INTRODUCTION

Women's writing, which had generally been on the periphery of literary studies is today emerging as one of the major areas of interest, specially among women. It is because this writing depicts the common condition of invisibility resulting from sexual politics that women are drawn towards it. The issue of double oppression raised by Dalit women in India makes the study of Black American women writers in particular of great interest and relevance to us because they too are doubly marginalised. Moreover, they are articulating a stand point that appeals to the post-colonial consciousness that is emerging in the once colonised nations.

Women writers have often drawn an analogy between the discourse of feminism and post-colonialism. Relegated to the position of the 'other,' women have metaphorically been considered as 'colonised' because they share with the colonised people a painful experience of the politics of oppression. Black women writers have problems not only with sexism but also with the Eurocentric epistemology of the White American writers. Therefore like the post-colonial societies, they are firmly rejecting Western definitions about themselves and refuting their supposedly authoritative views about the Black community. Just as Edward Said exposed Orientalism "as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient" (Lodge 1988:294), the contemporary Black women writers of
America are exposing the omissions and distortions of their reality by the dominant group to serve their vested interests. They are not merely refuting the established hierarchical order based on racism, but are also questioning the ideology on which the order was based. While they are challenging the Euro-American world view which is shaped by the concepts of centre and periphery, they are simultaneously engaged in the construction of an Afrocentric perspective. Having consciously accepted the fact that they are different from the dominant group, they are accentuating their distinctive and unique features and celebrating the difference.

With the emergence of a new self-affirming consciousness, it is natural that the concern of the Black women writers of America should be directed towards the production of an indigenous literature containing the unique characteristics of African art forms, just as the post colonial writers are rediscovering the significance of their distinctive art forms. Africans and Afro-Americans have successfully rescued 'oral performance art' from labels like 'primitive' and elevated it to the level of sophisticated artistic tradition. By doing so they have given their work a unique cultural identity. The stress is on the need to see literature in relation to the society which produced it.

Since both the post colonial writers and Black American women writers take historical, sociological, ideological and cultural factors into account, they strongly defend the
political nature of their discourse. Hence literature gains significance on account of its social function of projecting a specific perspective. Black American women writers consider literature as an institutional site for the resistance of marginalisation and as an appropriate channel for documenting their newly emerging ideology and portraying a new identity with 'self' as subject.

While place and displacement is a major concern of the post-colonial literatures, for the Black Americans the crisis of displacement is even more acute since they were forcibly displaced from their native land by slave traders. The Black Americans have lived away from their ancestral land for generations, a point that Alex Haley stresses in Roots. Displacement inevitably leads to an identity crisis, nurtured further by the cultural denigration carried out by a supposedly superior race. Black American women writers reveal their concern about the crisis in self-image and the resultant suffering of Black women when they internalise the dominant image of themselves.

Another problem which these writers face in common with the post-colonial writers is the use of language. With a growing awareness of the function of language as a medium of power it becomes necessary to remould it to suit their writing so as to make it different from the dominant group's or the coloniser's discourse. The problem they face is how to "convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's
own" (Rao 1938:vii). Black American women writers achieve this end through the use of Black dialect and also through subtle nuances which impart to the language a specific cultural identity. The power that the dominant group exercises through language is thus rejected with the emergence of a Black feminist voice.

The novels of the contemporary Black American women novelists are illustrative of the tensions of being Black and female in America. This study explores the images of Black American women in these novels to uncover the many subtle factors that shape Black female reality.

The writers chosen for this study are Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor, these being the most prominent of the contemporary Black women novelists. All three of them are gifted writers and their talent has been greatly appreciated by the academic world. The novels discussed in this study are, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1972), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1978), *Tar Baby* (1982) and *Beloved* (1987); Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *Meridian* (1977), *The Color Purple* (1983) and *The Temple of My Familiar* (1990); Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983), *Linden Hills* (1986) and *Mama Day* (1988). All these novelists have received literary honors for their writing. Toni Morrison received the National Book Critics Award and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award for *Song of Solomon* in 1978. In 1981 she became the first Black woman
writer to appear on the cover of *Newsweek*. In 1988 she received the prestigious Pulitzer Award for *Beloved*. Walker received the Pulitzer and the National Book Awards for *The Color Purple* in 1983 and Gloria Naylor won the American Book Award for First Fiction for *The Women of Brewster Place* in 1983.

Morrison's *Jazz*, Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and Naylor's *Bailey's Cafe* have been published in 1992. Since these novels were unfortunately not available in India by the time this thesis was completed they could not be included in this study.

This is a thematic study. A socio-cultural perspective has been useful for analysing the oppressive racist and patriarchal conditions which shape the images of Black American women. Certain insights from R.D. Laing's theory of 'the divided self' have been helpful in studying the damaging psychological impact of racist ideologies on Black American women. The application of Black feminist theories from select critics has been fruitful for highlighting the Afrocentric consciousness of these writers. The theories of select white feminists have also been cited in the discussion of those experiences of motherhood which are considered common in all cultures.

The thesis comprises four chapters. Since any study of the images of women in literature must begin with the examination of stereotypes before the reality can be explored, Chapter 1 entitled *The Black Female Literary Tradition*, looks at the
stereotypes of Black women since slavery and also examines the means of their production. The stereotyped portrayal of Black women by the major Black male writers of this century has also been discussed. The chapter goes on to trace the Black female literary tradition from the autobiographical narratives written in the nineteenth century to Zora Neale Hurston in the early twentieth century. The narratives of Jarena Lee, Zilpha Keat and Harriet Jacobs have been examined to illustrate the debunking of the stereotypes. Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) anticipates the contemporary Afrocentricism because of its use of Black dialect and folkloric materials. Its significant contribution to the making of the Black female literary tradition has been outlined.

Since Black feminist consciousness plays an important role in the shaping of the images of Black women in contemporary novels, the Black feminist perspective provided by select critics like Barbara Smith, Deborah McDowell, Hazel V Carby and Patricia Hill Collins has also been discussed.

Chapter 2, entitled *Fragmented Women*, first examines the role played by various institutions, such as the advertising media and the formal education system in perpetuating Black female stereotypes in modern times. The consequential negative self formation of Black women is also explored. The chapter focuses on the fragmentation of Black adolescent girls and Black women due to the hostile racist and sexist environment. Arguments from R.D. Laing's theory of 'the divided self' have
been used to explore the detrimental effect of the interlocking system of race, class and gender on the psyches of Black adolescent girls. The chapter also focuses on the domestic violence and the sexual abuse of young girls. The 'mule uh de world' status of Black women is explored through the examination of their exploitation at home and at work. Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* (1990) reveal the fragmentation of Black women during slavery. A major concern of Black feminists today is homophobia. This chapter also focuses on the oppression of lesbians as depicted in Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983). The chapter closes with a discussion of the manner in which Black women feel betrayed by their female body.

Chapter 3 and 4 explore the positive images of Black women. Chapter 3 looks at the image of the Black woman as a nurturer. Motherhood, the primary nurturing role of women, is discussed with reference to various novels. The problematic position of the Black mother as a nurturer and a destroyer has also been examined. Significant nurturing relationships, such as female bonding, the close bond between sisters and community bonding have been explored. That the nurturing involved in motherhood and sisterhood has tremendous healing power is revealed through the study of *The Women of Brewster Place* and *The Color Purple* (1983). The chapter closes with an examination of 'womanist' perspectives in some of these novels. The theories of Adrienne Rich and Nancy Chodorow have helped to illuminate the role of Black woman as a nurturer.
Chapter 4, entitled Afrocentric Consciousness, examines the role of Afrocentricism in empowering Black women. The chapter begins with a study of culture conflict in the protagonists of Sula (1973) and Tar Baby (1982). The clash between the white ideology of material success and the emerging Black ideology of cultural revival often becomes a cause of conflict in the Black woman eager for upward mobility. This chapter chiefly examines the later novels of Morrison, Walker and Naylor which present an Afrocentric perspective. The language question, which is crucial to the formation of a distinctive identity, has been discussed, as also the use of Black American folklore and folk beliefs which together project an Afrocentric world view.

In the conclusion the various images that emerge to present the Black female reality are brought together and discussed. The common features of the three novelists are indicated and the differences which distinguish them from each other are highlighted.

The method of documentation used in this thesis is the one recommended in the Indian Journal of American Studies. Hence both footnotes and end notes are eliminated. An alphabetized bibliography is given at the end of the thesis.

The term 'Black' with a capital B is used to denote the Afro-Americans as a group. The term Black women or Black women writers throughout this study refers to Black women of America.