CONCLUSION

What does it mean to be Black? What are the cultural, social, historical, political and economic features that inform Blackness? What is it like being Black and female in America? Morrison, Walker and Naylor, explore the answers to these questions through their writing. When Morrison said, "I wrote Sula and The Bluest Eye because they were the books I had wanted to read" (Tate 1984:122), she was voicing her concern that American literature did not capture the variety and complexity of Black female experience in America. She felt the need for a body of writing that would reflect their unique history and experience. The novels of Black women writers of America, hence, focus on Black female experience from a distinctive viewpoint which emphasizes the sociopolitical factors that shape Black female reality.

Conscious of the fact that the American ideology of domination was responsible for foisting a variety of negative images on Black women, Morrison, Walker and Naylor challenge these images by constructing new images that range from the anguished and fragmented Black woman to the emergent Black woman who resists being defined as the 'Other' and carves a new definition of Black womanhood. In presenting Black women, they faithfully depict the fluidity, the complexity and the contradictions that mark Black female personality.
EvejTSince Morrison's and Walker's first novels The Bluest Bye and The Third Life of Grange Copeland were published in 1970, there is a gradual and clearly perceptible change in the images of Black American women presented in their novels. A comprehensive study of their body of writing from 1970 to 1990 reveals three stages in the evolving image of the Black American woman as conceptualised by them. In their first novels Morrison and Walker highlight the image of the Black woman as a victim of the interlocking system of race, class and gender oppression. Their objective was to draw attention to the extreme vulnerability of Black American women as a doubly oppressed section of a racially oppressed minority group in America. The focus therefore is to a large extent on the gender based violence and the gender specific degradation suffered by them so that child abuse and wife battering form the subject matter, much to the consternation of Black men. They nevertheless break new grounds as they explore a hitherto uncharted territory, and at the cost of exposing the evils within the community to a society that already denigrated them, they direct their gaze on issues and problems closer to home. The first novels of Morrison and Walker mark the beginning of the Black woman's quest for identity. However both the novels anticipate the possibility of "survival whole" through the portrayals of young girls like Claudia, Frieda and Ruth.
The novels published between 1975 to 1983, mark the second stage in the evolution of the self-defined Black American woman. *Sula* (1973), *Meridian* (1977), *The Color Purple* (1983) and *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983) present Black women as mothers, sisters and friends empowering each other through powerful female bonds. Morrison, Walker and Naylor in this stage recognise the vital significance of the Black women's activity of nurturing for the survival of the Afro-American community. Moreover, female relationships have been presented as vital to the positive definition of 'self' because only in these relationships can women be themselves and not be defined in relation to men or to the white race. Female bonding as depicted by these writers, leads to a shared recognition of their Blackness and to the need to value not only Black womanhood, but also the Black race. As mothers, sisters and friends these women emerge as "caring women" who, while despising the separatism that racism and sexism perpetuate, propose "solidarity around the fact of race," as a means of resisting oppressive conditions. These writers are writing with a purpose. Their novels reveal those factors that strengthen Black women to form a positive identity.

Walker's "womanist" ideal which she articulates in her collection of essays entitled *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1983), reveals her vision of the solidarity of humanity. However, none of her novels written during this period, or those of Morrison and Naylor present close bonds
between Black and white women. Their milieu remains exclusively Black and any interaction with the whites generally leads to unhappy consequences. Though it is obviously the historical and contemporary complicity of white women in the structures of domination that makes it difficult for Black women novelists to depict such bonding, portrayals of white women, nevertheless, could have led to a serious study of their behaviour. They could have thus made a valuable contribution in the study of power-relationships in women's worlds.

The third stage marks the emergence of Afrocentric consciousness which logically follows the new self-confidence and a sense of power inspired by female solidarity. While Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1978) and *Tar Baby* (1982) already reveal her concern with the quest for roots and Black cultural affirmation, it is in Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) and Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* (1990) that one encounters a complete Afrocentric environment. The image of Pilate as a culture bearer in *Song of Solomon* heralds the new woman who overcomes her "otherness" by assuming a subject position. Lissie, Fanny and Nzingha in Walker's novel and Miranda Day in Naylor's novel advocate Afrocentric values. Nzingha echoes the current Afrocentric thinkers when she interprets Greek myths from the perspective of African people. She considers Medusa to be Isis, Goddess of Egypt who was known earlier all over Africa as the Great Mother, 'The Goddess.' The snake-like locks of Medusa have positive connotations because in Africa, Nzingha
points out, snakes are a symbol of fertility. The myth of Perseus slaying Medusa, according to her Afrocentric feminist perspective, reveals the destruction of the Black mother/Goddess tradition and culture of Africa by the white male world of Greece. Such interpretations of history and mythology from the subject position of the Blacks are highly self-affirming as Fanny's reaction to Nzingha's arguments indicates. Given the Afrocentric feminist perspective, the new Black woman that emerges is happy and content with her African identity.

The three major images of Black women, the oppressed victim, the supportive nurturer and the Afrocentric woman, emerging progressively from the novels of Morrison, Walker and Naylor reveal the developing perspective of these writers as they move from the frustrating experience of dual "otherness" to a celebration of womanhood and then finally to the affirmation of Blackness.

History, or their absence in it is a major concern of women intellectuals today. Morrison, Walker and Naylor, in their latest novels recreate the history of slavery. While Morrison's Beloved (1987) is situated in the period of slavery, in Walker's The Temple of My Familiar (1990) Lissie recalls female slave history and Naylor in Mama Day (1988) traces the family history of Mama Day to her slave ancestor Sapphira. With these "archaeological explorations" these writers write an alternate history of America from the viewpoint of Afro-American women. This is borne out by the fact that Morrison's
Beloved is based on a true incident during slavery, which was reported and discussed in the newspapers. By turning a sensational newspaper report into a sensitive piece of literature Morrison not only exhibits the historical and social context of Black women's writing but also makes her contribution to the restoration of the damaged images of Black women by providing a correct perspective with which to view them.

By writing Beloved Morrison demolishes the myth of the acquiescent and the happy slave as Sethe prefers death for her children rather than slavery. Morrison highlights Sethe's valiant resistance to the institution of slavery and poses a question, who exactly is responsible for Beloved's death? Can Sethe be held guilty when it is the institution of slavery that drove her to the act? The enterprise of recreating the unrecorded past is important to these writers because they can thus visualise how their ancestors' worlds were shaped. Did they dare to dream in their anguished existence? What were their dreams? How did they try to preserve their selfhood? What strategies did they have to use to maintain their integrity? Literature becomes the best medium through which one could reimagine history and thus try to find an answer to these questions.

The novels of Morrison and Walker also provide evidence of the writers' feminist endeavour of radically questioning
the socially constructed roles of women. In Morrison's *Sula* and Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* the very concept of loyalty between friends and in the family is questioned. Morrison and Walker exhibit the need to strip off the patriarchally defined roles of women, like the betrayed and mournful wife and the self-sacrificing mother, which Nel and Zede play in the novels. *Sula* and *Zede* 's betrayal of the friend's or the daughter's trust are not condemned by the writers but left open for consideration. By presenting these radical situations, the writers provide enough scope for intensive questioning over these issues. In *The Color Purple* however, Walker is not only opening up a world in which female friendship transcends rivalry for men, but also one in which a specifically lesbian relationship is celebrated. The relationship between Celie and Shug is presented as a completely normal relationship. Hence it is a radical vision that Walker presents which excludes homophobia and undermines the phallic power of men. She thus opens up the idea of a women's world which men share not as masters but as co-workers.

There is also a marked change in the presentation of men from the first novels to the latest ones under study. Whereas men are presented as brutal, callous, cruel and irresponsible in *The Bluest Eye, Sula, The Third Life of Grange Copeland, Meridian, The Color Purple, The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*, the later novels like *Tar Baby, Beloved,*
The Temple of My Familiar and Mama Day depict men as sensitive and caring. Son and Paul D are supportive figures who play a vital role in trying to restore Jadine and Sethe to wholeness. While Paul D succeeds, Son is deserted by Jadine. Naylor presents George in Mama Day as a devoted husband who saves the life of his wife but has to lose his own life in the process. In Beloved, The Temple of My Familiar and Mama Day, these writers highlight the significance of a balanced and a harmonious man-woman relationship. Sethe can recover because of Paul D's comforting presence, Fanny doesn't want to stay married but still treasures her friendship with Suwelo and Cocoa cannot forget George and spends her time thinking about him and in a way keeps him alive through memory. These writers have come a long way from presenting violence-ridden relationships between men and women to a balanced relationship in which the two strive to understand each other and thereby establish a bond. It is significant that Pilate in Song of Solomon should choose to pass on her message of love to Milkman Dead, her male relative. She thus rescues the 'Dead' family from spiritual death. The maturity Milkman attains through this quest, makes him feel responsible for Hagar's death. Thus in both Tar Baby and Song of Solomon Morrison passes on the mantle of culture bearers to men, adopting therefore a "womanist" rather than a feminist stance.
The most powerful women in these novels are those who have abundant love to shower. Women's love for each other, for the men in their lives and for their community is a theme that binds these novelists together. Pilate's singular regret when she is dying is, "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all" (Morrison 1977:340). Love of oneself and of one's fellowmen is her message to her nephew. Women like Baby Suggs (Beloved), Meridian (Meridian), Shug (The Color Purple), Lissie (The Temple of My Familiar), Mattie and Kiswana (The Women of Brewster Place), and Mama Day and Abigail (Mama Day) are memorable creations and their strength lies in their generous capacity to reach out to others and thus ameliorate not only their own pain but that of their racially denigrated community. Just as, in Naylor's novel, Mama Day's power of love prevails over Ruby's power of hate, these writers provide hope that the power of love which is a cultural endowment of Black women may empower them to overcome the vicarious oppression that is their reality in America.

While Walker, Morrison and Naylor reveal many common features in their portrayal of Black women, they are however very individualistic in their approaches to the problems they tackle. Morrison's and Naylor's concern about the lure of wealth and glamour is evident from their novels. Making it big, living in comfort and luxury even at the cost of self effacement is presented as one of the chief obstacles to
the attainment of a self-defined standpoint. Both equate bourgeois materialism with spiritual emptiness, as Morrison's *Tar Baby* and Naylor's *Linden Hills* illustrate. Walker on the other hand presents business enterprise as a source of self-affirmation, specially since it is based on the protagonist's creative talents, as *The Color Purple* and *The Temple of My Familiar* exemplify. Celie becomes a successful business woman due to her talent of stitching, Fanny opens a massage parlour and Carlotta becomes a 'bell chimist'. They thus gain self-confidence and self-empowerment by giving an outlet to their repressed creativity. However, the business enterprise that Walker projects in her novels is not capitalistic in concept but is a collective endeavour directed towards self-sufficiency and wholeness. She thus rejects the values of commercial culture and promotes a collective that not only provides a decent living, but also induces harmony and warmth in human relationships. Celie and Fanny thus direct their efforts towards healing themselves and also the other members of their community.

In their exploration of a self-affirming Afrocentric feminist perspective for Black women, Morrison and Naylor use a Black American locale, creating their imaginary communities rich in Black culture either within America as Eloe in *Tar Baby* or just offshore but connected to America as Willow Springs in *Mama Day*. They are thus concentrating on a Black cultural
affirmation within the American context, whereas Walker is more visionary in her outlook and through a valorisation of African culture and African history, widens her scope from resurrecting Black American women from denigration to the revisioning of the entire African race from an affirmative and self-empowering stand-point.

Walker experiments with a narrative technique that is borrowed from the African griots and the oral tradition. Lissie's narrative has the essence of history. Walker in this novel uses the novel form as a site to convey her message of womanism, humanism, Afrocentrism and environmentalism. Morrison on the other hand resorts to fabulation and peoples her landscape with mythical and supernatural presences. Naylor, likewise, presents an alternate reality through the depiction of the "other place" on an imaginary island. By juxtaposing the urban and the rural in *Mama Day*, she reveals the two worlds which Black American women experience.

Since Morrison, Walker and Naylor are still writing, it is to be seen what new direction their search for the image of the new Black woman will take. Will they consolidate their Afrocentric position or will they widen their vision to a new community embracing the entire world? Will Walker carry forward the image of Mary Jane, the white woman in *The Temple of My Familiar*, who had devoted her life to Africa? How will
she carry forward Mary Jane's message, "We all touch upon each other's lives in ways we can't begin to imagine?" (1990:351). The next novels of these writers will provide the answer.