CHAPTER 4

AFROCENTRIC CONSCIOUSNESS

Introduction

While Chapter 3 discussed the empowerment of Black women through connectedness, this chapter explores the positive effect of Afrocentrism on Black American women in realising their ethnic identity. The first section reveals the polarity of the two worlds they experience, the white world which promises wealth and glamour and the Black world which promises self-worth. Caught between these two opposing worlds, some Black women succumb to the lure of the dominant culture and alienate themselves from their ethnic heritage. The world of white values is generally equated by these writers with spiritual emptiness.

Section 2 explains Afrocentrism and examines those women who rather than seek success and wealth for themselves, are actively engaged in the struggle for group survival. The efforts of these activists are directed towards bringing about social change and inspiring self-reliance and self-worth. Naylor’s Mama Day and Walker’s The Temple of My Familiar have also been examined to show how these writers explore the possibility of integrating white culture and history with Black culture and history.
One of the ways in which Black women attain wholeness is by reclaiming their historical identity. These writers show how through a journey to their historical or familial past, Black women acquaint themselves and others with their ancient heritage. History is viewed by the Black women protagonists as well as the Black women novelists themselves from a new perspective. Novels like Morrison's *Beloved* and Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* have been analysed to reveal the reconstructed history of slavery. These writers present Black women steeped in Black culture, perpetuating Black folk traditions of herbal cure, conjure, story-telling and music. Naylor creates a world of folk beliefs and conjure in *Mama Day*, in which the eponymous protagonist emerges as a powerful culture bearer, struggling against the dark forces that threaten the extinction of her family line. Morrison projects an alternate reality in *Beloved* with the belief in spirits and haunted houses. This section also examines Morrison, Walker and Naylor as culture bearers themselves, as they make use of Black folk lore and myths in order to create a Black ethos in their novels.

Section 3 discusses the role of Christianity in the lives of Black women depicted in these novels. Walker's exploration of an alternative theology that spreads the message of love and encompasses the entire humanity has been highlighted. Women's association with trees and with nature in general is a common feature in the novels of Walker and Morrison who
emerge as environmentalists as they suggest connections between domination and oppression of women and domination and exploitation of Nature.

Section 4 examines the theme of creativity as a means of self expression. Black women whose creativity is repressed often waste and ruin their lives whereas those who find avenues to release their 'springs of creativity' often attain self-fulfillment.

The last section examines Black dialect and Black English used by these writers as tools for the projection of distinctive Black female identity. The construction of Black female subjectivity with the help of a subtly nuanced English has been explored.

4.1 Women Trapped Between Two Cultures

What happens to those Black women who because of their interaction with the mainstream white society come under the influence of its worldview? What happens to those Black women who attain wealth and glamour and have the chance of assimilation in the dominant white society and share its hegemony? How do Black women cope with the tension between the two world views that simultaneously attract and repel each other? These are some of the questions which Black women writers like Morrison, Walker and Naylor try to answer in their novels.
In *The Bluest Eye* (1972) Morrison depicts the pathetic outcome of the tension between the two cultures in the lives of Pauline, Pecola and Geraldine. While Pauline and Pecola surrender totally to the hegemony of white values, Geraldine deludes herself into equating herself with the whites and thus loses her true identity. Morrison is contemptuous of women like Geraldine, who because they are economically better placed, despise the lower class Blacks and emulate that section of American society to which they can never belong. The tragedy of women like Geraldine is that their entire life revolves around their persistent denial of their Black selves and thus they lead an artificial existence. Morrison subtly accentuates the shallowness and inauthenticity of Geraldine by describing the beauty of her house through Pecola's eyes and then presenting her cruel rejection of the innocent but racially and economically oppressed Black girl: "Get out ... you nasty black bitch. Get out of my house" (1972:75) she spits out with venom. Affiliation with white values has led to the loss of her humanity. Morrison's entire description of women like Geraldine (ibidem:67-68) is tinged with deep irony as she firmly nails them down as traitors because they have joined the oppressor.

Cynthia Edelberg has pointed out that in Morrison's fictional world, "higher education for blacks is a waste of time at best, truly destructive at worst" (1986:219). In *Sula* (1973) Morrison depicts the eponymous heroine turning
into a pariah of the community after her return to her hometown after ten years during which she acquired college education and experienced city life. Her personality is totally changed during this period and people stare at her from porches and windows as she walks towards her home. Even Eva, her grandmother, has no words of welcome, sore as she is at Sula's complete break with the family. Voicing her disapproval of the change in her personality she says, "Them little old furry tails ain't going to do you more good than they did the fox that was wearing them" (1973:91). Nel also exclaims after talking to Sula for some time, "You sure have changed" (ibidem:100).

Because of her prolonged exposure to a white world view, Sula has imbibed the "cult of individualism" which is a very American ideology. Her statements to Eva soon after her return, "I don't want to make somebody else, I want to make myself" (ibidem:92), "Whatever is burning in me is mine!" (ibidem:93), "It's (Life's) mine to throw" (ibidem) and later to Nel "But my lonely is mine" (ibidem:143), reveal her individualism that alienates her from the Black community. But as Faye Powell has observed:

While the ideology of individualism has no doubt been responsible for much American innovation and personal achievement, it, like all ideologies, has its blind spot, and proponents of individualism
ignore the unequal access that minorities and working class people have to economic, educational and social opportunities (1990:3).

Sula's determination to "make herself" leads her to take control over her sexuality. After alienating herself from the community she chooses and discards sexual partners at her whim. Her liberated self finds expression in sexual liberation. One of the indisputable truths of the Black community as Sula experienced it was that men heartlessly desert their women, therefore she decides to do the rejecting herself. But ironically she too suffers rejection when Ajax deserts her after she has started becoming possessive about him.

Besides her alienation and promiscuity, another major reason why Sula becomes unpopular is her decision to throw Eva, her grandmother, into a home for the aged. Sula, under the influence of the mainstream society's world view, has drifted away from the Afro-American ideology of interdependence and nurturance which ensures care and respect for the elders in the family. The ancestor, who could be a grandparent or even an aged parent enjoys an important position in the Afro-American family because his presence establishes a continuum and provides a historical connection. Nel protests to Sula when she hears about Sula's action:

You mean that home the white church run? Sula!
That ain't no place for Eva. All them women is dirt poor with no people at all. Mrs. Wilkens and
them. They got dropsy and can't hold their water - crazy as loons. Eva's odd but she got sense. I don't think that's right, Sula (1973:100).

She thus emphasises Afro-American family values which Sula has disdainfully flouted. From the beginning of the novel Morrison has stressed the Afro-American values of supportiveness and caring. She begins the novel, "In that place where they tore the night shade and blackberry patches from their roots to make place for Medallion city golf course, there was once a neighbourhood" (ibidem:3). By using the word "neighbourhood," she evokes a community that thrives on interaction and interdependence. Sula grew up in this community where neighbours could be counted on for help and support. In the conclusion of the novel Morrison depicts a completely changed town, lifeless and mechanical. She depicts a definite erosion of family values. The people have changed just as the entire environment has changed with the white people buying the land and building television stations and hill top houses. There are more and more of old peoples' homes. Nel muses, "You'd think folks was living longer, but the fact of it was, they was just being put out faster" (ibidem:164). Morrison further indicates the effect of separateness and individualism on their life style as she writes, "Now there weren't any places left, just separate houses with separate televisions and separate telephones and less and less of dropping by" (ibidem:166).
Morrison in her novels seems very concerned about white materialistic culture overwhelming and suppressing Black cultural values. By writing about Pecola's and Sula's alienation from the community she draws attention to the devastating effect of mainstream values on Black women. As a new world woman, Sula shows disrespect for the institutions of the Church and the family. She upsets the women by going to church suppers without underwear. She breaks Nel's family by seducing Jude and thus unwittingly breaks her bond with her close friend thereby defeating the very purpose for which she had returned to the community. Morrison gives two major reasons for Sula's return to Bottom. One is her boredom with city life and the other is her close bond with Nel. Moving about with different men, "she had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be - for a woman" (ibidem: 121). Morrison here takes a radically feminist stance as she suggests that the type of fulfillment in friendship that Sula was seeking, that transcended the physical bond, was only possible through another woman and that was Nel. Whereas her other reason for her return, that is, her boredom with city life, reveals her identification with the Bottom community to which she returns. However Morrison presents Sula as a highly complex figure riddled with hidden contradictions, because of which she becomes a misfit in Bottom.
In *Tar Baby* (1982) likewise Morrison presents Jadine as a new world woman who is more loyal to Western culture rather than to Afro-American values. One of the most disturbing effects of Western commercial values is the fragmentation of the family. Upwardly mobile Jadine is so intent on personal material progress that she firmly and heartlessly tells Ondine, her aunt, that she must not expect support from her in their old age. Morrison is more explicit here about the cultural divide. While Ondine, Sydney and Son believe in the values of interdependence and caring, Jadine superciliously condemns these values as old-fashioned. Ondine explains to Jadine:

> A daughter is a woman that cares about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her. No, I don't want you to be what you call a parent. Not me, and not Sydney either. What I want from you is what I want for you (1982:283).

Jadine, however, has imbibed a different worldview and tells Ondine that she does not want to be the type of woman she is talking about. Her rejection of Ondine and Sydney is reminiscent of Sula's rejection of Eva. Son had earlier tried to instil into Jadine the understanding that she must be thankful to her aunt and uncle for her education and success and not to Valerian Street. He is even derisive about her education that did not teach her about Afro-American values. Morrison thus underscores the fact that Jadine rejects family responsibility not realising that the same family values have
given her the status she could not have hoped to attain otherwise. Erickson observes, "Jadine's defiance of conventional expectation has an exemplary, generalised force that implies the break up and complete dissolution of neighbourhood ideals. Tar Baby in this sense is a work of mourning for the passing of those ideals" (1984:20). The mourning is evident when Sydney and Ondine console each other when they realise that they would have to bury themselves since Jadine had refused to fulfil her responsibility towards them.

The contradictions in Sula and Jadine are caused by culture conflict. Both of them are new world women trapped within two cultures. Sula can neither be happy away from Bottom, nor within the community. Her promiscuity which is partly inherited from her mother and partly an expression of rebellion against patriarchally defined roles of women, distances her from the community women. To this Morrison also adds the dimension of racism, since Sula is suspected to be a sinner of even a more heinous kind. It is rumoured that she sleeps with white men. Morrison provides the suspicion without confirming the reality in order to reveal Black and white tension. However, Morrison in this novel does not equate Blacks with positive and whites with negative attributes, therefore the Black community of Medallion is constantly exposed for its shortcomings. Morrison blurs and confuses the binary oppositions between the two races. However, in Tar Baby (1982) she upholds the humanistic values of Black culture embodied in Son.
Since education is generally considered to facilitate upward mobility and prosperity, Morrison in this novel questions the value of education for Blacks when it is designed to uphold the Euro-American world view. Son, contemptuous of Sorbonne educated Jadine's bourgeois materialism, denounces her for her lack of race pride. He deliberately calls her "little white girl" to make her aware of her betrayal of her African heritage. When she is furious about it he tells her, "Then why don't you settle down and stop acting like it" (1982:121).

Preservation of Black culture and Black consciousness is a primary concern of Black women writers. Black consciousness does not merely imply cultural bonds but also an awareness and a relatedness to the traumatic past of slavery. Morrison in Tar Baby tackles the rather delicate issue of how to preserve their past tradition and simultaneously move on ahead with the present times. She presents Jadine and Son as embodiments of two cultural perspectives. While Jadine, who has tasted fame and success and has a bright future ahead of her, feels that the past is best forgotten because nothing can be done about it, Son has strong connections with Black folk culture and does not agree with her. Morrison depicts the conflict between Son and Jadine:

Each was pulling the other way from the maw of hell - its very ridge top. Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be. One had a past, the other a
future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands. Mama - spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing? (I982:272).

The struggle is between Black folk culture and white materialistic progress. Outlining their tussle Morrison pits "wifely competence," fertility and nurturing against, "originality and building" (ibidem:271). Thus there is a clear opposition between old world folk values and a new world ambitious drive. While for Jadine whites represent constructive progress, for Son they represent destruction of the natural wealth of America. While Jadine is comfortably at home with the whites, Son considers them aliens. When Son condemns Jadine for wanting to marry a European he makes an interesting analogy between a Black Mammy in a white family and a Black wife of a white husband rearing his children. Morrison here depicts the race pride of Afro Americans who do not tolerate inter-racial sexual relations or marriages.

Talking to Charles Ruas about culture conflict in *Tar Baby*, Morrison observes:

This civilisation of black people, which was underneath the white civilisation, was there with its own everything.

Everything of that civilisation was not worth hanging on to, but some of it was, and nothing has taken its place while it is being dismangled.
There is a new, capitalistic, modern American black which is what everybody thought was the ultimate in integration. To produce Jadine, that's what it was for. I think there is some danger in the result of that production. It cannot replace certain essentials from the past (1986:229).

While Son and Jadine represent two extremes, Morrison clearly denounces Jadine and reserves her sympathy for Son. In various instances Morrison illustrates the false values and consequent hard heartedness of Jadine. Though Sydney and Ondine are her foster parents she allows them to wait upon her as she heartlessly identifies with the Streets and not with her Black relatives. Significantly both are her benefactors but while Valerian endows her with material prosperity, Sydney and Ondine endow her with love and caring, but as she makes it clear later it is material wealth she values above love and caring. In another instance when she is talking to Valerian about art she remarks, "Picasso is better than an Itumba mask. The fact that he was intrigued by them was a proof of his genius, not the mask makers ..." (72). Because she is ashamed of her heredity Jadine overlooks the fact that if Picasso admired Itumba masks it must have been for their artistic value.

Though Jadine tries to emulate white middle class values, the fact that she is unnerved by the rejection of the woman in yellow in a store in Paris reveals her inner contradictions.
Morrison told Mckay in an interview that this woman, who makes a powerful impact in the novel and on the consciousness of Jadine, "is the original self - the self we betray when we lie, the one that is always there" (1983:422). When Jadine sees this "woman - that mother/sister/she; that unphotographable beauty" (1982:42), she is herself at the top of her glory and yet she is transfixed by this African woman who represents "all loveliness and life and breath in the world" (1982:43), and is very disconcerted when the woman conveys her rejection of Jadine's image by spitting contemptuously in her direction. It seems very important for Jadine to be approved by an authentic woman like her and she is for the first time conscious of her own inauthenticity. Jadine is so shaken that she needs to reassure herself of her identity and hence she returns to L’Arbe de la Croix to relax and think. The woman in yellow continues to haunt Jadine and in Eloe, Son's hometown, she joins the mystical night women who try to confront her with her cultural heritage. The most outstanding feature of the woman in yellow is her impressive and powerful personality which reveals her inner strength acquired from race pride. She is the opposite of Jadine, who takes pride in her Westernisation, because her appeal lies in her African personality which she carries with self-confidence. While in The Bluest Eye (1972) Morrison dealt with the pathos of a little black girl who had internalised the denigrated
image of Afro-American women as ugly, in *Tar Baby* (1982) she provides an Afrocentric perspective according to which "women's beauty is not based solely on physical criteria because mind, spirit and body are not conceptualised as separate, oppositional spheres. Instead, all are central in aesthetic assessments of individuals and their creations" (Collins 1990:89). By constructing an Afro-American aesthetic for beauty Morrison rescues the concept of beauty from the control of the dominant ideology of 'white is beautiful' and establishes an aesthetics that transcends physical appearance. Resistance to the system of domination in this way is a marked step towards self-empowerment.

Jadine is presented as totally divorced from Black culture so that she wonders about the Frenchman who wants to marry her,

> I wonder if the person he wants to marry is me or a black girl? And if it isn't me he wants, but any black girl who looks like me, talks and acts like me, what will happen when he finds out that I hate earhoops, and I don't have to straighten my hair, that Mingus puts me to sleep, that sometime I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside — not American — not Black — just me? (1982:45).

Though Jadine visualises a subjectivity that transcends racial categories, she subconsciously rejects her own racial identity by claiming not to have certain stereotypical Afro-American characteristics. However, despite her attempts to
identify with the whites she cannot obliterate the fact that her authenticity lies in her African descent and the westernised image she projects is a false image. Her immense distress over the episode of the woman in yellow and her dream of the nurturing women in Bloe, reveals that one cannot reject one's history, it comes back to haunt one unexpectedly. Morrison explores the relationship between subjectivity and history in those individuals who do not acknowledge their ancestry because they are ashamed of their heritage due to the influence of the dominant concept of race. If in her first novel she depicts the pathos of a little black girl's desire for blue eyes, in her fourth novel she explores what happens if her incongruous wish is fulfilled.

Morrison however is not advocating a complete reversal to folk values and an Bloe type of living but suggests a fair combination of ethnic values and material success. Son, who emerges as the culture bearer in Tar Baby does not provide an answer to the problems of Afro-Americans either. If Jadine cannot combine her western values with Afro-American folk values, Son too cannot adapt to the modern world along with his folk ways. The issue of the conflicting western and Afro-American values is a complex one and there can be no simple answer. As Morrison states in an interview, "There should be lots of things: there should be a quality of adventure and a quality of nest" (Ruas 1986:229). Will Jadine be able to find peace and fulfilment in Paris? Will she be able to forget Son
and her snatches of happiness with him and also what he stood for? Will she be able to convince herself of her own authenticity? These are the questions Morrison leaves unanswered. Perhaps she wants discerning readers to ponder over them and decide for themselves.

Naylor in her second novel *Linden Hills* (1986) depicts a community that has lost its spirituality because of its unrelenting pursuit of material wealth. "The people in those houses were selling little bits of themselves to make it," says Mamie Tilson about those who lived in the sprawling houses of Linden Hills, which is a symbol of Black achievement. As Mamie Tilson pointed out, the upper middle class people of Linden Hills, glorying in their wealth and success, and conscious of their status, have sold their souls in order to make it. They are alienated from their cultural values and hold the less fortunate Blacks, living in Brewster Place close by, in contempt. Naylor illustrates how bourgeois materialism leads to fragmentation of the communities and even families. While in *Brewster Place* she celebrates the healing power of sisterhood, in *Linden Hills* she mourns the alienation and the spiritual deadness of a community. Those like Lester Tilson and Kiswana Browne who deviate from the norm of 'making it', are branded abnormal and mentally disturbed. The people of Linden Hills who despise Brewster Place in fact despise their own Blackness.
Greed, corruption, boundless ambition, insanity and suicide mark the already fragmented lives of the inhabitants of Linden Hills. Trapped by the lure of mainstream culture, the individuals Naylor presents lead an artificial existence, often not even conscious of their true heredity. One such woman Naylor presents, enmeshed in the ambitious drive for success and glory is Laurel Dumont. Brought up by her grandmother Roberta, who lavishes her love on the motherless girl, Laurel cultivates a love for swimming and music. She goes to Berkeley for college education and also to improve her swimming. But this becomes a turning point in her life, "Because all Roberta knew was that she had cashed in her life insurance to send a child she had named Laurel Johnson to the State of California and it sent her back a stranger" (1986: 226-227). Laurel's transformation is highlighted by Naylor in her description of her driving a silver Mercedes and wearing a halter top. The sophisticated young woman is returning to her grandmother after several years of cancelled visits. From a lively energetic fun loving young girl she has transformed into an elegant but tense and depressed young woman.

A significant point that emerges is that when Black women like Jadine in Tar Baby, Sula in Sula and Laurel in Linden Hills, leave their community for a prolonged period of time, for education or a career, they become strangers to their own community because of the radical change in their world view. Naylor and Morrison suggest that the culture of materialism
and the obsession with success generally saps the nurturing instincts of women like Jadine and Laurel. However, though these women are trapped by the lure of wealth and success, their link to the community, however tenuous, brings them back even though for a short while. Sula returns permanently to Medallion but distances herself from other women, Jadine returns to L'Arbédé la Croix but rejects Black culture for materialistic pursuits and Laurel returns to her grandmother because of her problems but has to go back because her home is in Linden Hills with her husband.

Laurel's problem is that in her ambition to reach the top in her career, she has failed to make her house a home and to give Howard a family. Naylor shows how wealth and success lack adhesiveness and tend to drive people apart. She describes their married life:

The couple had everything; she had to believe that because everyone told her so. And with so much in the house they didn't miss each other as they stumbled on their way up, not realising that their stairways were not strictly parallel. Slowly, deceptively, the steps slanted until the couple's fingertips could just barely meet across the chasm (1986:232).

This chasm, Naylor points out, could have been filled with children. But Laurel has no inclination for motherhood. She is captivated by the glamour of being Howard Dumont's wife and
proud of becoming the biggest woman at IBM until she finally becomes aware of the wall of isolation she had built around herself. Her visit to her grandmother and the fact that she considers her house as 'home', indicates the hidden contradiction in Laurel. With Roberta she can be her true self and from her she can expect to receive selfless love and concern, the two virtues sadly lacking in Linden Hills. Thus Laurel, despite her wealth and success, feels the pull of her roots. She meets a tragic end because she is defeated by materialistic and patriarchal values. Just when she is trying to reorient her life, Luther asks her to leave her house because the lease was in her husband's name, and he didn't want the house after divorce. Laurel is a broken woman when she discovers that she must suffer because of her gendered identity. Her brave front, "Howard Dumont made that decision, not Laurel Dumont - not me. And this Dumont is telling you that she is going to stay here" (1986:244), only amuses Luther Nedeed. Her mental fragmentation is concretised in the form of physical fragmentation as Laurel lies dead at the bottom of the empty pool. Braithwaite, the historian, when discussing the tragedy with Lester and Willie, brings to light the inner struggle of Laurel Dumont:

People who commit suicide are struggling to order their existence, and when they see it's a losing battle, they will finalise it rather than have it wrenched from them (1986:256).
Naylor presents a bleak vision as Braithwaite tells the two boys that Laurel's tragedy was "a minute part of a greater tragedy that has afflicted this community for decades" (1986: 257).

4.2 Culture Bearers

4.2.1 Afrocentrism

For Black women, in order to construct positive self-definitions, it is important that they must overcome their racial denigration, which can be achieved by acquiring an affirmative attitude towards their Blackness. The celebration of Blackness is inspired by the movement of Afrocentricism which has helped the Afro-Americans to forge a new world view in which the dominant white race no longer occupies the central exalted position. The aim of Afrocentrism is to restore to Black Americans their cultural heritage, which they had lost because of their displacement during slavery. In the words of Molefi Asante:

Afrocentricity is both theory and practice. In its theoretical aspect it consists of interpretation and analysis from the perspective of African people as subjects rather than as objects on the fringes of the European experience. When Afrocentric methods are used to explain an issue, the aim is to look for areas where the idea or person is off-center in terms of subject position and suggest appropriate solutions. (Asante 1991:46).
The appropriate solutions are the inculcation of proper values and cultural stability. Hence those Afro Americans who go off-center because of being overwhelmed by white ideology and suffer from a negative self image, can be helped by Afrocentric intervention to regain an affirmative identity. A significant objective of Afrocentrism is to reconstruct the history of Blacks and expose how whites have "manipulated" history and ethnography to their own advantage. Their aim is to correct the misorientation of the Black Americans about their history so that they learn to place themselves within their specific historical framework which would be different from the American history. Their effort to reconstruct their history and reclaim their ancestry is also directed towards retrieving African civilisation from the charge of barbarism. Afrocentric scholars assert the primacy of African civilisations that flourished in the past and have not been recognised by the European scholars. They also claim that the European civilisation was derived from Africa by asserting that Egypt was a part of Africa and the Greek culture and technology was actually Egyptian.

While there are charges of 'racism' and separatism directed against Afrocentrism, Molefi Asante asserts that Afrocentrism respects difference and significantly accentuates the fact that difference does not necessarily mean hostility. Moreover, as Louis Gates points out:
Nobody comes into the world as a "black" person or a "white" person: these identities are conferred on us by a complex history, by patterns of social acculturation that are both surprisingly labile and persistent. Social identities are never as rigid as we like to pretend: they are constantly being contested and negotiated (1991:47).

The argument is the same as the one used by de Beauvoir about the social construction of woman. By suggesting that "black" or "white" is a historical and a social construct, he demolishes the Eurocentric idea of Black racial inferiority and puts both the races on an equal plane. The emphasis is on the fact that Blacks have suffered because of colonialism, imperialism, slavery, apartheid and other systems of racial domination, and all these systems are man made. For proper self definitions and for self-empowerment Blacks must reclaim the core African value system that existed prior to and independently of racial oppression.

4.2.2 Activism and Cultural integration

In her first novel The Women of Brewster Place (1985) Naylor tackles the issue of value conflict in the story of Kiswana Brown. Though the novel deals primarily with lower class Blacks, in this story she depicts the collision of Kiswana's Afrocentric values with her mother's middle class values. Even as Mrs Browne enters the locality of Brewster
Place, Naylor accentuates her difference from the poor and destitute who reside over there. Just as Kiswana is fantasizing a militant demonstration of frustrated tenants, she becomes aware of "a tall copper-skinned woman" with a leather bag and a black fur-trimmed coat and as the contrast strikes her she realises that the woman is her mother. Naylor further heightens the clash between the two world views with the two names Melanie and Kiswana, one westernised and preferred by the mother and the other African and chosen by the daughter. While Kiswana identifies herself with the poor and deprived people of Brewster Place, Mrs Browne, coming from the upper middle class Linden Hills, alienates herself from them. She disapproves of Kiswana living in this place but Kiswana is contemptuous of the people of Linden Hills who because of their alienation from the poor class Black community suffer from "a terminal case of middle class Amnesia" (Naylor 1983:85). When her mother accuses her of trying to be what she is not she hits out at her angrily:

"Trying to be something I'm not - trying to be something I'm not, Mama! Trying to be proud of my heritage and the fact that I was of African descent. If that's being what I'm not, then I say fine. But I'd rather be dead than be like you - a white man's nigger who is ashamed of being black!" (ibidem:85).

Black women writers not only portray the internalisation of denigrated images of Afro American women but also explore
the theme of Black women's resistance to these denigrated images, a resistance typified by the emergent woman like Kiswana Browne in Brewster Place, Meridian in *Meridian* and Claudia in *The Bluest Eye*. Kiswana represents race pride and possesses Black folk values of nurturing hence she strives for the upliftment of her race. Presenting Kiswana as an activist Naylor presents two different attitudes towards Black revolution. While Mrs. Browne feels that one can participate in the revolution from a comfortable position of an assembly woman or a civil liberties lawyer, Kiswana believes in staying in day-to-day touch with the people and fighting for them from their level. Naylor thus exposes the tokenism of Mrs. Browne by highlighting the genuine involvement of Kiswana who displays great capacity for humanity and compassion. She encourages Cora Lee to come out of her lethargic existence and bring her children to a Shakespeare play in the park. She even tries to confront Cora Lee with the limitations of prolific motherhood she had chosen for herself. She tries to unite the Brewster Place community to fight against the landlord for better living conditions, and she bravely protects Lorrain from the leering comments of some obscene men.

Kiswana Browne like Alice Walker's eponymous heroine in *Meridian* is the emergent Black woman who carves out a new definition of Black womanhood. Kiswana refuses to take a defeatist attitude after the failure of Black revolution and strongly believes in continuing the fight. *Meridian* likewise
upholds the ideals of the civil rights movement, but she gives it a new dimension by highlighting the woman's role in it. Both are daughters of mothers who take pride in their middle class status and both reject material comforts for activism and face the consequent hardships. They are both aware that if they did not experience the material reality of the poor class they would not understand their problems and would not be able to convince them about their viewpoints. As political activists they realise that social change is only possible through the group's collective activity.

While Naylor depicts Kiswana encouraging organised resistance to exploitation as a means to Black empowerment, Walker depicts Meridian tackling the major issue of franchise besides organising other forms of resistance. What is significant about Meridian is the zeal with which she serves her community. She embodies a consciousness that envisions a dignified life for her community.

While educated women like Jadine in Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1982) and Laurel Dumont in Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1986) seek security and fulfillment in material success, Meridian finds happiness in living with the least possessions. Though Meridian had studied in a college that promoted superficial gentility, she feels stifled by its stultifying rules and turns to the Civil Rights Movement as a means to serve the community. Walker adds to Meridian's activism the dimensions
of renunciation and non-violence reminiscent of the activism of Mahatma Gandhi in India. Like him she emerges as a spiritual force guiding the community children as well as those around her. By choosing to serve the children, Meridian not only seeks the fulfillment of motherhood which she had earlier surrendered, but also shapes the future of the Afro-American community. By depicting Meridian's non-violent pattern of resistance, Walker upholds Afrocentric values of toleration and co-existence as articulated by Morrison (Ruas 1986:223, quoted earlier).

Meridian strives for the community's wholeness by leading them in demonstrations against racist practices. Because of her complete dedication she ultimately reaches that state of being in which relationships don't have any meaning, only the goal matters. Her selfless activism effects a transformation in Truman who at the end of the novel adopts Meridian's vision and resolves to carry on the struggle.

As the woman's fate has been to be hidden from history, Black women's participation in resistance to slavery and her involvement in organised movements has been ignored until recently. By depicting Kiswana and Meridian as devoted activists Naylor and Walker explore a hitherto uncharted territory as they highlight Black women's involvement in organised struggle against racism.

Naylor in *Mama Day* (1988) and Walker in *The Temple of My Familiar* (1990) explore whether it is possible to integrate
white culture and history with Black culture and history. Cocoa in Naylor’s novel and Fanny in Walker’s novel are educated women who, unlike Jadine and Sula who fail to draw from the traditions of their community, attempt to retain their cultural heritage. Cocoa’s intense bond with her grandmother Abigail and grandaunt Mama Day helps her to retain her link with Willow Springs to which she regularly returns. Because of the immense love she has for them and the responsibility she feels towards them, she gives priority to her annual visit to Willow Springs over the new job she was hoping to get. "Mama Day and Grandma could forgive me for leaving Willow Springs, but not for staying away" (1988:79), she says. On the other hand Fanny, on a quest for her roots, goes to Africa, meets her father and sister and learns Black history from an Afrocentric perspective which is very self-affirming.

In Mama Day, throughout the city sections which outline the growing relationship between Cocoa and George, Willow Springs is kept alive in the conversation of Cocoa. She informs George about the tradition of Candle Walk in Willow Springs. Every "December twenty-second folks take to the road-strolling, laughing and talking - holding some kind of light in their hands" (ibidem:110). On this day people exchanged home made gifts with a parting whisper "Lead on with light." This age old tradition helps people to show their
gratitude and to share their love. The humanistic warmth of this tradition is threatened by the young folks who, having earned more money by working on the mainland, start substituting fancy gadgets instead of the simple gifts the island people exchanged and drive cars flashing headlights rather than walk with candles. Clearly the mainland culture signifying materialism and pettiness is contrasted to the cordiality and warmth of the Black culture found in Willow Springs. Mama Day, who herself is an embodiment of maternal love and concern, has a way of seeing through people so that when she sees the Phil Donahue television show, "she can pick out which ladies in the audience have secretly given up their babies for adoption, which fathers have daughters making pornographic movies, exactly which homes have been shattered by Vietnam, drugs, or "the alarming rise of divorce"" (1988: 38). In contrast Willow Springs, which has its share of petty jealousy and vindictiveness, is a place of higher values. However, the fact that Willow Springs does not seem to have a man suitable enough for Cocoa as Mama Day indicates, and that Cocoa herself stays away first at New York and then at Charleston, suggests that Naylor is not presenting Willow Springs as an ideal to replace white cultural values. But she is definitely exploring the possibilities and ways of balancing the two cultures.

Fanny in The Temple of My Familiar is in the process of discovering feminism and Afrocentrism. She is disappointed
that her husband Suwelo does not share her ardour for Black women's writing and African culture, and decides to go to Africa to discover her roots. Walker depicts Fanny as a Black feminist asserting her dignity as Black and female. Expressing her anguish over racism and sexism she says to Suwelo:

I was sick of explaining everything. In my women's studies class and in the administration office at college I had to explain about Blacks; to you and other men I had to explain about women. None of you seemed capable of using your own eyes and feelings to try to comprehend things and people for yourselves (1990:321).

As Suwelo's wife she tries to resist being considered a sexual object. Her decision not to stay married to Suwelo is a protest against the institution of marriage in which women are the sexual property of men. Equally disturbed about racism she is in great mental stress in this period of her life, but like Meridian she is determined that her reaction must not be violent. "I won't be a racist," she says, "I won't be a murderer. I won't do to them what they've done to black people. I'll die first" (ibidem:300). There is a conscious projection of whites as prone to violence and oppression and Blacks as peace loving people. Considering white people to be an affliction, she feels that the planet earth will be better off without them. However, her mother and father advise her
to "harmonize (her) own heart" and to learn to forgive. Fanny feels empowered by the Afrocentric consciousness acquired by her. The knowledge that "the white man is our brother," and that he left Africa thousands of years ago because the heat was unkind to him, makes Fanny look at her country of origin in a new light. The white man, her mother informs us, "needed to keep us terrorised and desperately poor, in order to feel powerful. No one who was secure in himself as a person would put such emphasis on the nonpersonhood and unworthiness of another" (ibidem:307). This new angle of seeing transforms Fanny's attitude as she becomes convinced, "Black is the color the sun loves" (ibidem:319).

In the act of self-affirmation, Walker's female protagonists like Meridian and Fanny, give up their life of material comfort and devote themselves to the healing of their community. Fanny gives up her job as a teacher and opens a massage parlor so that she can relieve the mental stress of people like her with the help of massage. By touching people "in gentleness" and massaging away their pain she endeavours to make them whole again.

Walker lays great stress on companionship and dialogue. She displays in this novel that people become more human and empowered when they interact with each other through speech. "The power of the word generally and dialogues specifically, allows this to happen" (Collins 1990:212). Fanny, Carlotta, Suwelo and Arveyda become very close friends. Conscious that
they have a purpose in each other's lives, they help each other to overcome their psychological repressions that were inhibiting their growth, by talking to each other. Carlotta by talking to Arveyda and later to Suwelo comes to understand her mother Zede, as "a person, a being sacred." Suwelo talks to Carlotta about his parents and is able to overcome his misgivings as he remembers their better sides. Arveyda likewise tells Fanny about his mother and father and feels comforted after sharing his story.

In Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1978) and *Tar Baby* (1982), Walker's *Meridian* (1977) and *The Temple of My Familiar* (1990) and Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) there is a clear movement towards the Black woman's realisation of her own ethnic identity with the confidence that to be Black and female is valuable and worthy of respect. Pilate in *Song of Solomon* and Zede and Fanny in *The Temple of My Familiar* are questing figures whose objective is to seek self-affirmation through reconciliation with their past which may be family past or historical past. The accent of these writers is on self-empowerment through self-definition. Fanny in *The Temple of My Familiar* and Cocoa in *Mama Day* are the emergent Black women who while affirming their Black heritage by firmly holding on to their roots, are also at home in the mainstream society. Cocoa loves Willow Springs, but keeps it as a haven to which she returns periodically for strengthening her ethnic self, Fanny goes to Africa and attains self-affirmation through her experience.
there and her contact with Nzingha, but returns to America and runs her massage parlour. Cocoa and Fanny, both educated and 'liberated' women like Jadine in *Tar Baby*, do not fall into the trap of white materialism. While Jadine becomes alienated from her ethnic community, Cocoa and Fanny are deeply attached to their ethnic group and heritage. The new self-defined Black woman, as conceived by Walker and Naylor, finds self-worth in the context of the dominant groups hegemonic values.

4.2.3 *Reclaiming one's historical identity*

Since culture conflict inevitably leads to an identity crisis, it becomes important for Afro-Americans to reclaim and valorise their culture for positive self-affirmation. Morrison, Walker and Naylor present Black women as powerful culture bearers whose specific aim is to inspire race pride and attain race upliftment. By reinterpreting Black history from the perspective of Afro-Americans as subjects rather than as objects, marginalised by the mainstream white society, these culture bearers revive Black folk values, norms and customs and by doing so empower their community. Steeped in Black folk values and possessing Afrocentric consciousness, Pilate in *Song of Solomon* (1976), Lissie in *The Temple of My Familiar* (1990) and Miranda Day in *Mama Day* (1988) guide the protagonists of the novels in their quest for self-affirmation and in doing so acquaint them with the humanistic values of their community and instil in them pride in their heritage.
While Macon Dead in *Song of Solomon* represents western materialism, his sister Pilate is his exact opposite. Macon's main aim in life is the accumulation of wealth, but Pilate is content with her small house and few possessions. Their different world views are reflected in the atmosphere of their homes. While Macon's family experiences listlessness and alienation from each other, Pilate's small house exudes warmth and cheer as it resounds with the spontaneous and collective singing of the three women who reside in it. Even Macon, who has disowned his sister, feels attracted by the cheer and the community spirit of Pilate's house. Likewise Milkman, as a young boy, is fascinated by "this lady who had one earring, no navel and looked like a tall black tree" (Morrison 1978:38). What he finds even more fascinating is the story she tells him about his family, recalling the tragic events that orphaned her and Macon. She narrates the family history like a griot and in keeping with the oral tradition, in which remembered history was transmitted from generation to generation, she sings a song that has a clue to their ancestry. This unique oral tradition is utilised by Morrison and Walker in their novels to salvage the past that has been distorted and misrepresented by the white hegemonic controllers of history. At the same time by using an African tradition they evoke a distinct Afro-American ethos in their novels. Moreover, by perpetuating the oral tradition in writing, they are attempting to save it from the oblivion
which threatens it when Black societies are influenced by western culture.

Morrison in *Song of Solomon* depicts Pilate from the beginning as a guardian of tradition. The novel begins with the local insurance agent Robert Smith's attempt to launch into a flight from the roof of Mercy Hospital one day before the birth of Milkman. Among the crowd collected to watch Mr. Smith is Pilate, who bursts into a song "O Sugarman done fly away," thus implying that his effort to fly was a part of an Afro-American tradition of flying Black men. When later Milkman visits her, Pilate becomes the story-teller familiarising him with those aspects of his family history with which he was not familiar. In Pilate's house he finds that spiritual nourishment which he found lacking in his own home. She becomes his teacher and guide as she first begins by teaching him how to talk and after having gained his interest by explaining how to make a perfect soft boiled egg she goes on to her personal familial history. Playing the role of a griot who also entertains, she has Milkman and his friend Guitar entranced as she tells them about the ghost of her father. But her specific aim is to educate and inspire Milkman. Besides being a guide Pilate also is a prophet who confidently tells Ruth, when she comes to warn Hagar not to hurt Milkman, that no one can kill Milkman because:

He come into the world trying to keep from getting killed. Layin' in your stomach, his own papa was
tryin' to do it ... When he was at his most helpless, he made it. Ain't nothing going to kill him but his own ignorance, and won't no woman ever kill him. What's likelier is that it'll be a woman save his life (1978:140).

Ultimately Pilate herself gets shot when Guitar tries to shoot Milkman. Thus besides providing Milkman the link to his ancestry she herself becomes the means of ensuring the future of the family by trying to save him.

Pilate's song like the griots' narratives, has an ambiguity which Milkman has to resolve. Just as the oral sources have to be cross checked with other accounts because oral communication is liable to inadvertent changes, Pilate's song is discovered to be a variation of the original song sung in Shalimar, "O Solomon don't leave me here," which narrates the history of his family. He learns that his ancestor was "one of those flying African children" (1978:325) who knew how to fly and flew back to Africa. He is told, ".. according to the story he wasn't running away. He was flying. He flew. You know, like a bird. Just stood up in the fields one day, ran up some hill, spun around a couple of times and was lifted up in the air. Went right on back to wherever it was he came from" (1978:326). Pilate plays a crucial role in the reorientation of Milkman who would indeed have led a "dead" existence without a historical determination of his identity. As Skerret observes, "Pilate's teaching and
example bring Milkman from confusion and alienation to community and creativity" (1985:201). By realising his link with the community in Shalimar and his responsibility for the death of Hagar and feeling very close to Pilate, Milkman acquires a collective sense of identity which embraces his larger family in love and affection. He discovers that because Pilate had an immense capacity of love, "without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (1978:340). Morrison thus signifies flying as transcendence of constricting circumstances of life through love.

"Blacks must reconstruct their historical memory. No nation, no race can face the future unless it knows what it is capable of. This is the function of history" (1991:42), says Dr. Charles Finch. Black women writers increasingly reveal their concern for historical memory in their recent novels. In Beloved (1987) Morrison's concern however is not merely with suppressed and distorted history but with that portion of the unrecorded past in which the interior life could provide many answers and which necessitates a re-imagining of history. With the help of magic realism Morrison explores the problem of infanticide as she probes the recesses of the mind of a mother who was driven to the murder of her child because of her passion for freedom and her obsessive anxiety to save her child from slavery at any cost. In Beloved Morrison also weaves in a series of stories which the characters tell themselves and each other about their past experiences. The
stories of Sethe's escape, Denver's birth, Sethe's act of killing are intertwined with Baby Suggs' story of her experiences, Sethe's earlier happy and later traumatic times at Sweet Home as a slave, and Paul D's experiences. The relevance of the knowledge of the past for a meaningful future is realised by Paul D also who at first is upset by the knowledge of Sethe's crime but later understands the anguish of Sethe and wants to replace it with love.

In order to focus on Black American history and heritage, Morrison starts the process of "rememory" for the dual purpose of rewriting history and reclaiming Black American women's historical identity.

In Walker's The Temple of My Familiar (1990) Lissie reveals her various incarnations to Suwelo, stopping to ask, "You do not believe I was there? I pity you" (1990:65). Asserting the authenticity of her knowledge of oral history she says, "Some people don't understand that it is the nature of the eye to have seen for ever, and the nature of the mind to recall anything that was ever known. Or that was the nature, I should say, until man started to put things on paper" (ibidem). Lissie's fascinating tales about her various lifetimes have the effect of linking her 'self' to history. By talking about her previous life when she was captured by slave catchers and brought to America, and by recounting the brutalities of the slave-catchers and white slave traders, Lissie becomes one with her ancestors, constructing her subjectivity through a historical
consciousness. By providing a link between the physical and the spiritual, Walker articulates an Afrocentric perspective. She draws on the rich oral legacy of Black female story-telling that has its roots in Afro-American culture.

By chronicling Lissie's several lifetimes Walker provides a definite African heritage to the Blacks and presents a distinct African world view in which there is a belief in the continued existence of human beings after death. In one life-time Lissie speaks about her existence as a pygmy. Drawing profusely from African mythology, she depicts a close bond between pygmies and trees, claiming that one can still see the great cracks in some trees from which they came. In another life-time Lissie remembers being caught by slave-catchers and in yet another she recalls being a white man. She even recalls being born into another species. Walker thus envisions a oneness not only of all races but also of man and nature. By presenting Lissie not as a perfect human being but with flaws and weaknesses, she succeeds in making her a real person with whom the reader can identify. Her mission is to help establish a link with the past, to realise a continuity, which though it may be extremely painful at times, is necessary for Afro-Americans to attain wholeness.

Memory is increasingly significant for Black women writers. Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* and Morrison's *Beloved* stress the significance of racial memory. Memory not only provides the link necessary for the holistic formation of self, but
is also valued for its power of healing. Both Walker and Morrison affirm the human tendency of repressing the memory when it is very painful. But they also indicate that such repression can be very harmful. The experience may be in one's past or in one's ancestry.

Just as in Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1986) the unearthing of the hidden history of the Nedeed wives helps in empowering Willa Nedeed so that she can confront her husband, Lissie's oral rendering of the history of Black Americans effects self-realisation in Suwelo and Hal. But while Naylor depicts women aiding women, Walker shows women and men helping each other. Lissie advises Suwelo that he must open the doors he had closed against some memories. Contact with Lissie and his friendship with Carlotta finally helps him to open the door of his mind and let his mother and father in. Likewise when Suwelo meets Mr. Hal in the nursing home after Lissie's death he discovers that "Mr. Hal's heart is hurt, and his mind, consequently is closed" (Walker 1990:413). He realises, "One of the reasons he was born; one of his functions in assisting Creation in this life" (ibidem), was to make Mr. Hal understand Lissie's message of oneness with the universe. The novel ends with the hope of the return of Mr. Hal's vision.

In the story of Zede and Carlotta, it is Arveyda who tells Carlotta about her mother's past. Walker displays the emotional intensity of oral performance in Arveyda's narrative about Zede's life. Giving Carlotta the gift of knowing her
mother, he strums the guitar and sings about the anguish of Zede which she did not communicate to her daughter. In the tradition of the griots the narrative is set to music. It is the combination of music and the story which has an emotional impact on the listener, moving her to a catharsis. Walker thus reveals a close functional tie between the narrator's verbal act and the immediate life of the listener.

Walker's didactic purpose in *The Temple of My Familiar* is to cure errant Afro-Americans of their distrust in their culture and values. Lissie is not celebrating the heroic exploits of African chiefs and kings as the traditional griots did, but speaks of her own lifetimes with the intent of bringing about cultural affirmation in those who listen to her. Walker's novel attempts a therapeutic cure at both the private and public levels. Walker prepares the Afro-Americans to re-write their history in order to become empowered to overcome their sense of helplessness induced by a racist ideology. As Armah has pointed out about Africans:

> Negative, anti-colonial feeling is relatively easy to come by. At any rate it does not demand any genius. The development of positive programs and ideologies is a much more difficult proposition (Wright 1988:100).

The same is true of Afro-Americans who nurse a negative feeling against the white oppressors. What is imperative is the construction of a positive Afrocentric ideology which can
lead to the empowerment of the community. Fanny in this novel, with the aid of an Afrocentric perspective, discovers the positive aspects of Africa. Her sister Nzingha further exposes the cultural imperialism of Europe as she articulates the cultural value of their country.

In Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1982) there are a number of culture bearers anxious to guide Jadine away from the lure of white cultural values. Besides the woman in yellow (discussed in 4.1.1) the swamp women, the night women and the women of Elooe emerge as culture bearers. The night women are the mystical women who haunt Jadine in Elooe. Jadine thinks of them as vulgar creatures who held out their loose breasts at her. The group consists of women who were alive and some who were dead and they are out to "grab the person she (Jadine) had worked hard to become" (1982:264) While Jadine is not prepared to give up her westernisation, the night women represent Son's allegiance with Black cultural values. There se, who along with Gideon, comes to the house of Valerian as a domestic help, is another significant culture bearer in the novel. She is another Pilate who tries to ensure Son's allegiance to Black culture. However, she does not waste time over Jadine who, she feels, "has lost her ancient properties" (ibidem:308). Just as Jadine calls her Mary, she calls her "Chippy" and "fast." thus voicing her disapproval. To counter the myths of the stupidity and primitive nature of Blacks she has her own myths about American
women "who reach into their wombs and kill their babies with their fingernails" and about American doctors who "took the stomachs, eyes, umbilical cords, the backs of the neck ... and froze them in plastic packages to be sold later to the rich" (ibidem:152). It is her allegiance to her ethnic values and her Afrocentric consciousness which inspire her to make up these counter myths.

As a culture bearer, she fulfills the task of guiding Son away from Jadine towards the blind horsemen on the island. Son's running away, "Lickity Split, Lickity split" provides the image of Brer Rabbit disentangled from the tar baby and running into the briar patch.

4.2.4 Black folk culture

Contemporary Black women writers have drawn extensively from Black folk culture to create a Black ethos in their works. The need to forge a positive identity has led to the recognition of Afrocentric aesthetics present in music, dance, language and quilting. The stress is on their uniqueness.

The folk traditions that provide a distinctive Afro-American perspective to the novels of Morrison, Walker and Naylor are herbal cures, superstition and conjure. Toni Morrison makes extensive use of folk culture in her novels. Harris says of The Bluest Eye, "it is also the story of Afro-American culture in process" (Mckay 1988:68). From Morrison's M'Dear to Naylor's Mama Day, Black women through their
knowledge of folk medicine subscribe to the ethics of caring. An essential aspect of their use of these cures is their sincere effort to help. The folk traditions followed by Black women reveal their humanistic tendencies. M'Dear in *The Bluest Eye* "was a quiet woman who lived in a shack near the woods" (Morrison 1972:108). People have great faith in her cures. When their own cures on Aunt Jimmy, of camomile tea and liniment have failed, they invite the infallible M'Dear. When Aunt Jimmy dies M'Dear is not blamed but rather something she ate. Local healers as Morrison depicts them do not always have proper cures and their treatment ofen reveals their ignorance. However, they command great respect in the community.

In *The Color Purple* Walker depicts the use of home cures through knowledge acquired from Africa. When little Henrietta is ill, Celie remembers that Nettie had written from Africa that similar illness was cured by yams there and hence Henrietta, who unfortunately dislikes yams, is made to eat them in different enticing recipes. Walker too stresses the caring element as she writes, "everybody for miles around try to come with yam dishes that don't taste like yam" (Walker 1983:222). Even Mr - who has always been overbearing and even brutal, thinks of his own recipes to feed the little girl.

Home medicines and magical powers are among the major features of Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988). Mama Day first makes her appearance in *Linden Hills*, as Willa Nedeed's great-aunt. As a young girl Willa considers her eccentric as she prescribes
shameweed to be given to any boy she wanted to win. When she's imprisoned by Luther in the cellar, Willa comes across various recipes written by her ancestor Evelyn Creton containing strange ingredients, like the ones Mama Day advised, with the specific intention of winning over her estranged husband. The ingredients varied and mixed consistently in Luther's food to effect his change of mind, is an indication of Evelyn's belief in the magical powers of these unorthodox concoctions, and reveals her desperation for recognition. In *Mama Day* the eponymous protagonist emerges as a powerful force combating the evils of western medicine, and bringing comfort with her strange roots and powders, but even more with her compassionate and loving presence. The rather eccentric and stereotypical witch doctor of *Linden Hills*, when seen at close quarters, emerges as the devoted and concerned aunt of Ophelia.

*Mama Day*’s expertise in herbal cures and conjure are presented by Naylor as an alternative to western medical science. Dr. Brian Smithfield, the medical practitioner shows grudging respect for *Mama Day*’s curative powers. "You stealing my patients again, Miss Miranda?" (Naylor 1988:84), he says good humouredly when he comes to see Bernice. He respects her diagnostic abilities, "Although it hurt his pride at times, he’d admit inside it was usually no different than what he had to say himself - just plainer words and a slower cure than them concentrated drugs" (Naylor 1988:84).
Mama Day commands great respect from the island community as Dr. Smithfield's diagnosis is always cross checked with her. Naylor is not presenting a quack but a genuine healer whose expertise one has to believe in. She depicts Mama Day successfully treating Bernice, Carmen Rae's son and finally her own granddaughter Cocoa. In her mode of treatment genuine humanistic concern is as important as the medicine. The amount of time she spends with the ailing, the personal touch, and often an impatient lecture on negligence are all a necessary part of her treatment. She lectures to Carmen Rae on the importance of responsible motherhood after she has seen her son through the crisis. There is in her an implicit belief in the curative power of love. Therefore some of her prescriptions have symbolic value, as the colored pumpkin seeds she gives to Bernice in order to instil self-confidence and hope in her mind. When Abigail shows her doubt that Bernice may make out that they were just seeds, she says:

The mind is a funny thing Abigail - and a powerful thing at that. Bernice is gonna believe they are what I tell her they are - magic seeds. And the only magic is what she believes they are, they're gonna become (1988:96).

Mama Day is right and eventually Bernice is able to overcome her nervousness. Similarly she tells George when she is desperately trying to save Cocoa's life:
Back at my coop, there's an old red hen that's setting her last batch of eggs. You can't mistake her because she's the biggest one in there and the tips of her feathers is almost blood red. She's crammed her nest in the northwest corner of the coop. You gotta take this book and cane in there with you, search good at the back of her nest, and come straight back here with whatever you find (1988: 295).

What Mama Day is implying is that Cocoa "needs his hand in hers - his very hand - so she can connect it up with all the believing that had gone before" (ibidem:285). She is able to reverse the deterioration of Cocoa's condition after George follows her strange directions.

Willow Springs is a counterpart of Eloe in Morrison's Tar Baby (1982). Both the places nurture folk values of hospitality and love. Willow Springs has its share of evil in the form of Ruby, the jealous and vindictive conjure woman who uses her powers for destructive purposes. Not only does she try to harm Cocoa by hiding a flannel bag full of strange ingredients under Mama Day's doorstep, but by combing a harmful substance in her hair and using black magic she nearly takes Cocoa's life. But Naylor endows love with greater power than hate.
"How bad is it gonna be?"
"How bad is hate Abigail? How strong is hate? It can destroy more people quicker than anything else."
"But I believe there is a power greater than hate."
"Yes, and that is what we gotta depend on - that and George." (1988:267).

Mama Day has a strong premonition of some evil forces working against her niece. At one stage she even feels powerless against the evil forces looming large and says, "I ain't up to all this, Lord. I'm an old woman. And I'm tired, tired of knowing things I can't do nothing about. Whatever is waiting in here to-day, I just ain't ready to face" (ibidem:174). Mama Day is about love and its healing power. The power of love is pitted against the power of hate and it is Mama Day with her faith in love, who wins. In this novel Naylor presents a world which has its frightening side as well as its benign and warm side. If there is Ruby who causes nothing but harm, there are Mama Day and Abigail who shower their warmth on all.

"Mama Day's image is that of a powerful matriarch, a nurturer of the community, struggling against dark forces that threaten to nullify her maternal nurturing. Though she is named Miranda, her popular name Mama Day is suggestive of her maternal instincts because of which she is so revered by all. In Mama Day Naylor rescues rural beliefs in herbal cures and
magical powers from the stamp of ignorance and backwardness and presents them as a part of Black rural traditions, very different from western sciences. Because the Europeans do not find a logical explanation of the medical practices of African healers they consider them to have elements of sorcery. Wauthier (1978) cites instances of African leaders and ethnologists claiming the efficacy of African herbal cures. He cites Jomo Kenyatta's comparison of the working of African magical cures to European spiritual healing. (1978:54). It is with a similar desire to rehabilitate African customs and traditions which are a vital heritage of the Afro-Americans, that Naylor presents the island of Willow Springs.

Morrison states her views on incorporating the Black world view in her fiction:

In the Third World cosmology as I perceive it, reality is not already constituted by my literary predecessors in Western culture. If my work is to confront a reality unlike that received reality of the West, it must centralise and animate information discredited by the West - discredited not because it is not true or useful or even of some racial value, but because it is information held by discredited people, information dismissed as "love" or "gossip" or "magic" or "sentiment" (Morrison 1984:388).
Morrison artistically presents this alternative reality in *Beloved* by using the technique of Magic Realism to depict humans and spirits living together. Magic Realism according to Jameson effects "a certain poetic transfiguration of the object world itself." The writer depicts -

A transfigured object world in which fantastic events are also narrated. Magic realism now comes to be understood as a kind of narrative raw material derived essentially from peasant society, drawing in sophisticated ways on the world of village or even tribal myth (Jameson 1986).

Morrison draws on the African belief in spirits. Central to the African worldview and religion is the belief in the continued existence of human beings after death and their continued influence on the affairs of the survivors. A popular belief that validates Beloved's return to Sethe is that those who die a violent death haunt the upper world for some years as noted in the *Mythology of all Races*. Lakes and pools are said to be entrances and exists from the spirit world (1964:196), hence Beloved is first introduced by Morrison thus: "A FULLY DRESSED woman walked out of the water. She barely gained the dry bank of the stream before she sat down and leaned against a mulberry tree" (Morrison 1987:50). Morrison is successful in achieving a suspension of disbelief because she transports us into a worldview in which spirits and ghosts were an accepted part of life. She informed
Marsha Darling:

There is a moment somewhere in time in which that's what you have to know. That is, ghosts or spirits are real and I don't mean (just a thought) . . . And the purpose of making her real is making history possible, making memory real – somebody walks in the door sits down at the table so you have to think about it, whatever they may be. And also it was clear to me that it was not at all a violation of African religion and philosophy; it's very easy for a son or parent or a neighbour to appear in a child or in another person (1988:6).

There is implicit belief in spirits in the novel and everyone accepts Beloved's presence in the house as something normal. Paul D disapproves of her, the community women are curious and wary about her, but no one rejects the idea of her being the dead child's spirit. Ella tells Stamp Paid, "You know as well as I do that people who die bad don't stay in the ground" (1987:188). Baby Suggs too voices the community's belief in ghosts, "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband's spirit was to come back in here? or yours?" (1987:5). Morrison adds the dimension of pain and anguish in the lives of Blacks in nineteenth century America. Victims of inhuman oppression all of them had some tragic tale of loss and suffering to tell.
In the African ethos, "events were meaningful; they had causes which Man could divine, understand, and profit from" (Levine 1977:58). If human beings could expect to understand the phenomena surrounding and affecting them, then they could also expect to understand the actions of each other. There was an implicit belief in every happening having a root cause which needed an understanding, hence it becomes vital for Beloved to understand why she was killed. Her return hence is natural. Her return and her answer to the question of her death ultimately exorcises her ghost and at the same time effects a transformation in the personality of Denver and Sethe. In the end, to both Denver and Sethe who had been leading alienated lives, communal link is restored. Morrison thus attributes positive consequences to the spirit's appearance.

4.2.5 Black women writers as culture bearers

Morrison, Walker and Naylor make use of folklore and myth to provide an Afrocentric perspective. Like the Black female characters they present, such as Pilate, Mama Day and Lissie, they themselves emerge as culture bearers of the Afro-Americans. Their own Afrocentric consciousness is evident in the Black ethos they cultivate with the help of folklore, myth, folk beliefs and Black dialect. *Song of Solomon* (1978) and *Tar Baby* (1982) are specially significant for an understanding of Morrison's use of myth and folklore. In
**Song of Solomon** the myth of the flying Black man is at the very core of the novel which is about Milkman's quest for identity. Black slaves, to ameliorate their suffering and to inspire hope for escape and freedom told tales of "flying Africans" who rose up from the slave fields and flew back to Africa. Morrison provides a feminist dimension to the myth by associating it with a woman. It is Pilate who sings the song, "Solomon done gone / Solomon cut across the sky, / Solomon gone home!" and passes on the message to Milkman, "if you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (Morrison 1978:341). The myth of the flying African in **Song of Solomon** embodies Pilate's aspirations for the construction of Black identity through a search for one's roots. For an Afro-American born and brought up in America it is important to learn about one's ancestry. Pilate, who spreads the message of the flying African, represents pride in Black heritage. Analysing the classical and African flying myths Norris Clark explains, "The classic myth (of Icarus and Daedalus) as well as the African myth, black ritual, and custom include the same aspiration ... of man's basic quest ... to go home, physically or spiritually, to be safe, to be free ... " (1980:56). The myth reveals man's attempt to transcend his own physical limitation. For Pilate it is at one level a means to transcend her own pain, of being witness to the senseless killing of her father and the subsequent agony she and her brother Macon experienced. At another level it is a message
to Blacks and specially Milkman to search for his roots. The myth of the flying African represents a challenge to the white hegemonic values since it implies a rejection of the white world view in the context of the novel. Moreover, Morrison and Naylor ascribe the power of flying to Black women as well, thereby accentuating their intense desire for freedom, a fact that had been hidden from history. About Pilate Milkman realises that "without ever leaving the ground she could fly" (Morrison 1978:340). In *Mama Day* (1988) Sapphira Wade, the slave woman to whom the ancestry of Mama Day and Abigail is traced, according to one legend, flew off from "the east bluff on her way back to Africa" (1988:206), after she had made Bascombe Wade, her master, bequeath his property to the seven sons she bore to him. Naylor like Morrison, celebrates the heroism of Black women as she attributes to Sapphira the heroic spirit which was considered the exclusive right of men.

In *Tar Baby* (1982) Morrison makes use of a popular Afro-American folktale. While the myth of the flying Black man implies transcendence of pain through a valiant effort, the folktale presents the idea of amelioration of pain through the use of strategy. The situation in the trickster folktales is that the strong attempt to trap the weak but are tricked through the use of a strategy so that ultimately it is the weak who triumph. "As interested as they might be in material gains," writes Levine, "African trickster figures were more
obsessed with manipulating the strong and reversing the normal structure of power and prestige" (1977:103). The message is of triumph in the face of hostile environment. In *Tar Baby* the tale functions at two levels. At the level of African cultural significance the tar baby represents adhesiveness or binding people together, and at the level of the *Brer Rabbit* folktale it signifies Jadine as the tar baby fashioned by Valerian Street. Son refuses to be lured by the tar baby and hence he narrates the tale:

```
Once upon a time there was a farmer. A white farmer ... And he had this bullshit bullshit bullshit farm. And a rabbit. A rabbit came along and ate a couple of his ... cabbages ... Just a few cabbages, you know what I mean? ... So he got this great idea about how to get him. How to, to trap ... this rabbit. And you know what he did? He made him a tar baby. He made it, you hear me? He made it!" (Morrison 1982:273).
```

Son presents the farmer, by which he means Valerian as the trickster, in order to emphasize the fact that his act of educating Jadine was not related to any humanitarian instinct. The white image in the mind of Son is that of exploitation and oppression. Valerian, in fact, in creating her in the image of whites, has robbed her of her genuine identity.
Besides the trickster image of the tar baby, Morrison makes her own myth of the tar lady as she points out that tar pit was considered to be holy because it was used for binding things together. Hence tar baby also means one who binds things together. She presents Sein de Vieilles, the swampy area where Jadine got stuck, as a holy tar pit presided over by mythical swamp women. Their function is to lure women like Jadine, gone astray, back to their cultural fold. "Mindful as they were of their value, their exceptional femaleness" (ibidem:184), the swamp women were arrogantly proud of their ancestry and their capacity to hold the world together with their "permanent embrace." They are resentful of Jadine's efforts to be free of their embrace. The tar image becomes more specific later, when Jadine passes Sein de Vieilles, her legs "burned with the memory of tar" (ibidem:278). Thus by attaching dual significance to the image of the tar baby Morrison dwells on the negative as well as the positive side of the properties of tar. When Son narrates the tale he represents himself as the rabbit whose briar patch is the village community of Eloe. In his mind he compares the independence and strength of Jadine to the strength of the women in Eloe who participated in activities associated with men. He thinks of Francine's athletic skill, of Cheyenne who could drive a truck when she was just nine years old, of his mother who roped horses when she was a young girl and of his grandmother who built a cowshed
with the help of Rosa. Life for them had not been easy but they had all survived due to communal harmony. These women possessed the communal value of the tar-lady.

Morrison presents three male-female pairs, other than Son and Jadine, all of whom share a common factor of the return of a member of the younger generation to the parents or guardians. The three pairs are, Gideon—Therese, Sydney—Ondine and Valerian—Margaret. Gideon and Therese steeped in Black folk values provide an example of caring because Gideon left USA and settled down in Dominique for the sake of his aunt Therese who had no one else to depend upon. Sydney and Ondine who consider themselves to be superior to Gideon and Therese because of their association with the Streets, fondly wait for their niece Jadine, who feels the need for their company only when her mind is in a conflict. Her refusal towards the end to look after them indicates the erosion of Black folk values in their lives. The Streets on the other hand have a totally fragmented family with Valerian and Margaret alienated from each other, waiting for their son Michael who does not come. While Gideon—Therese and Sydney—Ondine provide examples of faith and caring, Valerian and Margaret reveal a lack of cohesion and fragmentation. But does Morrison imply through the folklore and the instances of diverse families that the answer to the problem of Son and Jadine lies in Black folk values? Is Eloie the answer to Son's problems? Afterall he
acknowledges that it had not been easy for the women in Bloe. "It took all the grown up strength you had to stay there and stay alive and keep a family together" (1982:270), he muses. Morrison does not provide a direct answer to the question. However some indication can be found in the character of Michael, who, though he does not appear in the novel, is talked about by all and is even the main focus of attention in the crucial Christmas dinner scene. Jadine's memory of Michael is that of a clearheaded independent boy who criticised her for studying art history at the Sorbonne and implied that she should be doing something for her community. He had progressive ideas about Afro-Americans taking to handicrafts and leading a life of dignity. But along with his ideas of human dignity he is pursuing his studies at Berkeley. He therefore combines positive values of cultural pride and human dignity with the quest for material success in the modern world.

Besides these two major instances of the use of folklore in the novels of Morrison there are in the novels of these three writers, many other allusions to folk tales. In Beloved (1987) Morrison weaves in a Massa-John tale to reveal that "definitions belonged to the definers - not the defined" (1987:190). Sixo is questioned by his master whether he had stolen the shoat and Sixo replies he hadn't. Finally it turns out that he had indeed stolen the shoat and eaten it but he
insists that it was not stealing, since he was actually improving his master's property. "Sixo plant rye to give the high piece a better chance. Sixo take and feed the soil, give your more crop. Sixo take and feed Sixo give you more work" (ibidem:190), is his logical answer. The tale is borrowed from a popular folk-tale of slavery. Sethe remembers the incident in relation to her own pilfering of a few items from the restaurant she worked in.

In The Color Purple (1985) Squeak makes use of tricksterism inspired by folk-tales to succeed in rescuing Sofia from severe hardship in the jail. When Sofia is put behind bars for aggressively assaulting the Mayor's wife, Celie is shocked to see her condition. Her face is yellow and sickly and her fingers are swollen from the amount of laundry work she is made to do. Celie, Squeak, Mr - and Harpo then decide to use a strategy to lessen Sofia's hardship by having her sent to the Mayor's house as a maid, where the living conditions would be better. Squeak according to the plan, meets the jailor and pretends to be an enemy of Sofia and insists that she should be given a sterner punishment. She says that the worst punishment for Sofia would be to become a white woman's maid. She thus works on the psychology of the jailor who wants to make life very difficult for Sofia and achieves the desired result. But Squeak has to pay the price of being raped by the Jailor. The trickster strategy is useful in providing relief
to Sofia but at the same time makes a martyr of Squeak who has to suffer sexual abuse to help a sister in distress.

Roberta in *Linden Hills* (1986) narrates the story of Brer Fox and Brer Bear who had stolen farmer Brown's chicken and were caught by him. When Brer Bear is worried and asks what they should tell him when he sees the chicken Brer Fox replies "Me, you, and that chicken is gonna improvise" (Naylor 1986:222). Roberta is trying to console her grand daughter Laurel that she should not be upset over her mother's refusal to let her cut her hair. She suggests that there was a way out and she could flatten out her hair with relaxers and thus achieve what she wanted and keep peace at home.

Black women writers make use of folk tales to provide an Afrocentric ethos to their novels. The folk tales, which are an essential part of the Afro American culture also enhance the literary value of these novels. With the use of magic realism, through folk belief and folk tales and myths Naylor, Morrison and Walker are successful in writing distinctive Afro American literature.

4.3 Exploring an Alternative Theology

Christianity has been a source of great comfort for Afro-Americans since slavery. In this religion they found a message of hope and victory. The idea that one day slave and master would stand before the throne of divine justice where
God would balance the scales provided them great comfort. Sernet (1985) points out that the institutional church is still a significant part of Afro-American life and culture and by adopting Christian traditions they have placed themselves in the pluralistic American landscape. Discussing the role of Christianity in the lives of Afro-Americans, Morrison has said:

There is so much in Christianity that makes it a very interesting religion. It says something particularly interesting to black people, and I think it's a part of why they were so available to it. It was the love things that were psychically very important. Nobody could have endured that life in a constant rage. They would have all gone mad and done what other cultures have done when they could not deal with the enemy. You just don't deal with it. You do something that destroys yourself, or else you give up. But with the love things - love your enemies, turn the other cheek - they could sublimate the other things, they transcended them (Ruas 1986:242).

However, all the three writers reveal their disapproval of institutionalised religion in their novels. Pauline and Geraldine in The Bluest Eye (1972), Helene Wright in Sula (1973) and Mrs. Hill in Meridian (1977) profess themselves to be
pious christians but their Christianity is only limited to
their regularity in attending the church services, displaying
a decorative "red and gold" Bible at home or arranging seasonal
altar flowers. Church for them is a symbol of righteousness,
and their involvement with it gives them the satisfaction of
feeling very upright. The sermons at her church arouse Mrs.
Hill "to the attainment of Good," though "she did not learn
very much beyond a rudimentary knowledge of the birth and
crucifixion of Christ" (Walker 1977:78), while Pauline uses
Christianity to denounce the sins of her husband because she
was interested not in "Christ the Redeemer but rather Christ
the Judge" (Morrison 1972:37). But the attitude of these women
towards their families and their community betrays a lack of
the true Christian spirit of love and compassion. Naylor
however presents the true spirit of Christianity in Mattie
Michael in The Women of Brewster Place (1983), she too goes
to the Church regularly but unlike others she displays the
ideals of love and compassion towards the community and with
her humanitarian spirit she emerges as a benign and a motherly
figure.

In Naylor's Linden Hills (1986) the Bible becomes the
means through which Willa Nedeed learns the history of her
ancestor Luwana Packerville. Rather than derive comfort from
the text of the Bible, Luwana uses the gold-edged tissue
dividers between the books to pour out her agony over acute
patriarchal oppression she suffered from her husband. The Bible for her becomes the diary of a slave woman and ironically carries her message "There can be no God." There is in these words, a veiled indication about the patriarchal text which instead of providing her a message of hope, convinces her of her alienation from the Biblical God. It is Walker, however, who explores the idea of an alternative theology for Black woman in *The Color Purple* (1983) and *The Temple of My Familiar* (1990). *The Color Purple* begins with Celie writing to God about her dehumanising experiences. To her, God is an invisible figure to whom she could safely relate her degradations. She seems to carry in her mind the Christian concept of God as a deliverer, who would probably liberate her from her anguished state. But relentless oppression makes her doubt the benevolence of God until she finally dismisses him "You must be sleep" (1983:163). Her distancing from the God she was writing to is evident from her discussion with Shug when she says, "He 'big and old and tall and gray-bearded and white" (ibidem:176). Tackling the sensitive question of how women relate to the patriarchal image of God, Walker reveals Celie's indignation, "the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all other mens I know. Trifling forgitful and lowdown" (ibidem:175). Mary Daly articulates her view on the patriarchal concept of theology, "The entire conceptual
system of theology and ethics developed under the conditions of patriarchy, have been products of males and tend to serve the interests of sexist society" (1973:4). While Daly protests that ethicists present one dimensional arguments which do not take women's experience into account, Black women add that their specific experience of racism has also not been taken into account.

It is finally Shug who helps Celie understand God. Shug herself does not participate in institutionalised religion, which means going to Church, singing in the choir and pleasing the preacher. "Celie," she says, "tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God" (1983:176). Shug is defining a metaphysical concept of God that goes beyond the concept of the Church God. Walker suggests that the white folks' God from the white Bible cannot be a source of solace for black women who have always been tortured by white men. She presents a womanist version of God who is an experience rather than a presence:

The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it ... I believe God is everything ... And when you can
feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it. (1983:177-178).

In her next novel *The Temple of My Familiar* (1990) further elaborates this alternate theological belief. Celie's daughter Olivia refers to Christianity "as a religion of conquest and domination inflicted on other peoples" (1990:144) and used by the white man as a tool to keep his plantations going and to degrade women and enslave Blacks. She goes on to project a religion in which one experiences the beauty and greatness of the earth, and the possibilities for joy. Walker in this novel writes about Shug and Celie forming their own church which was called a 'band' to denote its radical difference from the traditional church, because they implicitly believed that "spirituality was too precious to be left to the perverted interpretations of men" (1990:300). Walker includes "The Gospel According to Shug" in this novel as an elaboration on Black women's theology as articulated by Shug. It is a gospel of love that envisions not only harmony in humanity but also in the Universe. This love extends to nature, animals, the planets and human beings of all colours. Shug's gospel envisages contentment with oneself in order to experience the joys of self discovery, a beginning of a new age with the "circular energy of generosity", compassion and kindness for all, that is, "plant, animal, river or human being" and finally an active support of "the diversity of life" and a celebration
of differentness (1990:287-289). In an interview Walker talks about a new 'tribe' coming together:

The new tribalism is totally global. From all over the earth, people who have certain ideas about the health of the planet, who care about each other are converging ... I am drawn to people who are politically or spiritually active trying to express their highest self (Thomas 1989:10).

Walker's is an ambitious vision of a global harmony and besides Shug, she exemplifies it with Mary Jane, a white woman who goes to Africa and runs an art school for disturbed youngsters. She believes that it is not racism alone that must be combated "but also stupidity and greed, qualities which unfortunately had a much longer human history" (1990:349). When Fanny expresses her surprise at discovering a white woman's dedication to Black people's welfare she replies, "We all touch upon each other's lives in ways we can't begin to imagine" (ibidem:351).

Exploring an Afrocentric feminist theology, Walker provides encyclopedic information on Goddess lore in The Temple of My Familiar in order to establish the supremacy of women in antiquity. Lissie emphasizes "the ancient tradition of worship of the mother" and speaks about women's temples in sacred groves of trees and Zede informs Arveyda that in olden days only women were priests, Walker regards Lissie as a Goddess
explaining that a goddess is someone who nurtures all and who is dedicated to the health of the world. In this novel thus Walker articulates an alternative theology that is self-affirming and self-empowering and she provides strength to this vision by rewriting ancient cultural history of the tradition of Goddess worship. Walker has skillfully made use of the novel form to elucidate her theological statement about love and equality for all.

Naylor in *Mama Day* (1988) highlights the Christian values of love and caring through Miranda Day and Abigail. With all her expertise in herbal cure and conjure, Miranda Day is a God fearing woman. She seems to dedicate her life to the welfare of the people at Willow Springs. The only time she directs her conjure towards punishment through destruction is when she discovers that Ruby is responsible for Cocoa's serious illness. When she goes to Ruby's house she calls out thrice so that on Judgement day she can answer God in defence of herself. In Naylor's women one finds the spirit of Christianity. However in *Mama Day* she makes a judicious blend of Afro-American folk beliefs and Christian values.

Shug emerges an environmentalist as she proposes that love of everything around them, birds, air, trees, flowers, other people is the real love of God. What makes Shug one of the most wonderful characters of Walker is her oneness with nature and her all enveloping love of the universe. "I know
that if I cut a tree my arm would bleed" (1983:178). Walker is here celebrating woman's age-old association with nature (the type which was celebrated in the Chipko movement in India) Walker's view is distinctively womanist not only because she rejects a white male image of God but because she implies love for God's creations and interaction with the environment. The idea that women are seen as closer to nature than men was initially introduced into contemporary feminist discourse by Sherry Ortner who argued that "woman is being identified with - or, if you will, seems to be a symbol of - something that every culture devalues, defines as being of a lower order of existence than itself ... (women are everywhere) being symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture" (Ortner 1974:72-73). Since Nature is seen as inferior to culture, women are seen as inferior to men. However Walker upholds Shug's concept of finding God in nature as a source of female strength. When Celie is finally able to perceive God in "stars, trees, sky, people, everything," she is a rejuvenated person, who has attained self awareness. The novel begins with a letter to God and ends with a letter to God but there is a vast difference between her address to a vague and distanced idea and to a real experiential phenomenon.

The association of women with nature and mostly with trees is a common feature found in the novels of Morrison and Walker. In Sula there is the inherent analogy between women
and trees when Sula tells Nel that all the colored women in
their country were "Dying just like me. But the difference is
they dying like a stump. Me. I'm going down like one of those
redwoods. I sure did live in this world" (Morrison 1973:143).
In Song of Solomon Pilate's personality seems even more
imposing when she is compared to a tall black tree. Morrison
presents her swaying like a willow when she stirs the wine
she is making, (1978:30) and Macon remembers that she smells
"like a forest" (ibidem:27). Pilate's connection with nature
and specially with trees symbolises her concern for rootedness.
In Tar Baby the swamp women hang out from trees which are
their abode. These exceptionally female mythical women are
eager to invite Jadine into their maternal fold. Even as
Jadine rejects the invitation of the swamp women, she seeks
solace from the trees, "Don't sweat or you'll lose your
partner, the tree. Cleave together like lovers. Press
together like man and wife. Cling to your partner, hang on
to him and never let him go ... Caress his bark and finger his
ridges. Sway when he sways and shiver with him too ... Love
him and trust him with your life because you are upto your
knee caps in rot" (Morrison 1982:184).

In Meridian Walker tells the story of a huge magnolia
tree called Sojourner which was known to be a place of refuge
for distressed young girls. When the students of the college,
in the campus of which the tree grew, learn about a proposal to
cut down the tree in order to erect a building on that location, they protest under the leadership of Meridian and are successful in saving it. Walker emphasizes women's affinity with nature and goes on to illustrate that even they can harm nature when they are blinded by frustrating rage, as the Saxon College students go on a rioting spree and cut down the tree. However, the tree, which has been endowed with maternal instinct sprouts up once again as an emblem of hope for Black women.

The ecofeminist idea that there are important connections between the domination and oppression of women and domination and exploitation of nature finds expression in Walker's *The Color Purple* when Celie pretends to be a tree when Albert is beating her mercilessly. "That's how come I know trees fear man (1983:30), Celie writes thus voicing her sympathy for trees and acknowledging an affinity with them because of being victimised by men. In *The Temple of My Familiar* (1990) Walker further voices her concern for environmentalism. At first it is Lissie who points out that the only "dream memory" she has of peace is the one in which she spent her life with her cousins in the forest. She remembers a time when people lived in the forests, sheltered by trees and the world seemed like one harmonious unit. The trees, she says were like Cathedrals and the mothers could depend upon them for their children's care. This idyllic life, Lissie says was shattered..."
when man divided the forest into fragments with the idea of ownership. Lissie clearly projects the image of trees as nurturers and providers of security.

Later in the novel, Fanny's father Ola advises her, "Harmonize, as much as this is ever possible, your surrounding ... You must try not to want 'things' too, for 'thingism' is the ultimate block across the path of peace. If everytime you see a tree, you want to make some thing out of it, soon no one on earth will even have air to breathe" (1990:316-317). Not only does Ola suggest that it is because of man's instinct for domination and for possession that the world forests are threatened to-day, but also that harmonising oneself with one's surroundings, which includes nature, is the greatest source of peace. By taking up larger issues like environmentalism, which are of intense global concern to-day, Walker makes use of the novel form as a means to spread a message of environmental protection.

4.4 'Springs of Creativity'

For ages woman has been denied creativity other than that of producing children. Motherhood was associated with maternal instinct rather than intelligence. Adrienne Rich observes:

The ancient, continuing envy, awe and dread of the male for female capacity to create life has repeatedly taken the form of hatred for every other
female aspect of creativity. Not only have women been told to stick to motherhood, but we have been told that our intellectual or aesthetic creations were inappropriate, inconsequential, or scandalous, an attempt to become like men, or to escape from the "real" tasks of adult womanhood: marriage and childbearing. (Rich 1977:21).

Forced to curb her creative instincts in art, painting, writing and other forms of intellectual self-expression, woman has led a frustrated existence. Research has revealed that those women who tried to give vent to their creativity or ventured into scientific or herbal experiments were branded as witches and burnt at the stake. Even in modern times, educated women in rural areas in Third World countries, who dare to express their opinion in public on matters of science, politics, economics, ethics and social relationships are branded as witches and oppressed. Woman and intelligence do not enjoy compatibility in the male world view. The situation has been even worse for Black women whose very humanity has been doubted because of their race. During slavery Black women were denied learning or any other form of creativity, other than "breeding" children. Alice Walker writes about the frustrations of such women:

When the poet Jean Toomer walked through the South in the early twenties, he discovered a curious thing:
black women whose spirituality was so intense, so deep, so unconscious, that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held. They stumbled blindly through their lives: creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope...

For these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists, driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. They were Creators who lived lives of Spiritual Waste, because they were so rich in spirituality—which is the basis of Art—that the strain of enduring the unwanted talent drove them insane (1977:231-235).

Morrison, Walker and Naylor in their novels depict women wasting or ruining their lives because of their frustrated creative instinct as well as women who attain self-fulfilment through creativity. About Sula Morrison writes, "Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings... she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous" (1973:121). Morrison attributes Sula's irresponsible lifestyle to a lack of artistic outlet. Unable
to give coherence to her life, she becomes the town's pariah. Sula's frustrated creativity is not the result of lack of education or independence, because she has both. It is because of a lack of purposeful direction in life that she doesn't think of the right form of self-expression. The latent artist in her is recognised by Ajax who woos her with gleaming white bottles of milk, clusters of blackberries still on their branches and a jar full of butterflies which he lets loose in the bedroom. It is the artist in her that makes her visualise the gold leaf, alabaster and fertile loam under the cheekbone of Ajax (1975:130). Any woman of her sensitivity could have utilised her energies in a positive manner if she had discovered a meaningful channel for her creativity. Pauline in Morrison's The Bluest Eye (1972) is another woman who has artistic tendencies but does not find a proper outlet. However unlike Sula, Pauline seeks fulfilment of her "artistic yearnings" in housework. "Whatever portable plurality she found, she organised into neat lines, according to their size, shape or gradations of color" (1972:89). She is enchanted by the beautiful accessories of the Fishers' household and becomes their loyal servant. She has a painter's love for colour and tends to describe her experiences with reference to colours. Her first meeting with Cholly reminds her of purple berries, yellow lemonade and green june bugs (ibidem:92). It is tragic that Pauline's artistic talents do not find expression in her own home which becomes for her a symbol of race and sex
oppression. Morrison explains that she "missed - without knowing what she missed - paints and crayons" (1972:89). Pauline is "unaware of the richness (she) held "and consequently makes a mess of her own life as well as her daughter's life. Morrison suggests that Pauline's life would not have been so tragic if her "springs of creativity" had found release. This does not happen because she is a victim of triple oppression.

Pauline and Sula (after her break with Nel) lead their lives in spiritual isolation, and, with no female tradition of creativity to seek inspiration from, become broken women. "For spiritual values and a creative tradition to continue unbroken we need concrete artifacts, the work of hands, written words to read, images to look at, a dialogue with brave and imaginative women who came before us" (Rich 1979: 205). The problem however arises from the fact that "Woman's work," that of housekeeping, is never considered work in the proper sense. The creativity which women employ in household work, that Pauline exhibits in her artistic arrangements of jars, is never considered creative work. A meaningful work of creativity, which was a part of their domain, and which Black women found time to do is making patchwork quilts. Tired after their day's work, they would sit in groups making patchwork quilts, which provided them opportunity to exercise their imagination. In Naylor's Mama Day (1988) Cocoa's
grandaunt and grandmother send her a beautiful quilt as a wedding present. Their quilt is emblematic of the immense love they felt for her. Quilting is an activity that saves Celie in *The Color Purple* from total fragmentation. Writing about Afro-American quilts Baker says:

A patch is a fragment. It is a vestige of wholeness that stands as a sign of loss and a challenge to creative design. As a remainder or remnant, the patch may symbolise rupture and impoverishment; it may be defined by the faded glory of the already gone. But as a fragment, it is also rife with explosive potential of yet to be discovered (1985: 706).

Described thus a patch symbolises the impoverished and fragmented Black woman, but with a potential for wholeness. As Walker displays in *The Color Purple* even the most viciously fragmented Black woman has within her the potential and the capability of piecing together the fragments and restoring herself to a "patterned wholeness." Quilting to Celie has many significant values. After she has misguidedly advised Harpo to beat Sofia if she didn't listen to him, she faces Sofia's angry outburst and is very ashamed of herself. After she has pacified Sofia, she suggests to her, "Let's make quilt pieces out these messed up curtains" (1983:47), and as they sit down together with their pattern book and start quilting,
Celie is purged of her guilt and a strong bond of sisterhood is established between the two. Creativity through quilting for Celie is an act of self expression and it keeps her from going insane. As she pieces together the fragments to fashion a thing of beauty, she releases the "springs of creativity" deep inside her, which ensure her survival. Celie is an artist and her art form is quilting. Morrison's words about her writing process reveal the similarity between quilting and writing. Her creative process, she says, begins with 'pieces' of memory. "The pieces (and only the pieces) are what begin the creative process in me. And the process by which the recollection of these pieces coalesce into a part (and knowing the difference between a piece and part) is creation" (Morrison 1984:386).

When Shug donates her yellow dress for patches in a quilt, Celie thinks of a pattern and calls it sister's choice. The very process of working with the yellow pieces is for Celie an act of love and this is the beginning of her progress from fragmentation to wholeness. Shug too understands the healing power of creativity. When Celie is in a murderous rage after discovering that Albert had hidden Nettie's letters, Shug turns her mind to designing pants, which ultimately becomes a lucrative business for the family. Albert too joins Celie in designing shirts confessing that he loved sewing when he was young but he gave it up because everybody laughed at him.
Walker draws attention to the gendered division of labour so that the work generally done by women is considered to be feminine and males are discouraged from doing it. However, she suggests that people should take up work for which they have aptitude because working with love has a cleansing and an empowering effect. Because Albert takes up the work he likes and because for that work he employs his "springs of creativity," towards the end of the novel he is a changed man. "Now us sit sewing and talking and smoking our pipes" (Walker 1983:238), writes Celie. As both Celie and Albert attain wholeness, they work together in mutual harmony, creating a utopia for the rest of the family.

For Celie besides quilting and tailoring, the act of writing is another source of liberation. Threatened by Alphonse to keep silent about her denigrating experiences, Celie would have become one of those "crazy, loony, pitiful women" if she had not written her letters to God. While writing, she analyses and judges and in this way tries to discover her coherent self. The letters reveal the gradual development of her feminist consciousness. Self expression leads to self-empowerment. In the portrayal of Celie, Walker shows how Black women, victimised by race, gender and class oppression, can actively work to change their circumstances and bring about changes in their lives. She thus implies that the ultimate responsibility for self-definition and self-valuation lies within the women themselves.
Story telling is a form of creative pursuit which Black women have inherited from Africa where history and narratives were preserved in oral forms. Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) was amongst the earliest Black women writers to explore the relevance of the African oral tradition. The narrative is told by Janie to Phoebe so that the listener is as important as the story-teller. Morrison's Eva in *Sula* is a story-teller who successfully evades questions about her missing leg by engaging others in a world of fantasy in which "the leg got up by itself one day and walked on off. How she hobbled after it but it ran too fast" (Morrison 1973:30). Lissie and Zede in Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* are also great narrators. (Their orality has been discussed elsewhere).

Besides being efficient narrators Lissie and Zede are also accomplished artists. Zede's mother is described by Walker as "more of a sewing magician. She was the creator of clothing, especially capes, made of feathers. These capes were worn by dancers and musicians and priests at traditional village festivals and had been worn for countless generations" (Walker 1990:3). Zede inherited her mother's gift of making beautiful capes out of peacock feathers and earns her living out of it. Her intense spirituality which she is not able to share with her daughter Carlotta, finds expression in the feather capes the "resplendent" and "iridescent" beauty of which captivated rock stars who bought them. Zede's creations are not thus
merely a means of preserving "cultural memory" but also a means to release her pent up spirituality. Lissie too preserves her "historical" memory through her paintings. Recollecting her various lifetimes, she paints her memory of each one of them. Her creative work, which includes her narratives and paintings, is a process of the construction of her holistic self from an Afrocentric perspective. "Lissie is a lot of women" (Walker 1990:38) says Hal and it turns out that she has lived not only as a Black woman but also as a white man, a lion and a pygmy. In two of the last paintings she made she has painted a tree of life with a little white fellow on one of its branches and in the other she has painted lions. Painting helps Lissie to gain an insight into people's problems. In the painting she does of Suwelo, she depicts him asleep "surrounded by all beauties of this life, the flowers, the corn, the ivy, the trees, the welcoming and sheltering house of (his) two old friends" (Walker 1990:354). The painting helps her to realise that Suwelo indeed was asleep and needed to be woken up by making him talk about his parents.

Like Celie in *The Color Purple* Lissie too, through her creativity brings about a positive transformation in those around her. Through her narratives and paintings Suwelo learns compassion for animals as he becomes conscious of his "non-human" relatives in the world and develops affinity with nature. When he visits Mr. Hal in the old peoples home, he has taken
with him a plant, which he waters and as he talks to the plant, he imagines that it is responding to him.

Music is another avenue through which Black women seek self-affirmation. Writing about Black women as creative artists Hine observes:

... music served as an artistic outlet which enabled black women to maintain a certain distance from the unique troubles that plagued them ... Black women's music has proven critical to black survival, for they have at all times used their song to uphold and preserve traditional or communal values and promote group solidarity (Hine 1982:367).

Morrison's Pilate in Song of Solomon, Naylor's Etta Mac in The Women of Brewster Place and Walker's Shug and Squeak in The Color Purple express themselves through music. Her song "O sugarman done fly away" not only helps Pilate to preserve her heritage but also gives coherence to Milkman's life. With Reba and Hagar her singing is in the blues tradition, an attempt to transcend their unhappiness. When she sings to Milkman she is offering him clues to his heritage, inspiring him to go on a quest for his roots. Milkman, on reaching his ancestral village discovers that the song is a variation of the song sung by the village children about his great grandfather who flew off to Africa leaving his children behind. By initiating Milkman into family history Pilate
gradually moves him away from the American ethos towards an Afrocentric consciousness. In the end of the novel when Pilate is dying she asks him to sing for her. Milkman's song, "Sugargirl don't leave me here," is a proof of his self-affirmation. He now affirms all that Pilate stood for, making her life meaningful and her mission successful.

In Walker's *The Color Purple* blues singing is a profession for Shug. Singing and the popularity that she earns with it gives her independence and self-affirmation, so that Albert who consistently brutalises Celie, treats her with deference. The two most significant achievements Shug makes through her musical talent are, the healing of Celie and the self-affirmation of Squeak. The first realisation Celie has of a positive 'self' is when Shug sings a song specially for Celie and calls it "Miss Celie's song," "First time somebody made something and name it after me" (Walker 1983:75) says Celie with great feeling. Shug uses her song to uphold communal values and establish a sisterhood with Celie and the other women around her. She inspires Harpo's girlfriend Squeak to sing and this leads to her affirming herself not as Squeak but as Mary Agnes. Walker reveals in this novel how Black women through the blues tradition can transcend their constricting circumstances and celebrate their womanhood.

In *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983) Naylor presents Etta Mae as a singer who leaves the community and tries to
establish herself as a professional. But Etta Mae is not as successful as Shug and she ends up in Brewster Place. While Walker dwells on the affirmative power of music Naylor reveals the frustrations disillusioned women feel when their talent is not recognised. Etta Mae discovers "that America was not ready for her yet - not in 1937. And so along with countless other disillusioned, restless children of Ham with so much to give and nowhere to give it, she took her talent to the streets" (1983:60). Etta Mae is depicted as a frustrated artist who like Sula in Sula and Pauline in The Bluest Eye ruin their lives because of the lack of a proper outlet for their "springs of creativity."

4.5 Black Dialect

Black folk speech in The Color Purple resonates with experience that is specifically Afro-American. Black dialect is exploited by Walker and to some extent by Morrison as a powerful tool in the projection of Black female identity, thus emphasizing the racial "otherness" of Black women. As Louis Gates Jr. points out:

... how can the black subject posit a full and sufficient self in a language in which blackness is a sign of absence? Can writing, with the very difference it makes and marks, mask the blackness of the black face that addresses the text of western letters, in a voice that speaks English through an idiom which contains the irreducible element of
The novels of Hurston and Walker, that is *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1978) and *The Color Purple* (1983) are ostensibly about the construction of Black female subjectivity and significantly both the writers have successfully used the Black dialect for the creation of an authentic Afro-American female "self." *The Color Purple* begins with the stern male injunction, "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker 1983:11), in which the use of the triple negative "not," "never" and "nobody" creates the effect of patriarchal finality in a command. Thus the first sentence, written in Black dialect, posits a patriarchal Black male subject. But the text that follows is in the voice of a brutally oppressed young girl. "My mama dead. She die screaming and cussing. She scream at me. She cuss at me. I'm big" (ibidem:12), writes Celie. With the use of short sentences Walker presents the image of an ignorant, illiterate girl, trying to make sense out of her experience. In contrast Nettie's letters are written in standard English, projecting an entirely different 'self'. Because of her education, her association with Samuel and Corinne and her visit to Africa her personality is very different from Celie's.

Celie's fragmented identity is founded on negations, beginning graphically with the cancelling out of her selfhood
with the words "I am" crossed out. It is significant that while Celie constructs her denigrated self with Black dialect, she finally achieves self-empowerment with the same dialect. Even when Darlene, who helps her with her business, tries to teach her standard English, Celie insists that she was quite happy with her dialect, even though others may consider her uneducated. She writes, "Look to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind" (1983: 194). Walker shows how the same speech that formed her fragmented identity, is later instrumental in her achieving her identity in positive and authentic terms, since Celie does not only achieve self-affirmation as a woman but also as an Afro-American. Walker shows how the language of the oppressed, even when appropriated from the language of the dominant group, takes on a different value in different contexts and situations.

Explaining Celie's use of Black dialect Walker says:

Celie is created out of language. In The Color Purple you see Celie because you "see" her voice ... She has not accepted a completely alien tongue to tell us about (her experience). Her being is affirmed by the language in which she is revealed, and like everything about her it is characteristic, hard won and authentic (Walker 1988:64).
Celie writes herself into existence with the language with which she is comfortable. Through the medium of language she defines her experience and slowly learns to understand the world around her. Walker states in the same essay that there were protests about the "offensive" language in her first letters. Besides being the language Celie knew, the "offensive" words used to describe her sexual abuse effectively condemn the act for what it is, vulgar and beastial. It is significant that though Celie is threatened to silence by Alphonse, she chooses to reconstruct the experience in the only language she knew, that of an illiterate Black female. Moreover, the dialect is appropriate for her because it is "psychologically immediate" and hence the most convenient tool for self expression in her state of confusion and anguish.

When Le Clair asked Morrison what she considered to be distinctive about her fiction she said:

The language, only the language. The language must be careful and must appear effortless. It must not sweat. It must suggest and be provocative at the same time. It is the thing that Black people love so much - the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them (Morrison 1983a:256).

In her novels Morrison uses a combination of standard English and Black dialect. In Sula Eva speaks mostly in
Black dialect. Besides dialect, Morrison uses Black idioms and phrases in a subtle way so as to make her language different from the oppressors' language. It is "the etymology of Africanisms" that gives it a distinctive touch and makes of it a Black voice. She herself explains that when Sva says "Is?" after being told that Plum was burning, "You can hear every grandmother say "Is?" and you know: a) she knows that she's been told; b) she is not going to do anything about it; and c) she will not have any more conversation. That sound is important to me (1983a:257). Morrison thus builds in "sounds" in her writing, which heighten the difference from the mainstream American English. Nel's words of sorrow and self-realisation at the end of Sula, "We was girls together, O Lord, Sula, girl, girl, girlgirlgirl" (1973:174), the advice of Therese to Son at the end of Tar Baby, "There is nothing in her parts for you. She has forgotten her ancient properties" (1982:308), Pilate's song in Song of Solomon, "O Sugarman done fly away" (1978:5) are some of the outstanding examples of Morrison's use of English language with a distinctive Afro-American touch in phrasing. In Beloved Baby Suggs, who led her community to the Clearing and became their preacher is referred to as "Baby Suggs, holy," because she accepted "no title of honor before her name, but (allowed) a small caress after it" (1987:87). To reveal the unending delight of Sethe at the sight of her daughter who had learnt to crawl extremely quickly during the time she took to join her children after
her escape from slavery, the daughter is mostly referred to as "crawling already?" in sentences like, "Sethe's laugh of delight was so loud the crawling-already? baby blinked" (1987: 93). These subtle touches place the text in a world that is distinctively Afro-American.

By using Black dialect selectively, and with the 'etymology of Africanisms,' Morrison, Walker and Naylor appropriate the English language to express their peculiar experiences and their emotions and feelings. They have thus skilfully, with the help of Black English, changed the dominant discourse that excluded them, into a discourse that is their very own. By giving Black dialect a literary status and by using the language to suit their cultural difference from the white Americans, these writers have carved a separate place for themselves in the realm of American Literature. Thus what would be termed ungrammatical emerges as the language of the Black Americans. Sentences like, "You won't never see me no more," "Sugarman done gone," "They different people you know..," "You looking good," "Tell me your diamonds," "Well, before we knowed ourselves good, as babies, me and Lissie use to play together," "I done already missed morning services," and "We gotta find out exactly what them pills do," have a structure that characterises Black English.

In the act of writing, these writers are breaking the silence imposed upon them for being Black and female. By
determinedly using Black English they write themselves into existence not only as women but also as Black women. They have thus been able to transcend linguistic alienation arising out of their gender and race difference from the dominant race. Since they are "Black Americans" or "Afro-Americans" they represent two different worlds, Blacks who draw their heredity from Africa and Americans of European origin. That language contains in itself a complex weave of social conditions and cultural experience, is evident from the distinct variety of English language used by these writers. With the aid of a distinct Black English, they have successfully presented the unique identity of the Black woman of America.