PREFACE

Southern fiction resulting from the ‘Southern experience’ has had certain critical hallmarks that have ostensibly given it distinction from American writing. The Southern ‘experience’ after the Civil War was never associated with the expanding economy of the North and the West, nor with the success and invincibility of American national and international standing or, for that matter, with the overweening optimism of American life. Most significant was the lack in Southern literature of Whitmanian or Emersonian optimism, an abstraction of time and space that opens to the future. Instead, Southern writers have often turned to historical consciousness of the past.

To designate an author as ‘Southern’ is not merely to make a geographical reference; the term has come to refer to a whole complex of themes and attitudes identified with the Southern milieu, particularly traditional attitudes of Southern people about themselves and their destiny. Southern writing often looks to the past, is deeply concerned with race relations and class differences, the force of superstition and religious belief over the rational mind. It is often described as grotesque (and ‘Southern Gothic’ is a favorite critical epithet) because Southern literature is obsessed by disorder, psychological disturbance, defeat and unnaturalness, so much so that it almost seems to convey a radical pessimism.

In the writing of their fictional works, novelists often have to reflect on the functioning of memory, for memory lies at the heart, both of inner life and of human
experience in general. There are different perspectives on the relationship between a novelist’s personal memories, collective memory, and the fictional narratives partially inspired by these two types of memory. There seem to be conflicting opinions regarding the basic question as to whether memory belongs to the individual or the group. According to some, memory is a subjective experience and memories belong to the individual, helping to build identity by differentiating this individual from others. Radically opposed to this is the school that argues for the existence of a collective unconscious and thus asserts the primacy of the collective aspect of memory. Several writers have attempted to reconcile these conflicting ideas on individual memory and collective memory. According to them, collective memory functions as a framework within which individual memory is built and structured.

Fiction is closely bound to the social, historical and cultural context in which it is created. A writer belongs to a social group, shares a collective memory with it, and often deals with a past, pregnant with meaning, and that still impinges on the present. Again, the personal narratives of writers transcend the individuals and concern a much larger group of people. Literature is thus often a skilful blend of individual and collective memories. Some writers believe in the existence of ‘pure memory,’ which is faithful to the past and can thus be reconstructed in its entirety. But for others, memory is always a reconstruction of the past based on present concerns and purposes. They point out that forgetting also plays a major role in this reconstruction process. The complexity of this field thus invites a detailed study of its treatment in
fiction. The literature of the American South offers rich instances of the role of past and memory in human life.

The conservative culture in the South has also produced a strong focus within Southern literature on the significance of family, religion, and community in one’s personal and social life. The South’s troubled history with racial issues, its moral and political failures, including slavery, civil war, and periodic economic troubles also appear in its literature. In the South the past lives in the present, and it is this intense awareness of its history that gives the South the continuity of its heritage. This relatedness of the individual on all the levels of his being — to a family, to a social group, to a geographical location — leads to the Southern need for totality. The idea of Southern distinctiveness surged when America’s burdens became viewed as strictly “the South’s burdens.” As a whole the troubles faced by Southerners are treated as troubles experienced by all Americans as a nation in its totality.

The recurrent Southern themes mentioned above find significant treatment in the women writers of the South. In order to study in a focused manner the way these Southern themes are portrayed, I have chosen a group of representative Southern women writers whose contribution to American literature is considerable. The four representative writers chosen for study are Ellen Glasgow, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers. Nowhere else in American literature is there a group of accomplished women writers so closely bound together by regional qualities of setting, character, and time. These four Southern women writers have historically engaged, complicated, and revised conventional modes of regional and gender
representation. The narrative devices employed by these four novelists are varied and rich. As literature is a powerful means of preserving memories of the past, they created fiction out of the materials of their region and its past and contributed to offset the despairing view of man. Comparatively the element of memory is not as much in Carson McCullers’ fiction but her novels are also included in the discussion as she is a Southern regionalist sharing some of the Southern themes like time, place and history.

The dissertation is composed in six chapters. The introductory chapter deals with the different theories of memory, Southern themes and Southern women’s writing. The Civil War (1861–1865) not only changed the history of America but also the Southern American literature. There was more than a generation gap between Mark Twain and William Faulkner, yet the two were linked by their relationship to the South broadly, to the Civil War specifically, in particular to the memory of that conflict in the South. As Lewis Simpson observes, Twain effectively “created the model of the crucial role Faulkner enacted: that of the Southern author as at once a participant in and ironic witness to a drama of memory and history that centered essentially in the never-ending remembrance of the great American civil conflict of 1861-1865.” Both acknowledged the “obligation of the writer to serve as a witness, not to the historical event, but to the remembrance of it” (Simpson1991:152). The influence of the Civil War on the prominent writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the history of Southern American literature, South Renaissance and its writers, Post-War literature, the important role played by Southern American women
writers and their contribution to literature are outlined in this chapter. An attempt is also made to understand the way these Southern American women writers used memories of their past, setting, time, history, race, family, myth and region in their fiction.

The second chapter studies in depth the way Ellen Glasgow used tradition, history, memory and past in her novels *Barren Ground* (1925) and *Vein of Iron* (1935). *Barren Ground* tells the story of Dorinda who was very much attached to the land. Her attachment to the land becomes the ground work for her conscious memories. For the setting of this novel, Glasgow went far back into the past, to the days of her childhood. The images of the South were seen by her through the remembering eyes of a child. Dorinda, represents Glasgow’s own conflict between Old South nostalgia and New South realism. It is shown clearly in her fight for the land and her own life. The novel *Vein of Iron* centers on the love and marriage of Ada Fincastle, daughter of a hardy Scotch-Irish family. The memories of the past are presented through family history in the novel. The novel shows four different generations interacting in order to trace an ideal of what Glasgow called “fortitude” and to show its transmission as a force transcending specific manifestations in particular characters. Glasgow used memories of past as a narrative device to present personal and family events. Ada endures the struggle of the contradictory elements of desire and will, and the always-disappointed expectancy of the return of the past. In these two novels *Barren Ground* and *Vein of Iron* Glasgow discusses many levels of history: universal, social, familial, and individual.
The third chapter gives us an insight into Katherine Anne Porter’s novels *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939) and *Old Mortality* (1939). In the novel, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, Porter uses stream of consciousness as one of the narrative devices by which Miranda, the protagonist of the novel, recollects her past. Because of a severe attack of influenza, she goes into delirium and has many fearful dreams which are presented vividly through the stream of consciousness device. Porter treats her memories also as “mythical events.” In her fiction myth refers to a form of tribal memory, a preserving of events of the past as a means of justifying and explaining the views of the present. In this semi–autobiographical novel Porter, through Miranda, examines the past of her family, adjusts to her disillusionment with some of the memories and ritual clichés she has been asked to accept, and somehow settles into the image of herself as a person occupying space and moving through time. During her early life, Miranda was the ward of her grandmother who sustained herself by the dogma of a legendary past. This story shows the distortion of the conventional time sequence in the interweaving of past, present and future time and the blending of fantasy with reality in order to render the sub-surface complexity of Miranda’s personality. *Old Mortality* is the story of Miranda’s confrontation with the most formidable archetype her society can offer: the Southern belle, a nineteenth century American manifestation of the virgin love goddess of Mexico. It is a mixture of legend and memory. Miranda is the fictional character fully based on the details of Porter’s own experiences in life. It has two prominent themes that are, in themselves, Southern favorites – the family and the legend the family creates – history transformed into myth. Her stated intention to write from memory is quite amply borne out in her fiction where she draws from a
long history of personal, family, and regional events. She used memory as a narrative
device to present a long history of personal, family, and regional events. The
mythopoeic ability of Miranda’s family is also typically Southern. Miranda attached
great importance to the family and its traditions, therefore, she had a sense of the past,
a sense of its history. Porter artistically uses the elements past and memory while
portraying the main theme of the family in the novel.

The fourth chapter examines Eudora Welty’s novels *The Robber Bridegroom*
(1963) and *The Optimist’s Daughter* (1972). In *The Robber Bridegroom*, Welty
artistically weaves the powerful elements of past, myth, Frontier legend, gothic horror,
folk tale and memory through the characters of the planter, Clement Musgrove, his
second wife Salome, his daughter Rosamond and Jamie Lockhart, the robber. Welty
had used the double nature of memory in order to show the conflict between past and
present in her two novels. Themes like the general history of a region, the effects of
the steady passage of time, the question of personal identity, the inability to
distinguish between reality and fantasy, and the dual nature of both man and the world
he confronts are depicted in the novel. Welty’s perception of the Southwest frontier as
reiteration of past tales gives rise to encompassing doubleness in the tale and
doubleness in respect to identity. Past and present have a sameness for Clement, and
experience has shown him that good and evil are not separate, nor ugliness and beauty.
*The Optimist’s Daughter* has several themes like death, human relationships and
effects of memory on the past. The novel deals with the recollection of memories of
Laurel Hand, the protagonist of the novel. She has long been absent from the South,
comes from Chicago to New Orleans, where her father dies after surgery. Welty’s concern here seems to be that death plunges the dead into the past by snapping the present shut and what becomes important then is what living memory does with the past. Welty had used past in her fiction not as an episode, but as an ethical alternative. In a night alone in the house she grew up in, she confronts elements of the past, comes to a better understanding of it and of herself and her parents.

The fifth chapter analyses McCullers’s novels, *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) and *Clock without Hands* (1961). The main theme in her novels is spiritual isolation. As a Southern regionalist she had portrayed some of the Southern themes like race, gender, setting, place, time, past and memory in her fiction. She used the element of memories of the past for the development of plot and characterization. *The Member of the Wedding* is primarily the story of Frankie Addams, a motherless, twelve-year-old-girl engaged in a romance with the world. The agonies of growth, the search for identity, the paradoxical desire to escape, to experience, to belong, suddenly converge on Frankie on the occasion of her brother’s wedding, which becomes the intolerable symbol of all her longings and the focus of her perverse misunderstanding of the adult world. Berenice Brown, the black cook who lives in her past, acts as a counterfoil to Frankie. Her desire to have a bright blue eye symbolizes her powerful desire to break from the fated conditions of her birth and social position. The elements of past in this novel are presented through the individual memories of Berenice. In *Clock without Hands* McCullers focuses on the internal conflict of her characters — Malone, the druggist and Judge Fox Clane. She attempts to give to the
dramatization of this conflict the sociological base and a historical perspective. The individual memories of both the characters reflect not only their past life but also the time of action. She explores issues like racial antagonism, political controversy, class differences and the barriers between generations, thereby enlarging the ambit of her loneliness, isolation and internal conflict. *Clock without Hands* is an exploration of the American South on the brink of desegregation. It tries to link the existential crisis of a man doomed by cancer with the sociological crisis of the South poisoned by racial strife.

The sixth chapter rounds off the discussion that takes place in the earlier chapters. It summarizes the recurring themes and preoccupations of Southern American literature as reflected in the Southern women writers. The four American women writers of the South chosen for study have skillfully delineated family, time, place, memory and past as narrative devices for the development of the plot and characterization which have enriched their fictional craft.

I have followed the MLA Style Sheet VII edition in the organisation and presentation of my thesis.

This is a revised version of my thesis revised along the lines suggested by the foreign examiner. I have tried my best to follow the advice given by the examiner in imparting greater focus to my thesis as well as filling any lacunae in the discussion. I thank the examiner for the valuable comments for the improvement of my thesis.