This volume explores the hidden, beautiful, whole, and free selves that her fictional black women discover or rediscover when they realise that definition of self must come from within.

The women in Walker's *In Love and Trouble* are unfortunately the victims of racism which threatens them in its various individual and institutional forms. They are helpless and are not yet able to save themselves, let alone save others.

These women are often used and abused by black men, because of their love for them. Walker herself states, "In my new book, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, thirteen women — mad, raging, loving, resentful, hateful, strong, ugly, weak, pitiful, and magnificent — try to live with the loyalty to black men that characterizes all of their lives." In Walker's short stories "Her Sweet Jerome" and "The Child Who Favored Daughter," she introduces a theme she develops further in her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, how larger social issues intrude into the individual lives of black men and women to become an excuse for cruelty. At home Jerome's wife serves as a convenient punching bag while in public Jerome ostensibly fights for the rights of blacks. Mrs. Washington, like Margaret and Mem, is one of those who get lost, or in this case trampled on, in the course of men's larger struggles. Jerome, in his intellectual fight against oppression, feels no remorse for his cruel and literal oppression of his wife. Walker is horrified to realize the extent to which black women still placed loyalty to black men above all else, a situation she terms "a dangerous state of affairs that has its logical end in self-destructive behavior."
Margaret and Mem in the *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and Celie in *The Color Purple* are the victims of both racial and sexual oppression. Their struggle is endless and are seemed to be trapped by circumstances, the entrapment being the result of their sense of powerlessness against the structure of the dominant society. These women are not only the victims of environmental deprivation and extreme insensitivity but are also the victims of the brutality of their men. With the exception of Celie who succeeded in fighting back, both Margaret and Mem fail to overcome their oppressive situations. In *Love and Trouble*, seldom do we see Walker's women fighting back, successfully against preconceived, stultifying, and restrictive notions of women's roles. Walker's women suffer the consequences of misplaced loyalty and misplaced love, both physically as well as psychologically. They still seek things like love, fulfilment as women and peace of mind. But in her later works Walker creates women richer in life's intangibles and more fulfilled and who act according to their own definitions of selfhood. The women of *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* fight for their spiritual and emotional lives. This collection is Walker's celebration of women's fighting spirit in contrast to the vulnerable and weak women in *In Love and Trouble*. The women in this collection continue their progress toward spiritual health and self-definition, begun by Ruth in the *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and Meridian Hill in *Meridian*. More often, the women survive with an independent self, not a self dictated by others.

Alice Walker's work represents her celebration of black women who have the wherewithal to discover inside themselves the sources of strength,
collectivity, and survival. Although Walker’s early women like Mem and Margaret fail to find their inner sources of strength, thus proving themselves too willing to let others determine their definitions of self, all other female characters undergo transformation from positions of vulnerability to positions of relative strength. Walker’s women achieve psychological wholeness when they are able to fight oppression, whether its source is white racism, their own black men, or their own self-righteous anger. She is concerned with survival whole of her people. Survival whole means in part choosing which self to celebrate. Part of the celebration of the self in Walker’s work is her characters’ acknowledgement that there is something of the divine in everyone and everything in the universe.

Adrienne Rich’s notion of lesbianism is both historical and literary. “Lesbian existence suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence. I mean the term ‘lesbian continuum’ to include a range -- through woman’s life and throughout history -- of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman.” Rich further identifies lesbian identity with a distinct, creative and imaginative autonomy. “It is the lesbian in every woman who is compelled by female energy, who gravitates towards strong women, who seeks a literature that will express that energy and strength. It is the lesbian in us who drives us to feel imaginatively, render in language, grasp, the full connection between woman and woman. It is the lesbian in us who is creative, for the dutiful daughter of the fathers is only a hack.”
Lesbianism is an attempt to recapture or re-experience the mother-daughter bond. Sue Silver-Marie describes the process as follows: “In loving another I discovered the deep urge to both be a mother and to find a mother in my mother.”\textsuperscript{22} Considering whether the term lesbian is ever appropriately applied to black women, Walker says, “The word “lesbian” may not, in any case, be suitable (or comfortable) for black women, who surely would have begun their woman-bonding earlier than Sappho’s residency on the Isle of Lesbos. Indeed, I can imagine black women who love women (sexually or not) hardly thinking of what Greeks were doing; but, instead, referring to themselves as “whole” women, from “wholly” or “holy.” Or as “round” women--women who love other women, yes, but women who also have concern, in a culture that oppresses all black people (and this would go back very far), for their fathers, brothers, and sons, no matter how they feel about them as males.”\textsuperscript{23} Walker presents such a relationship in her novel \textit{The Color Purple}. She regrets for those who consider such (lesbian) relationship far from normal and who deny a sense of connectedness with the literary community. “My own term” she says, “for such women would be “womanist” “... , the word they chose would have to be both spiritual and concrete and it would have to be organic, characteristic, not simply applied. ... it would have to be a word that affirmed connectedness to the entire community and the world, rather than separation, \textit{regardless} of who worked and slept with whom.”\textsuperscript{24}

Alice Walker’s substantial body of writing, though it varies, is characterised by recurrent motifs. The most obvious is her attention to the
Black woman as creator and her attempt to be whole, a concern which relates to the health of her community. This theme is focal to Walker's two collections of short stories, *In Love and Trouble* and *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, to her classic essay, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, and to *Meridian* and *The Color Purple*. Another recurrent motif in Walker's work is her insistent probing of the relationship between struggle and change, a probing that encompasses the pain of Black people's lives against which the writer protests. Paradoxically such pain sometimes results in growth precisely because of the nature of the struggle. Presented primarily through three generations of one family in Walker's first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, the struggle to change takes on overt societal dimensions in *Meridian*. Characteristically this theme is presented in her poetry, fiction, and essays as a spiritual legacy of Black people in the South. One might also characterise Walker's work as organically spare rather than elaborate, ascetic rather than lush. It involves a process of stripping off of layers. This pattern is refined in her subsequent volumes of poetry and it clearly marks the structure of her fiction and essays. There is a concentrated distillation of language which ironically allows her to expand rather than constrict. The focus on the struggle of Black people, especially Black women, to claim their own lives and the contention that this struggle emanates from a deepening of self-knowledge and love are characteristics of Walker's work. The specific mode through which the deepening of self-knowledge and self-love are revealed seems to have much to do with Walker's contrariness, her willingness at all turns to challenge the
fashionable belief of the day, to re-examine it in the light of her own experiences and of dearly won principles which she has previously challenged and absorbed. There is a sense in which the "forbidden" in the society is consistently approached by Walker as a possible route to truth.
REFERENCES


