

This Is Her Century: A Study of Margaret Walker's Work

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To The Memory of My Father

Abstract

Title: This Is Her Century: A Study of Margaret Walker's Work

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This thesis is a study of the works of Margaret Walker (1915-1998) in a chronological order in the social and intellectual context of twentieth century America. Material presented in this study is based on research on available criticism published on Walker's work. It is also based on research on the social, intellectual, and political aspects of twentieth century America. This thesis also incorporates information derived from the researcher's close reading of Walker's work. It argues that issues of race, gender, and class are always connected in twentieth century America and in Walker's work as reflective of this century in America. It also argues that Walker's feminist consciousness develops from one work to another until it reaches its peak in her later poetry. Chapter one investigates Walker's literary heritage to understand the factors that shaped her creativity and contributed to the formation of her voice as a writer. It examines how far she was influenced by white and black literary traditions in her writings. Chapter two approaches Walker's early poetry, represented in *For My People* (1942) in the context of 1930s and 1940s America. This volume is discussed in relation to Communism and Marxist thought to know how far Walker fell under their influence during that time. Chapter three examines Walker's next publication, *Jubilee* (1966) in the context of 1950s and 1960s America. It focuses specifically on the Civil Rights Movement and how Walker's novel reflects on its events and main debates. Chapter Four explores Walker's later poetry: *Prophets for a New Day* (1970), *October Journey* (1973), *Farish Street* (1986), and *This Is My Century* (1989) in relation to 1970s and 1980s America. It explores how far these works show the influence of the Women's Movement and Black Feminism on Walker's perceptions.

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Introduction:

The Most Famous Person Nobody Knows

Always I am determined to overcome adversity, determined to win, determined to be me, myself at my best, always female, always black, and everlastingly free. I think this is always what the woman writer wants to be, herself, inviolate, and whole. Shirley Chisholm, who is also black and female, says she is unbossed and unbought. So am I, and I intend to remain that way. Nobody can tell me what to write because nobody owns me and nobody pulls my strings. I have not been writing to make money or earn my living. I have taught school as my vocation. Writing is my life, but it is an avocation nobody can buy. In this respect I believe I am a free agent, stupid perhaps, but *me* and still free. (*On Being* 8)

These strong, assertive, and defiant words are the ones that Margaret Walker (1915-1998) uses to define herself. They indicate how the desire for freedom to be herself was her essential asset. Walker's emphasis on words like "agent," "free," and "*me*," regardless of how "stupid" that might be, highlights the way she preferred to live and write: counter-mainstream. This quotation also suggests that the interrelatedness of race and gender informed Walker's everlasting quest for intellectual and artistic freedom. Race and gender shape Walker's literary practice and vision. Her work mainly focuses on African Americans' past and present in America and specifically African American women.

That is not the only reason for Walker's importance as a writer whose work deserves to be read and analysed. Margaret walker is a significant author because she forms part of a matrilineal line of African American women writers from the first African American woman writer, Phyllis Wheatley to younger generations of African

American women writers like Toni Morrison, Nikki Giovanni, and Alice Walker. Moreover, Margaret Walker is an overtly political writer who engages directly with the politics of her time. She differs from her female literary contemporaries and successors in that she is not only involved in gender politics but in all kinds of political affairs. She reflects on every important issue of her time and place.

Furthermore, Walker was the first woman writer to question the authority of important male writers like Richard Wright and Alex Haley. She challenged the norms of her time and dared to psycho-analytically analyse Wright's life and work. She was not afraid to assert counter mainstream views of Wright as genius. Walker did that also with Alex Haley when she sued him for taking parts of her novel, *Jubilee* (1966) into his *Roots* (1976). In fact, Walker was the first writer to turn slave narratives into fiction through her innovative text; however, Haley took credit for what she did. The novel is a remarkable achievement that should be incorporated into the American canon of great literature like Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). In spite of this obvious importance of Walker as a writer, she has not received enough credit for her literary achievements and authentic accounts on twentieth Century America.

Walker is a writer who is well-known by name for her work. However, very little criticism is written on her literary contributions. Maryemma Graham gives an example: "Although widely anthologized – over two hundred appearances to date – Walker is too often recognized among academic critics as the author of the extraordinary "For My People," while the novel *Jubilee* (1966) is far more widely read than it or its author is discussed" (*Fields* xi). If this is the case with a popular novel like *Jubilee*, it is worse with Walker's later poetry. Graham notes the obvious

lack of criticism on Walker: “I had incorrectly assumed in my naiveté that someone with such a love for language and who thrived on intense intellectual debate would be better represented and viewed in the world of literary criticism” (introd. to *How* viii). However, this is far from being the case with Walker.

In 1998, in an advertisement for the first documentary film on Walker by Judith McCray, Nikki Giovanni lamented the fact that though Margaret Walker, “singlehandedly turned poetry upside down with her declaration of love and her challenge to the future of her people,” she remained outside the canon of African American literature. Giovanni called Walker “the most famous person nobody knows” (Nikki Giovanni, qtd. in Graham, *Fields* xi). These words are the most suitable to describe Margaret Walker’s status in literary circles during the twentieth century. Before this documentary film, Walker used to be excluded from the major literary guides like Donald B. Gibson’s *Modern Black Poets* (1973) on the basis that Walker is a well-known writer but on whom there is “very little or no writing” (167). Trudier Harris ascribes this critical negligence to the fact that “She was looked upon as one whose achievements were in the past, someone who had earned respect but to whom no undue attention needed to be given” (367).

In fact, the lack of criticism on Margaret Walker’s work needs to be explained and its reasons are worth investigating. Walker either received negative attention from critics or none at all. There are a number of possible explanations for this. Walker’s periodic absences from the literary scene, due to involvements with her family and a university teaching career, made it easy for critics to either forget or neglect her. Walker stayed far from public attention which can justify the scanty criticism available on her works. Maryemma Graham argues that Walker’s writing career “was marked by periodic silences from the literary scene, corresponding with

the moment when literary criticism was becoming a dominant force in the American academy” (*Fields* xi). Walker was highly appreciated by critics when she received the Yale University Younger Poets Award. Then, nearly twenty-four years passed before she got another literary work published. As Graham comments, “By the time Walker published a major work of fiction, it was twenty-four years after her first appearance as a poet, and the world had certainly changed. Not knowing where to place her critically, literary scholars found it easier to leave her alone” (xi). Her return after this long absence made Walker appear to critics like an intruder from a past generation, while younger voices emerged across the nation and worth consideration.

Furthermore, Walker returned in the 1960s with a novel when poetry by African Americans was in vogue during the Civil Rights Movement. It was a popular medium for conveying ideas and communicating with African American youth. Writers of the Black Arts Movement like Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed, and Sonia Sanchez published at least one volume of poetry each during the 1960s. Gwendolyn Brooks, Walker’s contemporary published five volumes of poetry during this decade and read her poetry in inns and taverns across the nation. Then, Walker resorted to poetry in the 1970s and the 1980s when novels by African American women writers like Alice Walker, Octavia Butler, and Toni Morrison were very popular. They used fiction to celebrate the African American female experience and received prestigious prizes for their literary achievements.

Walker’s limited literary production compared to younger writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Nikki Giovanni, and Rita Dove or contemporaries like Gwendolyn Brooks helped critics forget her. Also, regardless of her family and work commitments, Walker had an obsession with perfection, which made the number of

her publications much less than could be. She confirms that in one of her articles: “Oddly enough, I have not published a great deal of poetry – not nearly as much as I have written – because I had some notion instilled in me early about printing only the very best and not being satisfied easily” (*On Being* 20). For example, *Jubilee* took nearly three decades to complete. Walker could have published more but very little of her writings went to print.

Younger generations of writers who got more fame and acknowledgement than Walker used to care less about the issue of perfection. Blaming Walker for the long time she took to finish *Jubilee*, Nikki Giovanni expresses this view: “So, I am perfectly willing to expose a great deal of my foolishness because I don’t think that infallibility is anything to be proud of. I don’t believe that I should be perfect” (*A Poetic* 57). This difference is evident when Giovanni says: “I’m very proud of some of the foolish poems I’ve done” (57). It is significant here to know that while Walker took three decades to publish a novel, Giovanni published twenty volumes of poetry from 1967 to 1973. Yet, Walker is not the only writer who published less in pursuit of perfection; Ralph Ellison produced only one novel in his life, *Invisible Man* (1952). That is why, Walker considers him a “perfectionist” (*Conversations* 80). This seems to be a generational difference that can explain why Nikki Giovanni, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Rita Dove, and Sonia Sanchez received the fame and acknowledgement that Walker did not.

However, Ellison received considerable critical attention for only one novel and received satisfactory fame, which Walker could not attain for a novel and five volumes of poetry because she stayed in the South. Walker stayed physically away from the urban centres of critical attention. She lived most of her life in the South, which kept her out of critics’ consideration. Maryemma Graham notes that “Despite

the abundance of talent emerging from the South, no black writer has ever achieved recognition by remaining there. Richard Wright is identified with Chicago, New York, and Paris, and certainly not with Mississippi or Tennessee” (introd. to *How* xx). That is essentially true and it is the case with many other writers like Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker. Walker’s geographical isolation left her critically abandoned or as Melbe Joyce Boyd states removed “from the sharp, competitive edges of cultural conflict” (64). It seems that it is not only a matter of having a book in print to attract critics’ attention. A writer needs to be seen in literary salons, forums, and public debates to be visible to critics. Walker herself was aware of that. She told Nikki Giovanni that writers and artists “always felt you had to go to New York for success, because the big publishing houses were there, the big critics were there. Everybody gravitated toward New York” (*A Poetic* 46). This anti-Southern prejudice has nothing to do with writers’ creativity or talent.

Walker did not go to New York to get access to big publishing houses or pursue critics’ attention as some other writers did. Her later works in the 1970s and the 1980s were published in the South, which made them less circulated and much less investigated than her earlier two publications. At that time, Walker did not care about the possible opportunities available for her in the urban North, which she regretted in the 1990s. She admitted that in her conversation with Kay Bonetti in 1991: “Maybe if I were in New York or Chicago my stuff might be considered better than it’s considered as a Southern woman living in Jackson. But I don’t care about that” (*Conversations* 126). This quotation shows that Walker feels she is neglected not just because she is Southern but because a woman too.

Actually, Walker was undervalued by her male contemporary writers because of her early marriage and engagement with children, one year after the publication of

For My People. Joyce A. Joyce tells that she once heard Margaret Walker saying that “Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps were on a panel for which she was late or absent” and Hughes “jokingly asked about her absence” and Bontemps “amusingly replied that she was somewhere having a baby” (87-88). This sexist comment shows how gender was part of the reasons why Walker was overlooked by critics, who were mostly male at that time. An example of critics’ gender bias against Walker is Charles T. Davis’s *Black is the Color of the Cosmos: Essays on Afro-American Literature and Culture 1942-1981* (1989). The collection talks about a long list of male African American writers and not a single woman.

Walker did her best to produce perfect works according to her own criteria and considered that enough to present her to her audience. This can be ascribed to her upbringing, which made her unconcerned about rewards and appraisals. In one of her essays she says: “We were taught that we were expected to achieve and that the achievement must be one of excellence. However, we were taught not to expect excessive praise for a job well done” (*How* 19). This view made Walker content to stay in the South, away from public attention, and receive scanty comments on her work. She believed that her task was confined to writing her best and getting her work published and nothing else, which turned out to be wrong in practice.

Further, Walker did not think much of what might critics say about her. This is clear in her advice to Nikki Giovanni: “You have to be true to yourself and what you believe regardless of what the world thinks or regardless of how society reacts to you” (*A Poetic* 87). Walker refrained from adapting her work to meet the standards of the market or the preferences of critics. Charlotte Goodman gives an example when she says that *Jubilee* has been far less frequently discussed even by feminist critics than the novels of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker because it “does not focus

on sexism within the black community as the novels of other contemporary black women writers frequently do” (239). Walker maintained a conservative moral perspective that most critics did not find exciting enough to investigate in the second half of the twentieth century, when many writers challenged the norms of moral decency to attract attention. For example, sexuality is not an issue in her work and religious consciousness is always a backdrop in most of it. Though Walker’s work responds to main twentieth century socio-political movements in America, she lived by her own standards, which were somehow in contradiction with her time. Walker called for social change towards race, class, and gender equalities but she was conservative regarding moral issues. This contradiction was perceived negatively by critics. Walker told Ruth Campbell: “I read somewhere in *Newsweek* where Margaret Walker is one of those moral writers and that is supposed to be a form of derision, but to me I could not have a greater compliment” (*Conversations* 93). That indicates how Walker was committed to her own norms regardless of what is liked by media, critical circles, and publishing houses.

Another reason for the lack of criticism on Walker’s work is her reputation as a politically radical person and writer because of her relationship with several Communist writers in the 1930s and the 1940s such as Richard Wright and Arna Bontemps. Walker emerged as a writer during the Great Depression and the spread of Communism in America. She started to publish with a generation of writers who championed anti-racism, anti-imperialism, and anti-class. Thus, critics tended to classify Walker as a Communist and a Leftist all her life. Maryemma Graham links this preconceived idea about Walker with her personal and social radical views to explain critics’ negligence of her work. Graham considers this a “contradiction between Walker’s adherence to certain ideals that are traditionally American and her

own social radicalism that makes her critics uncomfortable with her aesthetic vision” (introd. to *How* ix). That is true to some extent that her later poetry strongly criticizes materialism, consumerism, and lack of values and family ties in modern American life. Nancy Berke considers Walker one of the poets who “appear to have been placed out of the modern American poetry canon because they wrote directly about political and social injustices” (*Women* 30). Actually, Walker’s critical attitude towards modern life-styles in America has urged critics to classify her as a counter-mainstream writer.

Moreover, Walker’s broad concern about African American experience and American society as a whole used to be a challenge to a predominantly white critical establishment. Locating the African American experience in the background of her work, Walker does not limit herself to one theme or a specific area of interest. Graham supports this idea: “It is this broader perspective, which always challenges the literary imagination that has given her critics such difficulty, perhaps, in finding for Walker a “place” in the literary canon” (xxi). Walker’s work addresses issues of race, class, and gender as well as considering family, history, the South, freedom, justice, activism, and modern America. Walker’s ability to respond to changes in American life made her work varied in a way that defies categorization, which is usually the base of most critical writings.

Walker also used various forms and different writing techniques to express her views; which also defies critical classifications of classic, modern, folk, or vernacular. Walker said to Nikki Giovanni: “I have just as much right to write “Hoppy Toad,” a folk narrative poem as I have to write “For My People.” Both of them are reflections of what I feel is black life” (*A Poetic* 71). Walker wrote poems in free verse, ballads, sonnets, litanies, elegies, and blues poems. She did not employ

one rhyme pattern or one poetic technique. Walker employed symbols and images from history, religion, folk culture, and political activities. This mixture of themes and forms in Walker's work is a source of confusion for any critic trying to categorize her work.

Besides, Walker's distinguished education and her bourgeois background work against her in the minds of critics. They consider her as a person who belongs to academia rather than the world of art and literature. Factually, Walker's first volume of poetry was submitted for the fulfilment of her Masters degree and her novel was later submitted for the fulfilment of her Ph.D. It should also be mentioned that the Yale University Younger Poets Award was provided by Yale University as well. Accordingly, Walker used to be perceived by critics as a person living in an ivory tower distanced from real writers' gatherings and competitions. Richard K. Barksdale confirms the opposite when he says that "Although Walker, too, spent all of her days in academia; she was never as a writer captive by it" (104). Walker believed that critics appreciated less educated writers who had more tendencies to experimentation. For example, in reference to Richard Wright, she told Claudia Tate that the American mind appreciates a self-made person, which is a myth or a bubble because everybody gets help: "There's no such thing as Topsy just grows" (*Conversations* 68). Walker refers here to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), in which a young slave girl, Topsy responds to a question about who made her that "I spect I grow'd. Don't think nobody never made me" because she has had no knowledge of God or her mother (157). This phrase passed into the English language in the nineteenth century. By using this phrase, Walker seems to suggest that particularly for African Americans many helping factors contribute to the making of any writer because of the collective nature of the race. Walker ascribes

Richard Wright's fame to this self-made man image. According to Walker, "The white man in America, the white world caters to the black person who didn't go to school. I represent education, family, and background. I represent scholarship" (68). That seems to be one of the reasons why critics' have neglected Walker's achievements.

Additionally, Walker disturbed critics and made them turn against her when she dared to go through a lawsuit against Alex Haley, an important and respected literary figure in the 1970s. Walker found significant parallels between Haley's *Roots* (1976) and *Jubilee*. The fact that Haley's novel was published ten years after hers made Walker more convinced that he stole from her text. Walker accused Haley of plagiarism and took him to the court. The judge ordered a hearing by a female magistrate, who wrote a report in her favour. However, the judge ignored the report. He later declared Haley innocent on the basis of "fair use." Haley's novel was very popular during that time and it was made into a TV serial. Walker's claims against Haley almost destroyed her reputation among critics. Maryemma Graham states that "Most readers knew Margaret Walker as a poet and author of a widely read novel, but there is no denying that her reputation and credibility were badly damaged by these actions" (*Fields* xi).

Further, in 1988, Walker infuriated the mainstream literary circles when she dared to publish her biography of Richard Wright, based on her three year friendship with him. Critics highly respected Wright as a self-made person and an exceptionally talented writer and considered him above criticism. However, Walker dared to challenge this image, which begot her critics' wrath. The book seems to deconstruct a long established view of Wright as a great man and writer. It is a psycho-analytical criticism of Wright, man and writer. Graham comments that "What fame Walker had

managed to achieve had become notoriety by the late 1980s. She was still reeling from attacks by the established literary community ... This was the second time that negative attention was directed toward her” (*Fields* xi). Critics viewed Walker as an unrequited lover and considered the book a personal revenge on Wright. The book aroused critics’ anger beyond normal limits. Graham says that many critics argued that Walker wrote the book “as an embittered old has-been, forgotten by the literary establishment, her aborted relationship with Richard Wright still the source of unmitigated anger” (xi). Henceforth, Walker continued to be surrounded by controversy and was urged to defend herself against accusations of being a rejected lover.

This controversial relationship with critics prompted Walker to be more visible in the literary circles. At the age of 74, she started to give poetry readings across America and welcomed interviewers who pursued her. She was not broken by these confrontations, she survived the consequences. Graham comments on this ability to withstand critics’ attacks: “But it is the survivor who can bear to speak her own truth, as Walker does here, fiercely defending her beliefs often in the presence of opposing realities” (introd. to *Conversations* xii). Actually, Walker’s relentless commitment to her principles, regardless of counter viewpoints, contributed to the making of her image as a radical thinker among critics.

As a result of all these reasons, not enough criticism was written on Walker’s work. Only in 1988, scholar and critic, Maryemma Graham, who was one of Walker’s students and very close to her, decided that there should be a book of criticism on Walker. Graham relates how Walker was eager to see this book and kept asking about it: “When are you going to get that book done,” “I want to know what are the critics saying about me,” and “are they all waiting for me to die?” Graham

says: “we both thought about Zora Neale Hurston and decided the book could wait no longer” (*Fields* xiii). Both were aware that Walker could be like Hurston, whose work slid into obscurity because of the lack of critical attention given to it. Only when Alice Walker published her article “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston” (1975), was Hurston’s work critically discovered, fifteen years after her death. A book manuscript was in Graham’s hands in the summer of 1998 including twenty-four critical essays out of fifty submitted by various authors from both sides of the Atlantic. However, Walker was too critically ill to read it (xi). Graham’s *Fields Watered With Blood: Critical Essays on Margaret Walker* was the first book on Walker’s works.

Since then, there has been no second book entirely devoted to Walker that covers all her works. In 1998, Jacqueline Miller Carmichael published *Trumpeting a Fiery Sound: History and Folklore in Margaret Walker’s ‘Jubilee,’* which is on Walker’s novel. In 2001, Nancy Berke published *Women Poets on the Left: Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, Margaret Walker*, which approaches Walker’s early poetry in comparison with Ridge’s and Taggard’s. Henceforth, there is nothing published on Walker except occasional journal articles and book chapters. Available studies of Walker’s work either focus on some of her work or compare her to other writers. This study is the first comprehensive study of Walker’s work: it focuses on one topic, all Walker’s creative work.

Walker’s contradictory views, the periods of silence that interrupted the course of her literary production, the important social and literary movements that coincided with each of her publications, and the continuous change of life and literature during her life necessitates a more inclusive approach to her work. Maryemma Graham argues that “Walker challenged both new critical and

conventional readings; at the same time she offers penetrating intellectual critiques” (*Fields* xii). This very fact makes it difficult to approach Walker’s work using a specific critical framework. According to Graham, “Walker ruptures the critical categories such as “modernist,” “feminist,” or “nationalist” that we commonly engage. Those offering interpretations of Walker’s work often find they have to modify if not “invent” a framework for discussion” (xii). This is exactly what this thesis aims to do: explore Walker’s work without being confined to conventional critical perspectives. It is an attempt to demonstrate that Walker’s creative work deserves to be incorporated in the twentieth century mainstream African American literary canon. Walker’s work is important because it reflects on major events of twentieth century America. It deserves critical attention because it shows that issues of race and gender are always connected in throughout the twentieth century American culture. Furthermore, Walker was ahead of her time in her consideration of the uniqueness of African American women’s experience. For example, she acknowledged her maternal ancestors in her poem “Lineages” (1942), two decades before Nikki Giovanni’s “Mothers” (1972) and Alice Walker’s “Women” (1973) and her novel *Jubilee* (1966) was the first neo-slave narrative.

Available criticism on Walker views her either as a writer of the South or a nationalist poet. Some critics focus only on the biblical aspect of her language and the Afro-centric perspective of her work. They tend to call Walker a humanist, a visionary, or a folk poet. None of these categories are adequate for thorough critical investigation of Walker’s work; they only refer to aspects of her writing. William Scott comments that “Readers of Margaret Walker’s poetry and fiction have found it relatively easy to characterize (and occasionally dismiss) her work as simply the vehicle for a grand historical vision” (1083). Thus, there is a need for a broader view

of Walker's literature that links it to the mainstream canon of African American literature. This study fills a gap in existing research on Walker, which can help later studies on her contemporaries or her influence on later generations of African American women writers. This study will explore how Walker developed her thought from one work to another, to prove that Walker – though committed to her race – managed to comment on America as a whole. It will show that a writer like Walker is a potential topic for a full length study, which is lacking so far because of critics' inability to view Walker's work in broader terms of analysis.

The foundation of this analysis of Walker's work is the assumption that Walker was a writer conscious of her time and place. Because Walker grew and developed as a writer throughout the twentieth century, her work can best be viewed in its socio-historical context. Born fifteen years after its beginning and dying two years before its end, Walker had the experience to speak about twentieth century America. She witnessed many debates, conflicts, defeats, and victories. Accordingly, twentieth century America can be taken as a background to view her literary works against. Associating Walker's works with their historical moments can illuminate how Walker responded to forces of change in American society. Nancy Berke considers this approach to the less investigated literary texts important to have an understanding of the periods during which they were written and the experiences that inspired them: "we must consider forgotten and undervalued voices that bore witness to the insurmountable rage, complexity, and horror that accompanied them as they lived, wrote, and worked for change" ("Anything" 39). Studying Walker's work in the context of the twentieth century is a way to prove that Walker's work is directly related and responsive to main debates in twentieth century America and it has been unduly neglected for various critical prejudices. It gives access to new perspectives

to view Walker's work or her "writing life" as bell hooks calls it in her autobiography (*Wounds* xxii).

Walker herself justified this framework as proper for the study of her works when she claimed her right to talk about the twentieth century in her poem "This Is My Century" (1989). She also used the title for her last poetic publication: *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems* (1989), which is also a complete edition of all her volumes of poetry. This title inspired the title, the topic, and the framework of this thesis. It provides a proper umbrella term, under which Walker's published literary works can be included. Walker was aware of the relationship between her life and literature and the twentieth century. She was keen on recording its major events and the various changes it witnessed. In 1992, in a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of *For My People*, Walker said:

From my early adolescence, I've been dealing with the meaning of the turn of the century. I was born when it was barely fifteen years old. And now we have less than ten years left in this century. So, the body of my work springs from my interest in a historical point of view that is central to the development of black people as we approach the twenty-first century. That is my theme. And I have tried to express it, both in prose and poetry. I feel that if I've learned anything about this country and century – I've expressed it already in the books I've been writing and the few more I'd like to write.
(qtd. in Graham, "I Want" 3)

This strong sense of the twentieth century as a backdrop for Walker's work validates the approach adopted in this study. How far Walker's claim that the twentieth century is a theme in her work is true is the main investigation of this thesis.

The twentieth century as a theme will be the thread of thought that binds all the chapters of this thesis. To explore the development of Walker's work throughout the century, this thesis will study it in chronological order to find out how far each of Walker's writings was representative and reflective of the time of its writing and publication. The focus of this study is the hundred poems included in *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems*, which were selected by Walker herself out of a thousand she had written throughout her life, in addition to *Jubilee*. Though this thesis incorporates evidence in support of its argument from Walker's biography of Richard Wright and her two books of essays, they are not investigated as literary genres in this current study.

Noticeably, Walker's writing career can be divided into three major stages: early poetry, represented in *For My People* (1942); *Jubilee* (1966); and her later poetry, published in the 1970s and the 1980s. Each stage is concurrent with a period of social and intellectual change in American society: the Great Depression and Communism, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Women's Movement. This correspondence is noteworthy as it links Walker to the broad context of life in America. This correspondence will be explored in this thesis to find out how far each of Walker's appearances on the American literary scene echoed major social and intellectual debates in America. This study will question areas of continuity and change in Walker's work in response to the social and intellectual development of America during the twentieth century. The three major phases of Walker's work will be investigated in three chapters of this thesis. Each of these chapters is concerned to illuminate how each phase of Walker's work responds to a specific historical moment.

Though Walker's work does not engage fully and explicitly with feminist themes until her later poetry, race and gender still shape her early poetry and *Jubilee*; her identification of herself first as "female" and second as "black" confirms that. This thesis approaches Walker's work through the lens of black feminist theory. It uses black feminism as a theoretical framework. As the interlocking system of race, class, and gender is explored all through the chapters of this thesis, specific feminist concepts are illuminating to its argument: Frances Beale's "double jeopardy," Patricia Hill Collins's "matrix of domination," and Kimberle Crenshaw's "intersectionality." Other feminist critics are also central to the analysis of Walker's work like bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Barbara Christian, Hazel Carby, and others. While the argument of this research benefits from those thinkers, it does not always agree with them.

This study shows that the gradual growth of Walker's feminist consciousness over the twentieth century echoes the change in the social and intellectual climate of America. The social and political atmosphere in the 1930s and 1940s encouraged Walker to diminish the significance of gender in favour of class in her early poetry. The events of the Civil Rights Movement, made race central to Walker's work but she reflected on it from an ordinary woman's point of view in *Jubilee*. In the 1970s and 1980s, women's lives became central to public debates for the first time, which is reflected in Walker's later poetry.

The first chapter of this thesis investigates the vibrancy of Walker's literary heritage as derived from both black and white cultures. It examines the kind of culture she had been exposed to and the elements that contributed to the formation of her creativity. This chapter demonstrates the broadness of Walker's cultural background: she acquainted herself with philosophy, history, foreign languages, and

literature. First, it traces possible influences of the European literary tradition on Walker's poetry: the Romantic poets and T.S. Eliot. Second, it examines the impact of Whitman on her poetry. The third section of the chapter investigates the influence of the Harlem Renaissance on Walker's work. This chapter is concerned to find out how Walker responded to her predecessors in the process of finding her own poetic voice.

Chapter Two explores Walker's first publication, *For My People* in the context of the 1930s and the 1940s. It studies this volume as the product of Walker's thoughts and experiences during these two decades including the Great Depression and Communism and how Walker represented them in her poems. The poems are analysed in the context of their time and place to find out how Walker reflected on America during the 1930s and the 1940s. The chapter focuses on how Walker, though influenced by Communism and the current class consciousness during that time, did not obscure issues of race and gender. Walker did not entirely conform to calls for subordinating race and gender to class struggle.

Chapter Three focuses on Walker's novel, *Jubilee*, and how it reflects on the Civil Rights Movement. It approaches the novel in the context of the 1950s and the 1960s, the years during which Walker wrote most of the novel. The chapter explores parallel lines between the events of the novel and Civil Rights events; it shows correspondences between the nineteenth and the twentieth century. This investigation of the novel demonstrates how Walker's representation of the struggle for racial equality is presented from a woman's point of view. The chapter also shows how Walker's condemnation of racial inequality overlaps with a denunciation of attendant class barriers.

Chapter Four considers the third phase of Walker's literary career, the 1970s and the 1980s. This chapter investigates the extent to which Walker's publications during these years reflect the influence of the Women's Liberation Movement. This chapter analyses Walker's poetry of that time to show how her feminist consciousness comes to its peak. It examines how Walker's poetry of the time engages fully with women's experience and reflects on black feminist thought. It also shows how Walker's growing feminist consciousness intersects with race and class issues. This chapter represents the third phase of Walker's work in which her feminist consciousness culminates and becomes central to her creative vision.

This thesis intends to affirm that Walker's work – though critically neglected and considered non-mainstream literature – is an essential record of major social and intellectual standpoints in America during the twentieth century. It illuminates the African American experience as manifested through the web of class, race, and gender during the twentieth century. Walker's publications echo the evolution of major movements in America: Communism, Civil Rights, and Women's Rights. The concept of equality and freedom for marginalized groups and especially African Americans is always there in the background of Walker's work. Yet, this thesis shows how each phase of Walker's work is concerned with a different kind of inequality imposed by surrounding social and intellectual circumstances.

The task of this thesis is to offer a close reading of Walker's work that demonstrates its importance, showing that its neglect is unjustified. Walker engages through her work with central concerns of twentieth century America, which qualifies her to be a major figure in the century's African American literature. This thesis shows that Walker is a woman writer, who slipped to the margins of the African American literary canon for improper reasons. In the coming few chapters,

the importance of Walker's representation of twentieth century America will be established against its critical obscurity.

Chapter One:

Margaret Walker's Literary Heritage

Straightforwardness, directness, reality are good things to find in a young poet. It is rare to find them combined with a controlled intensity of emotion and a language that, at times, even when it is most modern, has something of the surge of biblical poetry. A Contemporary writer, living in a contemporary world, when she speaks of and for her people older voices are mixed with hers – the voices of Methodist forebears and preachers who preached the word, the anonymous voices of many who lived and were forgotten and yet out of bondage and hope made a lasting music. Miss Walker is not merely a sounding-board for these voices – I do not mean that. (Benet 3-4)

For the purpose of this chapter, these words by Stephen Vincent Benet in his foreword to Margaret Walker's first volume of poetry, *For My People* (1942) are really important. The fact that Benet does not refer to any specific literary figures echoed in Walker's work suggests that various and unlimited voices are reflected in her voice. By "anonymous voices," Benet refers to the voiceless ordinary people who are given voice in Walker's work. However, his words allude to the literary heritage from which Walker started to write and to which she later added. Actually, many literary voices have been echoed in Walker's work beyond her ethnic heritage. This chapter investigate these voices and explores possible cultural and literary influences on her writings. It also finds out how she responded to her literary predecessors and how far she reflected on their legacies.

Margaret Walker's cultural heritage extends back to her ancestors in Africa and the Caribbean. However, the anonymous voices echoed in her life and literature are not confined to her ancestral lands. They extend to include every culture known

in America, the only land she had ever known. From birth to death, Walker never left America, the mostly white nation, whose culture is mainly derived from Europe. Walker received her education in white institutions and was taught by white teachers for a considerable part of her life. She was well versed in American and European history, philosophy, and literature. She spoke English, French, and German. She read European and Russian literature. So, the older voices that Benet talks about are really mixed with other varied, vibrant, and diverse ones. Benet refers to all that as a cultural memory echoed in Walker's verse beyond her immediate consciousness. That perspective seems perfectly in accord with T. S. Eliot's 1919 essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in which he talks about modern poets' debt to dead poets. Eliot argues in this essay that any writer derives his/her literary ancestors from all cultures and Walker is no exception: several literary traditions are reflected in her work.

Accordingly, the purpose of this chapter is to explore these diverse cultural influences as demonstrated in Margaret Walker's literature. It focuses on the different literary influences on the formation of her creativity, emergence, and development as a writer in twentieth century America. Here, the complexities of life and culture in America for an African American person will be highlighted. This chapter shows how Walker responded to literature by European, white American, and African American writers. It investigates how far there are similarities and differences between Walker and the different literary traditions she was exposed to. Additionally, it finds out how Walker viewed herself in the web of "white" versus "black" language, literature, and culture.

Since her early years, Walker experienced two cultures and was involved in them both. She read at home and studied at school European and white American

classical literature. She also admired the African American literature that grew during her childhood and adolescence, known as the Harlem Renaissance. From this very binary input, the argument of this chapter starts to investigate these two influences consecutively. This chapter starts by exploring the white literary tradition as a component of Walker's literary heritage, whether it came from Europe or originated in America. It is worth mentioning here that Walker acquainted herself with literature by white writers when she was a child, long before she studied it in Northwestern University. At NWU, which was mostly white at that time, Walker fought her colleagues' preconceived ideas about African Americans. About her time at NWU, Maryemma Graham says that for two years, "Walker immersed herself in a highly competitive educational environment, ever aware that she was battling against a double sense of inferiority. Not only were African Americans generally thought to be intellectually inferior, but the South's system of education was also regarded as equally inferior" ("I Want" 16). She wanted to prove that she was on equal footing with her white colleagues. She wanted also to show that the European classical literature, generally considered the elite's, is not beyond her abilities as an African American to understand and even use its forms in her work.

Walker's bourgeois background, her distinguished early education, and her diverse readings in the field of literature qualified her to impress her professors. Professor E. B. Hungerford taught her all the forms, the verses, and the meters of English poetry. She studied Shakespeare and the Romantic poets in detail. She also took a creative writing course under Professor Hungerford. He encouraged her to write both poetry and prose and reviewed her work. He also helped her join the Poetry Society of America and get her work published in magazines like *Poetry*. Graham states that he "broke the racial barriers by lobbying for her to be the first

African American to be admitted in a College Chapter” (27). Walker proved herself worthy of his guidance and support in the first place.

Professor Hungerford and later Stephen Vincent Benet, the then Dean of American Poetry, represent the white mentorship in Walker’s apprenticeship. Walker owed her winning of the Yale University Younger Poets Award to Benet. She told Claudia Tate that the volume was rejected three times by the prize’s board on the basis of race. Walker related that she did not submit it again because she was tired of sending it. She confirmed that Benet “simply confronted his colleagues with the fact that if they would not give the award to” her, “he was not going to name anybody else” (*Conversations* 60). If it were not for Hungerford and Benet, Walker would not have got access to publication. There was also Paul Engle, whom she met at the University of Iowa. He was then a notable poet, novelist, and playwright. He encouraged her to write in the ballad form and to use folk material.

The influence of the European tradition on Walker’s work goes back to ancient Greek and Roman literature. Her poem “Elegy” (1970), which she wrote in memory of her professor and friend Manford Kuhn, is an example of that influence. The poem is written in two sections and in free verse. The first section is about the cycle of nature as depicted in the archetypal memory of Greek myths. Summer gives way to winter and time passes for both human beings and nature: “This day a normal time- / Another hour, another year / Of summer fruit and nature” (87).¹ The cycle of life continually turns and everything comes to an end to usher a new beginning. Death comes from life and eternity comes from decay: “With golden summer ripening into Fall / Winter snow blanketing a slumbering seed / Of new anemone” (87). The poem suggests that Professor Kuhn’s death will lead to the birth of new

¹ All poetry by Walker quoted in this thesis will be quoted from *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1989.

intellectuals inspired by his legacy. His death is not the end but a phase of the cycle of life.

The second section of the poem refers to the natural cycle of change within an overall pattern of a collective memory of human beings and generational sequence. This section of the poem suggests that through noble thought and good deeds people can be eternal and outlive oblivion. Walker says that “Within our house of flesh we weave a web of time,” which is the “Rich Pattern of our lives” (87). She likens people’s wise use of their lives to a weaving of a work of art that defies mortality. On the other hand, she likens the human flesh to a “thin-worn twine” that can be easily snapped. The human flesh is mortal but human souls are not. People continue to live “In children’s faces and the sturdy vine / Of daily influences: the prime / Of teacher, neighbour, student, and friend” (88). This continuity through death makes a figure like Kuhn transcend the mortality of the flesh. The poem also echoes William Butler Yeats’s “Monuments of unaging intellect” in “Sailing To Byzantium” (1928) (163).

Walker admired English Romantic poets; however, she differed from them. For Walker, poetry is not emotion recollected in tranquillity as Wordsworth says. The distance in time, place, and topics necessitate that difference. Walker’s themes are related to the miseries of African American’s life and history. It is not tranquillity that produces poetry in Walker’s case. It is the urge to approach past and present troubles. Walker does not convey personal or complementary concerns to enjoy the luxury of tranquil composition. Writing for Walker is a mission as she says: “we seek understanding, liberation, and reconciliation through the mere manipulation of words” (*On Being* 23). Walker’s poetry is more than an evocation of feelings; it is a means of resistance.

On the other hand, like the Romantic poets, Walker wrote lyrical poems. However, Walker's lyricism is communal not subjective. Her lyrical "I" is meant to stand for the whole community. Walker's "I" is closer to Whitman's in its broad meaning. Boundaries between the personal and the public disappear in her poetry. Though the Romantic poets were socially and politically involved, they distanced themselves from the public. They were too much concerned with their inner selves and personal emotions as catalysts of their art. Unlike them, Walker concerned herself with the public and even when she wrote personal poems in specific occasions like the death of her father or her husband, the collective memory enriched her verse.

The influence of the European tradition can also be seen in Walker's poetic forms. For example, Walker used the sonnet form in some of her poems like the last six poems in *For My People*. The sonnet form is traditionally used to deal with such themes as love, time, and beauty. However, Walker uses it to deal with people's troubles. They are about miners, sharecroppers, and ordinary city-dwellers. According to Eugenia Collier, "the form of these poems supports their theme. For the dignified sonnet form, which emerges from a European vision of an orderly universe, substitutes here approximate rhyme rather than true rhyme, indicating that for these people, the promise has been distorted" (103). That is true because these poems are full of pathos, oppression, bewilderment, and hopelessness. There is a clear contradiction of the norms of sonnet writing. The form does not seem suitable to the weight of the tragedies expressed in them. However, Walker's use of the form is not artificial; it is part of her challenge to the masters of European versification. Walker never deviated from the overall theme of her poetry, namely, "her people." Walker confirms this when she says that her poetry "may sometimes be of necessity Anglo-

Saxon or Anglo-American in form, but never in content, in tone, or in philosophy; and always permeated with ideas of revolt” (*How* 122). This is Walker’s unique use of European forms; she uses whites’ poetic forms to attack racism and deconstruct the superiority of the white race. Walker uses the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house, contrary to Audre Lorde’s saying that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (112). Walker gives herself the right to employ traditional forms for untraditional purposes.

T. S. Eliot is one of the white writers whose work seems to be echoed in Walker’s poems. This influence is evident in her poem, “Our Need” (1942). This poem is a counter statement to Eliot’s “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” (1920). In his poem, Eliot draws upon the Agamemnon myth as written by Aeschylus. Eliot laments Sweeney, the character in the poem for being a copy of Agamemnon: crude, corrupt, and womanizer. Eliot alludes to Agamemnon’s murder with his Trojan mistress Cassandra by his wife Clytemnestra as a punishment for his betrayal. He suggests that Sweeney will die the same way. Like Agamemnon, two women will harm him; they “are suspect, thought to be in league” (60). Eliot denounces Sweeney’s inability to learn the lessons of the past as told in stories from ancient times, and thus, he deserves a fate as ominous as Agamemnon’s.

Contrary to Eliot’s point of view, Walker says that the dead people led a life different from ours. Moreover, death usually comes too suddenly to leave time for advices as the opening lines of the poem read:

If dead men died abruptly by a blow-
startled and trapped in today’s immediacy,
having neither moments to speak dazedly
nor whimper wistfully- how can they know

or tell us now the way which we should go? (50)

Modern life is “swift and dangerous” and to face it people should count upon themselves. According to the poem’s persona, the current generations “need a wholeness born of inner strength” to face this “dangerous” life. It is actual experience that helps people find proper ways to survive. Real experiences cannot be forgotten like “slaps of life along the body’s length” (50). We should be realistic to go through life and feel “earth beneath our feet against the storms” (50). The poem’s speaker emphasizes the importance of experiences as solid as the ground to protect people from storms of oppression. Walker’s personal and communal experiences qualify her to disagree with such prominent literary figures like Eliot, who was still alive when this poem was published.

The first line of Walker’s poem parallels the epigraph in Eliot’s poem, which is a sentence said by Agamemnon in the Greek text. It means “Alas, I am struck deep with a mortal blow” (Eliot 59). In spite of this analogy, Walker’s poem is written in the collective first person pronoun to establish a collective voice against Aeschylus’s first person pronoun and Eliot’s third person pronoun. Another difference between the two poems is the poet’s attitude. While Eliot is cynical and pessimistic, Walker is serious and is full of strength that can endow hope. While Walker makes a statement applicable to anyone anywhere; Eliot approaches a particular person, Sweeney. Unlike Eliot, Walker’s poem conveys certainty and positivity: “inner strength,” “sharp thinking,” “certain courage,” “friendly feel,” and “honest rays.” The contrast between the two poems reflects Walker’s response to European modernism as represented in Eliot’s poem. While Eliot’s poem emphasizes individualism, cutting with realist literature, pessimism, and fragmentation; Walker’s poem emphasizes the collective voice, real experiences, hope, and certainty.

This challenge to and subversion of the works of her literary predecessors is not confined to the European tradition. Walker shows the same attitude towards the works of several white American writers, the most distinguishable of them being Walt Whitman, to whom Walker owes much of her creative mind. Whitman's influence on Walker's poetry is unmistakable from the first encounter. Like Whitman, most of her poems are written in free verse, with fleeting rhythm, and the first person pronoun. Whitman's expansive style is implemented in Walker's lines. However, Walker's scope is narrower than Whitman's due to the racial nature of her themes. Walker's glorification of ordinary people and putting them on equal footing with distinguished figures is a recognizable Whitmanesque aspect. Like him, Walker sees heroism in the farmer and any manual labourer as much as she does in Martin Luther King and Du Bois. Furthermore, she adopts the role of a bard talking to common people as Whitman does. His syntax is also prevalent in her poetry: cumulative sentences, repetition, descriptors, and recurrence of verbs in the participle. Stanza by stanza, themes are unfolded in the poems through elaboration, expansion, and repetition to emphatically convey the message.

In the late nineteenth century, Whitman used the epic form to express real not mythical American themes. Like Whitman, Walker used the form; however, she used it to express racial themes. "For My People" is an example. In this poem, Walker embodies the daily life of normal African American people across centuries as heroic. She employs Whitman's extended sentences to include as many categories as she can. For example, she mentions types of music, kinds of domestic work, and various emotions. The racial theme of the poem draws upon the rich oral heritage of the spirituals to convey this expansion.

In this poem, Walker employs the technique of anaphora, which is the repetition of a sequence of words at the beginnings of clauses or lines for emphasis. Each stanza of the poem begins with the phrase “for my people” to emphasize that each section of the poem is concerned with Walker’s racial group. From one stanza to another, Walker emphasizes that each idea expressed is related to her people (6-7). This is typical of several poems by Whitman. In his “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” (1881), lines 13, 14, 15, and 16 consecutively begin with the word “Others:” “Others will enter ... ,” “Others will watch ... ,” and “Others will see ...” to emphasize the clarity and continuity of the scene of Brooklyn ferry travellers over years to come. In the next stanza, the lines from 22 to 26 start with the adverbial expression “just as” to confirm the similarity of enjoyment as felt by all travellers by the ferry across the river (160).

This pattern is actually repeated all through the poem, which is an aspect of Whitman’s style. This technique is useful for the poem’s rhythm as it controls the pace of lines. It also helps the poet express the same idea in different ways from one sentence to another and link them together. In his “Give me the Splendid Sun” (1865), several consecutive lines start with “Give me.” In each line he asks for a different thing but all lines together express his need for nature’s “primal sanities” as unfolded in the last line of the sequence (312). Likewise, Walker’s anaphoric pattern in “For My People” unifies all the stanzas together. Each stanza talks about a different period of time; however, they are all connected by talking about and for one racial group. Anaphora also functions as a linking marker between paralleled stanzas in the poem. This technique is employed in other poems by Walker like “Southern Song,” “We Have Been Believers,” “Today,” and “Teacher” all published in 1942 and “Oxford Is a Legend” (1970).

“For My People” draws upon another Whitmanesque pattern, cataloguing. This term means comprising a list of different names, things, places, times, or ideas that form a single denotation. In “Song of the Open Road” (1856), he mentions the numerous places he passes by in his journey to show the expansion of America. In “Song of Myself” (1856), he takes the reader on a journey to explore the different stages of his life mentioning people he met and thoughts he encountered to show the vast realms of human life and identity. Cataloguing as a technique is very functional in Whitman’s poems. It is the main reflector of his resourcefulness and America’s abundance. It is a tool implemented to celebrate the various aspects or points of view of any poetic topic. Contrary to Whitman’s, Walker’s poem marks the abundance of African Americans’ miseries: oppression, discrimination, dehumanization, and marginalization.

Whitman’s influence is also obvious in the chains of verbs in the present participle form that permeate “For My People.” For example, “washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending / hoeing plowing digging planting pruning patching / dragging along never gaining never reaping never / knowing and never understanding” (6). This fleeting sequence without any punctuation to separate the verbs of physical action indicates a speedy, restless, and ceaseless heavy work. It shows how tough the life of slaves is. Furthermore, the torment is heightened by the sequence of present participle verbs of mind in the negative form. Slaves’ misery is unfathomable to them and bewilderment becomes an additional pain. This pattern is identifiably Whitman’s. His poetry is replete with such chains.

Like Whitman, Walker gives lists of African American types of songs, activities, emotions, places, and hopes. Each stanza of “For My People” forms a separate catalogue of African Americans’ suffering in a specific period of time;

however, all these catalogues form a unifying catalogue of African American life in past, present, and future: “For my people lending their strength to the years, to the / gone years and the now years and the maybe years” (6). Walker’s lists indicate the different kinds of suffering and oppression African Americans were and are still exposed to in America. Though they work ceaselessly: “washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending / hoeing plowing digging planting pruning patching / dragging along,” their work is fruitless: “never gaining never reaping never / knowing and never understanding” (6). The poem develops through these lists to reach the concluding stanza that gives a resolution for them and a way to end suffering, which is revolution: “Let a race of men now / rise and take control” (6). This technique helps the poem show the abundance and diversity of African Americans’ suffering as an antithesis to America’s abundance of resources.

Another technique common in Whitman’s poetry and used by Walker is envelope. Whitman repeats a phrase, a line, or a stanza to enclose other lines or stanzas. In “Passage to India” (1871), he repeats the interjection “O” in the beginning of lines 234 and 238 to envelop three lines starting with “Of You.” (420). In “Delta” (1942), Walker uses the same enveloping interjection to create a pathetic effect when she says: “O valley of my moaning brothers! / Valley of my sorrowing sisters! / Valley of lost forgotten men. / O hunted desperate people” (16). This pathetic effect is in concord with Walker’s lamentation for the disconnected slaves’ families in the Delta of the Mississippi River. This pattern is repeated all through the poem like a typical Whitmanesque poem. This technique is used by Walker in several poems like “People of Unrest” (1942), whose opening line is the same as the closing line and in between seven lines are enveloped. This repeated line is “stare from your pillow into the sun” (23). The enclosed lines urge the reader to see and deliberately derive hope

and happiness from the many persons who saw this hope over centuries of “unrest” and “sorrow” (23).

Whitman was also a model for Walker in writing other poetic forms such as the elegy. In a conversation with Margaret Ann Reid Walker admitted imitating Whitman’s elegiac form, specifically, in “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” (67). Walker followed the form in “For Andy Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney” (1970). Whitman wrote his elegy shortly after the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln in April 1865. A century later, Walker wrote her poem after the murder of the three Civil Rights workers named in the title in Mississippi in June 1964. Both poems are elegiac in form and pathetic in tone, which suit the tragedy dealt with.

There are other imitations that Walker did not confess. One of them is her imitation of Whitman’s image of the lilacs in the first stanza of his poem: “When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom’d, / And the great star early droop’d in the western sky in the night, / I mourn’d, and yet shall mourn with ever returning spring” (328). These lines allude to Lincoln. Lilacs bloom in April, the month of Lincoln’s assassination. The lilacs remind Whitman of Lincoln on a yearly basis. Both the poem and the lilacs make Lincoln immortal; though he died, his memory will defy death. Walker draws upon the same image in a slightly different way when she says:

Three lives...

ripe for immortality of daisies and wheat

for the simple beauty of a hummingbird

and dignity of a sequoia

of renunciation and

resurrection.

For the Easter morning of our Meridians. (72)

Walker likens the three Civil Rights workers to the evergreen giant sequoia tree, which defies aging and death. The tree will always be there to remind Walker of these three men. In a conversation with Margaret Ann Reid, Walker confirms the intentional choice of the word “Meridian” because it both refers to both Greenwich Time longitude, which is everlasting, and refers to the city in Mississippi to suggest timelessness (Reid 67). The impact of Whitman’s verse is clear in the way Walker uses symbols of immortality from nature: daisies, wheat, hummingbird, and sequoia. Walker uses the hummingbird as a symbol of timeless lessons of life. Because it is the only bird that can fly backward, it denotes that though the past is not retrievable or changeable, it teaches unforgotten lessons. The meaningful death of the three activists is likened to the Christ’s, another symbol of timelessness and immortality.

Another poem by Walker emphasizing Whitman’s influence on her verse is “Today” (1942). It bears the form, the style, and the spirit of Whitman’s “Song of Myself” (1855). Walker says: “I sing of slum scabs on city / faces, scrawny children scarred by bombs and dying of / hunger” (24). Walker’s poem illustrates poverty, fear, sickness, and death in American life. The poem’s persona tries to find cleanliness and cannot. The speaker wants to find a place in America where materialism does not prevail. Images of materialism and violence are all around. The speaker advises the reader to pray “for second sight and inner ear” instead of finding solace in alcohol and sex (25).

The poem exceeds the narrow regional concern and outreaches to the downtrodden and the abused in Europe during World War II. This reflects Whitman’s expansive scope. Whitman’s investigation of the boundaries of his self is conveyed through an array of people, places, and occasions. Whitman is not confined

to the boundaries of his own life and tries to link himself to desperate people across America. Walker does the same in her poem and blames wealthy Americans for being inconsiderate to the distressed people in America and war-struck people in Europe: “viewing weekly “Wild West Indian and Shooting Sam, / “Mama Loves Papa,” and / “Gone by the Breeze,” complacently smug in a snug / somnolescence” (25). On the other hand, she considers the suffering of poor Americans parallel with that of war-plagued people in Europe or as Lorenzo Thomas states, “the point of the poem is that for African Americans and the poor, a war is already at home” (81).

Walker’s poem differs from Whitman’s in its racial theme. Walker shows the other side of Whitman’s America: “Contradicting Whitman’s text of American abundance, the singing of “Today” represents American lack” (Berke, *Women* 135). Walker’s poem shows that Whitman’s prophecies about American future did not come true. In his poem, Whitman talks about America in his time and from a white American’s point of view. A visionary poet and dreamer, Whitman celebrates America’s abundance as exclusively prosperous and neglects the potential racial complications of the nation that continues until Walker’s time. Lack and deprivation in Walker’s poem stand for African Americans’ dissatisfaction with their living conditions: “I sing of our soon-to-be dead,” they are barely living (24). Walker’s poem is a negation of Whitman’s, at least for African Americans.

Another poem in which “Song of Myself” is echoed is “Dark Blood” (1942). In this poem the Whitmanesque journey to know the self is enacted by Walker. Whitman’s journey is not only his but also the reader’s: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself / And what I assume you shall assume” (28). Similarly, Walker’s journey is a collective one where “I” and “me” stand for “we” and “us.” Like Whitman, Walker journeys in time, place, and psyche. While Whitman’s journey goes in circles,

Walker's is straightforward. Her poem is like a cause and result statement. However, Whitman's journey has no identifiable beginning or end. Walker's is simpler, more definite, and more rewarding. Unlike Walker's poem, Whitman's poem lacks coherence and the purpose of his journey is not met. On another level, Whitman merges body, soul, nature, cosmos, and the divinity and this state of infusion remains unperceivable. Nevertheless, nature in Walker's poem is functional, communal, and communicative. It made the poet, nurtured her, and unified her with her origins: "There were the wooing nights of tropical lands and the cool / discretion of flowering plains between two stalwart / hills. They nurtured my coming with wanderlust" (8). Night, hills, and plains welcome and sooth the speaker in the poem. The poetic persona in the poem is familiar and able to communicate with elements of nature.

The communicative aspect of "Song of Myself" is traceable in Walker's poems. Whitman involves his reader in his inner journey to understand himself and his world. Eldrid Herington states that Whitman puts no limit to the category of that world and "invites people of any nation to join in this ostensive identity; his own poem about self-identity has its first word as 'I.' Its last word is 'you'" (135). Walker follows the same pattern in her poem, "The Struggle Staggers Us" (1942). She involves her reader in a journey for a communal rather than a personal purpose. The speaker in the poem invites the reader to experience a mutual journey of knowing each other: "There is a journey from the me to you. / There is a journey from the you to me. / A union of the two strange worlds must be" (51). It seems that Walker surpasses the boundaries of her identity in this poem. The word "strange" suggests a race, gender, or class difference between the speaker and the reader.

Inspired by Whitman, Walker's punctuation is quite unique. Walker uses ellipsis, italics, capital letters, question marks, and exclamation marks for extra

emphasis. For example, half of the lines in “Money, Honey, Money” (1989) end in question marks, half of the stanzas in “the Ballad of the Free” (1970) are in italics, and each stanza in “Africa” (1989) starts with a capitalized word. This unconventional punctuation can be seen in Whitman’s poetry. For example, the last stanza in “Passage to India” has twenty five lines out of twenty nine ending with either a question or an exclamation mark. Because the poem suggests a spiritual journey within the geographical one, the exclamation and question marks create a contemplative tone “O my brave soul! / O father, father sail! / O daring joy, but safe, Are they not all the seas of God” (421)?

In spite of all these similarities between Walker and Whitman in writing style, she stands in contrast to his attitude towards racial equality. While both poets commemorate the Civil War in their work, they are different in their perspective. Whitman highly supported the Civil War for the sake of America’s integrity and the noble cause of emancipating the slaves is not an issue for him at all. His poetry about the war is written from the white point of view. He depicts the psyche of the soldiers and their families. Yet, Walker writes about the war from the slaves’ point of view and her novel *Jubilee* (1966) is mostly devoted to that purpose. Walker’s belief in racial equality is authenticated by her birth, race, culture, and heritage. However, Whitman’s stand is different. Martin Klammer states that “no one wrote about American slavery in more powerful, imaginative, and self-contradictory ways than Walt Whitman ... Whitman’s attitudes towards race and slavery continue to mystify his readers” (101). Klammer builds his point of view on the fact that Whitman claims in all his writings that he is the liberal, universal, humanitarian, and ultimate believer in equality. This claim contrasts his perspective on equality which excludes slaves. According to Klammer, Whitman opposed slavery and its extension in the

North not out of concern for black people but, for fear of any lack of work opportunities for poor whites (101). He was not concerned with eliminating slavery in the South as long as it would be contained there.

Whitman's vision of America's future has no place for the descendants of Africa. Whitman could not depict the personality of slaves because he was too distanced from them to understand them or be aware of their suffering. He adopted the colonial view that slaves were happy that way. Whitman anticipated America's future to be void of slaves; not through their emancipation and integration in the American society, but through their annihilation or being given a nearby Caribbean island to live in. This Whitmanesque view of America is confirmed by Kenneth Price in his statement that Whitman hoped that non white people "would filter through in time or gradually eliminate & disappear" (205). These views contradict his previously mentioned claims about equality. It should be taken into consideration that Whitman never calls in his poetry for the inclusion of slaves in the context of his dreams for America.

Slaves are mentioned in Whitman's poetry in the context of celebrating the slave body and its physical strength, but never the mind or the psyche. In "Song of Myself," Whitman says "I behold the picturesque giant and love him" (40). This limited scope is determined by Whitman's distance from the slave as a poetic subject. This is not in accordance with the opening lines in which he says: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (28). This declaration is neither inclusive nor applicable to any "Black" person. This infusion between Whitman and the reader is not available in any of the sections that deal with slaves.

Whitman does not give voice to the slave to articulate in his poetry, though he gives voice to other people. The distance is emphasized in each encounter between the slave and the poem's persona. Even when the encounter is very close when this persona helps a runaway slave by providing water, food, clothes, and shelter. They are spatially close: "I had him next me at table, my fire-lock lean'd in the corner" (36). However, they are psychologically apart that there is not a single word exchanged. Klammer says that in this poem, Whitman "pushes himself and his readers toward understanding that one's humanity depends upon recognizing the humanity of others, especially those most distant from Whitman's readers: black persons" (107). However, he never suggests in his poems that black and white people can be equal. Whitman implies equality with the slave and then emphasizes the difference (107). This inability to identify with the slave is understandable in the context of Whitman's nineteenth century culture.

This contradiction on Whitman's part corresponds with America's. Whitman's attitude towards African Americans is typical of America's. His poetry is as much a biography of America as it is an autobiography. Both Whitman and America are puzzled by the problem of slaves in America. It seems that the contradictory self that Du Bois calls "twoness" stamps the whole nation not only African Americans (5). While African Americans feel contradiction between being black and American, white Americans are split between their belief in equality and their inability to perceive non-white people as their equals.

Between this controversial nature of European Americans and the controversial nature of African Americans, America oscillates. In Walker's writings, this oscillation is transformed into a merge of opposites. She challenges Whitman's aloofness and uses his poetic form and style. Moreover, she uses them to write back

and defend the humanity of her people. She draws upon the pattern of his most acknowledged poems to convey a counterpoint message to his. Walker is Whitman's counterpart and her poems are an antithesis to his. Walker embodies America as viewed from the African American point of view.

Another major influence to trace in Walker's work is that of the Harlem Renaissance, which was an inspiration to every African American not only Walker. The movement was more than a group of writers presenting a marginalized culture. It was a landmark of a whole race starting over. Maryemma Graham states that when Walker was ten years old, "the Harlem Renaissance was in full swing in the urban centres of the North. In the South, those who chose not to migrate, nevertheless, felt the effects of this national, cultural, and social movement" ("I Want" 11). Margaret Walker was one of those who were touched by the movement in the South. The real value of the Harlem Renaissance is found in the seminal ideas it has provided to its successors to develop, criticize, or build on. The rest of this chapter investigates the influence of the Harlem Renaissance on Margaret Walker, who emerged as a promising poetic voice directly after the end of the movement.

Harlem Renaissance is the term that is usually used to define the period during which African American culture started to flourish in America. It was a time when Harlem's black community became the economic, political, and cultural centre of black America. Margaret Walker, who was born in 1915, two years before the formal start of the Harlem Renaissance and started publishing in 1937, two years after its formal end, should have fallen under its influence in one way or another. Walker started developing her poetic talents from her early years. As she says in one of her essays: "going to school had one major goal, to learn to be a writer. As early as my eighth year, I had the desire, at ten I was trying, at eleven and twelve I was

learning, and at fourteen and fifteen I was seeing my first things printed in local school and community papers” (*On Being* 4). That was in the 1920s when the Harlem Renaissance was at its peak and undoubtedly it contributed to the formation of her creativity. Walker met Langston Hughes when she was only seventeen and she related that he read her poetry and said that she had talent and advised her father to take her away from the South to develop into a writer. Accordingly, her father sent her to Northwestern University in Chicago (preface to *This Is* xii). That was where she met Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois who published her poetry for the first time in a national magazine, *Crisis*, in 1933, when she was only eighteen. Thus, she was mentored by prominent figures of the movement, which certainly had an impact on her literary consciousness. She acknowledged her indebtedness to Du Bois and Hughes several times in her essays and conversations.

Coming of age during that time included more than mere receiving advice during irregular meetings with important writers; it meant that Walker was touched by the literary and the intellectual fever of the time. Her literary consciousness was developing during that period and she grasped the significance of what was going on. She followed the main debates raised including participation in World War I or not, self-segregation or participation in society, and elitism or depicting ordinary people’s culture. Her poetry and essays confirm that she was, like writers of the Harlem Renaissance, concerned about the cultural, social, and political progress of African Americans. Maryemma Graham emphasizes that “Walker’s life and conscious cultivation of a literary career followed on the heels of this Renaissance and took inspiration from it” (“I Want” 11). That was the point from which she started developing her literary talents: argument, composition, and innovation. Furthermore, she defined roles for herself as a poet: historian, folk teller, and spokesperson.

Self-assertive, militant, proud of her race and cultural heritage, and able to view herself in the context of American society, Walker can be viewed as an example of Locke's term "New Negro." Locke used this term to describe the new image of the black person who can look at him/herself afresh and make his/her appeal in the face of stereotypes and clichés by being self-assertive and able to show the value of the black race and culture to the hegemonic white culture (47). Walker is an embodiment of the kind of black person the Harlem Renaissance celebrated. From the very beginning of her literary career, she announced her dissatisfaction with the docile "Old Negro" who lived long in the shadows. In her essay "What is to Become of Us" (1932), Walker signifies her rejection of Booker T. Washington's philosophy of accommodation when she says, "The Negro has a bucket ... His manual labour has brought enormous profits and stupendous results to nations who have used him as the tool to realize their dreams and ambitions, to materialize their ideas and plans. Now he must use what is his own for himself" (*On Being* 176). In her first published volume of poetry *For My People*, she urges the making of the "New Negro" that she represents when she says in the first poem that has the same title of the book: "Let a race of men now rise and take control" (7).

The Harlem Renaissance viewed the arts as the only possible means for attaining social equality. David Levering Lewis argues that "although the road to the ballot box, the union hall, the decent neighbourhood, and the office was blocked, there were two untried paths that had not been barred...: arts and letters" (xxv). The Harlem Renaissance encouraged literature and art for social and political purposes. Its literature and art attracted many white Americans, who searched for untraditional forms of art (Kallen 30). White editors and publishers supported talented African American writers' commercial success among white audience. Walker wrote poetry

for social purposes as did Harlem Renaissance; however, she did not address the white philanthropy.

Walker is also an embodiment of the kind of writers Du Bois called the “Talented Tenth” or the educated middle class elite of black people who can be leaders, uplift the race, and give a positive image of what a black person can be against all the negative stereotypes. Born to parents who were university graduates and master degree holders, later being herself a Ph.D. holder, and being brought up in a house of the same values and norms of behaviour as any middle class white person in the American society, Walker was an example of what Du Bois meant by the “Talented Tenth.” Koopmans argues that the “Talented Tenth” wanted to “show the middle-class whites that African Americans shared their values and thus would eventually encourage whites to share in full the rights and benefits of American society with their black compatriots” (34). However, Walker showed the same kind of behaviour to convince the black people that education can make all the difference in African Americans’ life, that what she calls: “the value of education in the struggle of our black masses for freedom, human dignity, and peace” (*On Being* 185).

Moreover, she took the role of spokesperson to the masses of black people which she developed as a result of her exposure to the speeches of the canonical figures of the era. She tried to help black people know their rights and become positive and realistic in approaching their problems. That message haunts her essay “Humanities with a Black Focus” (1972), when she says: “Too many of us are impractical dreamers and full of unchanneled emotion and imaginative fantasies...We need to know how to do certain things well and with skill, first in order to liberate our people, second in order to actually accomplish complete social and intellectual freedom” (*On Being* 103). Walker urges African American people to

know their heritage without being imprisoned in the past. According to Walker, African Americans should develop the skills of living in the modern world. Walker's poetry calls for social change to support this development.

Walker noted the early influence of the Harlem Renaissance on her writing. She started reading poetry of the Harlem Renaissance when she was only a teenager. As she says, "In the late Twenties, I was actually, reading the Harlem Renaissance poets. They greatly influenced me particularly Langston Hughes. I think Langston's poetry and his life influenced me remarkably from the time I was a child" (*Conversations* 20). Walker hoped to become a poet and that hope was kindled when she met Hughes, the first time she met a living writer. When her father sent her to Chicago, she became a migrant northward like most of the Harlem Renaissance writers. From then on, Walker considered Hughes her friend and mentor: "I cannot think of anyone outside of my family who was more wonderful to me than Langston. He certainly influenced my whole writing career" (*Conversations* 28). Indeed, Hughes's impact on Walker's poetry is clear in terms of subject and sometimes in form. He wrote letters of congratulation after every publication of a book, as did Countee Cullen and she met most of the writers of the movement. In brief, Walker's literary talents developed under the influence of the Harlem Renaissance even if she was not directly involved in it.

Walker explored many of the themes common among writers of the Harlem Renaissance: self-definition, identifying a common heritage, determination to fight oppression, and anger at racism. However, Walker does not show an obvious sense of self-split between being black and American, what Du Bois described as "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (5). That division

was a key debate in the Harlem Renaissance. Black people were divided between their unique history of pain and suffering from slavery and modern America. Nathan Irvin Huggins comments that “The Negro’s double consciousness – being black and uncertain of his acceptance as an American – allowed him no true “self consciousness.” So, the question “who am I?” was a natural one for the Afro-American. The value and the humanity of the individual and the race rested upon the answer” (*Voices* 135). By the term “sense of twoness,” Du Bois meant the way black people were obliged to look at themselves through the eyes of others trying to be what the white people thought they were or wanted them to be. Black people’s self-fulfilment depended on the way white people perceived them.

Walker viewed herself as both black and American. She knew well the way to a sense of wholeness and integration into American society as an American citizen. She did not refrain from showing pride in her unique black heritage. Her work does not show very much of that sense of identity conflict. Since her early childhood, she was aware of her multi-levelled identity and was always aware of its burdens. Furthermore, she developed every aspect of this identity. She emphasized her pride in being both black and American and never showed desire to be up to the white people’s criteria of success. Walker denounced the fact that African Americans’ writing was “never accepted in the traditional American literary world unless it was imitative, servile, or compromising” (*On Being* 24). She could not conform to white people’s expectations of a successful African American literature.

Nevertheless, it seems that this sense of twoness plagued the whole race including Walker, even if she did not admit it. Though she was not obsessed with the way she might be perceived by white people, a number of self-contradictions can be traced in her words about other issues. While most of her essays and talks assert a

humanistic view of all races and claim love for all people, other statements contradict such claims. In a rare statement in her conversation with Nikki Giovanni in 1974 Walker says: “I will tell you I do believe that our common enemy is the white man in America and his culture which are striving to destroy us and our culture” (5). This statement contradicts an earlier statement in the same conversation in which she says: “I think that it cuts away at my humanity when I attack the humanity of anyone else” (4). This contradiction shows how that “twoness” of the culture touched her to some extent, but in a way different from Du Bois’s.

Another example of this inferable self-contradiction is an interview with Lucy Freibert in 1986. In this interview Walker talked about her love of the South and says: “when we come together I am complete and it is complete because it is part of me and I am part of it” (*Conversations* 112). This statement means that Walker felt some kind of incompleteness when she was out of the South. In her poetry she contrasts the beauty of the Southern landscape and the horror and violence it witnesses. The South bears contradiction and conflict and Walker as part of it as she says, should bear the same contradictions inside her. That is why she expressed to Freibert an inner wish “to see the dichotomy closed, the split ended” (112). This wish is possibly as pertinent to Walker as it is to the South. Walker emphasized that idea when she told Jerry Ward in an interview in the same year that she felt the South in her blood (*For* 117). She identified herself with the South and all its components. This ambivalent relationship with the South also shows some kind of “twoness.”

Walker believed in an ideal image of how the world should be as a peaceful place of honour and equality for every human being regardless of his/her race, sex, or class. This ideal image stands against the reality of the world of injustice and discrimination. In her essay “On Being Black Female, and Free” (1980), she

describes this contradiction: “This clash of my ideal with the real, of my dream world with the practical, and the mystical inner life with the sordid and ugly world outside, this clash keeps me on a battlefield, at war, and struggling, even tilting at windmills” (*On Being* 8). This juxtaposition between the real and the ideal is always there in her work on themes of relevance to the Harlem Renaissance such as the South, black tradition, and race pride. Her vision of an ideal world and a better future for her people in America contradicts the horrible realities of American society. That is why she can be viewed as a visionary or a prophetic poet, who envisions how the world should be rather than how it is.

Walker explored other themes pertinent to women poets of the Harlem Renaissance: pursuit of gender equality, escape from the urban to the natural landscape, and pride in a matrilineal heritage. Maureen Honey argues that the Harlem Renaissance women poets felt themselves “alienated by a technological urban world that excluded blacks and worked for self interest” (8). According to Honey, they resorted to nature that “provided an objective correlative through which they could articulate their gender oppression” as well as that of race, for nature, like them, “had been objectified, invaded, and used by men seeking power and wealth” (Honey 8). Modern technology would be seen later to alienate many twentieth century writers, both male and female and black and white. However, some women poets viewed technology as man-made. They identified themselves with nature; they were both exploited by a male pursuit of power and domination (Honey 8). Claude McKay and Countee Cullen wrote pastoral poetry during this time, but it does not bear that female perspective. Women writers of the Harlem Renaissance rejected the intrusive city life. For example, Bessie Mayle in her poem “Skylines,” published in *Crisis* in 1930 describes skyscrapers as “huge arms” strangling her. She likens them

to mountains and herself to a valley surrounded by them: skyscrapers are “like mountains / locking me in and the world out” (163).

In some of her poems, Walker shows the same attitude: for her the North represents the urban life and its lack of humanity and the South stands for the beauty of nature that heals all pains and human ugliness in all its forms. She expresses this idea clearly in her poem “Southern Song” (1942) when she says, “I want my body bathed again by Southern suns, my soul reclaimed again from Southern land” (11). This line suggests that the Southern land has taken possession of the soul of the speaker in the poem and it needs to be reclaimed. Historically, the South has not been a place of safety for African Americans. Nonetheless, compared to the North that she experienced for few years in Chicago, it is closer to her. For Walker, the North represents the rigorous commercial system of capitalism and the ruthless city life and its attendant evils. Capitalism promotes individuality, greed, and self-interest.

Like women poets of the Harlem Renaissance, Walker talks about the difficulties of making a living as a black woman in America and the double burden of blackness and femaleness in such a society. As in their work, words of travel are recurrent in her poetry: “journey,” “traveller,” “travelling,” “rivers,” “mobile,” and “caravan.” Journeying is a common theme in the Harlem Renaissance women’s writings. For example, an interesting statement in an advertisement of one of Georgia Douglas Johnson’s books is: “If you cannot travel – write!” (qtd. in Hull, *Color* 207). This shows how reading and writing were outlets for these women. Being attached to one place most of their lives because of family commitment; they wanted to experience the worlds that their fellow male writers investigated both inside and outside America. Actually, Walker herself never travelled abroad and lived most of

her life in the South. Journeying in Walker's work is a quest for one's racial and cultural origins. It is also an attempt to restore pride in ancestral history.

Male writers of the Harlem Renaissance were completely free to go to cabarets, travel around America, and travel abroad any time they liked. By contrast, women writers were always expected to conform to the criteria of being a good woman as dictated by the society at that time. They resorted to imaginary worlds and exotic places. They tried to voyage on paper to release their inner selves and express their longing for freedom. In their poetry, "horizons beckon, roads appear, yet the speaker is rooted to one spot" (Honey 13). This spatial and social confinement is quite evident in their poetry. They were less innovative than their male counterparts and were mostly conventional in their writing. Honey considers this the main reason that their work was "relatively unexciting in a renaissance awakening that required some flash and newness" (25). Similarly, Walker's work lacks experimentation and maintains its conventional style though Walker lived longer than women poets of the Harlem Renaissance to witness times of unsurpassed experimentation. Walker's poems are written in the long line free verse, folk ballad, or sonnet. She does not experiment with the poetic form or shape of the poem. As said earlier in this chapter, Walker was innovative in her use of European forms like the sonnet, however, she did not write as many blues poems as Hughes did for example, or experiment with the shape of the poem as a poet like Nikki Giovanni did.

Like literature of the Harlem Renaissance, Walker's writings focus on folk elements. Literature published during the Harlem Renaissance is characterised by an abundance of folk idioms and details of black cultural heritage to enhance black people's pride in their origins. Walker's poetry is replete with this black heritage which is an indispensable part of the texture of her writing style. As B. Dilla Buckner

says, “Much of the work of Margaret Walker has as its base grounding in the history of black people, for she is the voice of, to, and about the black race” (139). Like Zora Neale Hurston, Walker has a special interest in African American folkways. This interest is evidently seen in her folk novel *Jubilee* (1966). Hurston was Walker’s favourite mentor in folklore. In admiration of Hurston’s talent as a folk novels writer, Walker says: “I do not know of a black or white male writer who understands the folk novel better than, if as well as Zora. She obviously had a profound influence upon Richard Wright and others who claim they have never heard of her” (*On Being* 45). Hurston’s *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1937) are essentially nonfictional accounts of her own trips to Eatonville, Florida, Haiti, and Jamaica to collect African-American folktales as part of her archaeological studies. They are marvellous travelogues into dark worlds of ceremonies, customs, and superstitions. Hurston’s theoretical and practical training in anthropology made her novels replete with folk elements in language, structure, and events.

Like many other African American novelists including Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker, Margaret Walker benefited much from Zora Neale Hurston. In her *Jubilee* (1966), like Hurston, Walker employs folk idioms, songs, and the spirituals. She also depicts folk ceremonies and introduces folk foods and drinks. Folk medicine is always there with various herbs and some superstitions. There is an obvious similarity between Walker’s Vyry and Hurston’s Janie Starks in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Michelle Cliff argues that Janie is Vyry’s predecessor: both are beautiful mulattos, who can easily pass for white and both willingly inhabit a black world (306). The strength of both women is evident in their relentless attempts to overcome troubles and survive. Motherhood shapes the perspectives of both women and limits their readiness to take risk.

Obviously, Walker's Vyry and Hurston's Janie are considerably different from Nella Larsen's mulatto, who strives to pass to white.

In her poetry, Walker celebrates the black cultural heritage and all its details in people's life past and present. The ten poems in the middle section of *For My People* show her ability to reflect the oral traditions of the South and her depiction of people's folk heroes. Specific poems prove Walker's masterful use of folk elements: "Ballad of the Hoppy-Toad," "Molly Means," "Poppa Chicken," "Kissie Lee," and "Bad-Man Stagolee," all published in 1942. In these poems, there are spell casting and its reversal, mention of various animals which embody African myths, good and evil spirits, use of conjurers, and implementation of magic. They also involve black dialect in pronunciation as "sich" for "such" and "chile" for "child." Walker uses the ballad that suits folkloric dialogic narration.

Comparing Walker to Langston Hughes as a predominant figure of the Harlem Renaissance shows areas where they converge and others where they diverge. The difference mainly stems from the area each poet's writing is pertinent to. Hughes writes about city culture: the streets, the menials, the homeless, the cabaret dancers, and the blues singers. These are his characters and he captures the mood of Harlem which he viewed as his home. Though he was born in the rural South, he never lived in it; he was more acquainted with cities both inside and outside the United States. On the other hand, Walker's scenes are mostly set in the South, which is reflected in her language that celebrates Southern pastoral scenes of trees, rivers, and valleys; and activities pertinent to people in the South such as ploughing, sowing, planting, and growing. In this concern, Walker is more like women poets of the Harlem Renaissance who were more acquainted with the South than their fellow male writers whose circumstances or their being men gave them the

freedom to move to the North more easily than women who were attached to their families. Though she left the South for few years to live in the North during her study, Walker spent most of her later life attached to her family in the South.

Like Hughes, race is one of the main themes discussed in Walker's poetry. She states that her central theme is being black in America (*How* 21). Walker's poems focus on African Americans' state of inequality and the ways black people can get their full rights. Both "For My People" and "We Have Been Believers" (1942) discuss the subordination and victimization of African Americans throughout history and suggest revolution and social change as means of getting equality. However, Walker depends on history, which Hughes does not count much on. Hughes focuses on the modern life of black people in America and does not relate it much to the past. Hughes employs history only in few poems like "The Negro Mother" (1959) in which he depicts a mother talking to her son about her long suffering from slavery to freedom to help him get honour and dignity. Walker investigates the history of African Americans and counts on it to relate her people to their culture. She uses history as a reference to prove the greatness of her culture and its values.

Moreover, Walker did not incorporate the blues much in her poems as Hughes did, but it was sparingly there in few lines in some poems. Most of Hughes's poems are in the blues form in a way that makes other poetic forms rare in his work. The words, the rhythms, the ethos, and the shape of the lines suggest a sense of the blues written, composed, and sung at the same time. Compared to Hughes, Walker's use of the blues is very limited. Only five poems by Walker give the essence of the blues and reflect some of its aspects: "Money, Honey, Money," "Inflation Blues," and "I Hear a Rumbling;" which are all published in 1989 and "Gus, the Lineman"

and “Long John Nelson and Sweetie Pie,” which are published in 1942. Walker used other forms more than the blues such as the sonnet, free verse, and the ballad. Yet, her blues lines are perfectly written that they sometimes remind us of Bessie Smith’s blues songs, which are mostly about loneliness without the lover and pleas for his return. An example can be found in the following lines from “Long John Nelson and Sweetie Pie” (1942):

“Long John, Baby, if you will come back
I won’t never call you black;
I’ll love you long and love you true
And I don’t care what else you do. (43)

This poem is truly a folk vernacular poem and it will be discussed later in the second chapter of this thesis.

It is helpful here to investigate some parallels between two poems by the two poets: Hughes’s “The Backlash Blues” (1967) and Walker’s “Inflation Blues” (1989). “The Backlash Blues” was one of the last protest poems by Hughes before his death in 1967. The backlash is the white racist reaction to the Civil Rights Movement which began around 1964 with increased attacks on blacks in America. A literal white backlash is, of course, something with which slaves were very familiar. In this poem, the backlash is against gains made by African Americans. Walker’s poem explores a similar theme. Walker talks about black people’s daily suffering from high prices, low incomes, and the attendant problems of crime and disease. However, Hughes includes other disenfranchised groups to give his poem a global insight or a possibility of uniting marginalized cultures in the face of hegemonic white culture: “But the world is big / Big and bright and round / And it’s full of folks like me / who are black, yellow, beige, and brown” (*The Collected* 552). The blues

as a form is known for being used to express personal pain and loss. However, the poets use it in these two poems to express the public concerns of black people.

The word “blues” is incorporated in the titles of the two poems. Both titles refer to and analyse bad conditions: backlash and inflation. Hughes’s addressed persona “Mister Backlash” stands for the system imposed on African Americans by the white hegemony. Hughes’s speaker tells “Mister Backlash” or white people who want him out of America that he will leave him and go to the big world to unite with other people with the same conditions of marginalization. Hughes says that he will not lose anything and the biased system will be the only loser: “I’m gonna leave you / with the back-lash blues / you’re the one will have the blues / Not me, just wait and see” (*The Collected* 552). Both Hughes and Walker confirm that the blues will not be of any help in overcoming oppression. In her poem, Walker says that singing the blues will not help African Americans pay for food, housing, transportation, fuel, and medication or feel safe when crime rates are high: “Inflation blues is what we got. / Poah Black folks must do without. / Can’t buy no bread, can’t buy no house. / Can’t live no better than a louse” (191). Both poems use the blues form to express protest rather than remorse.

Both poems pose questions to America and its hegemonic culture: Hughes asks “Mister Backlash” directly, “who do you think I am?” and Walker wonders, “What is wrong with Uncle Sam” (Hughes, *The Collected* 552 and Walker, *This Is* 191)? In both poems, the first and the last stanzas have the same structure. The final stanza in Hughes’s poem is similar to the first one, but there is a change in the position of Hughes’s poetic persona. In the first stanza the poetic persona is a passive receiver of the actions of “Mister Backlash:” “you raise my taxes / freeze my wages / and send my son to Vietnam” (552). However, in the final stanza he is the agent that

takes decisions: “I’m gonna leave you” (552). The final coda completes this reversal that the next “backlash blues” will be to the white people whose control will end. The first stanza in Walker’s poem is similar to the last one as well, but the last stanza provides a simile that likens the black people’s state of suffering and singing the blues to the state of the jaybirds in moulting time (these birds are known for liking to brag even when they lose their feathers and have nothing to brag of). This concluding image sums up all Walker’s argument which aims at convincing black people that singing the blues in trouble times is useless: “We naked in the wind and blind / As jaybirds in moulting times” (191). This conclusion suggests a call for developing a clear vision and taking action towards social change. Both poems adopt a collective persona: Hughes’s “I” stands for “Brown, Black, Beige, Yellow” and Walker’s “we” in the final stanza stands for all African Americans. That collective attitude implies necessity of unity in the face of oppression and co-operation to initiate change.

Other similarities between Walker and Hughes can be traced in her “How Many Silent Centuries Sleep in My Sultry Veins?” (1970) and his “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1926). In both poems, the verse moves backward and forward in time and place. The speaker understands different times and places and searches for an identity in them all. Both poems deal with the theme of heritage, which is recurrent in the poetry of both poets and may be in all African American poetry. Though Hughes does not discuss historical events in his poetry as mentioned earlier in this chapter, he relies much on heritage as a main component of one’s identity. Hughes links his heritage to various rivers around the world, Euphrates, Congo, Nile, and Mississippi: “I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the / flow of human blood in human veins / My soul has grown deep like rivers” (*Selected* 4). The

four rivers are associated with non-white people, the first three by location and the fourth by history as the Mississippi witnessed the history of slavery. The poem's persona is proud of the depth of the African American heritage endowed by the first three rivers and flourishing in the fourth. Faith acquired from the ancient continents gives strength to African Americans to endure toil and oppression in the Mississippi until they triumphantly see its "muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset" (4).

Like Hughes's Poem, Walker's is written in the first person "I," which is collective rather than personal. Walker conveys the same idea that her roots are deep in history in an interrogative form: "How many silent centuries sleep in my sultry veins" (67)? Walker shares a long experience of suffering with the oppressed everywhere even in Europe: "The plaintive songs of India," "the melodies of Spain," "Of Red men seeking Southern lands," and "Of Africans in chains" (67). While Hughes derives endurance and faith from the ancestral lands, Walker derives encouragement to revolt: "I hear them wail loud echoing. / Locked deep inside me they cry- / And wild their clamorings" (67)! According to Walker, youth should be inspired by their ancestors, who "Break from their time-locked sea / To make these modern, sensate sons / Immortal men and free." (67). The two poems reflect a difference in attitude between the two poets, which is a potential difference between the generation of the 1920s and that of the 1940s.

In spite of the previously mentioned similarities, there remain differences between Walker and the Harlem Renaissance writers. One of the main debates of the Harlem Renaissance was whether to use the European writing style like the sonnets as Countee Cullen did in a way that made him like the romanticists or the African American style of jazz and the blues as Langston Hughes did. Walker embraced both the European tradition and the black folkloric style. She did not reject the European

tradition as some of the Harlem Renaissance writers did like Wallace Thurman and Zora Neale Hurston. She considers any separation between the two traditions problematic: “I have always felt that one of our great problems in America is understanding the equal value of these two traditions ... African Americans are more conscious of the problem because they are the ones who suffer” (*On Being* 25). Walker’s work is an example of how to end this problem and incorporate the two traditions.

Walker emphasized her belonging to both writing traditions and her right to use any or both of them whenever she liked. Using either of these traditions never implied a rejection of the other for her. Unlike most of the Harlem Renaissance writers, she managed to combine both styles in her writing. This does not contradict the very fact that her targeted readers are her fellow African Americans not white Americans. Walker uses the European tradition to prove her ability to use it, challenging the white claims that African Americans are only capable of writing the vernacular. In her essay “The Writer and her Craft” (1974), Walker talks about her shocking experience at Yale University when a professor told her that “black people were acceptable as long as they remained primitive and did not imitate white people” (*On Being* 23). If African Americans remain ignorant and naive, white people can find a justification for segregation. Maureen Honey explains that “literacy posed a real threat to white supremacists because it not only opened avenues toward retrieving Afro-American history but also demolished the lie of Black intellectual inferiority with its corollary white paternalism” (5). Walker’s incorporation of white and black writing styles helps undermine any distinction between the two.

Using European poetic forms can be read as an attempt on Walker’s part to prove her ability to excel in the craft of versification. Taken from this point of view,

Walker won the challenge. But here, the question of double consciousness rises again: does Walker want to prove that to herself or to the mainstream white writers? It seems that Walker wanted to prove that for both herself and others. This is destined to be an everlasting debate for African American writers. This might be part of what Stephen Henderson calls “the challenge of the modern world which impacts upon us all” (qtd. in Traylor 110). Henderson suggests that African Americans are supposed to live modernity but they cannot forget the roots. That is why, the real challenge is how to incorporate the two.

Walker does not imitate white people, but she challenges their claim that black people are primitive. By being African American using white writing forms, Walker emphasizes her right in everything that is American. According to Walker, “If descendants of Europeans are Americans, descendants of Africa are also Americans. Neither has more right than the other: by right of birth, by right of toil, and by right of sacrifice” (*On Being* 127). For Walker, the only real Native Americans are the tribes of “red men” (127). She also emphasizes that the African American writing style is not inferior to the white forms. Walker stresses the equal value of both traditions and the importance of using them together by both black and white writers for a pluralistic view of American society. Pluralism comes along with inclusion in the American “melting pot.” If African Americans refrain from assimilating various traditions, they help whites exclude them from the “melting pot.” Walker best described this plural culture in her conversation with Kay Bonnetti in 1991 when she said: “in this country we have developed and arrived at a point where our culture is neither black nor white but a mulatto” (*Conversations* 130).

Joseph Riddle criticizes the idea that the “project” of African American poetics has been “to invent a machine of its own origins,” something that has no

relation to other cultures (358). In practice, it seems impossible to find any national literature that has not been exposed to outer influences. The European tradition itself is impossible to prove its being purely European. This should be admitted as a fact of any literature worldwide. A more logical view is Monroe K. Spears's, who believes that African American literature should find "a relation bolder, freer, blither, and productive of a riper art than any possible in our neurotic, fear-ridden hate-ridden world" (72). This is exactly Walker's attitude. Her commitment to her "people" does not mute the endless "older voices" from the white tradition. Walker's work is an example of how "African American Literature is the product of hybrid cultures, hybrid worlds, and hybrid religions" (Pierce 233). The two traditions are intricately interwoven in the literary consciousness of African Americans and it is not realistic to separate them.

In this regard, Amiri Baraka takes this argument further when he says that America itself cannot be intact without African Americans and their culture. He confirms that African American culture is "impossible without the overall U.S. culture, and likewise the overall U.S. culture, as it is, and has been for 300 years, is impossible without Afro-American culture" (11). This interdependent and interwoven design should be taken positively. The nature of this interdependence should be considered on both sides if America is to continue and prosper. Darwin T. Turner emphasizes that "in America, such absolute distinctiveness is impossible" (140). Mutual indebtedness is inevitable regardless of any rejections either by white or African American writers.

Walker has a similar view about the "Black English" controversy that was in vogue during the Harlem Renaissance. She argues:

Although anything created by African Americans is just as American as a

brainchild of whites, I wish to state for the record that there is no such thing as Black English. There may be a black idiom in the American language, and I am sure there always has been and will continue to be. We have had much to do with keeping the English language, rich, vital, dramatic, and as varied as all the nuances of our experience. (*On Being* 24)

Walker incorporated both traditions in her writing and appreciated them both as parts of her identity. Blyden Jackson says: “her racialism does not interfere with her Americanism” (qtd in Bloom 158). Both Hughes, the godfather of the blues and Whitman, the father of American poetry who innovated the first American verse form are equally echoed in her writing. Undeniably, Walker was influenced by Hughes and other writers of the Harlem Renaissance, but she was not a typical model of a Harlem Renaissance writer.

Walker was not only different from the Harlem Renaissance in some aspects of her writing, but she also criticized the Harlem Renaissance for two things. First, she regarded the movement as lacking proper social perspective. She did not like the way its writers refrained from strong protest. She blamed Hughes for typifying this attitude in his novel *Not without Laughter* (1930). The novel is about Sandy, a little boy who lives in the tension between the spirit of music and laughter and the duty of achievement for the race. In this novel, Hughes emphasizes the hero’s inability to abandon the spirit of recklessness and laughter in spite of all his attempts to be serious and goal-oriented. Maureen Honey comments that such images “served important psychological functions for whites, among them relief from guilt” (19).

Walker rejected that emphasis on laughter as a symbol of endurance and inner strength. She described this attitude as a “kind of euphoric belief among blacks that we may have a tough time in life, that we may suffer, and that they may mistreat

us, but we know how to live and laugh, we know how to enjoy life and nothing gets us down because we live with laughter” which enhanced all the stereotypes nurtured in the minds of white people about black people (*Conversations* 26). Walker refused this attitude which is evident in Hughes’s poem “I, Too” (1925) when he says “They send me to eat in the kitchen / When company comes, / But I laugh, / And eat well, / And grow stronger” (*Selected* 275).

Walker appreciated Hughes’s poetry more when he developed a stronger perspective on social protest during the 1930s and henceforth. Walker was influenced by the Harlem Renaissance, but belonged more to the school of social protest that grew in the 1930s. She did not like the way some of the Harlem Renaissance literature enhanced the stereotypical image of the black person as an exotic creature laughing in times of suffering because of an inherited helplessness. Walker believed that the real causes of black people’s bad conditions were political and economic. She wanted a stronger protest and a militant expression of black people’s suffering. Walker disapproved of the Harlem Renaissance’s writers for begging “the question of the Negro’s humanity as an answer to the white patron’s attitude that Negroes were only children anyway” (*How* 103). In the 1920s, rich white patrons supported vernacular poetry writers to amuse themselves. For Walker, “they suffered from a literary myopia” (103). Walker did not approve the way Harlem Renaissance writers wrote poetry to amuse their patrons. She denounced the way those patrons looked at the Talented Tenth writers as “unusual members of the race” and their poetry as “the prattle of gifted children” (103). Walker wanted poetry written for African American people and for their betterment.

Furthermore, Walker did not like the way the Harlem Renaissance was male-dominated. The movement did not much appreciate its women writers who had an

essential role in its progress and favoured male writers who might have been of fewer talents. Gloria T. Hull agrees with Walker when she says that the Renaissance “despite its veneer of equal opportunity, was a time when not only Harlem and the Negro, but men as usual were ‘in vogue.’ In a world that values and caters more to males, they enjoyed the lion’s share” of all the available opportunities (*Color* 10). This bias continued even after the eclipse of the movement.

Women continued to be out of the records of the movement or according to Walker, “received small success” (*On Being* 10). According to Honey, women writers “were always tyrannized by periodization, the hierarchy of canonical forms, critical ranking of major and minor, and generalization about literary periods. Indeed, generalizations about the characteristics of an era are often arrived at without weighing women’s work” (30). Walker faced a similar kind of prejudice. That is why she identifies herself with the suffering of women writers worldwide when she says: “Each of these internationally known women writers is my sister in search of an island of freedom. Each is part of me and I am part of her” (*On Being* 10).

To sum up this argument, Margaret Walker was influenced by the Harlem Renaissance in many ways. Her literary consciousness developed when the movement was at its peak. She was an embodiment of such terms as the “New Negro” and “The Talented Tenth.” She explored themes similar to the Harlem Renaissance’s and shared many of the concerns of its women writers. She called for a stronger protest than the Harlem Renaissance’s and did not like the way it was a male-biased movement. Walker differed from the movement in her ability to embrace her being both black and American and in her ability to address the concerns of black people without being haunted by the way she might be viewed by white people. That is obvious in her use of white forms to express black themes.

The negotiation between the “white” and the “black” was in Walker’s literary consciousness since her early childhood. There is always balance between the two sensibilities, not contradiction in her work. Walker says that at home she had “good books and wonderful music and the gentle intelligent parents” and could not see any reason “for prejudice on the basis of previous servitude” (*How* 3). Maryemma Graham argues that Walker’s bourgeois family life was balanced by her maternal grandmother, who was an immediate link between the young writer and an African American slave past. She gave Walker “an early appreciation for the images and sounds of the black lived experience as they were recorded in a slave woman’s memory” (“I Want” 14). Walker owes a considerable part of her creativity to her grandmother’s oral tradition as much as she does to Whitman and the Harlem Renaissance.

Walker embraced both sensibilities and combined them together to develop a unique poetic voice. She developed an innate awareness of the importance of drawing upon multiple traditions in her writing style. She took the “white” craft and the “black” spirit to convey her thoughts. This amalgam is very clear in what Blyden Jackson calls the “Whitmanesque” method in stanza formation and “stylistically, the rhythmic cadence of the black Southern minister” (68). Moreover, she appreciated both the structures of European poetry and the collective voice in the African America oral tradition.

By employing diverse styles in her poetry, Walker managed to envision ways to incorporate white and black norms in her writings. According to Graham, Walker came to understand that “her vocation was not just to be a writer but to permit her voice to be the instrument of reconciliation” (15). Consequently, poetic forms in Walker’s work are reflective of both black and white American traditions. Walker’s

use of classical European poetic forms is in accord with Maureen Honey's view of these forms as "timeless and universal heritage" rather than "a reflection of the conqueror's province" (6-7). Walker's work is an exemplary meeting ground of the two traditions. Though Walker uses white forms, her work still has the identifying aura of African American literature, due to her use of folk elements. Turner reminds us that such "distinctive elements do not cause works by African American writers to fall outside the canon of American literature" (143). He considers these works distinctively white in the approaches used and no more.

Walker's use of various poetic forms suggests her early ability to challenge male authority as represented in important black and white literary tradition. This implies a great deal of self-confidence as a woman writer of no less talent than her male literary predecessors. She managed to use, modify, and reject literary forms established by important male writers regardless of their race. Walker took her equality to her male literary forebears for granted from the very beginning. That feminist approach is developed gradually throughout her writing career and it will be explored in the coming few chapters as it develops from one work to another.

Chapter Two

Margaret Walker and Communism:

The Thirties and the Forties

Other Negro students often did not speak to me because they were embarrassed about the way I looked-wearing dresses and coats that had seen better days and ragged stockings ... there were days when we did not have a nickel for a White Castle hamburger, and I can remember feeling faint with the smell of food cooking, and going home to sleep off my hunger. Friends often fed us, and always did so on holidays. (Walker, *How* 16)

This quotation gives an idea about how Walker and her sister lived in Chicago during the Great Depression, which led some Americans to embrace Communism as a philosophy in the 1930s and 1940s. This chapter investigates how Walker lived and wrote during these years, which witnessed the Great Depression, World War II, and the growth of Communism in America. It investigates the influence of the Depression and Communism on Margaret Walker's poetry of the time. This chapter explores how the main tenets of Communist and socialist thought are manifested in this poetry. It also aims to find out how far Walker challenged Communist and Marxist principles by approaching class matters through racial themes like slavery and violence in the South. Moreover, it highlights the undercurrent of feminist consciousness as it intersects with race and class in Walker's poems of the time.

Margaret Walker experienced the Great Depression and witnessed how it reshaped people's perspectives of American ideals. The spread of poverty among citizens who were previously middle or high class made Americans lose their faith in capitalism. Thomas C. Cochran confirms that directly after the Depression "many intellectuals and artists, however, went further in their thinking and rejected

capitalism altogether. Some wanted various types of Socialism, others joined the Communist aims” (104). African American writers were no exception; they were attracted to the Communist Party’s claims of supporting the dispossessed from all races and fighting all forms of exploitation. Gradually, they developed a more universal perspective on their suffering beyond its racial implications. They started to ascribe slavery and its later consequences until the present day to economic exploitation of their physical power and labour. A broader identification with the working class worldwide started to evolve in African Americans’ thought. Though Walker was not officially a member of the Communist Party, she was influenced by the current debates and the evolving views of the racial problem in America as mainly economic.

Walker joined Northwestern University in 1932 and graduated in 1935. She continued to live in Chicago and work for the Writers’ Project in the WPA (Works Progress Administration) for the next three years until she left for Iowa, where she joined university to get her masters degree. The WPA was a great opportunity for Walker. Graham says: “it not only meant getting paid for working with enough time left to write on her own, but it also meant meeting other writers, finding out about publishing outlets, and being exposed to new ideas” (“I Want” 21). Walker experienced the Depression years in the slums of Chicago, where she lived. She knew the meaning of poverty, hunger, and need. The Chicago years were Walker’s first experience of living independently. They were also her first encounter with the practical and intellectual life of the North. She met important writers of the time both black and white, some of them were Marxist like Frank Marshall Davis, Ted Ward, Arna Bontemps, and William Attaway.

In the 1920s, America witnessed an unprecedented prosperity. There were numerous opportunities for success and independence. Success was measured by business profit and businessmen were highly honoured in society. After World War I, vast reconstructions made people eager to have a better living and a brighter future. Thomas C. Reeves states that “A new America was dawning, a nation of huge cities, massive industries, exciting inventions, and sweeping changes in traditional social and moral standards. People were eager to get in on the prosperity and fun they thought was within everyone’s grasp” (81). That is why the economic crisis that followed the stock market crash of 1929 and touched large numbers of people from all classes was a real disappointment for most of Americans.

The crash of the stock market in New York, in October 1929 caused the “Great Depression” that plagued America in the 1930s. It affected ordinary people not only businessmen and investors. Most people were on the verge of famine. Reeves explains that “people lost their homes and savings, panhandlers roamed the streets, the jobless slept on park benches, hospitals treated people who passed out due to hunger, soup kitchens and bread lines were common place” (101). Exploitation and unequal distribution of income in the late twenties initiated that misery. Ordinary people could not keep pace with the sharp rise in industrial productivity, prices, and corporate profits (102). Walker was not exempted from that experience of hunger.

In spite of people’s optimism, need and distress initiated several violent incidences during the early years of the 1930s in different states. For example, in the summer of 1932, 20,000 unemployed citizens marched on Washington urging President Hoover to improve their deteriorating conditions and they did not get any response (Reeves 104). Only in 1933 when Roosevelt became a president, people started to feel some kind of governmental consideration of their suffering.

Roosevelt's New Deal reformatory program "set production limits, price guidelines," and protected workers with maximum work hours and minimum wages (108). He even ordered monthly cheques for all citizens who were eligible for unemployment allowance based on their past earnings (110). Moreover, he imposed more taxes on big corporations (111). Walker was one of the citizens who benefited from the New Deal; she was employed by one of its programs, the WPA.

Though Roosevelt's program made a difference in people's lives, the majority of Americans could not reach the point of prosperity until the early years of the 1940s when the war industry expanded to support the needs of the fighting armies in Europe. World War II helped American economy as agricultural and industrial productions were doubled to meet the demands of Europe and its armed forces. There was a long debate in America during that time whether to be isolated from the war or to participate in it. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, west Hawaii in December 1941 brought the whole debate to an end and America entered the war and emerged as a guardian of anti-Communism all over the world. Thus, America raised its defence industries and workers headed to the military factories, where they found numerous job opportunities (Reeves 120-125).

The profits of war industry emphasized the importance of making workers comfortable. Factories started to care about workers' welfare and satisfaction about their work conditions. That is why by the mid 1940s, the working class became highly respected in American society. Thomas C. Cochran states that "by the end of the war, old social superiority of clerical office worker over the man in overalls had largely disappeared, and the continuing need for higher skills in plants and service establishments was to continue this trend" (106). People started to perceive the importance of having a strong and unified working class to support their rights.

Furthermore, America's involvement in the war broadened people's horizons and increased their awareness of global tensions and universal debates. In her poem "Today" (1942), Walker shows such awareness of the war-distressed people in Europe. She comments on the horrors of the blazing war and its attendant damage and deterioration.

African Americans were attracted to Roosevelt and the Democratic Party due to the benefits they received and the public relief policies of low-cost housing and job-creation. Reeves states that Roosevelt "appointed more blacks to more important government positions than any president ever had. He also condemned lynching, although the political realities of the time prohibited him from backing a proposal to make it a federal crime" (112). He could not back such a proposal because he could not risk losing the votes of the majority of the Democratic Party supporters in the South, who were hostile to African Americans. However, his attitudes to African Americans were after all highly valued by them as T. H. Watkins comments: "the New Dealers were, at least in principle, colour-blind" (218). Roosevelt's reformatory program started to win people's trust whereas the Communist Party started to lose some of its supporters.

African Americans believed that their debt to the Republican Party due to Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 that freed their ancestors was fully paid by now. Joe William Trotter states that though "The Republican Party was still the party of emancipation," its role "in the emancipation of slaves and the initial struggle for full citizenship rights represented a long memory for many black voters" (442). They decided to choose the party that would help them get a better future. In the 1930s, African Americans started to desert the Republicans that took their votes for granted. Under the Roosevelt administration, African Americans

participated in the Works Progress Administration, the National Youth Administration, and several other New Deal agencies.

However, African American gains during Roosevelt's era did not expand much in the political and the social spheres. As mentioned before, Roosevelt could not fight for more equality for African Americans. That is why his support for them through the New Deal's social and economic organizations could not protect them in their daily lives from being denied equal opportunities with their fellow white Americans. They were exposed to being fired whenever an unemployed white worker appeared. Cochran sums up this idea in one sentence when he states that African Americans "gained more in psychological recognition than in actual material advancement from these efforts" (104). Apparently, they were equal to whites because they were given access to work in factories where whites worked. However, they remained unequal in payment, work hours, and training opportunities. African American workers were helpless to do anything to overcome such limits of the New Deal, other than strengthening their ties with the labour movement that tried to address the needs of labour. Walker's poems of the time show some support to unionism which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Furthermore, Marxism, Socialism, Communism, proletarian thought, and similar ideas of the age continued to appeal to African American intellectuals. They strived to find a philosophy through which full equality could be legally fulfilled. Cochran clarifies that hope of equality for all mankind provided by the leftist philosophies encouraged both black and white American writers and artists in the 1930s and 1940s to produce proletarian texts for the masses (114). Proletarian literature typically has working class background and attacks capitalism. Walker was not an exception to this prevailing attitude; her poems of the time convey anti-

capitalist tendencies. Maryemma Graham comments that “the Communist party especially targeted artists and writers, encouraging representation of the masses of people, whether black, ethnic, or poor. It was the writers who would impart their vision of a new America to the nation and the world” (“I want” 20). The New Deal agencies which were funded by the Roosevelt administration included many members who could not avoid showing their socialist aims in what they wrote.

As a matter of fact, the Communist Party was eager to attract African American members and placed them in key leadership positions and made propaganda of how Communism was against racism. It used the issue to support its attack on capitalism. The Party helped publicize several injustices that captured the attention of the whole nation. A memorable example is the Scottsboro Trial in which nine African American teenagers were falsely accused of raping a white young woman and were sentenced to death in the electric chair (Franklin 388). Moreover, the Communist Party organized hunger marches, labour strikes, and demonstrations. In spite of all that activity and enthusiasm, the American Communist Party was doomed to failure in the end, mainly because of the efforts of the FBI. Douglas Tallack states that the FBI “amassed information and compiled lists of subversive organizations. Congressional hearings and judicial trials were held; absolutions were given to those who co-operated; and formal and informal sentences were meted out to those who would not” (193).

That was not the only cause of the failure of the Communist Party in America. Roosevelt managed to deal with union movements, which became stronger during these years. They were popular on a large scale and challenged capital owners and industry managers. Managers, according to Richard S. Kirkendall “looked upon unions as threats to their rights to control their firms and insisted that management

alone should decide who was to be paid how much, who was to be promoted, demoted, hired, or fired, how much to be produced, and what methods and machines to be used” (178). Roosevelt reduced the individualistic tone of American capitalism and the management of industry became a shared task of private and public organizations. Roosevelt fitted unionism into the larger context of American capitalism. That is why Irving Howe ascribes the failure of the socialist party to its rigidity, which prevented it from being part of the New Deal that brought reform to America (85). Though Communism failed in America, it shaped the 1930s and 1940s and helped Americans reassess capitalism.

The Depression years imposed a rigorous daily life style on the majority of Americans. People strived to make ends meet and there were not enough money to spend on theatres or night clubs as they used to do in the 1920s. They turned to cinema whose tickets were quite affordable. Cinemas were a common “source of escape” from the grim realities of daily life. Movies were full of romance, comedy, and songs (Reeves 116). Charles R. Hearn justifies that attitude in movies by the fact that, people “did not want to be reminded too often of the unpleasant reality of unemployment, hunger, and shattered dreams” (77). One of the texts that exemplified that attitude was Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1939).

By contrast, other books confronted the problems of the era and denied any diversion like John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). This text attracted people’s attention for reasons different from the reasons that publicized *Gone with the Wind*. It deals with the painful tales of Oklahoma sharecroppers. *Gone with the Wind* and *The Grapes of Wrath* represent two common approaches among people to the troubled times of the depression years. Walker belongs to the second approach; her poems are far from romance and fantasy writing. They evoke people’s will to

confront troubles and find solutions for them. Walker's poetry does not represent wealthy and bourgeois characters; it focuses on the farmer, the miner, and the worker. Marxism was always in the background of the minds of writers during that time at least as a backdrop. It helped them understand the importance of solidarity towards social change. Walker's poems of the time urge people to unite and revolt to initiate change. This aspect of Walker's poems of the time will be demonstrated later in this chapter.

Change of attitude applied also to some writers of the Harlem Renaissance who continued to write but in a stronger tone of protest like Langston Hughes, Arna Brompton, Claude McKay, and Zora Neale Hurston. Joe William Trotter, Jr. States that "under the impact of the depression, black artists and writers ... reassessed the meaning of the renaissance and called for a more socially conscious art" (480). This new politically aware spirit is what Walker blamed them for lacking during earlier years. They emerged in the 1930s with a stronger voice and a bolder social consciousness. They stopped writing what Richard Wright calls "a-begging to white America" ("Blueprint" 45). In the 1930s writers who previously formed the Harlem Renaissance adopted a more radical approach and demanded social change. Their ideas were articulated in new journals: *Challenge* (1934-1937) and *New Challenge* which was issued for the first time in 1937.

A younger generation of leftist African American writers like Margaret Walker, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and many other writers who were schooled and apprenticed during the Depression years emerged and started publishing. They wrote a socially concerned literature and appeared like an emerging literary movement. This movement was ushered in under the umbrella of the WPA in Chicago and was called the Chicago Renaissance or Chicago School. It established

Chicago as a major literary centre and Richard Wright seemed to be its most prominent figure. Most of its writers were immigrants from the South and were interested in or at least influenced by Communism. The movement was much associated with the publication of the sociological statements of Horace Cayton and St. Claire Drake in *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945).

Chicago Renaissance writers were concerned about social injustices in America. Though this literary trend was not new, this generation of writers provided a different perspective on it. Maryemma Graham argues that the difference lies in the departure from the conventional African American middle class and in the way “a new generation of writers, identifying with the experiences of Southern blacks, expanded their sociological imagination and responded to the politics of Marxism” (“I Want” 22). They worked towards a broader vision of the masses of African Americans rather than the African American middle class. Walker adopts the same strategy and highlights the contributions of ordinary African Americans in the making of America in *For My People*.

According to Graham, a Chicago-identified literature had its roots in the works of Richard Wright who gathered many young African American writers around the red flag of the Communist Party or at least under the banner of proletarian concerns (“I Want” 21-22). Wright admired the practical drive and the disciplined strategy of Communism. Walker first met Wright in 1936 and was invited by him to the organization meeting of the South Side Writers’ Group. Graham comments that Walker “found herself among young black professionals whom she could regard as peers and who had similar expectations and varying degrees of commitment to Communist ideals” (21). Graham adds that “only later would Margaret realize that

the group she was part of formed a new kind of Renaissance” (22). Walker only joined the group as part of her attempts to get her work published.

Richard Wright emerged as a literary phenomenon that triggered controversy and debate. His *Native Son* (1940), according to an observer, “changed American culture forever” (qtd. in Trotter 480). It shocked white readers in America and made them perceive how racial discrimination could be a destructive force of the whole society. The novel depicts how the daily miseries of life in the ghettos of Chicago could lead any person to devilish deeds. The accumulated frustrations of the protagonist lead him to kill unconsciously. This highlights the necessity to reassess the whole system of race and class discrimination in American society. The novel shows how youth in the ghettos are full of wrath and uncontrollable revolt, which can lead them to horrible violence against the whole society.

While novels drew attention, not much poetry by African Americans was published in the 1930s and 1940s compared to earlier years. Langston Hughes remained a prominent figure in African American literary circles. Hughes did not join the Communist Party and explained the reasons in the second volume of his autobiography *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956). For him, the Party was based on strict discipline and the acceptance of directives that ... a writer, did not wish to accept” (122). Even if he did not become a member of the Party, he could not refrain from showing his support to its activities. Later, the Scottsboro case, as William J. Maxwell notes, “melted Hughes’s remaining resistance to imagining himself as a black Bolshevik writer, one willing to produce for Communism’s benefit” (134). Hughes published a small volume of poetry and donated it to the defence of the boys in court under the title *Scottsboro Limited* (1932). This volume is a depiction of the nine boys’ arrest and trial and an attack on the two young white women whose fraud

caused the whole misery. The Scottsboro issue was the beginning of Hughes's overt support of unionism and several workers' leagues, which is very clear in the following lines from his verse play *Don't You Want to be Free* (1938):

Oh, who wants to come and join hands with me?

Who wants to make one great unity?

Who wants to say, no more black or white?

Then, let's get together, folks,

And fight, fight, fight! (392)

These lines reflect a belief in a collective unity of all humanity with no consideration of race through workers' unions.

Of course there was some opposition to this change in attitudes of African American writers towards a proletariat concern for both black and white. This opposition came mainly from Du Bois. He viewed this kind of blind belief in interracial labour unions as naivety. He believed that "Negroes were exploited by both the white capitalists and the white proletariat" (Young 24). Actually, this point of view turned out to be quite right after all. With the approach of the war in December 1941 when the depression ended for many Americans, factories absorbed masses of workers of whom African Americans were the least in number (Franklin 436).

In such a troublesome and controversial time, Margaret Walker emerged as a key poetic voice of the 1930s and 1940s. She was only fourteen when the stock market crashed in 1929 and was sixteen when she left the South to join Northwestern University in Chicago. Before her departure to Chicago, she was told that African Americans in Northern cities were enjoying more opportunities of equality and freedom. However, she was disappointed and the promises of dignity and equality

turned false. About her feelings in this concern, she says: “imagine my great hurt to discover that few of the wonderful promises came true. I was refused service in restaurants in Evanston, Chicago time and time again. In the South I had suffered no similar embarrassment because there I had known what to expect” (*How* 6). Some of Walker’s poems of the time express this disappointment in the North such as “Sorrow Home” and “Southern Song.”

She was a young African American woman starting an independent life in a time of social and economic difficulties. She outlived the trouble of the Great Depression and steeled herself with a sense of hope the bright future waiting for her after graduation. She experienced the Leftist ideas that dominated and appealed to many Americans at time. Maryemma Graham states that Walker bore “the unmistakable mark of a nascent radicalism, steeled in the Depression years, the heyday of American Communism” (introd. to Walker’s *How* ix). In that context, she believed that a better future will come sooner or later for herself and for the whole race, but only through activism.

Walker sympathized with the socialist ideas of social equality and condemnation of all forms of discrimination and exploitation. Though she was not a member of the Communist Party, she was familiar with its doctrines as she was very close to Richard Wright who was an active member of the party. She worked with him for three years in the WPA and was a member of Wright’s South Side Writers’ Group. Wright was her closest friend from 1936 to 1939 and she claimed that nobody could have ever known Richard Wright as she did

Going to the North was a new experience full of anticipation for Walker. It was an investigation and a discovery on different levels. She moved to the North loaded with many preconceived ideas about the life of white people in the North, full

of many hopes for equality, and many fears of the unknown. Walker expresses this early confusion as follows:

I was, nevertheless, shy and afraid over the prospect of going to a white school; I might prove backward as a result of my Southern training. I had also perforce become somewhat anti-white myself and I feared coming into close contact with white people. Yet I anticipated a new kind of freedom once I crossed the Mason-Dixon Line ... What was most amazing was my discovery of my own prejudices and my first realization of the economic problem ... My first step toward understanding what it meant to be Black in America was understanding the economics of the United States. (*How* 6)

Accordingly, Chicago was a distinguished experience for Walker. It opened her new vistas of American life and gave her new perspectives on the African American dilemma. By moving to the North, Walker developed a broader vision of the American social scene.

In the South, Walker thought that all white people were richer than black people and any poor white person was lazy and had no excuse for his/her poverty (*How* 6). It was a surprise for her to know that there were poor white people exploited by rich white people and that not all African Americans were economically equal as many of them became wealthy by exploiting the poor. Further, she started to perceive that “whites suffer psychologically from the problem of race prejudice as much as Negroes” and she “began to see race prejudice as a definite tool to keep people divided and economically helpless” (*How* 7). Competition over better life opportunities nurtured hatred between the two groups and kept them apart.

That way, Walker started to develop a new perspective of class consciousness. She perceived that suffering was not confined to African Americans.

This new attitude on Walker's part can be explained by Robert Bone's observation that "Economic catastrophe on such a scale promoted solidarity among its victims ... Black people came to see their plight less exclusively as racial; more and more a dichotomy of rich and poor" (452). Walker's poetry of the time demonstrates that cross-racial consciousness. In "The Struggle Staggers us" (1942), Walker analyses the common struggle "for bread, for pride, for simple dignity" (51). Nevertheless, Walker never subordinated race in her reflections on class.

When she was in the South, Walker could not connect herself with any white woman anywhere in the world because of the several incidents that she witnessed in her childhood of white people humiliating African Americans (*How* 6). However, after experiencing the interracial working class life in the north, Walker developed a belief in being identified with other oppressed people even outside America. She expresses that when she says: "I realized it was essential for Negroes to be identified with every heroic struggle of an oppressed people, with the brave Chinese, the Indians, the South Africans, the Negroes in West Indies who fight for liberty" (*How* 8). The proletarian global war against exploitation endowed Walker with a strong consciousness of common humanity worldwide.

In spite of her being a religious person, Marxist appeals of the time provided Walker with a critical view of African Americans' use of religion as a pretext to endure suffering. Apparently, her religious nature contradicted Marx's most quoted saying that "religion is the opiate of the masses" (72). Yet, Walker did not take this saying as a call for abandoning religion. She never did without her Christian faith; however, she developed a Marxist understanding of social practices linked to religion. Walker understood how necessary it was not to let religion make people unconscious of their social suffering. Walker believed in religion in spiritual terms,

which is evident in what she said to Dilla Buckner in an interview in 1995: “I am centred in a consciousness of divinity within all the time, and this is what spirituality means to me. God is part of me and I am part of God. That is my faith” (*Conversations* 175). Walker’s faith lies within her heart while her mind fights social and economic exploitation in the name of religion. Walker reconciled Marxism with Christianity by being eclectic in her understanding of each of them. She took from Marxism its call for solidarity and social change but refused its atheism. Walker agreed with Marx’s idea that religion “covers over the suffering without removing it” (72). At the same time, she valued Christianity but criticized African Americans’ understanding of it. In her poems, Walker emphasizes that religion does not mean being submissive or defeated.

Walker considered herself a representative writer of the post-Depression era. She confirms that in an interview with Charles H. Rowell in 1973: “I was one of few that captured the excitement and the mood of the Thirties when we were trying to pull out of the Depression” (*Conversations* 28). That is considerably true that Walker expressed both people’s suffering and their need for hope in her poems, which also call for revolution towards social change. She shared the big question raised at that time about the role of the artist in that time of distress. In Chicago, Walker found herself among radical and visionary writers and in the heart of social and philosophical debates. Maryemma Graham emphasizes that in Chicago Walker developed a “sense of her own agency and an evolving political awareness” which “matched her complex historical vision and her need to locate and resonate a distinctive African American sensibility” (“I Want” 22). Chicago represented a social and a cultural challenge for Walker. She won the social challenge when she managed to cope with the mixed race university life, which was new to her. She even managed

to have several successful contacts with many white students, professors, work colleagues, and writers. She won the cultural challenge when she broke her literary and cultural confinement to Southern and African American concerns.

Walker could not obscure her racial concerns; she only added a new dimension to her understanding of oppression in America. Though Marxism called for a “colour blind” literature, Walker’s work of the time is unmistakably racial. Marxism helped Walker perceive class discrimination as another dimension of African Americans’ suffering. Thus, she developed an understanding of how different forms of oppression intersect in her people’s life. According to Walker, “international brotherhood does not negate the nationalism of black people. It only enforces and re-enforces our common humanity” (*On Being* 78). This view helped her attain a cultural balance which could have only been nurtured at that time in Chicago.

It is noteworthy that the socialist “colour blind” principle had a negative implication for African Americans. Part of the African American identity was lost by being submerged into Communism. That is why the “colour blind” principle was one of the factors that led to the failure of Socialism in America. Irving Howe argues that American workers could not sustain a sense of solidarity because they belonged to different ethnicities (110-111). The Communist Party could not perceive the uniqueness of American society as a migrants’ society. This illuminates how racial concerns intersected with class consciousness in America. For Walker, this “intersectionality,” as Kimberle Crenshaw calls it, extends to gender. Walker’s poems that will be discussed later in this chapter show this.

Out of that all, several dichotomies arose in Walker’s mind: nationalism versus universalism, racial perspective versus class consciousness, North versus

South, and modernism versus folk culture. Many elements were there to destroy any cultural ghetto that she could have planned for. *For My People* is an important example of combining all these contrasting elements. For example, the volume begins with the exclusively racial dedication: “For My People” and concludes with a non-racial call for “A union of the two strange worlds” without specifying which strange worlds (51). *For My People* (1942) is the fruit of Walker’s experience of the 1930s and 1940s in Chicago mingled with her age old reservoir of African American and Southern traditions. According to Gloria T. Hull, the volume was “the most important poetic event” of that time (“Black”95). It is Walker’s first phase of mature creativity and it is the outcome of long years of learning and practising.

For My People is composed of twenty-eight poems in three different poetic forms. These poems can be divided into three sections, each having a unifying theme and form. The first section includes twelve poems written in the long line of free verse. This section is about African Americans, their history, and the South. They are mostly in the plural first person pronoun “we” or in the collective first person pronoun “I.” The second section consists of ten folk ballads in which Walker plays the role of a story-teller. In this section Walker rearticulates folk tales of real and mythical folk heroes. The third section of the volume includes six sonnets about real memories of the poet. The six poems have political connotations and social purposes.

Through all the sections of the volume, Walker expresses dissatisfaction about African Americans’ living conditions. Joyce Pettis ascribes this to the fact that Walker “observes little in black life about which to write genteel or romantic poetry; thus the poems are characterized by direct, strong, language and realistic, accessible images and symbols” (“Margaret Walker: Black” 49). This is accurate as Walker’s poetry is informed by the African American experience of oppression, which is far

from being romantic. Walker's poetic diction suits that experience of suffering and protest. For example, words like "blood," "fiery," "storm," "burst," and "struggle" are common in her poems.

Being influenced by Marxism, Walker celebrated the proletariat in *For My People*. The volume marks Walker's joining the masses of African American slaves and workers in spite of her bourgeois background. For example, by "My People," Walker does not mean the educated writers and intellectuals but the slaves, who spent years in "washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending / hoeing plowing digging planting pruning patching" (6). This attitude is in harmony with Richard Wright's call for joining the deprived masses instead of clinging to the bourgeois life, which will not avail in lifting African Americans socially (46). Thus, Walker narrows the social gap separating her from them. Walker's poems prove this as they are representative of ordinary African Americans in theme and accessible to them in language.

From the outset, the dedicatory phrase, "For My People" in the title poem denotes closeness between the speaker and the listeners through the first singular possessive pronoun. It also implies sincerity and honesty of the speaker in the poem, the poet talks "for" rather than "about" her people. The title fits the content of the poem as it emphasizes the poet's awareness of belonging to the community she addresses. That title phrase is repeated in the beginning of six of the ten stanzas that compose the poem. Three of the other four stanzas are specifically addressed to different groups included under the umbrella of that very title. The last stanza is the message delivered by Walker to her people.

The influence of Communism can be traced in the poem's condemnation of capitalism and economic exploitations of African American slaves. The metaphor,

“lending their strength to the years,” likens early slaves’ lives to a commodity that can be bought, sold, or lent (6). Though “lending” is not the same as “selling” as it denotes a temporal loan that will be returned, it still signifies dealing with an object rather than a human being. They have found themselves sold and bought as slaves, so they lend their strength to whoever wants to benefit from it, they do not resist. Their lives are given for free: “lent” not even sold. This shows how African American slaves were subject to economic exploitation; they used to be viewed as means of production that brings profit and gain. Another metaphor to enhance this idea is: “devoured by the money-hungry glory-craving leeches” (7). The poet likens those who seek to exploit blacks for capitalist interests to the leeches that suck their victim’s blood to survive. It is a very powerful metaphor that spurs the mind to think of a way to put an end to this injustice. Similarly, the poet uses another metaphor denoting the same meaning of blacks’ being victims when she says “preyed on” (7). She suggests that whoever contributes to the exploitation of black people is like a hawk or a tiger that attacks a prey ruthlessly.

Further, the poem denounces capitalism through another interesting image in the seventh stanza. Walker portrays the way black people are dominated by white people to the way puppets are helplessly controlled by their executor: “tied, and shackled and tangled between ourselves by the unseen creatures who tower over us omnisciently and laugh” (7). Moreover, the oppressor laughs at their suffering and blind obedience. This exploitation makes it difficult for black people to find a beam of hope in a better future. This is clear in the ninth stanza which reads:

For my people standing staring trying to fashion a better way
from confusion, from hypocrisy and misunderstanding,
trying to fashion a world that will hold all the people,

all the faces, all the adams and eves and their countless
generations; (7)

To convey the difficulty of finding that hope, Walker wittily uses the verb combination “fashion from” making its object or the material from which it is to be fashioned three negative words: confusion, hypocrisy, and misunderstanding. That makes the reader feel that this hope is quite unattainable as African Americans try to make it from things that are not suitable at all for its making. The surrounding atmosphere is not fit for its emergence and growth. Walker offers the way for getting that hope in the concluding stanza when she calls for revolution: “Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a / bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second / generation full of courage issue forth” (7). She authoritatively uses strong words like the imperative verb “let” which is used seven times in the eight line stanza. Then other strong words are used in the same stanza such as “bloody,” “issue forth,” “clenching,” “martial,” and “control” to signify the strength and the determination required to make that hope come true (7).

The structure of the poem suggests that the poet makes a speech to her people through the first nine stanzas, putting in each one a different reason for what is to be offered in the concluding one, a resolution for the problems mentioned in the previous stanzas. This resolution is introduced in the imperative to stress its being necessary and inescapable. The poem is like a causative sentence in that each stanza seems to be a short clause in a longer sentence. None of the poem’s stanzas can stand by itself either grammatically or semantically. Each one is grammatically a run-on sentence ending with a semicolon not a full stop and semantically, none of them is completely meaningful alone. This pattern creates an organic unity in the poem, which creates a connected line of thought all through the poem. Once again, there is

a feeling that the poet is making a speech to her people aiming at charging them with emotions, filling them with enthusiasm, and preparing them for something stronger coming later in the poem. The pace of the poem rises gradually from oppression to being strong and from helplessness to being determined.

In the context of the 1930s and 1940s revolutionary spirit, the poem calls for protest. The speaker in the poem declares that to set themselves free from all bonds of oppression and exploitation, those victims should fight for the fulfilment of a better life. Walker uses a skilful metaphor when she likens that better life to “a bloody peace” whose achievement necessitates a lot of bloodshed. Furthermore, Walker uses a brilliant metaphor when she says “let a second generation full of courage issue forth:” she likens the emergence of the new generation to the flow of blood from a wound as the phrase “issue forth” suggests so. This is quite a complex metaphor that the suffering of the past generation is likened to a wound in black people’s hearts, but their bleeding is to bring recovery through the new generations that rise from this very suffering to fight for freedom. Walker asks all her listeners to be the strongest they can through another metaphor, when she says that they should have the “strength of final clenching,” which is supposed to be the hardest and the most influential power in the breaking of their shackles. Walker likens their determination to a pair of pincers or a pair of jaws that can clench tightly to cut their chains. The word “clenching” also suggests a fist fighting for freedom. It denotes that freedom needs strength and determination to be able to “take control” of one’s fate.

Walker’s attack on capitalism through a racial theme like slavery shows that she could not write a “colour blind” literature even when Communism was in vogue. Walker’s call for “a race of men now rise and take control” coincides with her condemnation of the “money-hungry glory-craving leeches” in the poem. Jerry W.

Ward Jr. considers the reading of the poem completed or “complicated by the reader’s historicity” (*For* 179). That is true as the poem can be read as a chronicle of the history of African Americans’ suffering in America one generation after another.

The poem shows another influence of Marxist thought on Walker: her view of religion as means of oppression. White masters employed religion to dominate slaves’ minds by making them ascribe everything to the divine will. They gradually lost their ability to work their minds and employ their skills for their own benefit because of their dependence on God who will compensate them in the hereafter for their worldly suffering. Some words in the poem show African Americans’ inability to find justification for their suffering. The poem conveys their state of mental and psychological bewilderment through words like “distressed,” “disturbed,” “deceived,” “never knowing,” “never understanding,” “dispossessed,” and “disinherited” (7). The use of “never” in different places in the poem asserts black people’s state of being uncertain of everything.

This uncertainty includes even the God they worship in that they pray to an “unknown God.” By “unknown God,” Walker alludes to the fact that African American slaves were forced into Christianity as part of subduing them. This is part of Walker’s call for protest. Walker tries to understand African Americans’ suffering through an understanding of “the spiritual legacies that helped to produce and shape them” (Pierce 237). Walker suggests that African Americans’ troubles can be historically ascribed to their false understanding of religion. She suggests that religion alone will not help African Americans overcome their troubles.

Though Stephen E. Henderson considers “For My People,” “the most comprehensively Southful poem ever written,” other poems in the volume depict the south more elaborately like “Southern Song,” “Sorrow Home,” and “Delta” (101).

“Sorrow Home” is about the South, its ambivalence, and African Americans’ feelings of love and fear towards it. The poem deliberates on the collective experience of millions of African Americans who headed to the North for better opportunities and left their homes in the South. The poem signifies a sense of displacement as the speaker is in the North while her “roots are deep in southern life” (12). Nancy Berke argues that the poem “exemplifies this sense of displacement. Its title alone suggests it could be an anthem for the two million African Americans who went North in the first three decades of the twentieth century” (*Women* 141). Compared to the South, the North is equally ambivalent. It promises opportunities and gives the sense of dislocation instead. The North represents the discovery of the false promises of equality and prosperity. For Walker, the contrast between the North and the South is not just that of urban versus rural; it is the sense of displacement and estrangement that African Americans feel in both places. Yet as she expresses homesickness for her Southern home, she develops a strong sense of need to reclaim the South and fulfil social change and economic justice. The speaker in the poem laments the facts that make the South a “sorrow home,” and a “melody beating” in his/her “bones and blood” at the same time (12). The combination “melody beating” suggests that the South is the poetic persona’s heart and its melody is its beats, which signifies closeness and intimacy.

The alliteration between “beating,” “bone,” and “blood” signifies a strong bond between the poetic persona and the “melody” of the South. The use of the word “melody” associated with the South contrasts the use of “music” with the North: “I am not a hothouse bulb to be reared in steam-heated flats / with the music of El and subway in my ears, walled in / by steel and wood and brick far from the sky” (12). “Melody” suggests a sense of harmony and enjoyment, however, “music” is not

necessarily harmonious or enjoyable. “Music” in Chicago is related to the noise of the subway and the Chicago “L,” which is a means of transportation known in Chicago and its suburbs. The poem associates the South with positive sensory elements from nature: visual in “gulf blue streams,” olfactory in “smell of fresh pine,” auditory in “trail of coon,” gustatory in “wild onion,” and the feeling of the “warm skies.” Yet, the North is associated with the artificial warmth of “steam-heated flats,” sound of “the El and subway,” and the touch of “steel and wood and brick” (12). This contrast emphasizes the poetic person’s sense of displacement and loneliness in the North; it is not where she belongs. The poet asserts the contrast between the infertility of the city and the growth and warmth provided by the sun in both the tropic world and the American South. Noticeably, the poem is permeated with plant and growth diction, which emphasizes that the life of the poetic persona depends on his/her being in the South where elements of growth for plants are in abundance. That is why in the North he/she cannot live where they are missing.

This displacement conveys a sense of disappointment in the North for African Americans. The industrial system in the North is no better than the agrarian South. This stems from a prevailing capitalist system on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line. After trying the industrial North, the poetic persona wants to be back to the agrarian South: “I want the cotton fields, tobacco and the cane. I want to / walk along with sacks of seed to drop in fallow ground” (12). This seems to be a challenge to Marxism; Walker’s poetic persona wants to return to the South, the historical place of slavery. He/she wants to return armed with hope in a better future and reversal of conditions. That is why he/she wants to know how long that should take: “How long will the Klan of hate ... keep me from my own” (12)? This exemplifies Walker’s inability to thoroughly conform to the tenets of Marxist thought of the time.

The poem mourns the racial hatred of the KKK that made thousands of African Americans leave their homes in the South. The poetic persona expresses a painful and desperate wish for social change through the interjection “O,” the exclamation mark, the concluding question, and the internal rhyme. The poet’s interrogative tone expresses inability to endure further oppression and racist attacks and the internal rhyme quickens the pace of the rhythm which suggests impatience to initiate change. The influence of Marxism can be read in the juxtaposition between possession and deprivation in the poem. The poetic persona considers the South a property of his/her own; however, racial violence deprives him/her of this property. As he/she says, the KKK gangs “keep me from my own?” The speaker in the poem impatiently asks about the time needed to restore his/her ownership of the South. This possession and dispossession applies to all African Americans. Walker denounces not only racial violence but also the economic system it protects.

It is noteworthy that Walker’s feminist consciousness is subsumed in the priority given to race and class in this poem as the speaker in the poem’s gender is unidentified. However, the opening lines suggest an early challenge to male authority in documented history. The poem opens with its speaker’s claim of an equal and even more right in the South to that of white and black distinguished historical male figures: “My roots are deep in Southern life; deeper than John Brown / or Nat Turner or Robert Lee” (12). Walker’s poetic persona claims that he/she is more established in the South than John Brown, the famous white abolitionist; Nat Turner, the slave who led a slave revolution; and Robert Lee, the Confederate Army’s commanding general: his/her “roots are deep in Southern life; deeper” than them all (12).

It is worth mentioning that Walker’s depiction of the South in her poems of the time is in itself a challenge to her male contemporary writers, who avoided it.

James Edward Smethurst confirms that the most remarkable change in poetry in the 1940s is “the increasing ascendancy of the urban landscape and the urban African American culture” (*New* 50). Contrary to that attitude, Walker celebrates the South and undermines Northern cities as proper places to live in, especially for African Americans. That is why she was “an anomalous figure among African-American poets in the 1940s” (Smethurst, *New* 181). Walker’s poetry of the time confirms that she could not fully conform to Communism or to the norms of writing common among her contemporaries.

The injustice of the Southern agrarian economic system is denounced in another poem of the volume, “Delta.” “Delta” is Walker’s longest poem, 142 lines in three sections. It is an assertive lyrical poem which penetrates the South in detail. The first section of the poem is about the South about the speaker’s self-identification with the South and the sense of frustration that prevails in the valley. The second section explores the causes of people’s need for revolt. The third section describes the stages and the results of this revolt. Walker simply states that African Americans toiled for long and others reaped and now they are entitled to have the land as their own. The South is portrayed as a fertile body which is tormented and enslaved. The poem echoes Marxist explanations of slavery in economic terms.

The poem’s poetic persona is supposed to be female because of the merging found in the poem between this persona’s body and earth, which is associated with femininity and motherhood. The speaker in the poem identifies herself with the South and emphasizes her belonging to it when she says in the beginning of the poem: “I am a child of the valley” (15). She also uses the technique of merging body parts with Southern landscape elements: “Mud and muck on my feet,” “Damp draughts of mist ... on my breath,” and “Red clay ... colors my mouth.” Merging

body and land refers to the long patriarchal exploitation of both women and land for material profit during slavery. This merging is full of pain and wounds: “there is blood on my tongue” and “my heart bleeds for our fate” (15).

The speaker in the poem remembers the valley as both a personal and a collective property consecutively: “I turn to each stick and stone, marking them for / my own” and “here where muddy water flows at our shanty door” (15). This property is nurturing and nourishing for everyone outside the valley: “one great river / running through little towns / through swampy thickets and smoky cities” (15). The poem’s persona laments the loss, suffering, exploitation, and oppression of the valley residents over long years of slavery. She calls for a revolt to emerge from that valley by all African Americans: “stricken and silently submissive / seeking yet sullen ones! / If only from this valley we might rise with song! / With singing that is ours” (16). These lines conclude the first section of the poem. The collective aspect of this call for revolt is evident in the repetition of the plural first person pronoun in the subject and the possessive cases. The alliteration between “stricken,” “silently,” “submissive,” “seeking,” and “sullen” condenses the effect of the suffering of African Americans. The internal rhyme between “stricken” and “sullen” and between “seeking” and “singing” adds emphasis to this call for change. Actually, the music of the poem is mostly based on alliteration and internal rhyme. R. Baxter Miller notes that “Almost no rhyme scheme exists in the poem;” only “a predominance of three or four feet gives the impression of a very loose ballad” (86). Indeed, this can be ascribed to the nature of the story told in the poem: a distraught and fragmented people trying to cohere and find a way out of their suffering. The poem derives cohesion from the sequence of the events told: suffering, restlessness and dissatisfaction, and revolt.

In the second section of the poem, the narrator explores the forms of exploitation that necessitate revolt. First, it is a social and class discrimination:

High above us and round about us stand high

Mountains

rise the towering snow-capped mountains

while we are beaten and broken and bowed

here in this dark valley. (16)

The snow-capped mountains and the dark valley refer to difference in social status between the two races dwelling in the area: whites are the highest and blacks are the lowest. Eugenia Collier comments that “the mountains, snow capped, are our aspiration for the fulfilment of America’s promise-ever before us but totally beyond our reach” (102). The contrast in colour and height between “snow-capped mountains” and “dark valley” emphasizes the wide gap separating the two social classes. Ekaterini Georgoudaki considers the Mississippi Delta an Edenic garden “forbidden to black people” (168). This view of the area is accurate as it is in harmony with Walker’s portrayal of the lowland residents as “beaten and broken and bowed,” they look down whereas both mountains and paradise are in the sky. Walker suggests that worldly happiness does not contradict going to paradise in the hereafter. Both the mountains, which symbolize the social status of white people and paradise, are in the same direction: upward. Accordingly, the opposite can be true, African Americans who suffer for the sake of a reward after death might go to hell instead because they do not work towards the fulfilment of equality and justice in life. This reading of the lines can be linked to Walker’s denouncement of African Americans’ misunderstanding of religion in “For My People.”

Second, it is an economic exploitation. The valley is rich in a lot of products, the fruit of African Americans' labour: "We labor. / Our mothers and fathers labored before us / here in this low valley" (16). However, their labour and their products are not theirs: "Daily we fill boats with cargos of our need / and send them out to the sea." They send the products which they "need" to unknown others to use for nothing in return. The narrator conveys the labourers' complaint of the capitalist agrarian system in the valley:

We tend the crop and gather the harvest
but not for ourselves we labor,
not for ourselves do we sweat and starve and spend
under these mountains we dare not claim,
here on this earth we dare not claim,
here by the river we dare not claim.
Yet we are an age of years in this valley;
yet we are bound till death to this valley. (17)

Though slaves labour and starve, they have no right to a claim in the land, the river, or the mountains. However, they will not leave the valley because it is their own. They cannot leave it after toiling for years in it: "an age of years in this valley" make them "bound till death to" it. This seems in accord with Marxist call for corporate ownership of means of production, the land or the valley in the poem. The poem employs the strategy of incremental repetition: "not for ourselves" is repeated twice, "we dare not claim" thrice, and "yet we are...in this valley" twice. This pattern adds emphasis and conveys inability to endure anymore and impatience to initiate a social revolt.

Here, the South in political terms is not a soothing force in this poem. For example, storm itself, which symbolize their own anger and revolt works against them as it leaves them “dazed in wonder and caught in downpour” and makes it easy for “Robbers and murderers” to “rape the valley” and take their children to force them leave it (18-19). Walker likens the valley to an exploited female body. This metaphor signifies the fact that while all African Americans suffer from race and class discrimination, women are the most affected category; they are the easiest to harm. This shows how Walker, though influenced by Marxism, challenges it by insisting on the ways race, class, and gender oppressions intersect in her people’s lives. The speaker’s call for protest concludes the second section of the poem: “of radium in our bones and rebellion in our brains / and we wish no longer to rest” (17-18). The word “radium” signifies potentiality to interact and explode. Walker suggests that the residents of the valley have a latent power to take action, which will be destructive and uncontrollable.

“Delta” implies that the South is going to burst in the third section of the poem as if in protest: “Now burst dams of years,” “and flood overwhelms us,” “Here there is a thundering sound in our ears” and “The cannons boom in our brains” (18). The bursting dams denote a burst of accumulated frustration and floods suggest a cleansing of all these frustrations. These extended images of revolt express something exceptional in the valley. The narrator confirms: “nothing ever moved our valley” (18). This exceptional revolt is like a mutual decision between the valley and its residents. Revolt is both natural and social. This double meaning suggests that African Americans should seize the opportunity whenever available to them. Marxism encourages them to revolt and they have to respond. Furthermore, it is a

fruitful revolt that can bring about “a dawning understanding,” “a crystalline hope,” and “a new way to be worn and a path to be broken / from the past” (18).

Walker concludes the poem with a gendered image of the whole race. The speaker says that African Americans in their triumph and pride are like “the sensitive Spring / walking valleys like a slim young girl / full breasted and precious limbed / and carrying on our lips the kiss of the world” (19-20). They achieve their goal and the whole world approves their heroic success. This simile marks a reversal of conditions through the African American woman’s figure. The earlier images of “sorrowing,” “ravished,” “starving,” and “raped” black women, are transformed into an image of youthful, beautiful, and confident woman: “young girl,” “full breasted and precious limbed,” and carrying “the kiss of the world.” This image suggests the valley’s restoration of its vitality and abundance. It also expresses victory and pride. The internal rhyme between “breasted” and “limbed” and “lips” and “kiss” emphasizes the richness and the joyfulness of the image. Walker’s use of a gendered image to express both defeat and victory of African Americans signifies awareness on her part that women’s conditions are the most important reflection of any society’s social conditions. Walker implies that gender should be considered as an important element in “the matrix of oppression” rather than being obscured for improper reasons, on which Patricia Hill Collins comments that “Existing community structures provide a primary line of resistance against racial and class oppression. But because gender cross-cuts these structures, it finds fewer comparable bases to foster resistance” (*Black* 226). This woman-centred image denotes that Walker’s feminist consciousness started developing during this early stage of her career as a writer.

Noticeably, Walker uses strong words to express her call for revolt against capitalism and exploitation, which reflects the radical perspective of the time. She calls for the distribution of wealth to common people: “We with our blood have watered these fields / and they belong to us” (19). Walker confirms that they are entitled to own the valley as their right in the South is unlimited: “Only the naked arm of time / can measure the ground we know / and thresh the air we breathe” (20). This seems to be a challenge to capitalism by emphasizing African Americans’ possession of their means of production. The personification of time as a person who has an arm to “measure” and “thresh” emphasizes the infinity of African Americans’ possession of the South.

The poem concludes with an interesting image, which reads: “Neither earth nor star nor water’s host / can sever us from our life to be / for we are beyond your reach O mighty winnowing flail! / Infinite and free” (20)! Walker likens white Americans’ attempts to get African Americans out of the valley to the “winnowing flail” which tries to winnow them as if human waste out of the demography of the area. However, African Americans will survive the flail and continue to live in the valley infinitely free. This agricultural image confirms that African Americans are an agrarian community and undermines the idea that they can inhabit the North.

Another poem in the volume, “Dark Blood” expands the meaning of home to the broader realms of ancestral lands: “There were bizarre beginnings in old lands for the making of me” (8). Walker is aware of the multiplicity of African Americans’ origins: Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. As usual, Walker uses personal pronouns collectively. “Me” is both a personal and a collective pronoun in the poem. The poem’s speaker’s return to ancestral lands is a psychological journey in ancient times, distant places, and inner self towards a sense of reconciliation and

wholeness. Eventually, he/she returns to America after achieving the goal of his/her journey: “to reconcile the pride and pain in me” (8). Through this look backward in search for his/her racial origins, the speaker suggests an outreach to other oppressed races worldwide. Walker’s poem creates unification with coloured people around the world. It even expresses readiness to share common grounds with white people in Europe like those in the Balkans. This poem shows a strong influence of Marxist calls for international solidarity among oppressed groups worldwide on Walker during that time. Her poem creates a universal community and establishes connections with other people through an exploration of her ancestral lands

In this move from his/her physical residence in America and his/her psychological roaming in his/her ancestral lands, Walker’s poetic persona makes a comparison between the two. For example, “the old lands” are spacious, warm, and fruitful as they have “sugar sands and islands of fern and / pearl, palm jungles and stretches of never-ending sea” (8). These lands are enjoyable to be in and nurturing to communicate with: “They nurtured my coming with wanderlust. I / sucked fevers of adventure through my veins with my / mother’s milk” (8). However, the poem’s persona describes his/her return to America as a return to “the littered streets and / the one-room shacks of my poverty” (8). Thus, the old world is like an Eden on earth and the new world is one of poverty and confinement. The old world provides pride while the new world provides pain. This is another dimension of Walker’s juxtaposition of the North and South dichotomy in “Sorrow Home.” The psychological divide of African Americans is not only related to their sense of division between two places but also linked to their split between the glorious past in tropical lands and their oppression in modern times. Even at the end of the journey, the warmth he/she takes from the ancestral lands heals the contradiction between the

two feelings: “the blazing suns / of other lands may struggle then to reconcile the pride and pain in me” (8). The “blazing sun” is a symbol of reconciliation and completion. However, the word “may struggle” signifies that this reconciliation is both unguaranteed and difficult.

Through this comparison between the old world and the new world, the past and the present, and America and other lands, the poem condemns America’s social, economic, and political system of capitalism that brought “poverty:” the confinement of “one-room shack” living, and the “pain” in the speaker’s heart. However, the conclusion of the poem confirms the reconciliation of the speaker’s self-split between pride and pain through establishing connections with these other lands. A universal bond between people of the world towards better conditions is the solution provided in this poem. This is directly related to the influence of Communism’s call for solidarity between all the oppressed people of the world.

This Marxist influence is more evident in the way Walker approaches religion in other poems of the volume. For example, “We Have Been Believers” explores the history of African Americans’ relation with deities from the ancient charmers in Africa to Christianity. The first stanza is about primitive forms of worship in Africa: “believing in the secrets of the seeress and the / magic of the charmers and the devil’s evil / ones” (9). The second stanza is about their conversion to the religion of their masters in America: “we have been believers / believing in the mercy of our masters and the beauty of / our brothers” (9). The third stanza shows African Americans’ deep faith in tough times: “Neither the slaves’ whip nor the lynchers’ rope nor the / bayonet could kill our black belief.” They endure all troubles patiently to be rewarded with “the new Jerusalem” (9). Nancy Berke views the poem as an exposure of “the contradiction inherent in the relationship of faith and labor” as

“Black labor has certainly a tradition of building, but not a Jerusalem of its own” (“Anything” 138). This is what the poem presents as a cause of revolt and change of this tradition. African Americans should revolt against their own submission as much as against their oppressors.

The fourth and the fifth stanzas mark a shift in that submissive attitude towards religion. In the fourth stanza, the gods are not “the humble and the faithful and the pure” (9). The stanza expresses impatience over “feeding greedy grinning gods, like a / Moloch demanding our sons and our daughters, our / strength and our wills and our spirits of pain” (9). The gods are ruthless like Moloch, the god who demands them to sacrifice their children. This connects Christianity to white exploitation and African Americans’ belief in it to their oppression.

The poem blames African Americans for their blind faith, which contributes in the exploitation of their physical power in building a nation for others to enjoy: “We have been believers yielding substance for the world. / With our hands have we fed a people and out of our / strength have they wrung the necessities of a nation” (9). The use of the word “yield” has a double meaning here: African Americans both produce products for their white masters and allow themselves to be overcome by them. The word suggests that by sustaining white people and letting them profit from their work, African Americans contribute to their oppression. That is why they have to “strike” in Marxist terms. The poem views religion as an element of their exploitation. Its palliative effect urges people to endure for a reward in the hereafter instead of protest.

The last three stanzas in the poem represent change of attitude towards the gods. African Americans decide to wake up and do for themselves what they have done for white people: “Now we stand ready for the touch of one fiery iron, for the /

cleansing breath of many molten truths, that the eyes / of the blind may see and the ears of the deaf may hear” (9-10). This rhetorical question “where are our gods that leave us asleep?” is assertive rather than interrogative. This question confirms that the speaker in the poem does not expect any help from the gods, it calls for revolt. Accordingly, religion loses its ability as a palliative that their “hearts are too full to pray” (10). This suggests impatience and proximity of revolt.

The last stanza in the poem emphasizes that faith will be used to resist and get their share of America:

We have been believers believing in our burdens and our
demigods too long. Now the needy no longer weep and
pray; the long suffering arise, and our fists bleed
against the bars with a strange insistency.

Walker calls for action involving rejection of religion towards better life: “the needy no longer weep and pray” (10). Eugenia Collier argues that Walker demands revolution as an antithesis of religion (Collier 106). That seems true as the poem suggests impatience with communal spiritual quest for complacency. Instead of weeping; African Americans “bleed against the bars” of oppression. That conclusion reflects Walker’s belief in organizational and violent struggle for freedom at that time. Compared to the first stanza of the poem, this one signifies how radical Walker is in this poem. Walker’s voice of protest is determined to initiate change with blood. She is against viewing any meaning in people’s suffering. The poem is typical of the Marxist perception of religion. The poem suggests that if people are not able to reconcile religion and social protest, it is better for them to do without religion.

The same attitude towards religion is echoed in “Since 1619.” In this poem, Walker refers to the first slave ship landing on the American East Coast. It conveys

impatience and meaninglessness of prayer without work and asks: “how many years since 1619 have I been singing Spirituals? / How long have I been praising God and shouting hallelujahs” (22)? Because prayer does not bring relief, it just nurtures people’s endurance and the poem’s persona has lost patience with that: “How long have I been living in hell for heaven” (22)? So Walker’s persona considers this suffering for a postponed reward futile, prayers only tames their anger, which is helpful to masters not slaves. The four consecutive “how long” questions denote impatience with the long suffering and “singing Spirituals.”

The impact of Marxism is evident in the way Walker’s poetic persona urges African Americans to “die in a honest fight” instead of dying from suffering and oppression: “now to do or die” (22). His/Her wish is to see his/her people “conscious of the struggle” and desperately asks: “when will these scales fall away from my eyes” (22)? Like all her previously discussed poems, the first person pronouns “I” and “my” are used collectively to stand for the whole race. The repeated questions starting with “when will I” suggest that her people’s wakefulness and protest is delayed for too long.

Walker highlights the necessity of immediate protest as things may get worse: “what will I say when days of wrath descend: / When the money-gods take my life away” (22). Here, the poem confirms that contrary to people’s expectations, the result of worship without action against oppression is not a reward from God but a descent of His wrath. Exploitation will increase and capitalists, who are “money-gods,” will take not only their effort, strength, and production but also their entire life. That is why African Americans should understand “the cheated and the cheaters,” the way they were manipulated through religion (22). Like all the previous poems, this one concludes with a call for violent protest: “When will I burst from my

kennel an angry mongrel, / Lean and hungry and tired of my dry bones and years” (22)? The internal rhyme between “kennel” and “mongrel” emphasizes the reversal of docility to rebellion. The poet wants the race that is considered by capitalists a docile dog sleeping in a “kennel” to rebel and be “an angry mongrel” at all the years of deprivation. The poem expresses raw rage and impatience with people’s immobility. It also expresses disgust with the meanness of the capitalist system because of its “paltry pittance and cold concessions to” the speaker’s “pride” (22). Accordingly, palliative spirituals in the first stanza are transformed into a strong belief in immediate action.

The only poem in that section that is entirely devoted to women is “Lineage,” yet it comes in the same vein of Socialism and working class consciousness like the previously discussed poems. All the other poems of the volume celebrate the physical power of African American “men” to represent the whole race. However, “Lineage” represents the black female work experience as distinct from men’s. In this poem Walker captures the depth of African American women’s patience at hard work. She does not portray the way they look as much as she expresses the way they go through the load of their daily work. This poem seems to be an anticipation of Angela Davis’s saying that “the starting point for any exploration of Black women’s lives under slavery would be an appraisal of their role as workers” (5). The poem bears no bitter feelings at all, only admiration and pride run through its short and concise, but meaningfully loaded, twelve lines.

The poet uses the first singular pronoun throughout the poem to emphasize a sense of belonging and indebtedness to these working class women. She owes much to their long restless toil. She celebrates their endurance and patience. Walker glorifies women’s labour and stresses its value to the blessings enjoyed by modern

age's black generations. Their labour contributed to the fulfilment of what they would not enjoy in their lifetime, freedom. The speaker in the poem is sure that her grandmothers were much stronger than her. She recalls their daily routine of ceaseless work to prove their undoubted strength. They worked both inside and outside the home: cared about their children's food and cleanness "smelling of soap and onions," helped their husbands in "sowing seeds," and used "wet clay" for building and making pots but, they never complained or lost hope and kept "singing" (21). Happily or sadly, they kept singing, which helped them endure tough work. It gave them patience and wisdom. The poem can be taken as a song. Its internal rhyme, anaphora, and apostrophe create a rhythmic pattern that qualifies it to be so.

In spite of their tough life, those women used to have "clean words to say." They managed to create and maintain their moral strength and ability to survive the troubles of daily life. Nancy Berke argues that "clean words" reverses the idea of physical labour as dirty as it was published when Communism glorified the working class and valued their manual labour (*Women* 127). Berke's view is true because on one level, those grandmothers worked to make the life of their masters physically clean. On another level, they did not feel any bitterness towards those masters, keeping their hearts clean, which signifies integrity. Additionally, the poetic persona looks back at them with admiration as a model of survival and endurance. She wonders, "Why am I not as they" (21)? The speaker does not expect an answer for this rhetorical question. Through this question she makes a comparison between herself and her grandmothers wondering why, in spite of her various opportunities that her female ancestors were denied access to, she is not as strong or resilient as they were. Nancy Berke considers this concluding question a reflection of Walker's caution "of feeding the stereotyped representation of the black female labourer's

super-strength” (*Women* 126). That seems true as this rhetorical question conveys a sense of weakness and lack of endurance of the poetic persona and younger generations of women.

However, on another level, this comparison between younger generations and their grandmothers is an indispensable part of her class consciousness. During this time Walker discovered that “people who worked with their brains were also workers” (*How* 7). She started to view herself in the context of a working class that extends back to her ancestors. This working class consciousness is inclusive of all types of workers from farmers and servants to thinkers and writers. Though the poem does not ascribe any sense of protest to those women in the poem, it shows Walker’s early manifestations of her feminist consciousness. The poem marks her awareness of African American women’s work experience as distinct from black men’s. Yet, this feminist consciousness is still deficient. The poem represents black women’s strength and endurance as a means of “coping with oppression,” which is different as bell hooks says, from “overcoming oppression” (*Ain’t I* 6). While the previous poems that employ the word “men” to mean both men and women end with protest and in a revolutionary manner, this poem does not bear any suggestion of change. When she wrote the poem, Walker was aware of the fact that the time was not opportune yet for women to revolt for their rights. The ways African American folk culture enhances this complacency in women is explored by Walker in the second section of the volume.

The middle section of *For My People* employs the rich oral tradition of the South. It rearticulates African American folklore and shows it to be male-centred. James Edward Smethurst explains that “the race is rhetorically rendered male, maleness being associated with action, resistance, and racial self-worth” (*New* 52).

That is why nationalist writers tried to “record the folk as univocally male” and when “the folk is somehow feminine, this femininity is associated with passivity, accommodation, and racial-self hatred” (Smethurst, *New* 52). In this section, Walker shows how racial stereotypes debase black women and erode their self-esteem and agency rather than criticize women for their passivity. This shows Walker’s sympathy with women rather than blaming them. Walker understood that African American folk culture glorified black men at the expense of black women as a compensation for their injured dignity under racial oppression. This is what bell hooks calls “Assumptions that racism is more oppressive to black men than black women” (*Yearning* 75). The poems inspire mingled feelings of fear, pain, sympathy, and pride. The stories in the poems are based on defeat, survival, and triumph. They are all written in the folk ballad form. In the context of the 1930s and 1940s, these poems serve some social and political purposes. They are about ordinary figures from the masses. They warn of the latent danger of long oppression. The poems seem also to attack policemen as a tool of enhancing a corrupt social and political system. They illuminate how African American folk culture celebrates masculinity and debases women.

“Bad-Man Stagolee” and “Kissie Lee” show how powerlessness and oppression can lead to violence. They warn that any person who is unjustly treated for long can never endure forever. The two poems warn that African Americans, as an oppressed race, will not be patient for long. Their accumulated anger and frustration will come to a point of explosion. A violent response will be unavoidable and uncalculated. A good person can be bad when he/she runs out of patience; he/she can even kill. In the first poem Stagolee kills a policeman as a symbol of unjust authority and capitalism. Before he kills that policeman, he has been “an all-right

lad” (28). So, it seems that the policeman has wronged him in a way that has made him lose his patience and reason. This change denotes Walker’s desire to challenge corrupt authorities, which protect capitalism in America. The poem suggests an act of revenge for the police’s brutality:

The Stagolee was an all-right lad
Till he killed a cop and turned out bad,
Through some do say to this very day
He killed more’n one ‘fore he killed that ‘fay. (28)

The poem may be inspired by some incidents with the police. Nancy Berke argues that Walker’s re-articulation of the story bears political undertones and a challenge to the hegemony: “Stagolee does not just kill a fellow hood, a compatriot gambler, as he does in other versions of the tale: he kills a cop (He messes with authority; he messes with white America, and he gets away with it)” (*Women* 147). That is accurate as the poem expands this challenge and confirms that Stagolee has killed “A big policeman.” Moreover, he has escaped punishment: “Was he never got caught by no mob / And he missed the lynching meant for hide” (28). Furthermore, nobody knows how he died and his ghost continues to roam the area as an immortal reminder of his deed: “Bad-Man Stagolee ain’t no more / But his ghost still walks up and down the shore / Of Old Man River round New Orleans” (28). Stagolee becomes a “ghost” and society is “haunted” by what he represents: the violent result of oppression. The poem shows how accumulated frustration can lead “an all-right lad” to be a tough killer like Stagolee.

“Kissie Lee” is Stagolee’s female counterpart, a good girl turns bad. The poem opens with a description of how bad she is: “Toughest gal I ever did see” (31). Walker warns that she has become that rough because “When Kissie Lee was young

and good / Didn't nobody treat her like they should." Her grandmother who is known for being "the town's sin and shame" gives Kissie Lee the advice that she should avenge on whoever wrongs her, which prompts her change from victim to agent: "Ah got me a razor to talk for me / An' aftah that they let me be" /... / And after that she didn't speak twice," and "she learned to stab and run" (31). Thus, Walker finds an excuse for the poem's protagonist to be rough against her own people, which is socially condemned in the poem. The climax of the tale is Kissie Lee's revenge on a man who had "done her dirt long time ago / when she was good and feeling low" (32). This poem conveys the message that powerlessness should not be exploited for long even in women; otherwise, the consequences are unpredictable. The poem marks the triumph of a socially oppressed female figure that learns from bitter experiences that one must not be docile and subdued. Though Kissie Lee's violence is effective and helps her avenge on the man who has wronged her. This can be taken as an early anticipation of black feminism's later attack on all forms discrimination against black women. However, the social limitations of the time make Kissie Lee's revenge socially condemned as she, is punished soon.

Though both Stagolee and Kissie Lee commit the same crime of killing, the first escapes punishment and his ghost immortalizes his victory but the latter does not: Kissie Lee "died with her boots on switching blades / On Talladega Mountain in the likker raids" (32). Stagolee's deed seems to be socially approved because he kills a white man; however, Kissie Lee's seems to be socially denounced because she kills a black man. Nancy Berke confirms that "mainstream popular culture, while it is able not only to tolerate but idolize a bad man like Stagolee is apparently not ready to meet his female counterpart" (*Women* 148). When Kissie Lee loses her role as a

victim, she loses social sympathy. This is another way of subordinating women even in folklore.

Another victory is marked for men in “Poppa Chicken” though he is a bad person: he is showy, arrogant, and womanizer. Poppa’s dark skin is a source of sexual attraction and physical strength. This biased attitude is stressed by Tomeiko R. Ashford when he states that Poppa “is praised for his lewd actions and esteemed for his sexual potency, both of which are augmented because of the mesmerizing and empowering effects of Poppa’s dark skin” (152). All women are infatuated with him, yet, Walker makes it clear that these women are naive. They blindly follow him and nurture his ego: “All the gals for miles around / walked to Poppa’s time,” and they “Toe his special line” (29). Walker denounces this self-debasement and wonders how he “Treat’ em rough and make’ em say / Poppa Chicken’s fine” (29)! It is the common attitude of African American folk tales, which highly appreciate male dominance and sexual attraction. Men are depicted in folktales as powerful, invulnerable, and undefeatable. The story is told in the way the collective racial consciousness wants it as Julius Lester states: “each person who tells a story moulds the story to his tongue and to his mouth, and each listener moulds the story to his ear” (viii). Walker questions these stereotypes by putting poems glorifying men and others debasing women together in one section of the volume. Doing so, Walker shows how folk culture is based on sexism as bell hooks says: “Black women had been asked to fade into the background – to allow the spotlight to shine solely on black men” (*Ain’t I* 6). Walker’s folk poems highlight this attitude.

Poppa easily triumphs over any power in the poem. He defies all counter attacks and is only defeated by another male figure of the same potential. His fall results from his obsession with a woman called Rose. Her lover, Joe, tries to kill

Poppa saying “Poppa’s got to go,” but he does not die (30). Poppa is neither killed nor despised. He continues to be a source of attraction and admiration. His violence is acceptable and his punishment by jail does not “Hurt him nary speck” (30). Folktales seem to be tolerant towards men’s violence; however, they are very judgemental towards women. Justifiably like Bad-Man Stagolee, Poppa challenges white policemen: “Poppa cussed the coppers out; / Talked like he was God” (30). However, this attitude towards the police confirms its corruption and involvement with criminals like Poppa.

Another folk tale that celebrates masculinity is “Gus the Lineman.” Tomeiko Ashford says, “Walker leaves us with the portrait of an ultra-masculine hero whose reputation endures” (153). Like Poppa Chicken, he is not easily daunted by adverse powers. However, to Gus fear, fire, and even death seem conquerable: “He had nine lives / and lived them all” (39). He handled live wires and survived many fatal accidents. Eventually, he simply got drunk and fell into “A little crick / And went out dead / Just like a brick” (40-41). Gus who appears unconquerable is vulnerable after all. The poem suggests that the oppressors, whoever they are, can be easily defeated, which implies a call for rebellion.

Being aware of her community’s culture and perspectives, Walker is aware of the way black men copy their oppressor’s attitudes. In “Long John Nelson and Sweetie Pie,” Walker gives a moral lesson that warns of the consequences. She criticizes the way African American men are dazzled with white women. The poem questions African American women’s self-victimization to win their men’s love. Sweetie Pie is an industrious, caring, and unfaithful person. Long John Nelson is lazy, dependent, and faithful; yet, Sweetie continues to love him and care about him. He is violent with her, however, she is to blame for his attitude because she hurt him

when she has objected to his laziness: “Then she would fuss and pick a fight / Till he beat her and gave her hell” (42). This poem exemplifies bell hooks’s reference to the fact that “the black woman was victimized by sexist and racist oppression was seen as insignificant, for woman’s suffering however great could not take precedence over male pain” (*Ain’t I 6*). The poem shows how black folk culture blames the victim if she is a woman. Audre Lorde considers this attitude towards the victim as part of the American way of thinking. Lorde states: “One tool of the Great-American-Double-Thinking is to blame the victim for victimization ... Black women are said to invite rape and murder and abuse by not being submissive enough, or being too seductive, or too ...” (61). That explains the way Sweetie Pie tries to relinquish her own pride and regrets her expression of anger. After she shouts at Long John Nelson to release her frustrations, she is able to tolerate him and “would love him half the night / And when he’d leave she’d beg him back” (42). When a blond girl comes to town and he wants to leave, Sweetie Pie gives up her pride and tries to win him back, regardless of her personal self-esteem. He responds to her pleas unmercifully and coldly. Sweetie with a broken heart sings a Bessie Smith style blues song:

“Long John, Baby, if you’ll come back
I won’t never call you black;
I’ll love you long and love you true
And I don’t care what else you do.” (43)

All this self-debasement is for winning a lover back, though he left her because of a white woman. Dark skin is despised and white skin is celebrated in this folk poem. Sweetie Pie’s low self-esteem is a result of white dominance and black people’s assimilation of it. According to bell hooks, “Assimilation is the strategy that has provided social legitimation for this shift in alliance. It is a strategy deeply rooted in

the ideology of white supremacy and its advocates urge black people to negate blackness” (*Talking* 113). Sweetie pie is an example of hook’s analysis, she feels unworthy and ugly because her lover assimilates the white values of supremacy and allies with a white woman. Walker depicts this racist and sexist pattern in folk culture. This poem shows an example of how race and gender intersect in black women’s lives. In this poem, Walker shows that she is an African American woman writer who is engaged with various manifestations of oppression beyond Marxist emphasis on class struggle.

The last section of the volume shows the influence of universal proletarian thought on Walker during that time. The poems shed light on a raceless working class consciousness. This racially blind approach suggests that the problems discussed in this section are not confined to one race; they threaten all humanity. The croppers and the miners in “Childhood,” the women in “Whores,” the farmer and his son in “Iowa Farmer,” and the poor city dwellers in “Memory” are not racially identified. This universal concern about the working class is complemented with a universal view of a common humanity in the last two poems of the volume: “Our Need” and “The Struggle Staggers Us.” Walker’s use of the sonnet form noticeably contradicts the subject of these poems. R. Baxter Miller considers the sonnets section of the volume less figurative and boring (“The Etched” 87). Yet, this judgement neglects the fact that these sonnets record real memories from Walker’s life, which does not permit much scope for figurative language. Furthermore, Walker’s use of the sonnet form to express such grim memories about people’s suffering is understood in the light of her challenge to the superiority of white literary tradition. Moreover, this use of the elite’s poetic form to express ordinary people’s pains undermines any cultural class barriers implied in it.

In "Childhood," Walker recalls her childhood memories of "red miners / dressed raggedly and wearing carbide lamps." They work ceaselessly as the speaker meets them on the roads "Night after night" and without any hope for the improvement of their work conditions. The monotony of their movements, words, and activities denotes a tedious repetition without any change: "I caught their glance; / the swing of dinner buckets in their hands, / and grumbling undermining all their words" (46). The word "grumbling" shows that those miners are not satisfied; however, their protest is unarticulated. It is a non-verbal protest, "grumbling undermining all their words." The poem alludes to a latent revolution and a possible resolution in Communism that they are "dyed in red dust from Ishkooda mines" (46).

The second section of the poem is about the croppers in "low cotton county," who are also poor living in "rotting shacks / with famine, terror, flood, and plague near by" (46). The croppers not only suffer from poverty but also from the social complexities of the South "where sentiment and hatred still held sway" (46). Both the miners and the cotton croppers work hard and produce precious commodities: coal and cotton. However, both suffer from poverty: the miners are "dressed raggedly" and the croppers live in "rotting shacks" in hunger, terror, and disease. The poem suggests that workers are exploited under capitalism both in farming and in industry. Race does not seem to be the root cause of exploitation, but capitalism.

Walker addresses another form of economic exploitation in "Whores." The poem shows women's helplessness in Chicago's labour market. She wrote this poem after real contact with some prostitutes in Chicago. She was sent by the WPA to Division Street, the street of prostitution in Chicago, to interview some prostitutes to assess the influence a woman of Walker's background can have on these women. Walker talked about this experience to Nikki Giovanni and described it as "a time of

curiosity, especially for someone having come out of the South and a more provincial environment, to see this in Chicago. That is when I learned that prostitution and gambling were vices tied up with city politics” (*A Poetic* 90). Here, Walker’s words allude to the corruption of the police and local authorities in Chicago. The mafia and other drug dealers and gangsters paid bribes to be protected by the city authorities. Walker learned a lot from this experience about the social imbalance in American society and its patriarchal system.

In the poem, Walker sees these whores from the outside as a “fascinating sight,” exactly as their customers view them. Nancy Berke argues that this reflects how “the poem maintains a sharp distance from its subject, connected ... to Walker’s Southern, middle-class, educated perception of the northern urban prostitute” (*Women* 153). That does not seem true as the poem suggests that Walker understands these women’s circumstances and sympathizes with them. Walker notes their “sullen eyes” and “smirk.” She seems aware of the very fact that these prostitutes belong to the working class that she sympathizes with: “Old women working by an age old plan / to make their bread in ways as best they can” (47). Like “Lineage,” the poem does not conclude with revolution and hope in social change. That suggests that for women, there is still a long way to have their pains fully articulated and socially understood. Walker is aware of the social pressures on black women. The poem anticipates a pathetic end for them suggesting punishment for them for their submission for capitalist authorities. The phrase “easy ways” signifies submission to exploitation rather than resistance. It should not be interpreted literally to mean that prostitution is an easy profession as other words in the poem suggest the opposite like “hobble,” “beckon tirelessly,” and “dread.”

Perhaps one day they’ll all die in the streets

or be surprised by bombs in each wide bed;
learning too late in unaccustomed dread
that easy ways, like whores on special beats,
no longer have the gift to harbor pride
or bring men peace, or leave them satisfied. (47)

Walker rejects prostitution as a source of income because it does not “harbor pride.” “Whores on special beats” suggests Walker’s awareness of the involvement of Chicago police in the protection of prostitution activities. Walker told Nikki Giovanni in their conversation book that it was not possible for “a gangster, a criminal, or any organized syndicate” to “carry on any illegal activities...without the protection of the police and the involvement of the city, state or federal government” (*A Poetic* 90). This is an example of how gender and class oppression intersect in women’s lives. The word “beats” also suggests women’s helplessness in the labour market. As a working class woman, the prostitute “does not control her own means of employment,” her body (Berke, *Women* 155). These women are socially and economically exploited by men.

“Iowa Farmer” is about Walker’s memory of talking to a farmer from Iowa, who is likely to be white. Walker is concerned here with his social and economic stature and contrasts his living conditions to that of the poor and the needy and the exploited workers in other poems. He is prosperous and proud of his property: “We looked out far over acres of wheat. / He spoke with pride and yet not boastfully” (48). The Iowa farmer “had no need to fumble for his words;” he is self-confident because “He knew his land and there was love for home / within the soft serene eyes of his son” (48). Furthermore, his son is equally confident and proud: “the soft serene eyes of his son” (48). Their economic security provides them with satisfaction.

The Iowa Farmer is content with his social status because he is economically content. He has secured his family from hunger and hatred: “there was no hunger deep within the heart / nor burning riveted within the bone” (48). He and his family “ate satisfying bread.” Walker expands the comparison to the Middle West “where wheat was plentiful; / where grain grew golden under sunny skies / and cattle fattened through the summer heat” (48). The comparison does not seem to target similarity between the Iowa farmer’s land and the richness and resourcefulness of the Middle West lands. Using the word “yet” in “Yet in the Middle West where wheat was plentiful” suggests that Walker remembers the opposite living conditions of the poor farmers and workers who tend lands and cattle in the Middle West (48). They are not as comfortable as the Iowa farmer, though they live in the middle of wealthier farms. Walker implies that the rich Iowa farmer is not a common example in America. The poor and the needy are remembered as “more familiar sights” (48). Walker describes the house of the farmer as “ugly;” this might be because he is isolated in his land and home, socially unconcerned with the exploited and the distressed in the broader society.

“Memory” is a gloomy poem. It is about the pathetic life of city dwellers during the Depression years. It conveys people’s sense of unrest, distress, and poverty. The city itself does not welcome anybody; it expels people and gives a sense of alienation: “I can remember wind-swept streets of cities / on cold and blustery nights, on rainy days” (49). The city is scary and full of hate: “hearing ghostly marching on pavement stones / and closing fast around their squares of hate” (49). Unlike the Southern landscape that soothes people’s pain in “Southern Song,” the Northern city heightens it. In the city, there are no natural elements: pavements instead of the Delta sun-warmed soil. It is cold and void of the regenerative power of

the sun and thus it becomes a place of distress and death. The city is even void of human warmth. Urban people are always alone: “I can remember seeing them alone, / at work, and in their tenements at home” (49). Walker deconstructs the North as a place of better living opportunities.

Walker urges those frustrated people to articulate their protest and blames them for their complacency. In spite of all their suffering, they do not voice their protest: “I can remember all they said: / their muttering protests, their whispered oaths, / and all that spells their living distress” (49). People are full of protest, which needs to be given form and organization. The poem implies the necessity of all those lonely troubled people to reach out to each other and be involved in organizational protest. The poem criticizes that inactive mode. Walker remembers this prevailing group dissatisfaction and silent protest and takes the role of an organizer of the masses of the poor and the needy from all races.

Walker’s role as an organizer of the masses is more articulated in “Our Need.” The first section of the poem breaks with old ways of the past: “What price upon their wisdom can we stake / if ultimately we would live, not break / beneath a swift and dangerous undertow” (50)? Walker denounces the submissive ways of her ancestors and questions the validity of their advice: “how can they know / or tell us now the way we should go?” Noticeably in this poem, Walker is not a distant observer as in the previous four sonnets. Walker gives her advice as one of the people; she is one of the masses to initiate change.

In the second section of “Our Need,” Walker presents a list of steps to be taken towards a remedy of social ills. She undertakes her social role as a leader of the masses and gives a prescription to relieve people’s pains and sorrows:

We need a wholeness born of inner strength:

sharp thinking running through our stream of days,
having certain courage flame with honest rays
like slaps of life along the body's length.
We need the friendly feel of human forms
and earth beneath our feet against the storms. (50)

Walker's prescription includes: "inner strength," "sharp thinking," and "courage flame." James Edward Smethurst comments that "what is strangest about the poem is this call to arms that refuses to name who is calling, who is being called, and for what cause the call is being made" (*New* 187). That is accurate as Walker's poem calls for a union of humanity for nothing but a "friendly feel." Noticeably here, earth is a symbol of stability and confidence. Like "Delta," the storm is a symbol of counter circumstances. Here, earth is friendly and protects a unity of the whole globe. Earth, which is usually taken as an archetypal symbol of women is depicted in this poem as a symbol of stability and protection against any unfavourable social conditions or "storms." It is a unifying force of all its inhabitants.

Walker continues her call for a unity of all races in "The Struggle Staggers Us." She calls for bridging the gap "from the me to you," which Eleanor Traylor calls "the abyss that the forger poet wants to bridge" (127). The poem conveys a message to generations to come worldwide that eating, drinking, sleeping are "easy hours," which echoes "easy ways" in "Whores." Walker speaks as one of the people who are staggered by the struggle "for bread, for pride, for simple dignity" (51). The word "staggers us" denotes a sudden awakening from living "easy hours." Walker describes this struggle in broader terms:

And this is more than fighting to exist;
more than revolt and war and human odds.

There is a journey from the me to you.

There is a journey from the you to me.

A union of the two strange worlds must be. (51)

Walker calls for a struggle for a noble fight, in which all humans from whatever “strange worlds” between black and white people, the rich and the poor, and might be between men and women. Walker’s unidentified “two strange worlds” implies a call for a union of all antitheses. This fight “staggers” because it comes after a long silent suffering and inaction: “Ours is a struggle from a too-warm bed; / too cluttered with a patience full of sleep” (51). Their silent suffering is not a state of patience while preparing for action; it is “full of sleep,” which suggests complacency. That makes need for struggle stronger: “Out of this blackness we must struggle forth.” Walker assures that it will be fruitful and valuable as it “marks our years; this settles, too, our plight” (51). This conclusion of the poem and the whole volume inspires hope. It anticipates a revolutionary future to come, which will be realized later in the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Liberation Movement. It also anticipates a settlement of all human plights.

This volume shows Walker’s inability to live in social isolation. It is part of the current social and intellectual dialogue of the 1930s and 1940s. The different flaws of the social fabric of America are addressed carefully. In this volume, Walker is a typical figure of the time: a migrant northward that has experienced the burdens of the Great Depression, suffered from class struggle, and faced gender bias and racial discrimination. Furthermore, she is the socially conscious and politically aware writer suitable for the time. Walker attacks forms of social and political exploitation and highlights their interconnectedness. Eleanor Traylor considers this volume “a

distinct community of memory,” which is obviously true (124). That is why *For My People* remains most understandable in the context of the 1930s and the 1940s.

Communist or not, Walker adopts a socialist perspective in these poems in terms of Richard Wright’s definition of perspective as “that part of a poem, novel, or play which a writer never puts directly upon paper. It is that fixed point in intellectual space where a writer stands to view the struggles, hopes, and sufferings of his people” (“Blueprint” 50). Noticeably, the poems are about the masses of the people: the slave, the domestic servant, the farmer, the miner, the worker, and the whore. They are part of a group consciousness and a collective experience that is in the background of their stories.

The volume marks Walker’s first encounter with a social context broader than her Southern upbringing. Nationalism is balanced by universalism, racial perspectives by class consciousness, and Marxism by religion. In this volume, Walker reaches out for the oppressed and the exploited worldwide. She reassesses African Americas’ attitude towards religion. Walker pinpoints the necessity to fight back and initiate social change. Reflecting the radical mode of the time, most of the volume’s poems conclude with a call for revolution and change of condition.

The voice of the middle class poet is intersected by the voice of the working class. Language is accessible to the uneducated common people. Walker depends on literal accumulation of details in a way that makes each poem like a painted picture. The visual aspect of the volume is evidently seen in most of the poems. The poems can be transformed into pictures. That helped Roland Freeman publish his photo essay to complement the poems in the volume. Additionally, the structure reflects a classless writing style as well. The folk ballad is used to give a story-telling quality and the sonnet is used to convey ordinary people’s pains.

The current mode of the 1930s and the 1940s prioritized pursuits of racial and class equality and subordinated activities against gender discrimination. *For My People* reflects this aspect of the time. Walker uses words like “men” and “brothers” to represent both men and women. Nancy Berke explains that Walker’s identification with men, in her early works, is part of “acts of solidarity with male radicals, male workers, or other marginalized male figures” (*Women* 27). For Walker, gender issues are not a predominant concern in this volume, they are subordinated to issues of race and class struggle. This is a reflection of the social and the political mode of the volume’s publication time rather than a lack in it. The poems do not totally obscure gender, it is always there but in the background. Even when women appear independently in the volume, they are mostly subjugated and victimized: “bent to toil” in “Lineage,” “ravished” in “Delta,” unable to “harbour pride” in “Whores;” and Sweetie Pie’s lover “beat her and gave her hell” and deserts her for the “yellow gal.” Bad male folk heroes are celebrated for killing because they kill white policemen, to signify a deconstruction of racism and capitalism. However, female folk heroes like Kissie Lee die shamefully because they kill black men.

In conclusion, *For My People* mirrors the social and the historical context of the 1930s and 1940s. It shows how Walker responded to the intellectual debates of the time: supporting class struggle, calling for social protest and revolt, obscuring religion, Communism’s “colour blind” principle, subordinating gender to class consciousness, and challenging capitalism and corrupt authorities. Unmistakably, Walker fell under the influence of Marxist thought during that time. However, she challenged Marxist calls for subsuming race and gender to class struggle. She gave equal importance to race and represented the ways race and class oppressions intersected with gender oppression in African American women’s lives. This early

awareness of the inextricability of race, class, and gender oppressions is much developed in Walker's next creative work, her novel, *Jubilee*, which will be discussed in the following chapter of this thesis.

Chapter Three

Margaret Walker and the Civil Rights Movement:

The Fifties and Sixties

I wanted to tell the story that my grandmother had told me, and to set the record straight where Black people are concerned in terms of the Civil War, of Slavery, segregation and in Reconstruction. I believe that the role of the novelist can be, and largely is for me, the role of a historian. More people will read fiction than will history, and history is slanted just as fiction may seem to be. People will learn about a time and a place through a historical novel.

(Walker, *Conversations* 23)

This is Walker's reply when asked about the main objective of her novel *Jubilee* (1966), the first example of the neo-slave narrative genre. This reply sums up the interwoven private and public motivations of writing the novel. *Jubilee* documents a history which is both personal and communal. However, in approaching the history of the nineteenth century, Walker reflects on the immediate history of the twentieth century. Melissa Walker supports that perspective when she describes the novel as "a story of the 1860s for the 1960s" (63). The novel can be related to the 1950s and 1960s, the years when Walker wrote most of it.

This chapter explores the possible correlation between Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* and the context of the mid-twentieth century and explores how it can be related to the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, and the Black Arts Movement. It also investigates how Walker's engagement with the Civil Rights Movement is reflected in her work of the time, even though it is a historical novel. This chapter also examines how Walker's production of a woman-centred text that comments on both the contemporary moment and the past is a challenge to the

priority given to race at that time. This chapter shows how *Jubilee* reflects the development of Walker's feminist consciousness. Accordingly, it is necessary here to understand the conditions of African Americans and America in the 1950s and 1960s to establish the novel's correspondence with them.

Starting with the 1950s, it is important to know that this era in America witnessed numerous events that distinguished it from its predecessors. The United States had become a rich and powerful nation. However, the Cold War, the war in Vietnam, and the national shame of racial discrimination were considerable challenges that influenced people's lives. According to Richard M. Fried, the decade was "a mix of anxiety and relaxation, sloth and achievement, complacency and self-criticism" (71). Innovations in medicine, agriculture, air travel, and computer technology changed people's way of life by making it easier. The nation enjoyed several scientific achievements and military victories (Reeves 164). The government feared Soviet penetration of American society and followed a strict containment policy. This policy implied using military, economic, and diplomatic strategies to prevent the spread of Communism and enhance America's influence around the world (Reeves 144). The culture of consumption, abundance, and materialism became common nationwide. By the mid-1950s, the majority of Americans owned a television and people enjoyed entertainment at home. Thomas C. Reeves states that "many nightclubs, dance halls, and skating rinks closed" (157). The arrival of television marked the young Americans as the "TV generation." The population was shaped by mediated experiences (157).

The biggest problem of the 1950s for African Americans was the unfulfilled progress of the Civil Rights agenda. President Eisenhower was not a Civil Rights enthusiast. He was more concerned with the Cold War and anti-Communism, which

prevented any change to the status quo in American society. Any change on the level of Civil Rights might have brought about further discussions of class and distribution of wealth. Reeves explains that after the war and until the late 1960s, there was no redistribution of wealth: “between one-fifth and one-fourth of the American people could not survive on their earned income. The bottom 20 percent owned less than 1 percent of the nation’s wealth” (156).

It is worth noting here that many Americans and some historians like Thomas C. Reeves and Thomas C. Cochran consider the 1950s the best years of America because of the peace and prosperity enjoyed by millions of Americans. However, there was a lot going on during that decade as mentioned earlier. Douglas Tallack agrees on the decade’s simplicity and calmness; however, he calls that a stereotypical image of America at mid-century. He emphasizes that there was plenty going on in the sense that “many of the central ideas in twentieth century American thought were explicitly analysed: totalitarianism, individualism, conformity, political pluralism, and utopianism” (213).

In the 1950s, the wide spread of mass media and television broadcasting in America and abroad exposed the horrible daily discriminations and indignities suffered by coloured people in America. That threatened the image of America around the world as the protector of a free world. Additionally, President Eisenhower, though not very much concerned with Civil Rights issues, was “sensitive to the direction in which the country was moving and took major steps along that path” (Reeves 162). He feared any future terrible consequences of racial discrimination and initiated some federal and legal decisions towards appeasement of that national tension. The armed forces became desegregated in 1953. In 1954, federal contracts banned segregation by employers. In the same year, the government

eliminated segregation in theatres, hotels, and public transportation. The most important legal decision taken in 1954 was the ‘Brown v. Board of Education’ in which Eisenhower’s appointee, Earl Warren ruled in court that segregation in public schools was illegal (Reeves 162).

Actually, until the end of the sixties, the Cold War contributed to the progress of Civil Rights in one way or another. At least, the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union to have allies all over the world urged the two countries to try to win “the hearts and minds of the former colonial peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America” (Reeves 162). According to James Edward Smethurst’s analysis, American racism became “an enormous ideological liability for the United States and a tremendous propaganda for the Soviet Union and its allies” (*The Black* 33). The issue of separate education was widely debated at home and abroad. Separate schools supported the inherited idea of the white race’s superiority and nurtured racial inequalities. Though the early Civil Rights campaigns focused on the desegregation of schools, this was not the only aspect of segregation. Until 1954, the 1896 “separate but equal” doctrine of the “Plessy v. Ferguson” case made segregation in public accommodation a standard (Reeves 163).

Compared to the fifties, the sixties was a more militant decade on all levels. Nationally speaking, social and political activism, Civil Rights marches, protests against the war in Vietnam, college students controlling campuses, hippies, unconventional dressing, drug abuse, and rock music made the decade an antithesis of its quite calm predecessor (Reeves 181-191). Jama Lazerow explains the mode of the sixties as a rift between two generations: the one before and the one after 1960. The dramatic increase in the numbers of young people produced the rudiments of a youth culture, complete with its own jargon, clothes, and music (Reeves 186 and

192). In response, came complaints from conservatives about the danger of comic books, rock'n'roll, and juvenile delinquency, with frequent warnings about the "devil's music," "Communist plots," and "race mixing" (93). Youth Culture was already an established phenomenon of the 1950s, but it was something like "a healthy adolescent rebelliousness" according to Douglas Tallack (213). It became more intense and widespread in the 1960s.

Aside from the division between right wing and left wing activists, the Civil Rights activists themselves were sharply divided into integrationists and nationalists. Martin Luther king called for integration and non-violent resistance. On the other hand, Stokely Carmichael, the leader of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) called for using violence to fight the atrocious KKK. Additionally, Malcolm X called for fighting inequality by any necessary means (Reeves 188). The "Black Power" slogan was raised by such radical activists. It implied separatism and violent resistance. The contradiction between the widespread call for freedom and the oppression practised both nationally and internationally, the universal debate over nationalism versus imperialism, and the invigorated clash between Socialism and capitalism generated activism among youth. According to Lazerow, "the internationalization of the Civil Rights Movement illuminated the problem: if the US sought freedom abroad, why not at home" (92)? Thus, America's hypocrisy became obvious to the public, which led to an outbreak of strong protest nationwide. Minority groups in American society were no longer able to wait for their Civil Rights to be given to them by the government, so they decided to take them by themselves. The beginning of the modern Civil Rights Movement is traced to Rosa Park's refusal to give up her seat to a white passenger in a public bus in 1955 and the Montgomery bus boycott that followed in 1956 (Reeves 162). This incident proved

the strong willingness of African Americans to confront arrest and go to jail rather than endure indignity and segregation.

In February 1960, four black students at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College in Greensboro bought some items from a Woolworth's store, sat down at the lunch counter in the "white only" area, and ordered coffee. When they were refused service by a black waitress, they sat politely until the store closed and promised to return next day to continue their "sit-down protest" (Reeves 162-163). By July that year Woolworth's had racially integrated its lunch counter. The action generated what became known as the "sit-in" movement in seventy cities. Though it was not an organized movement, it inaugurated a new phase of protest according to the Ghandi style.

This non-violent resistance marked the early years of the sixties. Though a passive resistance, this kind of protest represented a breakthrough in the anti-discrimination policy that was confined to the "negative goal of preventing harm" according to Reed Ueda (271). The Civil Rights activists moved their struggle to the streets adopting non-violent change: the sit-ins, the marches, and the boycott of segregated public services. As a result, African Americans seized the media and television, which helped awake the nation's consciousness. Martin Luther King was the leader of this approach. His speech "I have a dream" in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom – in which 250,000 participated, of which 60,000 were white citizens – kindled the hope for a discrimination-free America. King's writings are a mirror of historical events of the time (Reeves 173). King did not advocate separatism as did early activists such as Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, or Du Bois in his later life. He was a devout Christian who believed that non-violence "never seeks to humiliate the opponent, only to win him" (*Black Protest* 303). King's

strategy involved a non-violent resistance of unjust laws and accepting penalties as part of protest. King was profoundly influenced by the teachings of Ghandi and Christianity and he preached the same principle of love in the face of persecution. Margaret Walker's protagonist, Vvry represents this attitude in her novel.

The social system over three hundred years created a marginalized black world within American society. Franklin and Moss support this idea: "it was the system of slavery with its basic assumption of inherent inferiority of blacks that gave rise to the deliberate separation of the races ... the policy of forcing them in ghettos in larger cities had the effect of creating new forces for perpetuation of the black world" (423). Consequently, African American people remained separated from the larger community throughout their history in America. This alienation attracted attention after WWII and became a recurrent theme in literature and a debatable public issue.

Alienation combined with a sense of frustration with both the federal government and the mainstream Civil Rights leadership led to revolt. The Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 were disappointing to people's expectations (Reeves 188). People were impatient with the slow pace of social change towards full freedom and equality. Michael G. Cooke confirms that, "the nationalism that yielded independence for one nation after another in a decade and a half from 1951 to 1966 ... both stimulated and reflected the pressure for equality and self-determination among black people in the United States" (86).

The Nation of Islam organization, led by Elijah Poole or Elijah Muhammad, rejected any connections with white America. In 1966, the organization's eloquent ex-spokesman, Malcolm X inspired and led the emerging "Black Power" movement, which marked a turning point in the struggle for equality. Malcolm X preached a

different message from King's: "If someone puts a hand on you, send him to the cemetery" (Breitman 48). He believed that integration in American society would not be a sufficient compensation for three hundred years of inequality and degradation. Black Power meant African Americans' proper representation and control of their communities, self-assertion, and black pride with overtones of separatism, and identification with a unique African American heritage. The Black Panther Party was annexed to the "Black Power" and it called for the right of African Americans to armed self-defence. They bought weapons and armed the party members to be able to defend themselves against any attacks from the KKK (Ogbar 90-91).

African American youth believed in militancy and resistance. This militant spirit facilitated the expansion of their representation on different levels in government positions, though not on equal footing with their white counterparts. They slowly became more visible in political life as voters and office-holders. However, there was a simultaneous white resistance to such gains, known as "the backlash." Some whites resented having new rivals to heighten competition over job opportunities and career developments. Thomas C. Reeves asserts that African Americans "were condemned for taking welfare and at the same time for bettering themselves" (194). Whites rejected having African Americans moving into their neighbourhoods. They harassed their new neighbours using eggs, paint, snakes, and rock throwing. Desegregated accommodation faced the harshest resistance because it implied direct personal and social relationships (194). The "backlash" was also evident in the killings of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and President John Kennedy because of his efforts to improve the conditions of African Americans.

"Black Power" inspired a powerful and important literary movement that conveyed its message to the people and publicized its goals. The Black Arts

Movement tried to write African American history from an African American point of view. It also tried to establish an African American literary theory based on African American symbolism and mythology. The Black Arts Movement invigorated the African American cultural consciousness. It rejected European or white American cultural modes. Symbolic of this attitude, “cultural nationalists urged blacks to abandon “slave names” and adopt Swahili-, Islamic-, or African-based names at the individual level and to transform their collective self-designation from “coloured” or “Negro” to “black,” “Afro-American,” or “African-American” (Trotter 595). They looked back to the glorious African past before slavery and “accented elements of continuity between enslavement, Jim Crow, and Contemporary black culture” (Trotter 595). They tried to be a united group in American society linked to all those who were of African descent all over the world. They propagandized and adopted African hair styles, dress codes, music, and cuisine. “Black Is Beautiful” became a slogan that took people gradually to their roots in Africa. Noticeably, Margaret Walker’s protagonist, Vyry is proud of her race and never tries to pass to white, though she can. Furthermore, she is mostly called by her first name; Walker never uses Vyry’s master/father name to refer to her in the text.

Several leaders of the Black Arts Movement were former soldiers in the Cold War military such as Askia Toure, Haki Madhubuti, and Amiri Baraka. They found their service in segregated armies a “profoundly alienating experience that encouraged them to find some sort of alternative “home” in the study of radical politics and art” (Themthurst 33). That is why such writers tried to make the movement more distinct from the mainstream of American culture to create a unique African American cultural experience and identity. They worked on resistance of anti-Communism, conservatism, McCarthyism, and social and cultural conformity.

They became the antithesis of the white dominated schools of New American poetry, New Criticism, and New York Intellectuals. The movement included several renowned writers in the world of African American literature such as Amiri Baraka, Maulana Karenga, Kawaiida, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Margaret Danner, and Gwendolyn Brooks. They enhanced Black Nationalism and tried to prove their ability to write and publish without any support from whites. Writers of the Black Arts Movement share some common concerns that characterize their literature: they “sought an explicit relationship with the expanding freedom struggle; a more positive identification with their blackness; a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood with Africa; and a willingness to encourage armed struggle if necessary to secure their freedom” (Trotter 597).

The incidents of the Civil Rights Movement in the fifties and the sixties were hugely influential upon the Black Arts Movement. The vigorous marches and demonstrations inspired the movement’s writers and artists and defined their themes. The “Black Power” movement was the catalyst of their nationalist writings (Trotter 597). Noticeably, the majority of the movement’s writers were poets and dramatists. Very few novels were published under the movement. This may be due to the fact that the movement was based on the struggle in the streets and public gatherings. That may explain the lack of novels and the popularity of poetry during that time. Poetry was the best medium to address people in public conventions. Lines of poetry were easy to quote and use as slogans in different situations. Being based on performance on stage that included communication with the audience, drama was also a favoured genre during that time. In the fifties and the sixties, the golden age of cinema was already over; it was replaced by the popular TV serial drama. So, people preferred going to live poetry readings and theatre performances, which involved

communication between artist and audience rather than going to cinemas. Alternatively, musicals and stage production flourished during that time. Baraka helped establish a theatre school in Harlem in 1964. African American plays were regularly performed and poetry readings were held in the streets nationwide. The movement tried to bridge any gaps between popular culture and high art. Its writers incorporated jazz and the hip hop in the sixties in their works and made themselves available everywhere among the people. (Franklin 476-478). They were not writing from ivory towers or away from the common people. They were accessible to the least educated African American person because they addressed common inherited and daily lived experiences and pains among all members of the race.

As the main concern of this chapter is Margaret Walker's novel, it is helpful to consider novels published in the 1950s and the 1960s by other African American writers, the time when Walker wrote and published her novel. Based on readability, number of editions, and critical response, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) can be taken as distinguished novels of the time. These two novels represent African Americans' quest for identity. Both novels' protagonists strive to reach a state of clear self-identification and a place in the paradigms of national American culture and private African American experience. Split self, loss of identity, lack of representation, marginalization, oppression, manipulation, and exploitation are all implied motifs in the two novels. The opposites of love and hatred, good and evil, and control and submission dominate the lives of the two protagonists.

Ellison's protagonist is not identified by name; he introduces himself to us at the beginning of the novel as "an invisible man" (15). Admitting his social invisibility initiates a journey to know the reasons of this invisibility. In all the stages

of his life, racism makes people perceive him as a stereotype rather than a unique individual character. His invisibility is representative of all his African American fellows of the time or all over history. When he describes the place where he lives and we know that it is a hole in a building mostly dwelled by white residents, we realize that his being invisible is both physical and psychological.

Though surrounded with 1369 lights, his dim hole is invisible compared to the big building where whites live spaciously. So, it is not a matter of light or darkness, but a matter of being socially visible in American society. Confined to the boundaries of his hole in the basement, he lives on the margins of the building or figuratively on the margin of American society. Moving from one community to another, he experiences different prescriptions of the way African Americans should act in American society. Each community expects him to conform to its code of conduct as one of its members. His “success” is based on his ability to subvert his real identity and keep it invisible. Sometimes, this self-denial leads him to think of himself as a phantom in the minds of people.

He has no self-esteem at all. After several years of being negatively viewed, he feels the same towards himself. All his continuous attempts to reach visibility and acknowledgement in either the white or black community end with his undisturbed invisibility in his hole. He wavers between the deathbed advice of his grandfather to always “overcome ‘em with yeses” and “undermine ‘em with grins” and the rebellious spirit of the communists or the radicals in Harlem (2). He struggles to fit in with any code of behaviour; however, he is an outcast everywhere. Finally, he rebels against all the white and black constitutions and resorts to his eternal invisibility that he knows well instead of being manipulated and then discarded. He discovers that his “invisibility” is related to his race, he is not “seen” in the sense that he is not

acknowledged as a person. “Invisible Man” searches for his real identity everywhere except inside his heart as he says: “I am looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions, which I, and only I, could answer” (15). Unlike “Invisible Man,” Vry, Walker’s protagonist knows herself, her world, and what she wants since her early years because she is racially rooted.

The novel’s protagonist assumes a link between his invisibility and others’ blindness. He is invisible because others’ prejudice makes them too blind to see a different perspective from theirs. They fail to see his real identity and his view of things. The novel conveys the idea that a clear self-identity can be complementary to the struggle of African Americans towards racial equality. Robert B. Stepto emphasizes that what is new in *Invisible Man* is “its brave assertion that there is a self and form to be discovered beyond the lockstep of linear movement within imposed definitions of reality” (168). Ellison does not dismiss group consciousness, however his novel “transcends tribal boundaries” (171). Stepto means that the novel’s assertion on individual identity within a collective racial perception is what “Invisible Man” needs to be “seen.” The novel describes the eternal state of African Americans in American society, which was first pinpointed by Du Bois in the early years of the twentieth century: “The Negro in this American world, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (5).

Similar to Ellison’s protagonist, Baldwin’s strives to feel fulfilment. John Grimes is a fourteen years-old African American boy in Harlem in the 1930s. The novel examines religion as a means of oppression in African Americans’ life through the tough religious philosophy of John’s father, Gabriel. He wants everyone in his family to conform to his narrow view of religion, otherwise, one is damned to hell.

Though the readers learn that Gabriel is not John's biological father, this fact is not revealed to John himself. This is quite important in the historical context of pre-emancipation America. The novel echoes centuries of obscured parenting among African American slaves. This also implies that African Americans' lack of self-knowledge and definite identity is true on all levels, even the biological.

Racism seems to be the real cause of the novel's characters' sense of anger, hatred, and guilt. The three adult characters are eye-witnesses of racist practices: the violent rape of a teenage girl, a castration of young soldier, lynching, burning, and police brutality against innocent people. The narrative links this background of racial oppression to Gabriel's exploitation of religion to domineer. John contemplates the nature of that religion that keeps him suffering and enduring pain. C. W. E. Bigsby views John's contemplations as a debate between "the ironic consolation of a religion which rationalizes his own debasement and a cold reality in which suffering operates in time and is generated anew by each generation" (119). Baldwin draws upon the way the white masters of slaves used religion to keep African Americans in the bondages of slavery as a condition dictated by the Bible and destined by God and at the same time to appease their rage by embracing the Christian ethos of love and tolerance. On a second level, Baldwin depicts the way Gabriel uses the same strategy towards John to control him and keep him restrained. This can be linked to Marxist view of religion as a palliative of people's protest against oppression. Adopting the white masters' policy, Gabriel who was a drunkard and a womanizer controls the whole family in the name of religion. At the same time, the church is portrayed as the place where all people find spiritual escape from the troubles of their daily life and a relief from their sins and sense of guilt. That confirms that it is not the church that makes Gabriel a hypocrite arrogant man fond of controlling others; it is racism.

Gabriel's attitude has resulted from his experience of racial oppression that makes him adopt the white masters' policies to feel superiority and control. While Gabriel copies his ex-masters' violence, Vyry tries her best to keep any form of violence away from her family. When her second husband beats her son, she is very distressful and full of fear as the narrator comments: "She was sick of killing and violence. She was sick of the hate that went with it. Was this kind of evil going to follow her all the days of her life?" (454)

John Grimes is an example of the ways this racial oppression can be reflected on younger generations of African Americans. John's major psychological crisis is his conflict with his father. He is most troubled by his father's cruelty and his own hatred towards him. While John hates his father he badly wants to feel his love. John can be taken as an embodiment of all African Americans' dual feelings of love and hate towards others. John Grimes has a sense of isolation as no one in his family is able to understand him. He is caught between the secular and the spiritual, the worldly and the divine, the spacious world of Broadway and the narrowness of Harlem, and what he wants and what others want. He suffers from a split self generated by all these dichotomies. He aspires to a reconciliation of the conflicting halves of his heart. He strives to attain a sense of wholeness and fulfillment.

Both novels depict quests for identity and self-consciousness. Both also stress the indelible influence of racism on African Americans. The correspondence between the private and the public, the personal and the racial, and the past and the present is obvious in both texts. Moreover, both are bildungsromans as the readers witness the progress of the protagonist from childhood to maturity and self-realization. A number of similarities and differences can be drawn between Walker's novel and these two texts. Like them, *Jubilee* is a bildungsroman, the narrative explores the

protagonist's journey from childhood to adulthood and examines her pursuits of self-fulfillment. Walker's novel is similar to Ellison's and Baldwin's in its negotiation of possibilities of relationships between white and black people. However, Walker elaborates on the issue of slavery, to which both Ellison and Baldwin refer briefly as a factor leading to their protagonists' immediate suffering. While Ellison and Baldwin consider the history of slavery and racial oppression as initiators of hatred and split self in new generations of African Americans, Walker presents an example of a slave woman who experiences oppression and humiliation and overcomes their psychological consequences. Whereas Ellison and Baldwin depict fragmentation, estrangement, and lack of self-confidence, Walker's protagonist is an example of resilience, independence, racial-rootedness, and sound understanding of religion. Walker's text is as significant as Ellison's and Baldwin's because it is the first one at that time to address the issue of slavery that has been obscured in the first half of the twentieth century by many African American novelists like Ellison and Baldwin. Being the first example of a neo-slave narrative genre, Walker's text is an important – even ground-breaking – novel of its time. This significance will be demonstrated through my discussion of several aspects of innovation that *Jubilee* has: addressing slavery from a contemporary point of view, focusing on the slaves themselves rather than important historical figures, presenting the events from a woman's perspective, and anticipating the emergence of several neo-slave narratives by African American women writers in the 1970s and 1980.

Like *Invisible Man* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Jubilee* can be defined as a bildungsroman in the sense that it is the story of Vyry's journey from the age of two until the age of twenty nine. It is a linear narrative of her years of childhood, adolescence, and maturity. It is full of varying experiences that lead to her coming of

age. This technique has always been applied by African American writers since the early slave narratives of the nineteenth century. The popularity of the form among African American writers is really interesting. African American writers' use of the eighteenth century European form is actually significant during the wake of nationalism in 1960s. This can be ascribed to their need to know more about themselves and the ways their long history of suffering from racism in America contributes to their immediate troubles. Martin Japtok argues that autobiography and bildungsroman flourish in unstable times because they give meaning to people's suffering. He states: "Not incidentally, the same circumstances that allow for a flourishing of autobiography and bildungsroman also provide a fertile ground for nationalist tendencies, since nationalism, too, imposes a kind of order onto chaos by appearing to provide clear boundaries" (24). That is why the genre became popular among African American writers when nationalist thought started to flourish in the 1950s.

African American writers find an opportunity in the bildungsroman to assert their uniqueness as individuals, which they need to balance their collective identity. Japtok notes that "an assertion of individuality makes sense in the face of a denial of individuality, or even of humanity, because of one's group affiliation" (24). It seems that the form provides a counter statement to the hegemonic white view of African Americans. Furthermore, it helps "share life experiences with other members of the writer's ethnic community" and "communicate authentic views of ethnic life to mainstream readers" (25). This narrative form serves to highlight characters' individuality in their response to collective experiences as a means of resisting marginalization and invisibility.

It is worth noting here that African American writers use the form differently from their white counterparts. Contrary to the European bildungsroman, African American writers have a broader view of the ethnic protagonist beyond the confines of his/her individuality. They give room for other characters in the narrative to share the events. Japtok emphasizes that “group consciousness thus seems to be one characteristic that is more pronounced in ethnic texts than in the more protagonist-dominated traditional versions that provided models for ethnic authors” (26). That makes the conflict in the ethnic bildungsroman social rather than personal which is not true in the original genre. This use of a white literary form to express African American concerns echoes the same debate over form during the Harlem Renaissance. Though this is a recurrent debate among African American writers, they have not really stopped using white forms. Their adaptation of these forms to serve racial purposes seems to be an intentional strategy to deconstruct the superiority of these forms. Walker has been one of the pioneers in this concern as explained in earlier chapters.

After long silence, Margaret Walker produces *Jubilee* to express her engagement with her people’s past and present. For twenty-four years, Walker devoted herself to being a wife, mother and a teacher in Southern universities. She lacked enough leisure or the devotion to write. However, during these years and even before, she was working on *Jubilee* whenever she found time to do so. She admitted that she was so long with writing the novel because she had a family and a teaching job (*How* 61). She had been working on the text since 1934 and doing extensive research for its material at the same time. Thus, *Jubilee* is really a life-long project for Walker. She once stated that she was writing *Jubilee* all her life as it had been a consuming ambition driving her relentlessly (54).

This ambition was kindled since her childhood by her maternal grandmother's slavery stories about incidents from her mother's life. Walker promised her grandmother that when she grew up she would write her great grandmother's story. Walker calls this oral heritage "the most valuable slave narrative of all, the living account of my great grandmother, which had been transmitted to me by her own daughter" (*How* 56). *Jubilee* is stimulated by Walker's double wish to tell the story of her own ancestors and portray the cumulative experiences of slaves in America. Doing so, Walker has exposed a historical period many post-WWII African Americans wanted to forget. Toni Morrison confirms that when she says: "the older generation of that era sometimes X'd out the Southern grandfather who had been a sharecropper and tried to forget the brutality of the African American past" (qtd. in Christian, "Somebody" 326). Margaret Walker's parents had the same attitude when they rejected her grandmother's telling these "harrowing tales" to her when she was a child (Walker, *How* 51). Walker's grandmother insisted to tell Walker these tales, which she called "the naked truth" and Walker promised to write them (*How* 51). So, *Jubilee* is a challenge to early twentieth century attempts to eliminate this past. The novel is generated by a deep private motivation and a promise between two women – Walker and her grandmother – separated by several years of age and experience. Ann Bauer Maglin appreciates this link with grandmothers through writing when she says: it is a way to "extend our matrilineage beyond our own families to our historic foremothers" (892). The vast success of the novel crowned the three decades of hard work on the novel and compensated Walker for her long absence from literary circles. She won a Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship Award for the novel, which had forty three

printings in the United States and Canada and sold over a million copies. It has been translated into seven languages.

The novel brought innovation to the traditional slave narrative, which had been a popular genre since 1866. However, after *Jubilee*, a long line of African American women writers enhanced the popularity of the genre. Since *Jubilee*, neo-slave narrative came into vogue. Joyce Pettice considers the novel “Walker’s significant legacy to black women writers who would take centre stage in literary production in 1970s” (“Margaret Walker” 501). After *Jubilee*, women became central to various slave narratives by writers like: Sherley Anne Williams, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, J. California Cooper, Gayl Jones, and Octavia E. Butler. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy states that Walker’s “*Jubilee* in 1966 defined a subject of representation that would come to predominate in the African American novel for the rest of the twentieth century. Literally dozens of novels about slaves and slavery appeared in the wake of *Jubilee*” (Rushdy, “The Neo-Slave” 87). Thus, *Jubilee* has been a real contribution to African American women’s re-visioning of the uniqueness of their experience from both black men’s and white women’s, which is the core of black feminist theory, that would flourish in later decades.

Amy Levin notes that “Black women writers turn repeatedly to writing about slavery because the topic allows them to focus on themes of power, identity, family, and authenticity” (284). That is true as these topics have timeless reflections on women’s lives (284). Being the most oppressive experience women have ever known, slavery is a rich source for contemporary writers to investigate ways of survival and resistance for oppressed women. Furthermore, it conveys “the meaningfulness of women’s daily lives and validates the forms in which it has been

transmitted” (Maglin 891). This illuminates buried aspects of history unrecorded in mainstream American history.

After one hundred years of being written by white writers from the masters’ perspective, Walker was the first African American to approach the genre from the slaves’ point of view. Both white Northern and Southern writers portrayed the “Negro” as a minor type. The Northerners portrayed the “noble Negro, an educated, sensitive rebel against the South’s customs” and the Southerners viewed him as the “loyal, responsible, and hard working slave” (Lively 50). In both versions, freedom is an unattainable dream and emancipation is a false hope. This was a problem for Walker that even historians diverged in their views on the issue of slavery. Her research showed that “Southern historians claimed slavery was a beneficial system with benign masters; northerners did not oppose slavery as long as it was “contained” in the South and did not spread into the territories; while Negro historians regarded slavery as a cruel, inhuman system” and she had to have her own viewpoint (*How I* 52). Walker replaced the ideological discussions of slavery with physical descriptions of the conditions of slaves before and after emancipation. Jerry Ward notes that Walker’s novel exposes “some of the limits of “official history”” and at the same time gives an alternative reading of people’s lives, which is true (“Black” 317).

In my discussion of *Jubilee* I argue that by giving priority to the slaves themselves and their relationships as a community, Walker deconstructs the superiority of white people and emphasizes the importance of African Americans as both individuals and a race. To correct false histories of slavery, Walker chose George Lukacs’s model of the historical novel “for an understanding of the popular character of the historical novel” (*How* 64). She learned from Lukacs that what

matters “in the historical novel is not the retelling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events” (Lukacs 42). Accordingly, Walker’s novel focuses on how slaves think about their own oppression and their means of survival.

Through an ordinary character like Vyry, Walker gives an example to her readers of how to respond to oppression. By concentrating on Vyry’s marginalization, Walker communicates what Jerome de Groot calls “the social and human motives of behaviour” (28). Thus, new generations can learn lessons to apply in contemporary contexts of oppression. Freedom from oppression can be taken as a major theme in Walker’s novel because it focuses on slaves’ circumstances both before and after emancipation. James E. Spears considers the novel “a search for freedom – Chiefly by its main character, Vyry, but symbolically by the black race as a whole” (225). The novel is a record of slaves’ dream of freedom from inception to fulfilment. That is why Sonia Sanchez perceives *Jubilee* and other neo-slave narratives as a “freedom narrative ... because they are all about freedom” (184).

Jubilee has emerged from the tradition of slave narratives, which are told in the first person to record personal experiences in the bondages of slavery. Slave narratives are typically concerned with a journey from the narrator’s birth, to his/her conditions of slavery in the plantation, then a dangerous escape northward, and eventually a happy life of freedom in New England or Canada. *Jubilee* maintains some aspects of the traditional slave narrative: the cruel mistress, slave auction, slave’s overseer, and public punishment. Gina Wisker confirms that the form was “of particular importance to people who have been silenced hitherto” as it was “both proof of identity and testimony to lived individual experience” (“Black” 6). Though

the narrative lacked historical authentication as it was based on slaves' dairies, it was the beginning of voicing slaves' suffering.

According to Ashraf H. A. Rushdy "*Jubilee* certainly marks a generational continuity with an earlier African American oral and literary tradition" ("The Neo-Slave Narrative" 88). However, Walker has revised some details of the traditional form to provide authenticity lacked in the original form. That is why Walker's novel is told in the third person by a narrator who is not one of the characters at all. Walker was obliged to employ the omniscient narrator technique because she tells the story from the point of view of slaves, who were ignorant of the events going on outside the plantations. The omniscient narrator's voice is functional in the novel because it fills gaps in the historical sequence of events and comments on the ones that influence the slaves. bell hooks considers it helpful because it has "an almost psychoanalytic power that enables critical reflection" (*Wounds* xxii). That is true in Walker's novel because the narrator not only tells the story but also criticizes characters, analyses their motivations, and comments on their dreams.

Barbra Christian criticizes this binary line of narration. Christian argues that "the novel seems split. On the one hand, we experience the drama of Vry's life through the action of the novel, and on the other hand, the novelist often intrudes upon this drama with historical facts about the period. At such points, the novel does not jell into a whole" (*Black Women* 71). However, this view should not be taken at its face value because the two lines of narrative in the novel are running in the same stream of history and in the same time and place. Furthermore, the binary narration technique gives an opportunity to the reader to parallel impersonal historical facts and the ways people in the margins of history respond to them. Esim Erdim views this binary narrative "enriching" rather than "disrupting" to the novel's unity because

that way, “there are other voices in the narrative involved in telling the story, which creates ironic tensions” (294). That is why there is no contradiction or violation of the overall unity of the novel. Bernard Bell considers the binary narration useful because it provides “both an opportunity for the reader to participate in the drama of the characters’ lives” and understand events from a “black perspective for the setting and characters” (Bell 289). Thus, the reader can be involved with two levels of the events: the personal and the public, which is illuminating rather than distracting.

The novel includes entire blocks of historical presentation interwoven with the narrative. Walker tells the historical events in parallelism with the narrative line in which the characters enact and develop. The historical line is full of marvelous accuracy that overreaches history books. The historical events are the outcome of Walker’s long research in libraries and governmental archives. Walker’s research for the novel’s material is evident in the omniscient narrator’s words and in the characters’ speech as well. Though this novel has originated from a real life story, historical study has authenticated it until the boundaries between the two has become difficult to identify (Walker *How* 62). Throughout the novel, solid historical facts are presented as a background to the narrative.

Furthermore, Walker’s novel is new in its depiction of slaves. In *Jubilee*, slaves are major characters: they have memories to live on, folk music to sustain them, an inherited oral culture to maintain, strong racial points of view to convey, and a firmly connected community to belong to. Walker regards herself as being “among the first dealing with characters looking up from the bottom rather than from the top” (*How* 64). The events of the antebellum, Civil War and reconstruction are narrated from the slaves’ perspective so that even important historical figures become secondary to the slaves. Thus, Walker puts the marginalized into the centre

of narrative suggesting a counter-mainstream viewpoint. Walker admits that even Abraham Lincoln is intentionally presented in the novel only through the minds of slaves (*How I* 64). Walker creates characters rather than types. Barbara Christian states that “Walker’s novel emphasizes the practical slave culture without which people as an abused race would not have been able to survive” (*Black Women* 72). To convey this practicality, Walker depicts the ways slaves survive their oppression and overcome their humiliation.

Jubilee is also a folk novel; it integrates the African American folk culture as passed from one generation to another. It permeates the speech, proverbs, values, and attitudes represented in the text. Spirituals are abundant in the text, the titles of the chapters reflect them, and they are quoted regularly. Each chapter is introduced by a line from the spirituals to signify the incidents that will happen in it. Omens and works of magic are occasionally mentioned as well. The owl signifies somebody is dying soon and it is taken in the novel as a bad sign. When Grimes’s child dies, he finds a fetish and tells Mrs. Salina that it is made by the slaves to destroy his life. Regarding folklore, Walker’s novel is similar to Zora Neale Hurston’s novels, which elaborate on folk material. The kinds of food and the traditions of its preparation and presentation are elaborated in every occasion in the novel. The handcrafts by men and the quilting and sewing by women are emphasized as valued skills inherited from the predecessors.

Folk medicine is also a sacred talent, common among the slaves. Don Yoder argues that African American herbal medicine is part of religious practices. He states that “Magico-religious folk medicine is sometimes called ‘occult’ folk medicine, which attempts to use charms, holy words, and holy actions to cure disease” (192). Vyry maintains this tradition of herbal medicine. She knows every kind of herbal

root and stem and its value. She puts this knowledge into practice when her children are ill. She uses different herbs to help them recover soon. She also employs this knowledge when she helps the white young woman to deliver her baby.

The religious practices of the slaves can also be taken as part of folk tradition. The secret walking in the plantation to the hidden slave church is part of their folk wisdom to avoid the wrath of their masters. They know about the world outside the plantation from brother Zeke and in Sundays' evening meetings in the church. Moreover, the biblical image and black folk sermons are prominently indispensable from the structure of the novel. The parallel between the Old Testament stories of Moses, who helps the children of Israel out of bondages in the Pharaoh's house, is a reiterated reference in the novel. The slaves identify themselves with the children of Israel who wait for a rescuer like Moses, who turns out later to be Abraham Lincoln who declares the emancipation of slaves in 1863.

On the other hand, the slaves use folk language (commonly known as Black English). This dialect has its own pronunciation, vocabulary variation, grammar, and syntax. The subject-verb agreement is different from standard English: "I has," "is you," "they was," "you does," "to be gone," and "I feels." The formation of verb tense is also different: "buyed", "brung", and "whup" and "what" for "who" is also common in the slave language. There are numerous examples of a specific accent: "needer" for "neither," "hurtcha" for "hurt you," "sitch" for "such," "sho" for "sure," "gwine be" for "going to be," and "yetiddy" for "yesterday." This use of slave dialect adds much to the authenticity of the narrative. This difference communicates a distinct identity for the slaves. Moreover, this difference is celebrated in Vryr's insistence on keeping her accent even when she tries to build an interracial community with her neighbours.

Walker talks with pride about the folkloric and the historical aspects of her novel in an interview with Kay Bonneti in 1991. She says:

Jubilee is a folk novel and a historical novel. In every sense of the word, regardless of period, time and circumstances, *Jubilee* can be defined in that way. I used folk ways, folk sayings, folk philosophy, folk ideas, folk everything. Vyry is a folk Character. At the same time, no one can deny the historical accuracy of what I have written (*Conversations* 126).

This folk aspect of Vyry's character is the real appeal of the character. Vyry's skills and resourcefulness qualify her to sustain herself and her family and help whoever in need around her.

While Walker focuses on slaves, she considers their difference from their masters in speech, dress codes, and activities. Walker shows a wide range of differences between the language of the masters and the language of the slaves, between the speech of the educated and the uneducated blacks, and the attitudes of the free blacks and the slaves. Language plays an essential role in the novel in conveying credibility. Randal Ware is an example of the difference education can make in African Americans' lives. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu states that "Literacy differentiated blacks from whites, masters from slaves" (8). Slave masters used to keep slaves away from any source of education because "to 'steal' learning ... was more threatening to the established white male patriarchy than to steal food for hungry children or trinkets for everyday living" (8). This is the reason why Brother Ezekiel is keen on keeping the secret that he can read and write. Brother Ezekiel's literacy fulfils what masters have feared most, making various contacts with black and white abolitionists in the North.

Jubilee elaborates on various differences between the slaves and the masters in living conditions to reflect another dimension of their oppression, class. Martis Hollis notes that Walker's novel "gave voice to a profound political insight: that America's first laboring class was African American" (50). The novel highlights various manifestations of class discrimination and economic exploitation between masters and slaves. For example, the slave cabins and the Big House are completely different in space, furniture, and design. For example, the Duttons have "rooms with massive dark furniture with silk furnishing in dark greens and reds and blues;" Vvry at the age of seven moves from room to room "tiptoeing in awe and not daring to touch all the wonderful things" (21). On the contrary, Vvry and Aunt Sally put pots and cans to catch water dripping through holes in the roof of their cabin. Christmas food is another interesting example of this difference. While the white masters in the Big House have "the good Christmas breakfast of fried chicken and waffles and steaming black coffee with fresh clotted cream," every "slave child on the place received an orange, hard Christmas candy, and sometimes ginger cake" (141, 140).

Jubilee is full of rich female experiences of domestic life. It implies some kind of unconscious memories of repeated experiences. The novel's protagonist, Vvry learns a lot from her surrogate mothers, Mammy Sukey and Aunt Sally about life and conveys it to other women. This folk wisdom is something born with slave women and developed by experience. That is why it was important for Vvry to "assimilate two cultural traditions: that of the slave quarter and that of the Big House" (Traylor, "Music" 200). For example, Vvry gives advice, which nobody taught to her, to May Liza, a new slave brought to help her in the kitchen about how to deal with Mrs. Salina: "don't never grin in that white woman's face. She don't know what you mean ... Well they ain't nothing here to grin about" (131). Vvry

wants her to avoid any wrath from the white masters by wearing a blank face and a silent tongue.

Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu considers each woman writer of neo-slave narrative as part of this shared memory: “each brings alive the woman who is her enslaved ancestor and the woman who is herself” (25). In the light of this perspective, Walker’s novel is not a biography of Walker’s great grandmother; it is every African American woman’s story. It is part of a “personally driven and socially charged” literature which honors women’s shared memory and sometimes creates it (Beaulieu 25). It also signifies a group experience suitable for marginalized women everywhere. The novel opens with the death of the protagonist’s mother and concludes with her daughter’s view of the future. This adds a continuity of a female tradition from one generation to another linked by the writer, who is a descendant of that family in the narrative. This unconventional beginning and end anticipates many texts to be written by feminist women writers before the end of the twentieth century to reflect on some shared female memories.

The novel celebrates a female experience of strength and survival. Several female experiences are passed from one generation to another in the novel. Domestic activities, cooking, needle work, spinning, and weaving are female inherited traditions. Vyry has learned all that from Aunt Sally. Delores S. Williams emphasizes that “Vyry’s endurance is assured by the shrew intelligence she develops under the tutelage of Mammy Sukey and Aunt Sally” (90-91). Advice about women’s issues is highly valued in the novel, including menstruation, cautionary tales about sexual matters, information about pregnancy, and childbirth. Patricia Hill Collins explains that “in valuing the concrete, African American women may be invoking not only an Afrocentric tradition, but a women’s tradition as well” because

“women are socialized in complex relational nexuses where contextual rules take priority over abstract principles in governing behaviour” (“The Social” 761). Collins calls this female strategy “the ethic of caring” (“The Social” 765).

This female-centred perspective in Walker’s novel marks the early signs of the Women’s Rights Movement and the feminist literature of the seventies and the beginning of a wave of African American novels by and about women. Paula Giddings confirms that “a male-conscious motif ran throughout the society in the sixties” (314). *Jubilee*, as a woman-centred narrative is an obvious challenge to this historical fact. Through Vry, Walker emphasizes the voice of African American women despite the fact that “in periods of racial assertion Black women’s feminist reactions tend to be muted” (Giddings 311). Walker’s text resists calls for subordinating gender to a unifying racial perspective in the mid-twentieth century. bell hooks states that “Black male activists publicly acknowledged that they expected black women involved in the movement to conform to a sexist role pattern” (*Ain’t* 5). By elaborating on African American women’s experience, Walker refuses any subordinate role in the struggle for racial equality.

The novel questions the various stereotypes disseminated by nineteenth century masters about slave women to contrast the image of white women as fragile, delicate, and pious. Joanne V. Gabbin emphasizes that Walker’s novel “exorcises the devils of stereotyping that had relegated too many images of black women to the roles of mummies, harlots, and confused and tragic mulattos” (248). Walker contributes to the correction of false images of slave women in white ante-bellum and Civil War novels: the mammy, who contentedly neglects her own children for the sake of her master; the tragic mulatto, who is rejected by both black and white communities and the conjure woman, whose magic is admired by her master; and the

concubine, who satisfies her master's desires. Patricia Hill ponders that "these controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life" (*Black* 68). Walker deconstructs these racist stereotypes and demonstrates the interconnectedness of racism and sexism in the lives of African American slave women.

Walker revises such stereotypes of African American women. Walker's protagonist, Vyry, is a mulatto, but she is not tragic at all. She establishes a successful life after slavery with her husband and children as a black family. She never tries passing as white, never loses communication with the slave community, and gets support from several fellow slaves all the time. She even gets acknowledgement from her white neighborhood, who accept her for her good deeds not for her light skin. Vyry is a strong woman who can love, think, act, feel, give, and make decisions. She has confidence in herself and in her heritage and has the ability to communicate with others. It is not only Vyry, even her mother, Hetta, who was her master's concubine, was a good wife to her husband, Jake, and a good mother. Barbra Christian notes how Aunt Sally, the cook that precedes Vyry is not a typical mammy: "She steals food, has little respect for her mistress, and teaches Vyry the tricks of survival in Missy's kitchen" (*Black Women* 72). Granny Tiecy, the conjurer in the novel is introduced as a herbalist, who helps the sick and the injured. Walker strips these women from the unilateral way they are viewed by their masters, by individualizing each character.

Sis Hetta is not the Jezebel stereotype, the sexually aggressive and lustful black woman. Walker's portrayal of Sis Hetta is a deconstruction of the stereotypical idea that any white male was "merely prey to the rampant sexuality of his female slaves" to justify his rape of them (Carby, *Reconstructing* 27). Walker portrays Hetta

as a young innocent girl raped by her ruthless master. After long years of exploiting her sexually, John Dutton remembers “her tears, and her frightened eyes, and how she had pleaded to be left alone, but he had persisted until she had given in to him” (9). Hetta continues to cry every time her master visits her throughout these long years. She has given birth to fifteen illegitimate children for her master, who either makes them work in the field or be sold in slave auctions when they have grown up.

Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu explains that this on the basis that: “A ‘breeder’ essentially has the ability to breed and nothing more; the term in no way implies nurturing or mothering” (12). This economic exploitation of female slaves’ bodies is part of the white masters’ view of female slaves as a means of economic profit. Here Walker refers to how class matters intersect with race and gender in slave women’s lives. According to Beaulieu, masters used the word “breeder” to signify cattle, “whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers” (7). The result of this inhuman treatment of Sis Hetta by John Dutton is evident in the deterioration of her health and psychological state and even leads to her death. Granny Ticey, the midwife, comments on her health condition: “She was going to die anyway. She had to die one of these times. The last two times were nothing but the goodness of God” (7). That proves how Hetta has been exploited as a “breeder” beyond limits. Furthermore, this humiliation has left her broken and silenced: “she was a sullen-looking woman with a pouting lip who rarely smiled and almost never talked” (14). Hetta’s last wish before death is to see her two year-old daughter, the master’s last bastard. Hetta is no sex-obsessed whore; she is a defeated, exploited, and broken woman, who has been deprived of both her humanity and her children.

It is not only Hetta who is stripped of her humanity; it is her slave husband as well. He is another victim of John Dutton's belief in the female "breeder." When Hetta "began to have babies, it was no problem," he "gave her Jake for a husband and that was that" (9). Jake is an example of how black men "couldn't be achieved or maintained because of the inability ... to protect the black woman" (Carby, *Reconstructing* 35). He lived with a defeated masculinity and helplessness: "he remembered the bitter dry taste in his mouth when he realized she was Marster's woman. Marster had broken her in, and then 'give her to me.'" (14). This psychological effect on Jake becomes a persistent sense of humiliation and self-contempt: "Jake's path seldom crossed Marster's. He stayed out of his way as much as possible ... Jake hated Marster and despised himself and looked at Hetta and got mad and evil. But that was the end of it. He never dared say anything or do anything" (14-15). Jake himself becomes part of this "breeding" concept; he has impregnated Hetta with more children for the master to sell: "When their children were sold away and some babies never cried she would cry and grieve over their helplessness" (14). The children themselves copy their parents silence, defeat, and helplessness.

Walker emphasizes the role of motherhood of female slaves in the novel. The character of Vyry contrasts the dominant view of slave women domestic workers, the mammy stereotype. She is not the obedient and faithful domestic servant who proves her faithfulness "By loving, nurturing, and caring for her white children and 'family' than her own" (Collins, *Black* 71). This image has been created by white writers to justify exploitation of African American domestic servants that "Black women domestic workers remained poor because they were economically exploited" (72). Vyry never lets her children away from her regardless of how busy she is. Before Minna is born, Jim is with her all the time: "When he was a toddler he would hang

around her feet in the kitchen of the Big House ... Vry kept him with her everywhere she turned” (150). She always keeps her children playing in the backyard of the kitchen to keep an eye on them.

The importance to Vry of her role as a mother is evident in her inability to follow her husband’s advice to leave the children and escape until he sends someone to bring them later. She risks her own safety and the possibility of being caught by the plantation’s guards and takes the children with her: “with the baby in her arms and Jim pulling on her stuffed pantsleg, she started out to make it to the swamp” (169). When the guards catch her, she does not think of the consequences of her arrest, she is just concerned with the children’s safety: “Despite everything, she felt glad the children were still with her and they were safe. She looked into little Minna’s face and smiled, and she patted Jim’s hand softly to assure him of her nearness” (170). Vry is punished for following the call of her motherhood by seventy-five lashes. The lash leaves ineffaceable scars on her back. When she shows her back to Innis Brown and Randall Ware, “the two men stood horrified before the sight of her terribly scarred back. The scars were webbed and her back had ridges like a washboard” (484). This contradiction between freedom and motherhood for slave women is common in African American women writers’ neo-slave narratives. Vry’s rejection of freedom without her children contrasts Sethe’s rejection of motherhood in the bondages of slavery in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). Sethe tries to kill her four children and succeeds with one to save them experiencing the horrors of slavery. Sethe denies slave women the right to be mothers. Hazel V. Carby comments that, “Walker is clearly historicizing the contradiction for slave women between being a “good” mother and being free” (“Ideologies” 136). Vry is a

challenge to this historical contradiction as she gets freedom with her children in the novel.

Walker emphasizes motherhood through Vyry. Vyry's unflagging love to her children is a symbol of her existence and hope in a better future. That is conveyed in the novel through the idea that a loss of baby is a loss of hope. Jane Campbell comments that the importance given in the novel to "motherhood in its various manifestations underpins Walker's celebration of black women in the novel" (275). Actually, Margaret Walker has been of the pioneers in authenticating the mother figure in neo-slave narrative by making Vyry a real character rather than a type. According to Campbell, Vyry's "mother figure has lent a new stability to the African American literary tradition by placing the family rather than the individual in the spotlight" (2). Before Vyry, slave narratives put male slave protagonists in the centre of narrative and obscured their families.

Such a strong female figure like Vyry stands beside previous male slave protagonists such as Frederick Douglass and Uncle Tom to give a balanced vision of the experience. After *Jubilee*, African American women writers have focused on the mother figure: both blood mothers and surrogate mothers. Since then, slave women have been portrayed as strong-willed women able to see through the troubles of their lives to get the best for their children. Angela Y. Davis confirms the existence of resilient and self-sustaining mothers who "were beaten and raped, but never subdued" during slavery (29). Vyry is an example of the possibility of finding such women in the context of slavery.

Walker's portrayal of an articulate female slave character acting with full agency is revolutionary. Yet, Barbara Christian considers this articulacy lacking as she notes that "Vyry is not complicated in the way that Sethe or Dessa Rosa are, for

we are seldom privy to her internal conflicts” (“African-American” 335). Christian proves that by the fact that Vyry “hardly speaks in the first half of the novel, although she becomes more vocal in the Reconstruction section” (“African-American” 335). Christian relates this to the fact that Walker wrote the novel “before the rise of the black culture movements of the sixties” and “could not give slaves the right to claim those events they do not want to remember” (“African-American” 335). However, I interpret this as a natural development of the character from a child acquiring knowledge and learning from her elders to an expert of the norms of sound judgement and the nature of her world. From a listener to an eloquent speaker, as the closer we come to the end of the novel, the longer Vyry’s speech becomes. Furthermore, Walker wrote most of the novel in the sixties and was inspired by the activities going on around her.

Vyry has inaugurated a new canon of women’s empowerment in African American literature. She does not only show maternal qualities but female agency as well. Before *Jubilee*, women characters in slave narratives used to be marginal. Male characters have dominated narratives at the expense of their female counterparts. Contrary to that, Vyry has a strong will and a sound logic before men in her life. She follows her female instincts and neglects Randal Ware’s warning about taking her children. Then she disregards Innis Brown’s wish to build a third house for them after the first two are destroyed and insists on searching for a safe area of no racial threats before building. In their argument at the end of the novel, Walker stands up to the two men and defends her belief in forgiveness and nonviolent resistance.

Moreover, Vyry becomes a working woman, which anticipates nineteenth century women’s work outside home. Beaulieu considers this “an opportunity to contribute to society outside the confines of her home” (20). Her work as a midwife

contributes to make a union between the black and white communities in building the Browns' house: men build the house and women quilt together. Vryy's agency can be seen in her ability to create such a sharing experience, which has been unimaginable before. Her deep and persistent belief in humanity and Christian values is finally rewarded. Vryy is accustomed to help the poor and the weak regardless of race considerations. She has already helped Lillian Dutton until her aunt comes to take her and have fed the Coopers family when they have been hungry.

Walker proves the falsity of the stereotypical image of slaves as dependent people, who cannot live without their benign masters. After emancipation slaves are equipped with several skills to employ in founding a new life for themselves away from their masters. Vryy and Innis Brown build and furnish two houses independently. They can rear pigs and cows, grow plants, cook, clean, weave, and sew. They also have strong will, physical power, and patience to start from a scratch. Vryy is innovative in making meals from scraps of food and is able to stock seasonal products for later times of the year: "At the end of summer, Vryy looked at her rows of canned vegetables, preserves, jam, and jelly and her provisions for the winter with great satisfaction" (330). Her husband Innis Brown laughs at her resourcefulness and comments: "Ain't nobody gwine starve with you around" (330).

The white characters in the novel are portrayed as the antithesis of the black characters: helpless, dependent, and good for nothing. They are not able to live without their slaves; they cannot even feed themselves. When Vryy and Innis Brown's first house, the log cabin is swamped in the flood, they find a white man to work for. Innis Brown confidently says, "I am able to do most anything." In contrast, the white man with regret says, "my wife will be mighty happy if your wife can cook. We haven't had a decent cook since the war ended" (364). Walker undermines

the system of slavery through her portrayal of white characters. Contrary to slave characters, which are mostly based on her grandmother's memories, white characters are Walker's invention. Actually, Walker's grandmother gave her a detailed description of the slaves' world, which she knew well; but she could not tell as much about the masters' life, which was not hers. Walker states that, "the entire white family is obviously symbolic of the Confederate South" (*How I* 62). The decline of the white masters coincides with the end of the war and the rise of slaves. The death of John Dutton after a debilitating problem with his leg that develops into a gangrene leading to his death, the death of his son while fighting with the Confederate army, the death of his wife of her grief shortly after the death of her son, and the madness of his daughter after being raped by the Union soldiers parallel the defeat of the Confederate army and dismantling of the Southern plantations.

Additionally, Walker contrasts the way the slave community is connected and cooperative with the class barriers that separate rich and poor whites. While everybody attends the dying Hetta and cares about Vyry, John Dutton and Salina hate their poor relatives. Walker pinpoints the ability of blacks to give love and care to the old, the sick, and the poor, white or black. In contrast, she shows how whites' relationships are neither spontaneous nor warm. This ability to give emotionally is accompanied by another ability to share possessions on the part of the black characters in the novel. Salina always has food in excess and never gives a morsel to any needy black or white. She even checks on her stock daily to make sure that nothing is stolen. However, Vyry, who has never been as rich as Salina always shares her food with others and enjoys doing so. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, takes *Jubilee* as an example of African American women writers' vicious portrayal of white women: "What could be more damaging than Margaret Walker's portrait in

Jubilee of Big Missy” (70)? Actually, the contrast between the characters of Big Missy and Vyry is one of Walker’s exaggerations in the narrative.

There is a danger here of idealizing slaves and stamping white masters as evil. Hortense J. Spillers states that Walker’s characters “are ultimately seen as one-dimensional, either good or bad, speaking in a public rhetoric that assumes the heroic or its opposite” and this single-dimensional characterization does not expose characters in depth or “penetrate the core of experience” (299). Spillers’s analysis can be related to the novel’s reversal of stereotypes. Walker’s characters contribute to her process of writing back against all the negative stereotypes. Yet, Walker seems to exaggerate in this concern. For example, she considers Vyry as “the best true example of the motherhood of her race” (486). Beaulieu criticizes Walker for her attempts to mythologize Vyry in a way that overshadows her personal story (16). This idealization of Vyry’s character raises doubts about its credibility.

Hiroko Sato notes this sharp contrast of Walker’s characters. He considers *Jubilee* a complex novel, which is “an examination of the Southern social institutions, its sense of values and its ways of life, from the reverse side” (270). Sato categorizes the characters in the novel under eight headings: “white-black, rich-poor, male-female, and literate-illiterate” (270). These dichotomies exist in the novel and do signify the codes of power in its time and place. Sato argues that there is a reversal of Vyry’s conditions by the end of the novel represented in her move from dark and small log cabin in the first half of the novel to a lit and spacious house at the end of the story (271). That is true and can be understood in Walker’s deconstruction of the system of slavery itself: masters decline and slaves rise, the Duttons die or go mad and the Browns increase in number and possession.

However, Vry's rise is sustained by her own wisdom and ability to survive troubles. Vry's social and economic development is gradual rather than sudden. Walker's protagonist seems to have a unique insight that values hard work, human relations and strength to overcome adverse conditions. She is aware of her roles as a wife, mother, and servant and performs them all as required. She always tries to get the best of what is available. Vry's deep insight permits her to understand the meaning of freedom from the beginning of emancipation more than any other liberated slave. She wisely says to her son, "yes, son, we's free and we ain't got to stay, but being free doesn't mean we ain't gotta work" (285). She understands the responsibilities of every stage of her life.

Freedom for Vry and her family is represented in their ability to have a house of their own. This is not an easy task at all; it involves confronting the racism of the KKK and the false promises of the Reconstruction government (29). Amanda J. Davis establishes home as a complex pursuit of African Americans and a site of resistance (25-26). Vry and her family gradually discover that it is not the physical house that provides protection, but the interconnected society where they can build that house. That is why Vry refuses to go with Randal Ware when asked to at the end of the novel. She stays with Innis Brown because she has already "got a house, a loving family, and a sustaining community" (Levin 287).

Vry's viewpoint is shaped by her Christian faith; she decides to refrain from hatred to maintain her spiritual integrity. According to Minrose C. Gwin, love for Vry "is born out of violence ... it is a peculiarly female regenerative process that saturates and thereby dilutes bitterness with sisterhood and maternal nurture" ("Jubilee" 135). Though this might be perceived as a stereotype of femininity, it is presented in the novel as a privilege rather than a weakening characteristic. Vry's

love and forgiveness are interwoven with strength and reason, which are both attributed to maleness. Her femininity gives her a broader view of human existence and development beyond hatred and revenge. Hortense J. Spillers emphasizes that Vry's story is "a story of the foremothers, a celebration of their stunning faith and intractable powers of endurance" (304). She looks ahead for a world of shared humanity and her dreams come true through her female skills of midwifery. This skill narrows the gap between black and white women through a private experience only understood by women regardless of race. Walker creates a world of common humanity based on other female skills including quilting and cooking. Modelling on this female experience, men are gradually encouraged to enjoy this bond between the two communities and start to employ their skills of building and making furniture. Vry's last house becomes a symbol of this shared humanity.

Walker emphasizes that, Vry "was shaped by the forces that dominated her life ... In the Big House and in the Quarters, she was raised according to Christian ethics, morality and faith, and she could not react any other way" (*How I* 62). Eugene Genovese considers religion, as an activity which slaveholders encouraged among their slaves, as an "opiate of the masses." It kept them harmless by appeasing their rage. Religion helped them endure their tough circumstances and daily suffering to be rewarded after death. However, Vry does not forgive her oppressors only in anticipation of a reward to come in the hereafter; she expects an immediate reward in life. Vry decides to forgive to get a stable family and healthy communal life for herself and her children. If others want to feed the fire of hatred, it will not come to an end. Vry forgives for empirical reasons as much as she does on account of religion.

Though Vryy decides to forgive, she never relinquishes her pride with white people. Michael P. Bibler argues that in her relationship with white women, Vryy “refuses to subordinate her own interests to theirs” (172). An example can be seen in her rejection of Mrs. Jacobson’s wish to have her as their permanent cook. That arrangement does not suit Vryy after emancipation. That is why she is insulted when accused by Randall Ware of being loyal to white people. She infuriately replies: “That’s the second time today you done told me I’m a white folks’ nigger. What is you? Some kind of devil out of hell come here to torment me” (474). Vryy makes a model of “human equality in which blackness is valid and important to the ideas of human forgiveness and reconciliation” (Bibler 176). Vryy helps Lillian for example out of humanity rather than servility, which Ware cannot understand. Robert A. Harris confirms that she does that because she has the strength and the confidence to do so (243). Floris Barnett Cash ascribes it also to the fact that “Black women carried these concepts of mutual assistance with them from bondage to freedom” (31).

Vryy decides to forgive and forget the injustices of slavery to be ready for the cross-racial shared community that she has successfully created. Vryy’s attitude represents Walker’s own belief that there should be no place for hatred between the two races. In 1951, Walker wrote an essay in which she states that it was time “to stop the beginnings of prejudice against white people that we as Negroes acquire unconsciously and that I believe is just as egregious as that imposed upon us” (12). That is why Walker’s novel does not call for any revenge on whites; instead, it calls for improving African Americans’ living conditions. Vryy’s sacred war is against hatred, ignorance, and poverty. She is a hard worker, a decision maker, and an industrious character; she is keen on improving the quality of her life. Spillers notes Walker’s emphasis on hard work beside faith after emancipation. He argues that the

novel's account of "the causes of the Civil War and its aftermath does not name 'God' as a factor in the liberation of black Americans" (301). Through Vry, Walker conveys the importance of a reasonable understanding of religion.

Vry conveys the message that education is the solution for all black people's troubles. Before her son leaves for school in Selma, her advice to him is to count on education and his inherited wisdom to become a good person: "But you gotta use mother-wit long with education else you won't be nothing but a fool" (491). Vry's emphasis on "mother-wit" even before education implies female-emphasis and self-confidence. Geneva Smitherman confirms that African Americans used to "ridicule 'educated fools,' ... they have 'book learning' but no 'mother wit,' knowledge, but not wisdom" (qtd. in Collins, "The Social" 759). Vry's advice to her son reflects her trust in her wisdom, though she wants education for him. Vry's wisdom is read in her insistence on education for her children and rejection of Innis Brown's wish to have her son, Jim work in the field to increase their property.

Considering the novel from a historical perspective, there is a correspondence between the time of the novel and the time of its publication. There are hundred years separating the nineteenth century slave culture and the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. However, an analogy between the two periods is traceable. The novel explores African Americans' 1860s aspirations for freedom from slavery and echoes their 1960s strife to get freedom from discrimination. This analogy is in accord with the Civil Rights intellectuals' insistence on "seeing the past analogous to and a cause of present politics" (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 33). These intellectuals created a connection between their ancestral slavery and their immediate oppression. Walker's novel serves this attitude by giving voice to slaves and challenging white writers' stereotyping of African Americans. Holly Martis comments that "the novel is less

about Vvry's particular path and more about the compels relationships between Walker's characters and time itself, in which 30 years is actually 300, and 300 is expressed in 30," which is metaphorically true (51).

Walker was inspired to finish her life-long project of *Jubilee* by the Civil Rights activities. In autumn 1962, she decided that she had researched enough for the novel. She left her family, took leave from her teaching position at Jackson State University, headed to Iowa to register for her Ph.D. degree, and started to put everything she had in mind on paper. From January to April 1965, when activists were marching in Selma, Detroit, and Albany, Walker worked beyond her normal energy to complete the novel. She was keen on completing the novel and publishing it during the 1960s (*How* 58-61). Walker was aware of the necessity of authenticating her grandmother's story during the climax of the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil War section in the novel which legalized slaves' freedom is partially similar to the 1960s' pursuits of Civil Rights laws for voting rights, and desegregation in employment, housing, and education. Similarities between the two epochs were too compelling for Walker to neglect. During her writing of the novel, Walker was quite involved in both the past and the present.

There is a complementary link between the novel and the 1960s. The 1960s are a continuation of the struggle of the 1860s. Walker's text explores the slaves' assumption that being emancipated means getting access to both resources and dignity. It shows that being free from slavery does not mean being free from oppression. They are free by law but not by social codes. Vvry and Innis Brown are attacked several times by the KKK, from whom the law cannot protect them. The novel states that they have fought for emancipation and won but their fight for freedom is not completed yet. The novel concludes with the beginning of the Jim

Crow laws. Vryy's Jim is going with his father to attend school in Selma and they are obliged to ride in "colored only" cars in the train: "The colored people shared half their car with the baggage and the freight including squawking chickens, pigs, and a goat" (496). This concluding reference to the Jim Crow Laws suggests that there is still a long way to go. These are issues that the Civil Rights activists were campaigning against in the 1960s.

Melissa Walker notes another correspondence between the novel and the 1960s. The novel takes place in Southwest Georgia near Alabama, where important campaigns of the Civil Rights took place (56). This is quite significant and suggests that the Civil Rights activists felt themselves in a similar historical situation to their ancestors' a century before. Rushdy emphasizes this point when he says that "It is no small part of the legacy of the early Civil Rights Movement that it inspired a reconsideration of that previously maligned historical group – American abolitionists" (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 33). The Civil Rights activists re-assessed the history of "antebellum reformers" to link themselves to Southern traditions of resistance. The call for freedom and human dignity echoes across a century of suffering and oppression.

Walker wrote the last section of her novel in 1965 when Black Power started to be a major movement. Their call for arming youth, radical nationalism, and separatism raised fears of the sequences of violent resistance. Rushdy states that the development of Black Power as a philosophy was "founded on the ruins of the strategic nonviolence of the early Civil Rights Movement led to a new recognition of the pervasive violence of American society and foreign policy and a renewed respect for the violence of slavery" (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 25). Walker's novel anticipates that danger and her fears are echoed in the last part of the novel. The final discussion

between Ware, Brown, and Vyry conveys that ideological conflict between violent and nonviolent resistance both in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Innis Brown stands for Booker T. Washington's philosophy of practical professions and gradual change. On the other hand, Randal Ware represents W.E. DuBois's philosophy in the 1960s of a daring and immediate social and political change on all levels. The debate between Innis Brown and Randall Ware leads to a strong conflict between Vyry and Ware which corresponds with the analogy between Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.

Randall Ware cannot understand that Vyry forgives for the sake of her worldly happiness and psychological integration. He does not forget white people's hatred and cruelty towards him, he cannot forgive or forget, and he is no more able to believe in a shared mixed society, which echoes Malcolm X's attitudes in the 1960s. He believes in militancy and resolution to legalize education, equal economic opportunities, the right to vote, and the right to participate in politics for all blacks. He cannot be satisfied with a house, a farm, and safety like Innis and Vyry. Warding off others' harm does not satisfy his goal of ultimate equality on all levels.

The conflict between Vyry and Ware echoes several dichotomies of the 1960s: non-violence versus militancy, integration versus nationalism, and accommodation versus resistance. The Ku Klux Klan in the novel is a symbol of the 1960s' white backlash, which reacted violently against desegregation and anti-racism. Melissa Walker confirms that the novel "is not the story of a dead past, but of the past as the precondition of the present" (57). That is clear in the way it addresses the debates of the sixties and echoes the goals of the Civil Rights Movement. It provides the heritage and the history that has been recalled by the Black Arts Movement and celebrates the racial tradition that they have revived.

The generation of the sixties took pride in everything pertinent to African Americans, even the history of suffering. Walker expressed her view of this generation to Nikki Giovanni in one of their conversations when she says: “I admire your generation. I could not at all be the same as your generation. I would not want to be. I lived and came of age in a time that ... certainly wasn’t as highly tensioned as the time we are living in now” (*Conversations* 23). Walker admired this generation for its race pride and self-confidence. However, she was against those whose commitments made them believe in violent resistance such as the Black Power Movement and Black Panther Party. Walker’s view is like Vryy’s and King’s.

On another level, *Jubilee* reflects the 1960s’ view of history from the bottom up. Unlike historians, the Civil Rights Movement learned to care about people at the bottom of society. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy argues that when historians saw the younger generations of students protesting in the streets in the 1960s, they started to revise their views of history. They saw how ordinary people could change history. Rushdy calls this “cross-fertilization between the streets and the ivory tower” (“The Neo-Slave Narrative” 88). Walker’s novel has ushered in not only the tradition of neo-slave narrative but also revisions of the history of slavery. Her novel was the first to look at history through the perspective of the marginalized.

Jubilee does not seem to be in accord with the Black Arts Movement that spanned between mid-1960s and mid-1970s. First, the novel was not the movement’s favourite genre as mentioned before. Cheryl Clarke confirms that “poetry was a principal instrument of political education about the new blackness ... most black women writers of that time wrote *because* of it-and still do” (2). Second, *Jubilee* lacks the movement’s militant spirit and radical tone. Clarke argues that The Black Arts Movement turned away from the white west to create “a new lexicon of

prescriptive and proscriptive blackness, which continues to influence the practice of African American culture” (2). Though *Jubilee* shows this lexicon of blackness as a source of pride, it does not reject the white world. Walker’s novel stresses the importance of integrating the two worlds for a balanced society. *Jubilee* is far from the Black Power Party’s and the Black Arts Movement’s call for separatism, which Larry Neal stresses when he says that the “two movements postulate that there are in fact and in spirit two Americas—one black, one white” (446).

However, *Jubilee* is after all a text of racial protest and it echoes the Black Arts Movement’s challenge to the superiority of white culture. Clarke emphasizes the movement’s success in creating “rhetoric and a vernacular that challenged hegemonic and racist White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant culture” (2). Yet, if writers of the Black Arts Movement wanted to destroy the white culture, Walker only wanted to criticize it and revise its assumptions. Neal’s description of the movement’s motives shows how radical it was: “The motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world” (448). The Black Arts Movement wanted one viewpoint to prevail and negated any possibility of reconciliation. Contrary to that, Vyr in *Jubilee* provides various possibilities of reconciliation between the two worlds through love and shared humanity. Walker used to criticize separatism and consider it an escape from the realities of life.

The novel is really multifaceted and multileveled. It is a portrayal of African American life over its history in a concise form and limited space and time. The heroine is a combination of the writer’s family heritage, private experience, and a public vision of a race and a nation. It is a celebration of all African American women and “ironically in the terms that white Southern culture tended to reserve for

its own self-expression: folklore, history, and the literature of memory” (Carmichael 1). Folklore, history, and memories are essential components on self-identification, understanding the past, and anticipating the future. That is why Walker chose to write a slave narrative to reflect on the Civil Rights Movement. She wanted to make people feel pride in their history in America even if it is a history of suffering and oppression. The novel conveys boundless messages and incites readers’ thinking beyond the present.

The real value of the novel is Walker’s ability to stand up for African American women who, according to Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, “suffered the greatest indignities of slavery ... and their plight continues to receive scant attention” (1). Walker revived these woman through the facts of her great grandmother’s life. *Jubilee* serves as an important link between two historical epochs: the nineteenth century’s struggle for emancipation and the twentieth century’s struggle for equality. It is also a link between the literary tradition of slave narrative and the Civil War novel and the twentieth century literature of the Civil Rights Movement.

In spite of the points of innovation discussed above, Walker remains a conservative person and writer. She is always cautious with experimentation compared to the following generations of African American women writers. Charlotte Goodman supports this idea: “Since Walker imitates the conventional linear structure of the traditional slave narrative, perhaps one reason *Jubilee* has received so little critical attention is that it appears to be less innovative than novels like Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* or Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*” (239). *Jubilee* is best viewed as a transitional work that has ushered in a long list of women characters in neo-slave narratives by African American women writers in the 1970s and 1980s. Beaulieu states that those writers have continued Walker’s legacy: “Late-

twentieth-century African American women writers have adopted and extended her work, continuing to privilege the female slave as speaking subject” (24). However, all these writers have shared a view of a common female ancestry. According to Beaulieu, “each brings alive the woman who is her enslaved ancestor and the woman who is herself” (25).

Walker’s motivation in writing the novel was a desire to fulfil a promise and a wish to know her own roots. Surprisingly, the two motivations have been fully met, bringing about a deeper and more fulfilling identification of the whole race. *Jubilee* is an example of how writing can be “a historical act of reclamation, a way of recognizing and charting roots and identity” (Wisker, *Post-Colonial* 38). Walker leaves the reader with an understanding of the past and an anticipation of the future. The novel shows how the epochs of the history of African Americans are connected to each other. Walker’s text marks different points of innovation and represents a transitional phase in the canon of African American slave narrative. It is also transitional phase in Walker’s literary career leading to the culmination of her feminist consciousness in her later poetry.

Chapter Four:

Margaret Walker and the Women's Movement:

The Seventies and the Eighties

My birth certificate reads female, Negro, date of birth and place. Call it fate or circumstance, this is my human condition. I have no wish to change it from being female, black, and free. I like being a woman. I have a proud African American heritage, and I have learned from the difficult exigencies of life that freedom is a philosophical state of mind and existence. The mind is the only place where I can exist and feel free. In my mind, I am absolutely free ... Maybe my glands have something to do with my occupation as a creative person ... Creativity cannot exist without the feminine principle. (Walker, *On Being* 3)

These opening words of one of Walker's essays, published in 1980, are helpful in the argument of this chapter. They position Walker in the canon of black feminist writers. In these words, Walker identifies herself with pride as a black woman. Furthermore, she confirms that this identity endows her with the freedom necessary to be a writer. This quotation demonstrates that Walker saw her gender as a central part of her identity. It also shows how Walker under the influence of the Women's Liberation Movement, developed a strong understanding of her gender identity.

The purpose of this chapter is to assess this change in Walker's literary work. It approaches Walker's later poetry in the context of the 1970s and the 1980s Women's Movement, when women's lives have become central to political debate for the first time in Walker's century. This chapter specifically investigates how Walker as a person and writer was influenced by late twentieth century feminism and specifically, black feminism. It explores how that growing feminist consciousness

informed her poetry in the 1970s and the 1980s. I will argue that Walker's later poetry reflects on various feminist themes of the time. I will also argue that Margaret Walker's poetry in this period is important because it does not only address current black feminist themes, but also comments on the twentieth century as a whole from a black feminist point of view. A socio-historical background about these two decades helps to understand the world in which Walker lived and wrote her later poetry.

The 1970s were an extension of the events and the atmosphere of the sixties in America: the spirit of protest grew stronger, the Civil Rights activists continued their struggle for equality, and the Black Arts Movement continued its spread in America. A permissive culture and blows against repression dominated the country. Free speech, youth culture, and demonstrations against forms of discrimination continued to prevail in the social and the political arenas. Rebellion dominated thought, behaviour, and dress. Free sex, pornography, drug addiction, left-wing politics, and radical thought were examples of resistance to traditional culture and attempts to shock American society (Lazerow 97-99). In the seventies, minorities in America grew self-conscious and protested strongly against racial discrimination. Native Americans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans embraced their racial cultures vehemently. Minority cultures and rebel groups like the Hippie Movement, Peace Movement, Gay Movement, and most importantly for this chapter Women's Movement became politically important among American youth everywhere as a rebellion against the traditional culture (Reeves 228).

From the mid-1960s there was a sharp division among Americans on the war in Vietnam. There was a strong anti-war tendency among the people. From the early years of Nixon's presidency there was pressure on the authorities to end the war. Polls showed that the vast majority of the people wanted a complete withdrawal from

Vietnam whatever the consequences. The Vietnam War ended in 1975 and it was the beginning of America's stabilized and expanded relations with world territories like China, Latin America, and the Middle East (Reeves 205-207). The successive American governments tried to maintain this stability with the world and to support peace worldwide to avoid any future wars. The war-troubled world led the Peace Movement to lose faith in the patriarchal order represented in the male leaders of the world, who initiated destruction. This view was echoed in the Women's Movement's view that the rule of patriarchy brought about war, environmental crises, and imbalance to the eco system. Some poems by Walker during that time reflected this critique of the patriarchal system and its initiation of social, economic, and ecological troubles. Walker's poetic treatment of this theme will be discussed later in this chapter.

Reagan governed America from 1981 to 1989. His administration brought about a noticeable change from the mood of the preceding two decades. America began to calm down after several fervent years. A considerable number of people became less rebellious and more conservative. According to Thomas C. Reeves, people became more "inclined to think about paying their bills than demonstrating on street corners" (228). This also indicates how the 1980s were defined by an obsession with money. This is clearly reflected in some of Walker's poems like "Money, Honey, Money" (1989). People became more concerned with their domestic prosperity than foreign affairs. After a period of decline, the economy prospered by mid-decade to people's satisfaction.

In the second half of the decade the demands of racial minorities and feminists started to be publicly discussed. According to Reeves, "what was controversial just a few years earlier was now conventional" (228). For example,

censorship was reduced; marijuana was smoked in public, and feminists' and gays' requests for social acknowledgement and equality became quite familiar in media. Reagan's domestic conservatism balanced the counter cultures of the seventies. His New Right proponents were against the tide of permissiveness that swept the country in the sixties and the seventies (Reeves 232). Reagan received the least ever number of votes from African Americans and women because he was not enthusiastic about the Civil Rights leaders and was against abortion (Reeves 232). Common people accepted women's rights and racial equality, however, millions of conservative Americans supported Reagan (Thompson 129-131). Reagan's right wing supporters wanted the nation to regain its faith and traditional style. James Davidson Hunter views this as a "battle between orthodoxy and progressivism," which can be taken as "part of an American tradition of cultural conflict" (qtd. in Thompson 131).

African Americans' struggle for racial equality was the most remarkable among all the minority groups in America. In spite of several Civil Rights amendments in the sixties, race remained the core problem in America. African Americans continued to suffer from low income, discrimination in employment and educational opportunities, and their inclusion in white neighbourhoods and institutions was still rejected by some conservative white groups (Reeves 242). Being dominated by poverty, disease, and crime, the ghettos remained a national disgrace to America. Though these ghettos continued to exist in America, the eighties witnessed a considerable improvement in the overall circumstances of the African American population. Some African Americans achieved remarkable success for themselves in business and others got important government positions. But this remained the exception not the rule. That is why violence remained a familiar occurrence in the seventies and the eighties. It was "a reminder that the nation had far to go before

racially integrated neighbourhoods would be a reality” (Moss, Jr. 472). Even those who succeeded in the business were mostly urged to establish their own companies after being obliged to depart other locations where people were not colour blind. Though Walker’s poetry of the time has broader concerns than her earlier poetry, race continues to be a main theme. She continues her call for a better future for African Americans in her poem “Solace” (1989): “a Fighter still, I will not cease to strive / and see beyond this thorny path a light” (193).

After long years of embracing the principles of self-sacrifice, humility, and maternity in the forties and the fifties, women decided to consider their conditions and position in American society. They were not taken on equal footing with their male counterparts in salaries and promotion opportunities. They ushered in the Women’s Liberation Movement that flourished in the seventies and the eighties. They rejected discrimination in jobs on the basis of sex and called for a full representation of women in employment. They also called for easier divorce laws, tougher rape and prostitution laws, child care centres, birth control clinics, legalization of abortion, criminalization of domestic violence, and other reforms in the legal system and the family structure to support women (Reeves 212-213). The movement grew stronger and feminists demonstrated everywhere in America and dominated the news. Feminists attempted to agree on common goals of equality in opportunities before the law and sexual freedom.

The first wave of the Women’s Liberation movement was in the nineteenth century when women called for their rights to vote, to work, and to be economically independent. They defied the patriarchal system that was based on stereotypical images of femininity and masculinity to define men’s and women’s roles in society. The second wave of the Women’s Movement started in 1963 with the publication of

Betty Friedan's *The Feminist Mystique*. Since then, the movement swept the country. It redefined the position of women in society, reshaped laws that govern the relationship between men and women, and undermined the inherited stereotypical image of women forever (Lazerow 99).

The sexual-economic relation that shaped the first wave of the movement led to the appearance of the second wave in the mid-1960s. The difference in salaries, the segregation in offices, and women's work in the professions and in the domestic sphere urged women to seek equality both at home and at work. However, their demands exceeded these limits. In the twentieth century women pursued a redefinition of themselves in their own terms. They wanted to have experiences of womanhood beyond that of wife and mother. They protested against all forms of harassment: physical, sexual, emotional, or economic. This is one of the new themes in Walker's poetry of the time. For example, "My Truth and My Flame" (1989) emphasizes black women's willingness to resist any form of oppression against women: "I rise with the tides of revolution / against the systems of oppression / that hammer me down" (158).

In the late seventies feminists started to research the buried and forgotten history of American women. Through letters, diaries, articles, and networking they tried to document that history and analyse it. A number of Walker's poems of that time are dedicated to African American female historical figures like "For Mary McLeod Bethune," "Harriet Tubman," and "Ballad For Phillis Wheatley" (1973). In this way, Walker highlights the existence of pioneering female figures in African Americans' history and literature. Actually, feminists tried to end women's silence and give them voice. They wanted to create a new history of women told by them not by men, whose point of view assumes women's passivity and inferiority.

The Women's Liberation Movement tried to approach women's concerns collectively. It perceived women as one oppressed group and assumed that all women shared the same concerns. White feminists were not aware of the racial differences that imposed different concerns and created the uniqueness of different women's experiences. Black Feminists were the first to pinpoint this drawback in the movement. In *Ain't I A Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* (1982), bell hooks criticizes white women for making their social status synonymous with black women's:

And it was in the context of endless comparisons of the plight of 'women' and 'blacks' that they revealed their racism. In most cases, this racism was an unconscious, unacknowledged aspect of their thought, suppressed by their narcissism- a narcissism which so blinded them that they would not admit two obvious facts: one, that in a capitalist, racist, imperialist state there is no one social status women share as a collective group; and second, that the social status of white women in America has never been like that of black women or men. (*Ain't I* 136)

White feminists were oblivious to the very fact that throughout American history black women have been oppressed by white women, white men, and black men.

Several poems by Walker celebrate African American women's strength and ability to survive. Black women's suffering differed from black men's and white women's. Walker is aware of this difference. In her poetry she talks about African American female domestic workers, prostitutes, and grandmothers. She is aware of the uniqueness of their experiences. Black feminists are aware that neither black men nor white women could speak on their behalf. According to Patricia Hill Collins, African American women are "outsiders within" because their dual marginalization

makes them able to move in both communities but with no access to the privileges of each group (*Fighting* 5). Collins uses this term to define “the location of people who no longer belongs to any one group” (5).

Black feminists refuse to be manipulated by either white women or black men. White women wanted them to neglect their racial difference for the sake of their gender identity. Black men took black women’s negligence of their private female issues for the sake of racial issues for granted. Black men argue that black women should support the whole race instead of pursuing gender equality, which might be a betrayal of the racial cause. hooks comments on black women’s position in both movements when she states that “sexism militates against the acknowledgement of the interests of black women ... and racism militates against recognition of black female interests” (*Ain’t I* 7). hook’s argument reflects the way black women found themselves in the margin of both the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Liberation Movement. White women’s and black men’s inability to understand the overlap between sexism and racism in African American women’s lives led to the emergence of black feminism.

This distinctive status of having a multi-layered oppressed identity makes race and sex interwoven together in the black female psyche. It becomes a challenge to feminism to show how economic and social oppression affect women differently on account of their race. In *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women’s writing* (1987), Jan Montefiore admits that challenge when she says; “it is true that white, middle-class feminists (including myself) did not begin to understand the complexity and bitterness of the experiences endured by our colonized, immigrant, black, mestiza, and coloured sisters until the latter started, often angrily, to challenge our ignorance” (196). She likens the position of white feminists to that

of the anti-imperialists like Frantz Fanon and Edward Said who did not consider women's oppression as a real problem either (196). Black women were invisible in both movements. That is why they wanted to have their own movement.

However, there have been debates at the same time about whether acknowledging differences between women strengthens or weakens the Women's Movement. For example, Imelda Whelehan views feminism's heterogeneity as a destructive element (127). On the contrary, Cora Kaplan regards it as a way of developing feminism through its own dialectic (6). She encourages dialectical debates among different categories of women, which will lead to new perspectives. The debate over the unity of feminism and the female experience remained a controversial issue. However, being different does not mean separate. Kimberle Crenshaw confirms that though black women often "experience double-discrimination," and sometimes they "experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences" (149). That is accurate as feminists from different races have a common goal, which is fighting oppression, regardless of its form, even if they differ in their racial concerns.

The seventies and the eighties witnessed an unprecedented torrent of writings by African American women in support of their cause. Black feminism aims at a clear and unique identification of African American women's history, experience, and literature. They are a united group of a social and political consciousness. They combine race and gender to understand their past and present suffering. Black feminist criticism has established a tradition and an aesthetic of its own. Critics like bell hooks, Gloria T. Hull, Angela Davis, and others have created a framework for black feminist thought. Writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, and many other black women writers have represented areas of black women's

experience as exclusively theirs. Establishing a shared history of struggle, a strong sense of community, the matriarchal heritage of endurance, the strength of oral history and inherited ethnic tradition, sisterhood, and journeying to freedom and self-definition are all common themes in black feminist theory. Walker's work too expresses these themes. African American women writers have given voice to their long suppressed suffering from being neglected and misunderstood by the American literary canon. They believe that if their "subordination – past and present – was secured at least in part by their invisibility, then emancipation might be advanced by making them visible in narratives of social struggle and political achievement" (Scott 2). Walker was a pioneer in doing that when she put a female character in the centre of her narrative in *Jubilee* in 1966. Black feminists concentrated on deconstructing the negative stereotypes circulated about black women as unfeminine, sexually promiscuous, and too strong to be raped, or being morally deviant. They developed their own agenda and worked on it feverishly.

Poetry was a remarkable genre for African American writers in the seventieth and the eighties. Prolific writers like Gwendolyn Brooks, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and many others established a new canon of African American women's poetry. They reflected on being black and female and how "the complexity and vitality of black female experience have been fundamentally ignored" (Hernton 139). They worked on sustaining their identity and dignity in a world that marginalized them. They viewed that world from a female perspective. Self identification, the quest for identity, the heritage of slavery, journeying in the internal collective psyche of black women, and understanding the self in collective terms and in relation to community are common themes in their poetry. Like them, Walker's poetry of the time celebrates slave women's strength, identifies with a matrilineal heritage, and

views oneself in communal terms. This poetry celebrates their blackness and their womanhood and affirms their being unique among other women. Survival with dignity is a recurring theme in the writings of all these poets and in Walker's poetry of the time too. They managed to establish a poetic tradition of their own, gain respect, and get access to publication.

Gwendolyn Brooks is one of the poets who reflect the spirit of the period in her poetry. Before that time, Brooks was an established poet. She had already published more than five volumes of poetry and a novel. All her publications received positive criticism and won distinguished literary awards. In the seventies and the eighties, she published more: nearly ten volumes of poetry and five prose works. The year 1967 marked a shift in her writing style to grasp the racial and the feminist heightened tone of the time. In a conversation with Claudia Tate, published in *Black Women Writers at Work* (1988), Brooks comments on that shift in women's protest tone and vision: "I cannot see us going back to the temper of the fifties. After what happened in the sixties, I just can't see us crawling. But I'm getting ahead of myself" (40). From the seventies and henceforth, Brooks started writing consciously as a black woman for black women, in black literary forms. A feminist tone became more obvious in her poems. She expresses women's rage and even celebrates its revolutionary power. In her *Primer For Blacks* (1980), Brooks supports the new concepts of "black is beautiful" and "look natural" that were common in the seventies and the eighties. Even her poetic form and style grew clearer in language and more direct. She comments on this shift in style as well: "This what I'm fighting for now in my work, for an expression relevant to all manner of blacks, poems I could take into a tavern, into the street, into the halls of a housing project" (44).

Though Walker maintains an accessible diction in her poetry, Brooks's remains much simpler.

Brooks's awareness of black feminism is evident in her poem "To Those of My Sisters Who Kept Their Naturals" from *Primer For Blacks*. This poem conveys several messages to black women. It urges them to love themselves and raise their self-esteem: "I love you because you love you" (120). It also urges all black women to be proud of their history and cultural heritage, which is reflected in their eyes: "Your eyes, loud-soft, with crying and / with smiles, / are older than a million years" (120). The poem also celebrates the black woman's beauty as equal to the white woman's: "You have not bought Blondine. / You have not hailed the hot-comb recently. / You never worshipped Marilyn Monroe. / You say: Farrah's hair is hers," the poem appreciates black women who "have not wanted to be white" (121). Brooks invokes both Farrah Fawcett and Marilyn Monroe as icons of the white, western ideal of beauty, which she rejects as superior to black women's beauty. Brooks calls for "the Real, / the Right. / The natural Respect of Self and Seal!" (121). Brooks's poem wants black women to be themselves and never embrace the American culture of imitation and falsification of identity and appearance. Brooks's speaker urges black women to refrain from attempting to satisfy white people or seek their approval by conforming to their norms of beauty and behaviour. She urges black women to be themselves and respect what they are. For Brooks, respecting the self is the way to gain others' respect.

Brooks's poetry of the 1970s and the 1980s expresses pride in African American women's beauty, history, and labour. Brooks lived among poor black people and often "witnessed a confused people, brainwashed, berated, and hating their skin colour" (Russell 61). Her engagement with the subject in her poems and

the straightforward message reflect her awareness of the troubled souls of ordinary black women. She wanted to reach out to them and console their hearts and help them regain their self-confidence. Racial pride, self-esteem, constructing new norms of beauty, deconstructing the white norms, and appreciating the black and the female are presented in her poems as means of healing black women's pain. Brooks urges all black women to fight denial by finding inner strength and mutual support among themselves. The poem reflects Brooks's sensitivity to black women's issues and shows her kinship to that oppressed and undermined community, which reflects the tone and the mood of the black feminist perspective of the seventies and the eighties.

Gwendolyn Brooks responded to the events of the Women's Liberation Movement by getting closer to the public: she read her poetry in taverns, cafes, bars, lounges, literary salons, and theatres. She also applied a simpler writing style than before to make her poetry accessible to common African Americans. Margaret Walker, her contemporary, responded to the activities of the 1970s and the 1980s by growing more active too. She became keen on writing and publishing more. From 1970 and until the end of her life in 1998, Walker kept herself busy writing. The seventies and the eighties witnessed unprecedented activity on Walker's part. Walker started publishing fervently from the age of fifty-five in a way that she had not done when she was much younger and healthier. She worked on several projects at the same time. From 1970, Walker published eight books of poetry and prose; four times what she had published before. These publications were interrupted by illness and exhaustion. When she died in 1998, she was still working on several other unfinished literary and critical projects including an autobiography. Her sudden activity exceeded merely writing; she gave speeches everywhere, had promotional tours for

her books, was interviewed regularly by young critics and researchers, and read her poetry in public.

Walker as a person and a writer is a good example for all feminist scholars to study to show the ordeal of the black woman writer. Joyce Pettis states that the long years that separated Walker's first two publications "exposes the complications common to a woman writer because of gender, employment, marriage, and motherhood" ("Margaret Walker: Black" 48). In *Silences* (1978), Tillie Olsen uses Walker as an example of the relationship between gender and the absence of writing by women writers. Walker's later public activity helped her survive the silence that plagued other women writers.

It seems that the Women's Movement energized Walker and she benefited from joining the new intellectual community of black women. Walker was moved by the activities of the time, which enlightened her about the negative implications of being a woman in American society. In an essay published in 1980, Walker states: "I think it took the women's movement to call my attention to cases of overt discrimination that hark back to my WPA days" (*On Being* 5). In the WPA, Walker used to get less payment than any male colleague doing the same job. Maryemma Graham provides one reason for Walker's late awareness of the gender barriers that faced her. Graham confirms that Walker's Southern upbringing helped her develop "the orientation that race was the major barrier to overcome in order to achieve success" ("I Want" 25). Another reason is the political atmosphere of Marxism in the 1930s and the 1940s that discouraged Walker from highlighting gender inequality in favour of class discrimination.

However, in the 1970s and 1980s, Walker's newly developed feminist consciousness made her reject male-dominated literature. She was encouraged by

Second Wave Feminists who took women writers seriously, celebrated their downgraded work, and understood the circumstances that affected their literary advancement. The movement inspired Walker to have a new sense of her worth as a writer. She wanted to prove herself able to contribute to the African American women's awakening and compensate for the long years she spent busy doing other things like teaching in universities and taking care of her family, which distracted her from her literary career.

Many reasons can be attributed to this sudden activity of a woman writer burdened with old age and illness. In her essay, "Willing to Pay the Price" (1969), she blames herself for not taking her writing career as seriously as should have:

One thing I always wanted to avoid was becoming a dilettante. I have always wanted to be a full-time writer. I have been instead a full-time teacher and nobody really writes effectively while teaching full time. Therefore, in one sense all my books are not written, and I am in that sense a failure, since I never sacrificed anything for writing. Rather, I sacrificed writing to have a family, to keep a job, to make a living. The best writers have given up everything for the sake of their art, and herein lies part of their success. Now as I face retirement from teaching, I look forward to full-time writing. It is a lifelong dream, but who know whether it will ever come true? Perhaps I am now too late. Have I really put first things first? (*How* 21)

This self-reflection stems from her feminist consciousness. Walker seeks reconciliation between her lost dream of being a prolific writer and the trap of economic and social obligations that consumed her life. She feared being like the dozen women writers she talks about in her essay "Rediscovering Women in the Mecca of the New Negro," which was written in the early 1970s. In this essay,

Walker laments the fact that nearly a dozen talented women writers of the Harlem Renaissance were overshadowed and obscured in the literary history of the movement.

In this essay Walker calls for the restoration of black women writers to their proper place in literary history. She presents a dozen black women writers who wrote in obscurity in the first half of the twentieth century (*How* 91-99). Walker questions the reasons these women were forgotten and overshadowed. This essay positions Walker as part of the canon of black feminists of the seventies and the eighties. Like them, she pursued the restoration of lost and forgotten literature by African American women writers; who have been undervalued. According to black feminists, the obscurity of the black women's tradition was intentional not accidental because suppressing the writings of any oppressed group make it easier for dominant group to rule (Collins, *Black* 5). Black men gave themselves the right to speak in the name of the whole race. Gradually black writing became represented through one point of view, which was male-biased. Walker wanted to save herself from the fate of oblivion that many other talented women writers faced. She felt that there were some elements in common between her and those writers, who were her seniors and contemporaries. That is why she started working ceaselessly on her writing to create a legacy of her own. She sought acknowledgement and remembrance.

Embracing black feminism in the seventies and the eighties, Walker decided to challenge the long tradition of black men's negative writing about black women. In 1988, Walker published her biography of Richard Wright, *Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius*. This book denotes Walker's desire to affirm black women and their right to have a critical viewpoint of their own. In her book on Wright, she is the first woman writer to dissect a male writer's psyche. In this book, Walker offers an

account of Wright's character and work. It seems that she wrote this book to assert her equality with Wright. She does not deconstruct his superiority, but her inferiority to him. This attitude has been prompted by her growing feminist consciousness. To some extent, she undermines the myth of his perfection and discloses the imperfections he strived to conceal, though she does not deny his genius as a writer and admits his talents. As a woman she gives herself the right to write about men as they do about women.

Walker gave herself the right to write about a highly respected male figure in both black and white literary circles like Wright. The book is a psychoanalytic reading of the writer and his work based on Walker's three-year friendship with him in the 1930s. She approaches the psycho-sexual aspect of his life and literature, describing Wright as a vulnerable and ambivalent man who behaves and writes through his anger. Walker means that Wright's writings are motivated by at the racial and sexual frustrations that he faced in his life. Walker views this anger as the most influential element of Wright, the man and the writer. Walker states that "he learned to mask his anger with a poker face, passively moving through situations that were tormenting and intolerable" (23). Walker considers his writing the only means through which Wright expressed that concealed anger. Walker also emphasizes the negative impact of poverty, the religious strictness, and the sexual repression his maternal grandmother imposed on him. She also confirms his latent anger at some black women's prostitution for white men, which he considered very demeaning to the whole race.

Walker expresses her anger at the fact that Wright stole her work and ideas. She dares to raise doubts over Wright's creativity and morality when she accuses him of exploiting people around him for the sake of his own interest. Walker portrays

Wright as a person whose “friends do not want to remember how he exploited them, how opportunistic and self-seeking, even self-serving, he seemed to be” and who was “always acting out what he called the ‘higher art of selfishness’” (10). Being one of those friends for three years, Walker seems to imply that she was exploited by him herself. She actually refers to this in an essay about him. She states that he took the plot of his *Native Son* (1940) from *Goose Island*, a novel she was writing in 1937 and did not publish because she considered it not good enough at that time (*How* 33-49). She emphasizes that “the first part of *Native Son* is a reflection of a sociological research that Wright got from” her (*Richard* 125). She intended to rewrite this novel and publish it, but died before managing to do that. It was actually one of the uncompleted projects that she worked on in the last decade of her life.

Walker felt that she had a role in his success as she states it: “I feel I had a part in the conception, organization, and realization of Wright’s most successful long work of fiction, *Native Son*” (121). Walker helped Wright with great devotion and gathered material for his novel. He wrote to her from New York requesting this help. She helped him in doing research for the novel. She also typed his first novella, *Lawd Today*, which was published in his first book, *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938). In fact, she revised the whole book with him before it went to print. Furthermore, Walker confirms that Wright’s most famous article “Blueprint for Negro Writing” is not his alone. According to Walker, he claimed that he wrote the article but it was the product of a group discussion of the South Side Writers Group (355-356). Walker’s comment about her unacknowledged input into Wright’s career proves how her growing feminist consciousness has helped her disclose a fact that undermines a male writer’s superiority.

Walker even broadens the realm of her authoritative writing to talk daringly about Wright's sexuality in this book. She probes his self-hating racial and sexual identity. She dismisses his reputation as a sexual maniac established by other biographers. She states that "Richard Wright was no ladies' man at all" (*Richard* 88). She proposes that all his "creative energy, which was mental and not physical, went into books and not sexual affairs" (88). Walker negates the claim that she was in love with Wright and implies that he was not physically attractive to women: "He gave the appearance of an almost effete, slightly effeminate personality. He had a pipsqueak voice, small and delicate hands and feet, smooth face with very light beard, and rather fastidious ways or mannerisms. Perhaps this is one of the answers to his problems with women" (88). She also refers to his homosexuality (143). Walker was the first to talk about Wright's homosexuality and it was like breaking a taboo. She ironically says: "When I read about Wright's passionate affairs and mistresses and how many women he jilted and disappointed, I think I must be reading some kind of fairy tale" (90). It is noticeable here that those memories were in Walker's mind since the 1930s, however, she was only encouraged to write about them in the 1980s, encouraged by the current feminist thought.

Walker undermines the myth that men are more in control than women. She deconstructs the brilliant image of a respected male figure like Wright and proves how he lacks clarity and control. According to her, Wright was an ambivalent man who talked to men and women differently. She says; "I do not know who he hated most: homosexuals, heterosexuals, or bisexuals ... Sometimes I am sure he hated his own black self" (*Richard* 91). He read and researched Freud and Jung to understand his own troubled psyche. He was "interested in some self-analysis and introspection without being too honest about what face he consciously put on his unconscious"

(95). Confusion, vagueness, ambivalence, and lack of control have always been attributed to women. Now, Walker attributes these qualities to a male figure like Wright, deconstructing the patriarchal dichotomy of men's reason and women's passion. Furthermore, she attributes the failure of his two marriages to this troubled psychosexual identity and confused view of women. For him, "a woman was an enemy, who failed to give him love and happiness by frustrating him in his search for meaning and success" (107). This disturbed relationship with women is obvious in his negative treatment of women, black and white in his fiction. Walker defends women and proves that the real problem was in Wright not in his partners.

Walker asserts that she was not motivated to write this book by being rejected by Wright or by being an unrequited lover. She says that the book is not retaliation against him. She confirms that "there was never any question of marriage or intimate physical relationship" between them (*Richard* 311). She describes their relationship as platonic, political, intellectual, and literary. Walker strived to convince their mutual friends that she and Wright were just friends but in vain. She concludes that the "American society is too sexist to allow a genuine friendship between a man and a woman" (311). It seems that she attacks men's ego and narcissism, which make them overestimate their physical attraction to women.

Walker's feminist consciousness helped her perceive Wright's Southern stereotypical view of black women. She knew very well that if he intended to marry, it would be to a white woman, which he later did twice (*Richard* 89). He expressed his opinion on black women when he told her that "black women don't do anything but pull you down when you're trying to get up" (89). She rejected that view at that time and asked him not to talk about black women that way because she, a black woman, was helping him all the time and was not pulling him down at all (90). So,

her book might be retaliation for all black women if not for herself. Walker analyses Wright's hatred of black women as a mixture of inferiority, self-hatred, and the influence of the stereotypes he adopted from his childhood in the South: "He believed that black women were easy prey to white men, not loyal to their black men, and capable of a blind animal sexuality" (163). This is an example of the way some black men assimilated racist and sexist views of black women.

The book signals a change brought about by the Women's Movement in Walker's writing during that time. She wanted to be seen as a writer in her own right able to challenge male supremacy. Walker's persistence and perseverance in the struggle to establish her own legacy before her life came to an end gave her the strength to continue the project of her biography of Wright in spite of difficulties. She wrote it against the wishes of his widow who feared what Walker might know and put on paper about her marital life and her deceased husband's sexual tendencies. Mrs. Wright took Walker to the court to stop her using letters he had written to her during their friendship in the 1930s. Walker won this case, though she lost another one with Alex Haley, whom she accused of plagiarism for stealing parts of her novel and using them in his *Roots* (1977).

Walker's feminist consciousness helped her go through the fire of these lawsuits challenging the male-dominated literary circles, claiming her right to question these men's greatness. As she blames herself for being distracted from writing, Walker also blames the circumstances that make it easier for men to win fame and acknowledgement. She describes this situation of woman writers in the following lines:

All through the ages, women have been writing and publishing, black and white in America and all over the world. A few women stand as geniuses of

their times, but those are all too few. Even the women who survived and are printed, published, taught, and studied in the classroom, fall victim to negative male literary criticism. Black women suffer damages at the hands of every male literary critic, whether he is black or white. Occasionally, a man grudgingly admits that some woman writes well, but only rarely. (*On Being* 6)

It is noticeable here how Walker's awareness of the patriarchal forces that oppress women and women writers in particular grows out of her new feminist consciousness. Walker develops a desire to challenge these forces and their attendant literary double standards.

Walker became more aware of the effects of patriarchal and racial discrimination directly in her own life. She experienced the gender bias of American society herself. Walker remembers: "in every case where I have attempted a contribution and succeeded, I have immediately been replaced by a man ... Had I been a man, no one would have dared move me around like that" (29). She started to talk about how she was insecure in her work just because of her sex, which she had not talked about before. She used to be replaced by men of no superior qualifications or training. Like all the educated women in her family, her mother and sister she strived to make a living and to be taken seriously on the basis of her qualifications not her sex. Her essay "Black Women in Academia," which was written in 1972, presents a forceful critique of the male-dominated black colleges in America, where she used to be overworked and underpaid (*How* 26-32). Walker became more conscious of past and present manifestations of gender bias in her life. To assess how far this feminist consciousness is reflected in her poetry of the 1970s and the 1980s, it is important to have a closer look at some of this poetry.

Walker's feminist consciousness emerges increasingly in her work throughout the 1970s and 1980s. These years mark a gradual development of Walker's feminist themes in four volumes of poetry. *Prophets for a New Day*, *October Journey*, *This Is My Century*, and *Farish Street* are replete with various feminist themes. The theme of journeying in time, place, and in the human psyche is obvious in various poems like "October Journey" and "The Labyrinth of Life." The importance of mothers and grandmothers is highly stressed in most of the poems. Women's effect on men's lives is a source of Walker's pride in several poems. The strength of the woman figure is also celebrated over different periods of time past and present. The woman figure plays different roles in these poems: grandmother, mother, wife, daughter, young girl, and lover. The slave, the folk figure, the abolitionist, the educator, the intellectual, and the poet are all side by side in these poems.

These volumes are mostly written in free verse. However, other forms like the epic, the ballad, the elegy, the hymen, and the sonnet are there. This proves that Walker is skilful enough to use various poetic forms and using free verse is a matter of selection of what suits her thoughts. The poetic form is variably divided between the European tradition and the African American poetic forms, which is in itself a challenge to both white and black male poets, who consider poetry their genre. Walker also mingles the traditional standard language with some African American slang and folk African terms. The tone in these four volumes of poetry reflects the difference in the political and the social atmosphere between the seventies and the eighties and earlier decades. It shows stronger protest and tendency to be counter-mainstream thought. This reflects Walker's ability to echo changes in each period of time and reflect it in her writing.

As for the language of the poetry, it is typically Walker's writing style. It maintains its vital elements: refrain, syntactic repetition, internal rhyme, and alliteration. She does not experiment with language like other poets of the time like Sonia Sanchez or Nikki Giovanni. Walker managed to adapt to the late twentieth century protest spirit, however, she continued to use her earlier verse style. She did not like postmodernists, who said that language is everything. Postmodernist writers enhanced obscurity and fragmentation of meaning and urged readers to seek meanings on their own. Postmodern writings tended to defy shape, harmony, and organic unity. They undermined univocal reference and made meanings implied in words. Walker said to Joanne Gabbin, "I am still a student of the old school ... I believe you have to tell a story" (*Conversations* 179). Thus Walker reflected on common themes of the time without changing her writing style.

The organic unity in these volumes is very obvious. Titles are in harmony with the contents. The sequence of the volumes as they appear in *This Is My Century: New and Collected poems* is very significant. Eleanor Traylor considers the book a record of a lifetime's poetic vocation and "a poetic biography of the twentieth century refracted through the lens of the poet's community of memory" (117). Walker's voice makes the experience of a marginalized culture intelligible. It gives order and meaning to the fragments of this culture. In this phase of Walker's writing career, she seems stronger, more daring, and more experienced. This marks a shift from her earlier tendency to show compromise and complacency towards gender issues. However, her later poetry shows more interest in women's concerns and social position.

Prophets For A New Day (1970) was written in the 1960s and was inspired by their events. It is a historical record of the decade: the marches, the

demonstrations, the strikes, and the assassinations. In this volume, Walker mythologizes several Civil Rights figures. However, Walker affirms the role of women in this struggle. For the first time in her poetry, she specifies poems for female figures participating in the struggle for Civil Rights. Female activists become visible and identifiable side by side with men in the movement. In her earlier poetry, Walker used to use the word “men” to stand for the whole race. She continues this use of the word in this volume but not in all poems. Six exemplary poems in this volume will be discussed to show the development of Walker’s feminist consciousness. These six poems stress women’s voice and address issues related specifically to women.

The theme of women’s political activity and participation in the Civil Rights Movement is addressed in two poems of this volume: “Street Demonstrations” and “Girl Held Without Bail.” “Street Demonstrations” marks the beginning of Walker’s identification of women as contributors to African Americans’ struggle for racial equality rather than subverting them in earlier poems. It is about a young girl’s desire to go to jail with other Civil Rights demonstrators. It has the subtitle, “*Hurry up Lucille or we won’t get arrested with our group*” in italics. It also concludes with other two italicized lines: “*Hurry up, Lucille, Hurry up / We are going to Miss Our Chance to go to Jail*” (55). The voice of the poem is that of an eight years old girl demonstrating against racial discrimination in 1963. This girl stands for the future generation of rebellious women who will refuse to compromise. The italicization of the lines and the capitalization of some words indicate the strength of the will of the female rebellion to come.

Going to jail seems to be a celebratory experience for this young girl: “We’ll sing and shout and pray / For Freedom and for Justice / And for Human Dignity”

(55). She is even ready to die for this noble fight to contribute to the making of a better future for her generation and other generations to come: “The Fighting may be long / And some of us will die / But Liberty is costly.” This shows how women are no less than men in their faithfulness to issues of race. It also suggests their contributions merit being more visible in the Civil Rights Movement. bell hooks critically affirms that “As black men advanced in all spheres of American life, they encouraged black women to assume a more subservient role” (*Ain't I* 4). Challenging this sexist attitude, this poem highlights women’s role. The poem reflects Walker’s awareness of how generations differ in their strength and protest spirit. She is fully cognizant of the fact that the rhythm of resisting racism and sexism will be heightened generation after generation. The one to come will be more daring than the present one. Walker never presented women as agents of change in her earlier poetry. This is a new feature in her poetry, which affirms the growth of her feminist consciousness.

The rhythm of the poem is joyful to convey women’s eagerness to be politically active. The repetition of the verb “hoping” twice in the poem confirms this feeling and the gerund form implies continuity of this hope. Walker adds emphasis to the words expressing the things hoped for by using capital letters like: “Freedom,” “Justice,” “Human Dignity,” and “Liberty.” This emphasis is also achieved through the use of the envelope technique that Walker concludes the poem with the same phrase “*Hurry up Lucille.*” Joyce Pettis views the poem as an indication of “the countless numbers of jailed civil rights advocates” (“Margaret Walker: Black” 52). That is suggested in the poem through the phrase “*with our group,*” which indicates that Civil Rights prisoners were taken to jail in groups

“Girl Held Without Bail” is a similar poem about a female protestor’s desire to go to jail to be with other female demonstrators. Her militant soul overcomes the principles of reconciliation in her protest to avoid punishment. A female free soul rejecting “any unjust state:” choosing either justice or jail because as Walker says in the epigraph of the poem: “*In an unjust state the only place / for a just man is in jail*” (56). This poem offers a new definition of freedom: freedom of the heart in spite of physical imprisonment. Though Walker uses the word “man” to stand for both men and women in the epigraph, the poem itself is specifically about women Civil Rights activists. It “creates a female community within the jail” (Gwin, “The Intricate” 73). That female community is a source of satisfaction for the speaker in the poem even in a so confined place like prison. It constructs a sense of sisterhood and a unified resistant female voice:

I like it here just fine
And I don’t want no bail
My sister’s here
My mother’s here
And all my girl friends too. (56)

This community calls for black women’s right to be “like *anybody* else” and to be treated “Just like *everybody* else” (56). The words “anybody” and “everybody” suggest a call for both racial and gender equality. The words equally suggest that the speaker in the poem wants to be treated like both white women and black men. This shows Walker’s awareness of the tenet of Black Feminism that black women’s oppression is not like white women’s because it is doubled. bell hooks confirms that: “it is obvious that the two forces, sexism and racism, intensified and magnified the sufferings and oppressions of black women” (*Ain’t I* 22). The emphasis added by

italicizing these words shows that the speaker's desire to attain racial and/or gender equality is prominent that she is ready to fight for: "I want my rights / I'm fighting for my rights" (56). The poem highlights the role played by women in social and political activism, which shows the influence of Women's Movement on Walker.

However, the fact that the jail is run by men suggests that freedom is still limited. This small women's community is under the control of a male prison guard. It seems that the freedom celebrated by the poem is circumscribed. Yet, there is still hope to overcome limits one day as she says in the previous poem: "And ROME they say to me / Was not built in one day" (55). This hope can also be read in the poem's challenge to the authority of this male prison guard. Noticeably, the jail is where these female prisoners should be disciplined and controlled. Nevertheless, they even deconstruct this traditional perception and transform the jail to a site of further resistance. Exactly like the previous poem, this one employs certain techniques for emphasis on this resistance: the envelope, the anaphora, and the epiphora. Refrain is also used in the poem for further emphasis in the repetition of the epigraph in the last two lines of the poem.

In "Now," black women's domestic servitude is the subject. This is a core theme in black feminist thought. Black women servants used to be viewed as mules. Patricia Hill Collins states that, "as dehumanized objects, mules are living machines and can be treated as part of the scenery. Fully human women are less easily exploited" (*Black* 43). The poem addresses this perception of black women servants and the way white men undermined the dignity and integrity of the black woman. They depersonalized her and made her invisible in the web of stereotypical depictions of the "nigger girl, and girlie! / Auntie, Ant, and Granny" (57). Walker views these women in a different way:

My old mammy was a wonder
and I love those dear old darkies
who were good and servile nigras
with their kerchiefed heads and faces
in their sweet and menial places. (57)

Out of a strong black feminist consciousness, Walker challenges these controlling images. She is proud of her female ancestors and celebrates their history of toil and humiliation as something worthy of respect. Walker celebrates their survival in the face of oppression and its bruises, which makes them “a wonder.”

Additionally, Walker presents these exploited black women as a positive antithesis to the cruelty and the inhumanity of their white oppressors. The oppressor’s “white” blood is linked to the whiteness of the gowns of the Ku Klux Klan. Walker questions ideas of superiority, purity, and whiteness. The KKK, whose members are white males represent violence and hatred: “mobs who mass / with a priest of cult and klan / robed and masked in purest White / marking Kleagle with a Klux” (57-58). The poem deconstructs the superiority of the whiteness and the maleness of the oppressor and constructs African American womanhood as a noble substitute. Though the oppressor is white and is dressed in “purest white,” his heart is not white at all: “Feeling hate and blood comingled / in a savage supplication / full of rites and ceremonies.” On the contrary, black women are “servile” but “good” and their places are “menial” but “sweet” (57). Here, Walker links white people’s “hatred” to “savagery,” which they claimed to be pertinent to black people in Africa. This reversal adds more to the deconstruction of the superiority of the white race.

This poem sheds light on the difference in tradition between the white and the black American women, about which Walker talked in an interview with Lucy M.

Freibert in 1986. Unlike white women, who used to talk about marriage as a way of being kept women, black women had no “conflict between marriage and career that white women have” as “slaves used to work, tradition is different” (*Conversations* 107). Walker’s poem emphasizes this difference in the imperatives of the Women’s Movement for black and white women. That fact heightened Women’s suffering from oppression. Angela Davis comments that “since Black women as workers could not be treated as the “weak sex” or the “housewife,” Black men could not be candidates for the figure of “family head” and certainly not for the “family provider” (8). They were obliged to work both inside and outside their homes, it was not a matter of choice. That is why Walker’s poem stresses the invisible dimension of women’s suffering from white men’s racism and sexism: “inner rooms of thinking” and “covert skin of suffering” (57). The word “skin” emphasizes the relation between this suffering and black women’s skin colour, which is a major dimension differentiating white and black feminists.

The poem sheds light on black women’s suffering, which is an essential part of black feminism. Before black feminist thinkers identify the uniqueness of black women’s oppression, it was considered as a subsidiary issue by black men. hooks confirms that when she says: “That the black woman was victimized by sexist and racist oppression was seen as insignificant” (*Ain’t I* 6). Out of a growing awareness of black feminism, Walker gives priority to women’s pain in this poem. She expresses her impatience to free black women from their long suffering: “Time to wipe the slime / from inner rooms of thinking, / and covert skin of suffering.” Walker undermines their silent suffering and voices these women’s unvoiced “inner” and “covert” suffering. Minrose C. Gwin reads the poem as a manifestation of how black women are “the focus of white racism” (“The Intricate” 73). That is not all as “Now”

depicts other “outer” and “overt” forms of oppression that all black people face: “the back doors and dark alleys,” “the cleaning rooms and closets,” and “the washrooms and the filthy / privies marked “For Colored Only”” (57). The ending rhyme between “filthy” and “only” confirms the relationship between them: only black people get filthy things. That suggests that black people are the most disadvantaged group in American society.

Walker’s challenge of the superiority and purity of the white race in “Now” extends to “Oxford Is a Legend.” In this poem, Walker undermines white male history further. Here Walker targets a specific person to stand for this history: William Faulkner. The poem refers to his infamous statement that he later renounced, about his readiness to defend Mississippi against the United States “even if it meant going out into the street and shooting Negroes” (Peavy 70). Walker attacks Faulkner on account of this statement. Minrose C. Gwin considers the poem a tearing down of “a racist discourse and racist structure” (“The Intricate” 74). Actually, Walker’s poem does more than that, it ironically comments on Faulkner and his statement:

And a place in Yoknapatawpha
Too bad the old man from Jefferson County
Died before he saw the fighting in his streets
Before he had to bear arms for Mississippi
And shoot the Negroes in the streets.

The poem refers to Faulkner as “the old man from Jefferson County,” which is demeaning to be used with a famous and prestigious person like Faulkner. The poem deconstructs this importance by considering him as an anonymous person. Furthermore, there is an ironic tone implied in the expression of pity “Too bad ...

Died before.” The speaker in the poem is joyful for the fact that Faulkner died before putting his words into action.

Walker denounces Faulkner’s position as something from the past. For her, “all the bygone years of chivalry and poetry and crinoline / Are dead” (64). This is another irony contributing to the speaker’s joy and Walker’s deconstruction of white traditions. This European chivalry is replaced in the last stanza of the poem by black people’s battles for Civil Rights. Moreover, Faulkner as a symbol of the white South is replaced by “the figure of one brave ironic, bright, grim smile / Smile of a black American” (64). Walker refers here to James Meredith, the first African American student in the University of Mississippi. The fact that Walker’s poem challenges a white male and glorifies a black man, deconstructs some black men’s claim that black women deteriorate black men as Richard Wright once said to Walker. Frances Beale supports that view when she says: “It is a gross distortion of fact to state that Black women have oppressed Black men” (92). Black feminists’ racial concern is the main cause that led them to be independent from white feminists. This proves that black women never betrayed the cause of race.

Walker’s sense of belonging to a long line of female sowers is expressed in “Jackson, Mississippi.” This poem echoes “Lineage,” a previous poem from *For My People*. In “Lineage” grandmothers “followed plowes and bent to toil” and “moved through fields sowing seeds” (21). However, in “Jackson, Mississippi” Walker “planted seeds of dreams and visions and prophecies” and “fantasies of freedom and of pride” (62-63). There is an important distinction between the two poems, which marks the influence of feminism on Walker. In “Lineage,” Walker’s grandmothers are oppressed by work, they are “bent,” implying the burden of work and they “toil,” which stresses the nature of their exhaustive work. However, in “Jackson

Mississippi,” the act of sowing is more positive, it concerns freedom rather than oppression. This change in attitude towards grandmothers’ toil is an obvious example of the influence of feminism on Walker’s thought in the 1970s.

Unlike “Lineage,” sowing here is related to “freedom and pride” rather than servility and humiliation. The speaker in the poem links today’s women’s intellectual toil for “freedom and pride” to their maternal ancestors’ physical toil: “Here lie centuries of my eyes and my brains and my / hands” (63). The employment of the synecdoche here in mentioning the “hand” to stand for the grandmothers and the “brains” to stand for the speaker puts emphasis on the value of the work done by the “hands” or the “brains.” The word “eyes” is common between the grandmothers’ and the granddaughters’; both were eye-witnesses if not victims of women’s oppression. This overlap between grandmothers and granddaughter is also suggested in the last stanza of the poem in which Walker links African Americans work as grannies helping with physical birth and the granddaughters work on intellectual feeding: “The birthing stools of grannies long since fled. / Here are echoes of my laughing children / And hungry minds of pupils to be fed” (63). This link conveys appreciation of grandmothers’ work as midwives, which is no less in value than granddaughters’ work as teachers. There is even an implication that the two professions are complementary to each other: grannies bring children to life and teachers feed them educationally. Noticeably, the speaker in the poem represents female agency: “I have planted” and “I give you” (62-63). She is also a voice of protest in the name of immediate generations and dead ones: “Of my lips and strident demands, / The graves of my dead” (63). This agency is new to Walker’s female poetic personas; which is missing in *For My People*.

Furthermore, the act of sowing is literal in the first poem and metaphorical in the second, which signifies progress in black women's work conditions. This is also an aspect of black feminism, in which a link with the past suffering helps black women anticipate a better future. Minrose Gwin views this poem as an attempt to "express her vision of teaching and writing in images of maternal nurturance" ("The Intricate" 75). In "Lineage," Walker laments herself for not being as strong as her grandmothers: "My grandmothers were strong. / Why am I not as they?" In "Jackson, Mississippi", she seems to repeat the question and feel herself as strong as they were. Walker is closer to black feminists' view of their struggle for better conditions for black women in the light of a matrilineal tradition. Walker wrote this poem at the age of fifty-five. She had already strived to make a living, a family, and a tradition. She had toiled physically and intellectually. It took years of toil to be as strong as her grandmothers and to identify herself with them. Of course, the major theme in this poem is racial, Yet, there is a newly developed focus on the uniqueness of black women's experience.

"Ballad of the Hoppy Toad" is a folk poem, which empowers women on a mythical level. Contrary to Walker's earlier folk poems in *For My People*, this poem expresses women's agency. The poem's protagonist falls victim to an evil spell cast upon her by the "goopher man" or "the root worker." The protagonist is a woman who seeks another woman's assistance, the conjure woman. Walker's earlier folk poems celebrate male strength and dominance and debase women. However, this later poem gives voice to women's complaints of male attack: "Was the night I seen the goopher man / Throw dust around my door" (84). It also expresses sisterhood and women's support to each other: "I run down to Sis Avery's / And told her what I seen" (84). Sis Avery confidently says to the poem's protagonist: "Now honey go on

back / I know just what will hex him / And that old goopher sack.” Sis Avery is powerful enough to combat the evil “goopher man” and win: “she knows what will hex him” (84). She reverses the spell against him and he falls victim to his own evil. This is a metaphor of women’s revenge and men’s defeat. This poem clearly shows the development of Walker’s feminist consciousness.

The conjure woman in black women’s writing used to be a symbol of self-defence and revenge. Marjorie Pryse argues that conjuring in African American women literature is a means of empowering women that they can “reassert the self and one’s heritage in the face of overwhelming injustice” (16). Walker’s poem uses it for similar purposes. The poem’s protagonist seeks the conjure woman’s help only for self-defence and not for hurting others: “Don’t want to burn his picture / Don’t want to dig his grave / just want to have my peace of mind / And make this dog behave” (85). The “goopher man” has initiated violence against a kind woman and thus he deserves punishment: “The goopher man was hollering / ‘Don’t kill the hoppy-toad.’ / Sis Avery she said ‘Honey, / You bout to lose your load.’” Sis Avery uses her manipulative power to belittle “the hoppy-toad:” “Begun to sweat and shrink. / He shrunk up to a teeny horse / He shrunk to a toad” (86). This shrinking is a symbol of the gradual reduction of male authority for the sake of women. Noticeably the poem is written in the folk ballad form, whose fixed rhyme and line scheme make it difficult to adapt or change in. This suggests that Walker chose this form to keep this poem in readers’ minds to memorize this form of women’s victory.

In *October Journey* (1973), the undercurrent of feminist concerns such as the role of African American women in their families, celebrating African American women writers, and the lack of opportunities available for women is growing stronger. The volume is partially a work of personal contemplation. The title poem,

“October Journey” draws an analogy between the natural cycle of life and the poet’s personal life. The contemplative mood of this poem haunts other poems in the volume. Walker contemplates her life and remembers men and women who influenced her and admits their favour: “One taught me love, another taught me truth / and one of them brought bitterness and truth / But all of them inspired my life to be / a charging promise ringed with rhapsody” (112). Walker writes about women like Harriet Tubman, Mary McLeod Bethune, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Phyllis Wheatley. Furthermore, the poems about men celebrate the role of women in their lives.

“October Journey” is an introspective poem. The poet contemplates her life from childhood to the present day of the poem. Approaching her sixties, Walker seems to feel her life closer to an end. The poem is a journey Southward to the home land and a journey through the poet’s memories. Walker likens her own aging to that of nature. She remembers her childhood and its fresh dreams and later several disappointments; the dreams, which used to “appear and disappear” (93). This articulates her desire to see herself in print “appear” and her fear to be forgotten as a writer “disappear.” The poem signifies Walker’s frustration at her inability to fully achieve her own dreams. In the autumn years of her life, she feels that “the promise of a sun-lit hour dies” (93). It is no more possible as it was before. Walker has never confessed her frustrations and disappointments before; she used to claim herself a fully fulfilled woman. However, this poem proves these claims false.

Walker’s pride prevents her from showing her grief as she says, “tears of grief I cannot shed” (93). She laments the end of her youth and the end of her time in this life as “the clock runs down” (93). However, the poem conveys that there is still hope. The poem implies the existence of hope in this autumn journey, because October journeys “are safest, brightest, and best” (91). The poem renews the dream

of self-fulfilment and emphasizes the positive aspects of journeying in life and in nature even if the opportune times are over. The poet, armed with the maturity of her long experience in life, is still able to see that all her unfulfilled dreams are possible. Now, the traveller southward to the homeland is able to “avoid the dangerous summer nights” and “the heavy tempting hours of spring” (91). Walker likens her old age to autumn, middle-age to summer, and youth to spring. This suggests that her “October Journey” or metaphorically journeying in life when old is less risky: no “dangerous nights” or “tempting hours.” Her experience will protect her from unrewarding adventures. The “dangerous summer nights” might stand for her involvement in law cases with Alex Haley and Mrs. Wright in middle age. “The heavy tempting hours of spring” can also be taken as a reference to her relationship with Richard Wright in her youth. Walker juxtaposes the elements of the natural cycle of life with her own being and movement in time and space. The change of nature in the fall echoes the change of the traveller’s memory and psyche.

This merging between self and nature is a long tradition of almost all women poets. In feminist terms, association between women and nature is a problematic issue. Male critics and patriarchal writings used to associate women with nature as an antithesis of men’s association with culture. According to eco-feminists both women and nature have no control over their bodies. Val Plumwood states that “The very idea of a feminine connection with nature seems to many to be regressive and insulting, summoning up images of women as earth mothers, as passive, reproductive animals, contented cows immersed in the body and in the unreflective experiencing of life” (20). Walker challenges this negative association. In this poem, the cycle of nature is paralleled with human growth from childhood to older age and wisdom. Additionally, the change of nature from one season to another is not linked to

women's change of temper but to deliberateness and a contemplative mood. Walker associates herself with nature in positive terms. Thus, she deconstructs patriarchal classifications that link women to nature in the sense that nature is related to disorder and chaos. Walker deconstructs this sexist perspective and emphasizes her relation to nature in the sense that nature in its accurate sequence of seasons and day and night is a symbol of order rather than disorder.

"Epithet For My Father" presents another perspective of Walker's developing feminist consciousness. It is a tribute to her father and his personal traits and struggle in life. She talks about him as a Caribbean migrant to America during the Jim Crow years. Some parts of the poem have feminist connotations. The poem shows great respect to the mother figure, Walker's parental grandmother. The mother embodies some important values: home, family, support, and wisdom. These same traits are celebrated in another woman, his wife. Walker's mother is another supportive, caring, loving, and wise woman in her father's life. Her ability to economize and her patience make dreams come true and help the family stay respectable and proud in the face of poverty and racial discrimination in America.

The poem emphasizes the strength and the endurance of the African American mother. The prevalence of mothers and grandmothers is a new feature of Walker's poetry of the period, which reflects the impact of feminism on her work. Mothers do not appear in *For My People* except once. In "Delta," Walker refers to them as part of women's subjugation: "and our sister who is ravished / and our mother who is starving" (17). Grandmothers appear once in "Lineage," in which "they are bent to toil" (21). However, in "Epithet For My Father," Walker's mother is given full agency. She is also given full credit for her efforts to help her family. Walker's mother used to work relentlessly to support the family and nurture the

children. As Walker says, “At first my mother was a wraith, / A frail and a walking ghost with babies in her arms / And many nights I dreamed that she would die” (104). This self-sacrifice, by exhausting herself with her children to the limit of being close to death, makes this mother a heroic figure. As the title of the poem indicates, Walker’s primary intention was to make her father the focus of the poem. However, the greatness of his mother and wife makes it impossible to see him without them. The poem emphasizes the importance of African American women at their homes, which go “Fillymanew” without them. This meaningless word signifies the meaninglessness of the family without the mother. Walker possibly presents her father as an example of all African American men, in whose lives the supportive woman figure never disappears. It is always there: either a mother or a wife. The poem implies that her father’s success is indebted to women in his life.

Minrose C. Gwin considers another line of thought in the poem, which is Walker’s “inability to construct boundaries between herself and others, marking that inability as a female characteristic that separates her from her father. The poem reveals her mixed feelings at being unable to define her own consciousness as separate from others” (“The Intricate” 71). This interior conflict is obvious in the following lines:

If I had been a man
I might have followed in his every step,
Had preached from pulpits, found my life as his
And wandered too, as he, an alien on the earth,
But female and feline I could not stand
Alone through love and hate and truth
And still remain my own. He was himself;

His own man all his life.

And I belong to all the people I have met,

Am part of them, am molded by the throng

Caught in the tide of compromise, and grown

Chameleon for Camouflage. (105)

These lines suggest that the poem is about the lack of opportunities open to her as a woman compared to those enjoyed by her father. As a woman she was obliged to meet others' expectations and protect herself by growing "chameleon for camouflage." Walker likens the social obligations that make her compromise to that of the Chameleon's camouflage. Her being a woman makes her unable to be herself all the time or show her real feelings at any time. The alliteration between "Caught," "compromise," "Chameleon," "camouflage" emphasizes the link between the four words. They all connote the social pressure on Walker as a woman. The alliteration between "female" and "feline" also suggests the link in meaning. The feline is usually used as a metaphor for women in either stealth or grace. The use of the word "Chameleon" suggests that Walker likens herself to the feline's stealth. As a woman, she is supposed to be cautious and watch her steps; she is not able to move freely as her father who "wandered." The use of the word "But" also signifies the contradiction between her father's free movement and her feline-like steps.

Walker explores the role of black women in their families further in another poem, "A Litany of Black History For Black People" (1989) from *This Is My Century*. The poem might sound like a celebration of black men's endurance. However, Walker's perceptive eye sees the ones to whom they owe this endurance, their women:

For all our noble heritage:

The brave enduring men;
For those whose hands upheld them,
Courageous now as then:
The women who were mothers,
The wives and barren kin. (149)

This poem echoes “Epithet For My Father” but has a broader focus. Walker highlights women’s invisibility and considers it more important than men’s visibility. Men are belittled beside these women in this poem. Walker considers the achievements of those men so humble compared to women’s achievement of making the men themselves. The poem is like a song as it employs the chorus to repeat variations of four-line praise to God. Each of these variations conclude with a claim of possession of the twentieth century for African Americans: “We hail this century,” “We take this century,” “We own this century,” “We claim this century” (149-150). Yet, those who claim the century as theirs are made by their “mothers,” “wives,” and even their “barren kin.” That suggest that this century belongs to African American women even those who are “barren” and cannot bear children have contributed to the making of African American youth and the whole century, this is a possible reference to surrogate mothers.

Noticeably, the poem’s tone is assertive. Walker’s poetic voice is authoritative and determined to claim this century to African Americans and the women who made them. In religious terms, Yolanda Pierce comments that the litany is “usually a prayer of supplication, consisting of requests from the petitioners to God,” however, “Walker provides neither requests nor supplications, but a sacred chastisement of the moral wrongs of slavery ... forced racial segregation, and

racism” (236). Walker revises such a religious form to give her speaker’s voice a divine-like authority, which is indicative of her sense of agency.

“For Gwen, 1969” (1973) from *October Journey* is a tribute to Gwendolyn Brooks, Walker’s closest contemporary. Walker celebrates Brooks’s power and success as a woman who “witnesses rebellion, struggle and sweat” (114). Walker appreciates Brooks’s courage that made “all her black words of fire and blood.” Her words are “a power in the Ebon land” (114). Here, Walker admires Brooks as an example of the successful African American woman. The poem is a tribute to the “dreamer and seer of tales” that shared the struggle and echoed the agonies of her time (114).

In this volume Walker does not only commemorate the achievements of her contemporaries but also her maternal forebears, an example can be found in “Ballad for Phillis Wheatley.” Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784) is a woman of an early contribution, whose experience stands for African American women’s endurance and creativity. “Ballad for Phillis Wheatley” honours the efforts of the mother of African American women’s poetry. The poem is touching and expresses compassion for Wheatley, a “Pretty little black girl / standing on the block, / how have you withstood this shame, / bearing all this shock” (122)? The poem goes on commemorating her early childhood experience of suffering under slavery: “weathering trip,” “riding on the striking ship,” “caught and kidnapped far away,” and “bereft of mother, / father stricken so” (122). Wheatley is too young to suffer: “This little Phillis / shedding two front teeth. / This is little Phillis, / caught and torn beneath” (122). The young girl is stricken by her being departed from her family and her sunny homeland to be taken to the cold and rainy Boston, “where faces pale and men with whips, / danger always there” (123). This cruel early encounter with the realities of life later created the first

African American poet ever. The two poems establishes a tradition of African American women writers and thinkers. From present to past, Walker follows the roots of this heritage and celebrates it as heroic.

Farish Street (1986) is a seven poem collection which stresses the idea that black women are the real makers of America. Walker was commissioned to write these poems in honour of Jackson's historic black district. Walker spent half of her life in Jackson, Mississippi, where she taught in Jackson State University. Florence Howe says that the poems in this volume "focus with camera-like intensity on the southern street" (189). These poems commemorate a specific black district, but they can represent similar locations all over America. The geographic, the demographic, and the cultural structure are quite the same. In these poems, Walker talks about all the components of the typical black district: the history of its buildings, the visible African heritage, miseries of people's daily lives, and the house of prayer, the night club, and the magic makers.

In "A Patchwork Quilt," Walker likens Farish Street in Jackson Mississippi to her grandmother's patchwork quilt. Women are represented in the poem through the positive image of the grandmother who toiled to establish a tradition and enhance the existence of their offspring: "This street is like my grandma's patchwork quilt / ... / This patchwork quilt is stitched with blood and tears" (201). Walker positions the African American grandmother in her due place as the maker of the street and the culture it represents, which confirms her agency. The colours of the natural elements and the colours of people's faces echo each other and shape life there.

This street stands for all America that is composed not only of different colours, but also of different materials: "Bright gingham, fine silk and satin and linen cloth / patterned patches on the faces of these people." The quilt is made by the

grandmother to signify that women are the main making factor of America. The making of the quilt or the making of America was not an easy process. America went through a painful process to reach its diversity: “the Chinese laundryman / Black cobbler / Greek grocer / And down the street there used to be / A livery stable with a brown Indian man” (201). Quilting is a common trope in African American women’s writing, it stands for black women’s creativity that they make a piece of art out of worn out pieces of cloth. It also expresses those women’s ability to bring their communities into one unity regardless of counter circumstances. Margot Ann Kelley adds that “the assembly of a lowly bedcovering can suggest valuable ways to reconceptualise our senses of self, community, lineage, and connections between art and its social function” (191).

In “The House of Prayer,” Walker does not talk about the house of prayer, but about its adjacent brothel houses. The contrast between the two heightens the idea that Walker rejects black women who work in prostitution, whom she calls “the shame of Farish / Street” (203). Walker disapproves of their behaviour as a sign of the moral deterioration of the black race. This shame stems from what Collins calls “the image of the sexually denigrated black woman,” which “has been vital in sustaining a system of interlocking race, gender, and class oppression” (*Black* 174). Moreover, black women’s prostitution “allowed white women to be the opposite; black ‘whores’ make white ‘virgins’ possible” (176). The poem does not show if Walker blames black women themselves or the racist and patriarchal forces that push them into prostitution.

However, the phrase “clown’s face” suggests a kind of sympathy towards those prostitutes whose fancy colourful face covers their real features and feelings. The fact that they cannot be themselves is also confirmed by the speaker’s saying

that the prostitute “laughs a hollow joyless sound.” (203). The laugh is not real; it is just a hollow sound. That artificial laugh is associated with these prostitutes living on deceiving themselves and others as the prostitute’s bag is “full of tricks” (203). The speaker’s sympathy is also suggested in the question posed to this prostitute: “Hey gal, what you selling / On Farish Street” (203)? This confirms the degrading meaning of prostitution which is “selling” oneself for others’ pleasure. Walker is unable to blame those women because she understands that they are victims of classism, racism and sexism.

Walker is against the implications of prostitution for all black women. These prostitutes threaten black women’s pursuit of equality, respect, and empowerment. Walker is ashamed of the behaviour of those women, who make themselves a commodity and a source of exploitation. Consequently, they contribute to the denigration of the whole race. In the next poem, “small Black World,” Walker stresses again this deterioration: “Drunken, stoned, and crazy / slashing stabbing knives and razors cutting throats.” The street becomes a grave of morality and spirituality: “All our yearning, dreaming, hoping, loving, dying / All our lives are buried here” (205). Walker’s exploration of prostitution is in accord with her desire to defend black women against false accusations of exotic sexuality. Walker tends to see them as victims of this deteriorating morality.

This Is My Century (1989) is Walker’s last volume of poetry. All the poems in this book were written in the 1980s when Walker was in her seventies. It is a historical statement about the country and the century by a person who lived and experienced both. In this volume, Walker expresses her disgust at the modern age of technological advancement and moral decay, materialism, consumerism, greed, and corruption. She laments the loss of values and spirituality. Walker hates the new

culture of materialism that begets crime and violence and heightens racism and sexism. This seems to be criticism of Reaganism, whose tenets encouraged unregulated capitalism, individualism, self-reliance, and boundless optimism based on scientific and technological advancement. Walter Williams argues that “Reaganism’s unregulated free-market capitalism begot the political dominance by big-money interests, which in turn carried the nation to higher and higher levels of political and economic inequality” (44). This is exactly what Walker criticizes in this volume. Walker seems to attack Reaganism as a manifestation of inhumane male dominance. In this volume, Walker’s feminist consciousness comes to its strongest and clearest point. More poems in this volume mark an obvious stand on Walker’s part against patriarchal dominance. Moreover, more poems portray women as agents of social change.

In “This Is My Century: Black Synthesis of Time,” Walker approaches the twentieth century critically. Doing that, she embraces the feminist creed that women should express themselves and the world. In this poem, Walker takes the role of the historian. However, she is inclined to be subjective and judgemental. She warns her audience from going into a phase of moral annihilation. Walker’s judgement on the century stems from her awareness of the past, perceptions of the present, and fears for the future. For Walker, the three dimensions are fused together in the first stanza:

O Man, behold your destiny.

Look on this life

and know our future living;

our former lives from these our present days

now melded into one. (129)

Though Walker opens the poem with “O Man,” she says it authoritatively. The poetic voice represents a sense of her agency as a woman to give advices to whoever meant by the word “Man” either humanity or literally men. Walker’s agency is confirmed in the following imperative verb “behold,” this strong verb suggests that the speaker is in control. Walker sees herself as indispensable part of this “parade of centuries.” She is entitled to talk about the entire century on account of her age: “This is my century / I saw it grow / from darkness into dawn” (130). She considers herself qualified to talk about it in the six continents of the world on account of her human experience: “saw six suns and sunsets rise and burn” (130). Though Walker did not know any country other than America, it seems that she considers her knowledge about other cultures enough to know about the world. Walker wants her audience to be cognizant of the inevitable end of death that even the cruel oppressors will face: “Now see our marching dead / The tyrants too, have fled” (130). The phrase “the marching dead” suggests that even those who are still alive will die sooner or later; this is their state at the end.

The same authoritative criticism of the twentieth century is echoed in “Giants of My Century.” Walker presents a list of the century’s giants including different races, religions, and philosophies: Freud, Marx, Kierkegaard, Du Bois, and Einstein. This list proves that Walker is really well-read in areas of knowledge that used to be associated with masculinity. This is echoed again in her voice when she says: “New liberties arise; / from Freedom’s flag unfold; / the right to live and be / both stronger and more wise” (132). Walker sounds empowered to claim strength and wisdom, which are both claimed to be masculine domains. In stanza nine, Walker bases her authority on her long experience in life and her rich ethnic heritage: “the songs of my fathers / the melodies of my mothers / the plaintive minor notes of my grandmothers”

(133). She gives herself the right to talk about the twentieth century's culture. This seems to be part of the development of her feminist consciousness, which makes her see herself on equal footing with male intellectuals and philosophers. This persona identifies herself with "a black shoeshine boy / made immortal by Barthe / and I am a black mother / running from slavery" (133). Walker defines herself to Richmond Barthe's bronze sculpture *Shoeshine Boy* (1938) in the immortality of its subject and to the immortality of slave mothers' experience. The immortality of the "shoeshine boy" in Barthe's work of art immortalizes his African American mother too because she nurtured the defiant and enduring look in his eyes, the main thing that attracted the artist to him.

"Giants of My Century" elaborates on the list of great men that Walker talked about in the previous poem: Einstein, Freud, Marx, Kierkegaard, and Du Bois. Each one of those men stands for an idea that contributed to the history of ideas and western thought: relativity, psychoanalysis, Marxism, existentialism, and integrationism. These men represent science, psychology, philosophy, theology, and sociology. Both "This Is My Century" and "Giants of My Century" shed light on Walker's view of Freud, which is like some feminists'. She is against his degrading attitude towards women. In the first poem, she takes issue with Freud's view of women and calls it "The Freudian slip" (132). This denotes that Walker appreciates Freud's contribution to human knowledge except his view of women. In the second poem, she declares her disagreement with some of his views that men appreciate. She questions his views: "Sex is the key? / At least one key for males, / if *not* for me" (136).

Walker criticized Freud on two accounts: his stress on the importance of sexuality and his view of women. Walker believes that people are influenced by

spirituality as much by sexuality. She told Dilla Buckner in an interview in 1995 that, Freud “limited sexuality entirely to the body and he believed that sexuality was the strongest force in the world. But sexuality isn’t” (*Conversations* 174). Further, Walker agrees with the feminist scholars who attacked Freud because he believed that, in some respects, women were inferior to men: they have a weaker superego and are envious of men (Scott 125-128). Walker agrees with this feminist view of Freud, she told John Griffins Jones in 1982 that, “I am not a Freudian. I don’t hold to him. Freud is no good for women ... I think the best of Freud is his ground work for psychoanalysis. That is it. I do not think he understood women at all” (*Conversations* 86). In this poem, Walker puts the five men under her perceptive eye. She takes issue with one of them, which suggests that the other men in the list are not above her criticism. This challenge to male intellectual authority undeniably reflects the influence of feminism on Walker’s poetry during this time.

Another poem, “Black Paramour” is about the potential of women and their role in history. The poem shows that women played a role in the life of important historical male figures. The “Black Paramour” can be taken as Cleopatra, the Roman queen of Egypt because she is associated with “Nubian emperors,” who governed parts of Egypt in ancient history. She is also associated with various Italian leaders and kings like “Borgias,” “the Caesars,” “Claudius and Antony,” “Rimini,” and “Bourbons.” This also confirmed by line 33 of the poem which reads: “the asp upon my bosom, the poison upon my tongue” (148). On the other hand, the word “Black” in the title of the poem and the fact that Cleopatra was not black suggests that the poem is about all women from all races not a specific personality.

The men listed in the poem are important leaders and kings; however, the role of women in their lives is the focus of the poem. The speaker in the poem is proud

that she is “the woman of kings; / the love supreme of emperors” who “colored the pages of all tedious stages / in history” (147). This suggests that Walker is aware of the uniqueness of women and their ability to make a difference in things. Using the word “colored” with women and “tedious” with men confirm this difference and signify that it is a positive one. It might also signify that men’s perspective lacks variety and flexibility. That demonstrates the importance of women in men’s lives. This phrase “the love supreme of emperors” shows the importance of the role of women as lovers. Yet, the phrase “of kings” suggests belonging to those kings and subordination rather than prominence. Walker seems to question patriarchal views of women as objects of desire. Patriarchal writings circulated stereotypes of the enchantress who seduces men with her charm and exercises power over them through her enchanting sexuality.

Walker subverts these stereotypes in her poem; she celebrates the potentialities of this stereotypical enchantress. Walker considers beauty no sin to be ashamed of; she inspired poets, composers, and painters to eternalize her beauty in their art: “Poets and composers / worshipped at my shrine. / ... / while music, art, and poetry, and sculpture stone / thrived round my purple throne” (147). The poem suggests that the problem is not in the “paramour” herself but in men’s interpretation of her influence. The patriarchal stereotypes considered her beauty as demeaning and destructive. Walker rejects any association between the beauty of the black paramour and her influence on men. If she is beautiful, it does not mean that she is responsible for others’ evil deeds. The kings, the emperors, and the conquerors adored her beauty and committed crimes in its name. She has not induced them to do anything against their will. Her beauty is not an incitement to cruelty and these men, who are drunk with power and domination, are the only ones to be blamed for their actions. All of

them were moved by their “lust for power, wealth, and fame” that “pulsed through their sensual veins” (147). However, they all blamed her for what they did: “I was the fate of Empires lost / when kingdoms crumbled into dust” (147). They blamed her for their greed and evil. Walker defends black women’s sexuality and declares it innocent of men’s false claims. Women cannot pay for men’s mistakes:

the asp upon my bosom, the poison on my tongue;

how much my sexual royalty has wrung

and what by politic I mean;

what storms my slaves of passion stirred,

how much because of me occurred,

nor let them now forget they knew my dust

forgetting all their vampire lust

while I remain eternally the same-

Black paramour, eternal vestal flame. (148)

Walker rejects the idea that black women are a destructive force. She negates these racist and sexist views of women. She attributes purity and chastity to this “black paramour” and calls her “eternal vestal flame.” On the contrary, she attributes blood shedding to her male “slaves of passion” and associates them with “vampire lust.” Walker’s feminist consciousness undermines the false claims of racist and patriarchal writers and challenges them. This end rhyme pattern throughout the poem gives a rhythm which makes the poem sound like a song memorizing the enchantress’s self-defence. This paramour’s self-defence suggests that her beauty has been misinterpreted and misjudged by male standards, which have been demeaning. Walker’s poem does the opposite and empowers this woman. Instead of being

inarticulate in patriarchal versions of history, she is voiced in Walker's poem. She is given full agency to talk for herself rather than being an object talked about by men.

In "On Youth and Age" and "On Youth and Age II," Walker claims the twentieth century as hers because she lived most of it. In both poems, Walker approaches the twentieth century America in the context of the feminist adage that "the personal is political." Walker creates an analogy between her life and the twentieth century in America. She witnessed the change in politics, race struggle, Women's Movement, economy, science, and even transportation. In the first poem, Walker talks about America from her birth until the end of World War II. Walker follows the history of ideas as it develops socially in the country. The theme of this poem is expanded in the second poem, which looks critically at the scientific and economic advancements of America in the twentieth century and their influence on people's life style, living conditions, entertainment, and popular culture.

In the first poem, Walker rejects different manifestations of America's racism: the political and the economic. She ironically remembers how she and other black children were happy to see President Harding in his visit to the South and thought he was wonderful "cause he waved to us black children / on one side of the street / just like he waved to the white children / on the other side of the street" (152). The poem refers to segregation rather than to President Harding as a nice person. This racism is most intensified when it hurts a young black girl's sense of herself and her beauty. Walker is hurt by the spread of white women's pictures on all products as the norm of acceptable beauty. She recalls the influence of seeing white girls in advertisements on her feelings:

When I was a little girl
the little girl on Morton salt was white;

She still is.

So were all the faces on the billboards

in the trolley cars

in the newspapers and books and moving picture houses.

They hurt my eyes. (153-154)

Walker considers this political and economic enhancement of racism in America a personal trouble. It is part of her memory and perception of herself. Walker affirms these personal connotations against male racist minds like President Harding's and the advertisers'. Caroline Ramazanoglu argues that "The radical feminist slogan, 'the personal is political', allowed women to make sense of their own lives as part of common experiences in male-dominated societies" (12). This is exactly what Walker does here; she puts herself in the centre of political and economic manifestations of racism.

This also reflects a strong black feminist consciousness that rejects America's glorification of white women's beauty at the expense of black women's. This view is related to the 1970s "Black Is Beautiful" movement. In the context of this movement, Walker undermines the media-enhanced idea that European features and light skin are more attractive. When Walker says "They hurt my eyes," Walker highlights the psychological effect of such ideas on non-white people, especially young girls. This is absolutely in accord with the movement's tenets. Some black feminists believe in the value of this slogan as a means of self-affirmation. bell hooks considers the slogan "an important popular expression of resistance to white supremacy" (*Talking Back* 109).

On the other hand, Walker continues her challenge to male authority close to the end of the poem. She criticizes male political and economic authority during the

Great Depression. She ironically points out the recklessness of President Hoover, who told Americans that “Just around the corner / there’s a rainbow in the sky” and the fruitlessness of President Roosevelt’s decision to enter WWII:

Then we went to war
to resuscitate our dying economy
and make the world safe for prosperity.
Men died and died and died
so nickels could become quarters.
Now a dollar equals a dime. (156)

This rising fluid rhyme quickens the rhythm of the poem to convey that the catastrophic results of Roosevelt’s decision were sequential and fast. This adds emphasis to the irrationality of male’s single-dimensional way of thinking: Roosevelt goes to war for material profit unconscious of the attendant losses. The repetition of the word “die” signifies that this loss was enormous. It also contrasts the word “resuscitate” in the earlier line for further ironic effect. Furthermore, this repetition stresses the fact that men’s lust for material profit and uncalculated risk are always at the expense of people’s lives. The irony in the poem is intensified in the last two lines of this quotation. Roosevelt entered the war to make “nickels” equal “quarters” and instead he reaped inflation which reduced the “dollar” to “a dime.” This ironical view of male authority continues until the end of the poem when Walker ridicules the Federal authority and calls its members “con-men:” “While the G-Men became Federal / All the con-men went “legit (157). They are false like movie heroes and their adventures are fabricated. This challenging tone unmistakably shows the influence of the Women’s Movement on Walker’s perceptions.

Walker continues her criticism of twentieth century America and its male-dominated authority in poem II. In this poem, Walker expresses her dissatisfaction with the younger generation and the modern family. Both are obsessed with money and dominated by technology. People have lost their values and are in a state of moral degradation: children are “overdosed on drugs ... Mama is drunk. / Daddy is money-mad, out cashing dollars and dames” (164). Moreover, the poem attacks the 1980s culture and Reaganism, which is based on technology, materialism, and consumerism. The poem reflects bell hooks’s statement that “While the poor are offered addiction as a way to escape thinking too much, working people are encouraged to shop” (*Where* 6).

Walker is aware of the plague of inflation, which is eating people up: “Roaches and rats are eating up the babies, / while the slummy, crummy basements / are still drawing the highest rent and killing death” (165). The unusual phrase “killing death” is a hyperbole which conveys the idea that these slums are not human to live in. Walker highlights the evils this culture brought about: moral decay, energy crisis, global warming. Walker describes the twentieth century in commercial terms: “Our Century is about to expire” (165). Moreover, she anticipates a disastrous end of the century that will affect everybody:

Call the doctor; call the ambulance.

Get the fire department.

Put our feeble century in intensive care.

See if the old man can’t last till tomorrow.

Everybody’s getting burned up in this fire. (165)

This personification of the twentieth century as a dying man makes readers aware of the approaching disaster that Walker talks about. Likening the century to an “old

man” is a reference to the fact that the twentieth century was mainly shaped by men, whom Walker considers the cause of people’s deterioration. The word “everybody” is of course inclusive of Walker herself, which reflects again her implementation of the feminist adage that “the personal is political.”

Manifestations of the Women’s Movement on Walker’s writing can also be seen in this poem as she refrains from using the word “mankind” to stand for both sexes. She says, “I guess there’s something called Energy / making big problems for mankind / womankind and childrenkind too, / only I don’t know why” (166). These lines reflect a strong feminist consciousness that resists identifying women in patriarchal terms, which are imposed by “the clash of race and sex and class,” as she says in a later poem called “Old Age” (169). Walker challenges the patriarchal terminology that stresses male supremacy. The poem is immersed in this challenging tone. The theme itself shows a strong feminist consciousness on Walker’s part. Writing directly about politics in this way, Walker challenges the stereotypical assumption that women only write about limited “feminine” themes such as nature and love.

Walker continues this criticism of male authority in other poems in the volume. She addresses the troubles that everybody has, especially the poor in the modern age based on her criticism of Reaganism. Poems like “The Telly Boob-Tube on The Idiot Box,” “Money, Honey, Money,” “On Police Brutality,” “Power to The People,” “They Have Put Us on Hold,” and “Inflation Blues” talk about the cruel age of science and technology, the brutality of the CIA and the FBI, and the degrading values of consumerism and materialism. All these are traditional masculine territories. Men used to view these topics as areas of their excellence and pride. However, Walker considers them areas of masculine failure. Walker shows how

men's claims to power, rationality, and being in control are false and have plagued humanity with several imbalances. Walker invades these territories and criticizes them in her verse. She challenges male dominance and dares to re-create her own themes not merely conform to the traditional themes of women's writing such as confession, self-pity, and the body related investigations.

"Love Song For Alex, 1979" is written by Walker in memory of her deceased husband. The poem bears the voice of a lover and faithful wife. The poem is an expression of love and a long marital life based on understanding and respect. It seems that Walker's marriage was a fulfilling experience for her. The poem does not convey any grudge or dissatisfaction. This poem illustrates that not all her poems express anger towards men, which dispels the patriarchal stereotype of feminists as man-haters. bell hooks says that people mostly do not know what feminism is. She relates: "I tend to hear all about the evil of feminism and the bad feminists: how "they" hate men; how "they" want to go against nature—and god; how "they" are all lesbians; how "they" are taking all the jobs and making the world hard for white men, who do not stand a chance" (*Feminism* vii). This poem gives credibility to Walker's previous criticism of male authority. It proves that Walker does not establish her criticism on personal experiences or a view of men as enemies. It proves that Walker's position is based on deliberate thought and reasonable analysis. It proves the falsity of claims like "feminism is a bunch of angry women who want to be like men" (viii). hooks confirms that feminism is not a "declaration of war between the sexes" but "a political struggle to end sexist oppression" (*Feminist Theory* 33). Walker represents this perspective in this poem. The poem shows how feminism is a matter of equal rights and balance in social status for every human not only women. Walker says in the poem that all her "days of Happiness and wonder /

are cradled in his arms and eyes entire” (175). Walker uses the word “entire” to describe her days with her husband suggests that she had not been subordinated by her husband. She praises the man for the fact that he had treated her as his equal. It is worth mentioning that though Walker’s husband was not a university graduate, he had not been an obstacle in her professional and literary careers.

Walker views the world from a woman-centred perspective in her later poetry. She explores various kinds of heroism in women’s lives. Women in Walker’s poems do not lament their bad luck. They are strong and patient and go through difficulties to become stronger. Walker’s poems are an example of Joyce Lander’s saying that black women have always been “the very essence of what American womanhood is trying to become” (239). Walker expresses the feelings these women experience: suffering, pain, frustration, oppression, and confusion. Qualified with her age, experience, culture, and knowledge, Walker makes a statement on America and the twentieth century. These four volumes of poetry are written from a feminist perspective and through a woman’s critical eye. Florence Howe is right when she says if we search for the poet behind Walker’s poetry, “we need to study the people who fill its pages” (189). Howe means that the women characters in the poems reflect Walker’s own view of life.

These four volumes of poetry mark a strong return to poetry for Walker after a long period of poetic silence. Walker’s return to poetry in the seventies and the eighties after a successful novel can be attributed to her feminist consciousness. As a genre, “poetry is a privileged metalanguage in western patriarchal culture ... Its appeal may have diminished in relation to other literary forms but its status and function continues to be important” (Kaplan 70). Walker challenges the patriarchal stereotype that women cannot write poetry of value. This assumption nurtures the

idea that poetry is for the elite and is exclusively a masculine genre, in which women are deficient to compete. According to this perspective, women are at best able to write confessional, pathetic, and self-pitying lyrical poems void of any argument or value. Walker's return to poetry is a challenge to this idea and a deconstruction of its sexist grounding. In her novel, Walker showed a strong feminist consciousness and managed to give a feminist reading of various issues like slavery, racism, motherhood, tradition, separatism, and integrationism. Using poetry to express a feminist view of more recent issues of relevance to the twentieth century and women is another challenge to men's skills and an invasion of their "masculine" genre. Walker returns to poetry to express women's concerns and to undermine male writers' claim that all women's poetry is "melancholy and self-consciousness" (Kaplan 85).

The feminist undercurrent in Walker's *For My People* comes to the surface in this later poetry. It is still not a predominant theme, but it clearly and equally intersects with her racial themes. According to Maryemma Graham, "Had not her sense of self been so completely bound to her sense of others, Walker would have made some very different personal choices as a woman and an artist. This is the humanistic appeal that pervades her work, one that is quintessentially feminine" ("I Want" 26). Graham alludes here to Walker's being obliged throughout her life to sacrifice her career as a writer for the sake of her family. This was a personal choice and a decision of free will; however, it made her literary production much less than could be. It also kept her away from the literary circles and public gatherings. Graham's statement is quite true; Walker could have achieved much greater acknowledgement and fame, if she could have given priority to herself and her creativity as a woman and a writer. But, this maternity, self-sacrifice, and ability to

give are indispensable parts of her being an African American woman and writer. Though these qualities sound like a stereotype of African American women, Walker admires them. This can be related to her being morally conservative which might sit uneasily with her feminist consciousness. Though Walker's later poetry shows a stronger feminist perspective, it maintains a conservative and traditional outlook on life. That can be attributed to her upbringing in early twentieth century era.

In brief, Walker represents a state of correspondence between the personal circumstances of women writers and their poetic production. Walker's later poetry is the result of both personal experience and intellectual activity. Both should be taken together to help us understand the person, the poet, and the poetry. They are complementary to each other in a way that illustrates Audre Lorde's saying: "For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams towards survival and change" (37). Walker decided late in her life to use poetry to fulfil this survival and defy oblivion. She resorted to it to change people's perception of her poetry as exclusively racial. She also used it to change the emphasis of her work from solely racial concerns to that of race and gender.

This is exactly what the Women's Movement and black feminism contributed to Walker's view of herself and her role as a writer. Margaret Walker's later poetry reflects the culmination of her awareness of the importance of her gender identity. This development echoes her statement in an interview with Lucy Freibert in 1986 that "being a woman is first, that when the doctor says "It's she," that is the first thing" (*Conversations* 98). According to this perception, Walker's later poetry represents the preoccupation of the Women's Movement and, especially, black feminism. This poetry is obviously concerned with women and shows pride in their

experiences. It voices their long silenced protest and gives them full authority to represent themselves. Walker's later poetry emphatically shows her awareness of the priority of being a woman in twentieth century America.

Conclusion

As this thesis approaches its end, it is time to find out how far it has achieved its aims. As mentioned before, the main purpose of this study has been to examine Walker's work in a chronological order to consider how it reflects on the major social and intellectual debates of the twentieth century. This research has sought to determine how far Walker as an African American writer was influenced by the major literary and intellectual movements during her writing career. Accordingly, this study has approached Walker's entire published literature in the light of major twentieth century movements: Communism, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Women's Movement.

Providing a new reading of Walker's work beyond conventional assumptions, this thesis has looked at Walker's work in terms of its time and place. Throughout its chapters, I have tried to associate Walker's work with ongoing social and intellectual debates in America to prove that Walker was too much involved in the main concerns of twentieth century America to be excluded from its mainstream literary canon. By examining the potential causes of this exclusion in the introduction of this thesis, the argument developed throughout its four chapters has shown that Walker has been unjustly treated by critics. Broadly speaking, this study shows that Walker's body of literature is far from being written in isolation from the central issues of twentieth century American society. Her work essentially evolves in correspondence with the development of thought in America and challenges it consistently.

The first chapter of this study proves that Walker's literary heritage combines both white and black influences. This combination of both traditions made Walker tolerant with various influences around her and able to develop a critical perspective at the same time. Being primarily concerned with racial issues, Walker opened her

mind and her literature to various influences. This chapter elicits that Walker started writing with an awareness of earlier thoughts, which prepared her to grasp later thoughts along with the course of her work. Walker was a well versed person and writer and had the ability to grasp various cultures and employ them in the body of her work and subvert their superiority.

After examining this tendency to derive from her predecessors, the second chapter of this thesis shows the first encounter between Walker and living writers and communication with them on professional levels. That helped Walker broaden her scope of knowledge beyond the South and develop her political consciousness. This chapter proves how Walker was influenced by the American cultural milieu of the 1930s and 1940s by being in touch with several radical writers in the WPA and magazines like *Challenge*, and *New Challenge*. Accordingly, her poetry became more radical in its call for action towards social change, which appeared to critics to be in contrast with her conservative upbringing.

Chapter Two demonstrates how *For My People*, Walker's only publication during these two decades reflects on the current thoughts of the time: delineating people's suffering from the Great Depression, attack on capitalism, reaching out to global Proletariat, call for protest and social change, urging people to be involved in organizational resistance and unionism, and challenging capitalist authorities. This chapter has argued that Walker has managed to adapt her Christian faith with Marxist view of religion by being eclectic in her understanding of the two. Walker did not fully conform to Communist calls for subordinating race and gender to class matters. Her poetry of the time expresses anti-capitalist themes through historically racial contexts like slavery and the South. Furthermore, Walker addressed gender issues in these poems even within minimal limits. Walker's subsumed gender consciousness at

that time resulted from the socio-political atmosphere of the time, which did not welcome any deviation from class-related writings.

Chapter Three considers Walker's second publication, *Jubilee* in the context of the 1950s and 1960s. It approaches the novel as a reflection of the Civil Rights Movement. This chapter notes areas of correspondence between mid-nineteenth century and mid-twentieth century debates. It has managed to show how the novel draws upon similarities between Civil War and Civil Rights events. Walker's novel reflects on essential debates like: peaceful vs. violent resistance, integration vs. segregation, and forgiveness vs. revenge as they are reiterated across a century-long pursuit of equality and freedom. This chapter stresses a strong response on Walker's part to the activities of the Civil Rights Movement in her novel. Though the novel is based on the story of Walker's great grandmother, it echoes a collective history and transcends its time frame to comment on contemporary concerns. This chapter demonstrates how Walker's text is an important work of its time because it is the first model of the neo-slave narrative genre, the first from the slaves' point of view, and the first from a woman's point of view. This chapter also shows how Walker's depiction of Vyry's character is a deconstruction of earlier stereotypical slave characters. The chapter also shows how Walker's woman-centred novel was a challenge to current calls for subordinating gender to race at that time.

Chapter Four of this study shows how Walker's early subordination of her feminist consciousness develops into a stronger manifestation in her later poetic publications in the 1970s and 1980s as a result of the influence of Women's Movement and black feminism. It traces manifestations of this influence, including celebrating slave women's endurance and survival, stressing the importance of women's labour, challenging male authority and patriarchal orders, deconstructing

stereotypes about black women, stressing the role of women in their homes, voicing women's suffering, portraying them as agents of social change, and emphasizing a matriarchal heritage. Furthermore, this chapter has shown how Walker on the personal level was inspired by the ongoing Women's Movement's activities to resume her writing career with unprecedented vitality and determination. This chapter also illuminates how Walker's feminist perspective overlaps with her racial concerns in her later poetry through African American women's experience.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from these findings. First, Walker was an interactive writer with her cultural surroundings and her work shows how responsive she was to changes in American intellectual milieu. Second, Walker's literature can be taken as an important – but undervalued – representation of twentieth century African American experience, in which race, class, and gender cannot be separated. Third, Walker's work should qualify her to be an indispensable part of mainstream African American literary canon because it can be taken as a literary record of African Americans' experience in the past and the present. Fourth, Walker's literature marks a subtle critique and deliberate analysis of twentieth century America's flaws as it moves forward.

The chapters of this thesis show how Walker's work anticipated various black feminist themes a long time before they become in vogue in the 1970s and 1980s like acknowledging African American matrilineal heritage, elaborating on African American women's slavery, and approaching African American history from women's perspective. On another level, this thesis presents Walker as an example of how socio-political conditions affect African American women writer's representations of feminist themes. Walker's feminist consciousness developed from

one work to another in response to various social, political, and cultural circumstances.

Furthermore, the chapters of this study show that Walker – though politically radical and morally conservative – was concerned with gender issues from the very beginning of her literary career. Walker was radical in her call for social change towards race, class, and gender equality. At the same time, she was morally conservative and traditional in her view of family and religion. Neither of these aspects of Walker's character made it difficult for her to embrace an early feminist consciousness and to develop it over the course of the twentieth century. These three elements of Walker's work can be viewed by critics as heterogeneous. However, they can be viewed in harmony if understood in the light of Walker's eclectic approach, which she used to combine both white and black traditions in her writing and adapt Marxism with her Christian faith.

Based on these conclusions, this thesis contributes to assess Walker's work outside of critics' prejudices. It also helps students of African American literature understand how a writer of Walker's calibre was subordinated by critics to younger generations of writers for improper reasons. This thesis participates in filling existing gaps in knowledge about the development of Walker's writings from one work to another. Additionally, it helps future researchers of Walker's work to understand how her literary development coincided with a personal development of her life. In her early poetry, Walker is a student and emergent writer trying to discover herself and America. In her novel she is a wife, mother, and established writer and university teacher. In her later poetry, she is armed with a lifetime's wisdom and experience that qualify her to be a historian and a social reformer.

In spite of these new findings, Walker is still a potential subject for future research. For example, how Walker was influenced by her female predecessors like Zora Neale Hurston is an interesting area of research. On the other hand, there is still need to study Walker's work in comparison with her contemporaries to know where they converge and where they diverge. Furthermore, there is still a need to consider Walker's legacy and her influence on younger generations of African American women writers. In brief, further studies on Walker's work are important to estimate her value and what she represents to the sequence and development of African American literature.

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