CHAPTER 1  
THE BLACK FEMALE LITERARY TRADITION

Introduction

This chapter outlines the creation of Black female stereotypes in the nineteenth century and examines autobiographical narratives written by Black women in that century to reveal the reality of Black womanhood. While in most cultures woman has been defined in relation to man, the Black woman experiences double marginalisation because she also belongs to an oppressed group. From the outset she was defined by the white man who owned her and controlled her sexuality. The stereotypes foisted upon her were - the breeder woman, the whore, the loyal mammy, the conjure woman and the emasculating matriarch. Black women to this day find themselves burdened with these negative stereotypes. Black male writers too have presented Black women in a stereotyped mould of the supportive mother, the fallen woman or the victimised girl friend. Their portrayal lacks the complexity of Black female experience which only Black women could articulate.

Black women intellectuals, activists and sociologists have strongly protested against the negative stereotypes and provided arguments to counter these images. Black feminist critics have outlined a Black feminist perspective, emphasizing
the politics of race, sex and class as crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers. Articulating their standpoint, these writers have stressed that their creativity springs from their cultural identity.

Autobiographical narratives written by Black women in the nineteenth century debunk the stereotyped images. Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw challenge the traditional female roles in organised Black religious life. Harriet Jacobs not only reveals her trauma as a female slave but also her bizarre but brave act of resistance. Hurston's novel written in the early twentieth century portrays a female protagonist who values her selfhood above a financial security which is accompanied by patriarchal restrictions. It is also a novel about the silence imposed on women and about a woman's discovery of her voice.

1.1 The Creation of Stereotypes

It was Simone de Beauvoir who first drew attention to the distinction between biology and the social construction of gender. In her pioneering text The Second Sex she made her famous observation, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman ... it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature" (1954:273). She drew attention to the fact that throughout history women have been objectified by men. Constructed as man's 'other', woman has had no subjectivity of her own. "She is the incidental the inessential as
opposed to the essential" (ibidem:16). In practically all cultures woman has been defined in relation to man. Her identity has always been that of a daughter, wife or mother. Culturally expected to live under the protection of her father, husband or son, her life is marked by a constant and profound powerlessness, "not chosen but assigned." With the rise of feminist consciousness in the twentieth century, women started reacting against their 'otherness' with regard to men. Feminist scholars have tried to study the patriarchal structures which have shaped women's lives and marginalised them, as they simultaneously endeavour to extend a feminist perspective that encourages liberation from a constrictive existence.

"Literary criticism is one of the places where feminism confronts patriarchal values" (Greene and Kahn 1985:59). Feminist critics have discovered that woman characters in literature have mostly been depicted according to a male perspective. Analyses of images of women in literature have uncovered various stereotypes, such as the submissive wife, the devoted mother, the seductress, the sex object, the virgin and the whore. Thus woman is either celebrated as a passive and self-sacrificing wife or mother, or else she is condemned as a prostitute. Masculine and feminine have generally been dichotomised as provider-dependent, characterized as strong-weak and associated with culture—nature, reason—passion. These binary oppositions, embedded in patriarchal ideology,
are projected in male and female characterisations in literature. Hence the heroes are generally bold, daring and adventurous, promising "power to the weak, glamour to the dull, and liberty to the oppressed" (Edwards 1984:3), while the heroine is mostly delicate and docile, content to be protected and cherished by the hero. By studying the status of women in literature, feminist critics have exposed the male bias responsible for the female stereotyped images.

While white women have been struggling against the constricting patriarchal structures that oppress them, Black women of America have had an additional battle to wage. They have had to contend with not only the politics of sex but also the politics of race. Brought to the country as slaves, they have been doubly marginalised for their race and gender. Controlled and defined by the master race, the Black woman finds herself saddled with a negative set of images that were perpetuated by the whites to serve their interests. It is the institution of slavery that is widely regarded as the source of various stereotypes about the black women, as Black feminist critics such as Joyce Ladner (1971), Angela Davis (1971), Michelle Wallace (1978), Barbara Christian (1980), Patricia Bell Scott (1982), Hazel V Carby (1987) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) have pointed out in their studies.

1.1.1 Images perpetuated during slavery

"Race has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents
of specific belief systems which - more often than not - also have fundamentally opposed economic interests. Race is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application" (1985:5), writes Louis Gates Jr. He goes on to quote the eighteenth century philosophers Hume and Kant who "conflate color with intelligence" (ibidem:10), and consider Negroes to be an inferior species to the whites. There was a widespread belief among the Europeans that Blacks as a species were somewhere between animal and man in the Great Chain of Being. In eighteenth century America, when slavery was widespread in the southern states, Blacks were associated with the ape, especially the orangutan. Considered closer to animals, Blacks were thought to be "lewd, lascivious and wanton." The image of the Black woman suffered pathetically because, according to myths perpetuated by slave traders, Black women were supposed to be sexually aggressive and were said to have sometimes mated with orangutans, as Scott (1982) and Christian (1980) have noted. By projecting Black women as animallike, they could be sold as "breeders" and considered to be good investments because every slave child born represented a valuable unit of property.

Louis Gates Jr (1985) cites the case of Phyllis Wheatby as a significant example that reveals the European approach towards the African race in the eighteenth century. When efforts were made to publish Phyllis Wheatley's book of poetry, the publishers were incredulous that an African could write
poetry. The book was finally published in England along with an attestation from a group of eminent men who examined her and were convinced that the "young Negro girl, who was, but a few years since, brought as an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa," was qualified to write the poetry published in the book. Wheatley's poetry set people thinking that if the African "species of men" could create formal literature, they were indeed human beings and thus fundamentally related to the Europeans. Wheatley herself was manumitted but slavery continued as an institution, refusing to award human status to the Blacks. Southern plantation owners, wedded to the pursuit of profit, exploited Blacks for their own vested interests. Slaves not only worked tirelessly for their masters but were themselves also "marketable commodities." Young healthy Black female slaves, prolific in child-bearing, were highly valued for their capacity to "make little niggers for Massa." However, if the slave owner was enraged he would brutally whip the pregnant slave woman after she was "made to lie down in a specially dug depression in the ground" so that the unborn child which represented the slave-master's "commodity" was not harmed (Davis 1972:88; Jones 1985:20).

The primary image of the Black woman that emerges out of the American institution of slavery is that of a breeder. It is an image that denigrates her to the level of cattle. By implying that Black women were able to produce children as easily as animals, the master race could justify itself for
encouraging them to have more and more children. The law was on the side of the slave-holder. A law passed in Virginia in 1705 stated, "... All Negro, mulatto and Indian slaves shall be held, taken, and adjudged to be real estate, in the same category as livestock and household furniture, wagons and goods" (quoted by Stetson 1982:72). Thus slave-holding laws sanctioned the reification and commodification of Blacks by placing them in the nonhuman category.

The projection of Black female slaves as "female animals" served the economic interest of the slave-holder. Moreover by perpetuating the image of Black women as mothers who did not love their own black children, he could sell off her children to remote plantation areas without a troubled conscience. His mercenary instinct was thus satisfied at the cost of immense anguish to slave mothers and children. The institution of slavery also reduced slave women to sexual objects. "A fine line existed between work-related punishment and rape," writes Jacqueline Jones. "An overseer's lust might yield to sadistic rage" (1985:20). Any resistance to the advances of the slave-holder could result in brutal whipping.

According to Michele Barrett the male attempt to control female sexuality has resulted in the "madonna / whore dichotomy." In her words patriarchy perpetuates:

... twin images of woman as, on the one hand, the sexual property of men and, on the other, the chaste mothers of their children ... the means whereby men
... ensure both the sanctity and inheritance of their families and their extra-familial sexual pleasure (1980:45).

Nowhere else can the madonna/whore dichotomy be better illustrated than in the American institution of slavery. While the slave-owner upheld the image of the "delicate alabaster" white lady as chaste and virginal, he turned his slave women into whores for his "extra familial sexual pleasure." The function of the image of the whore or sexually aggressive woman was to provide justification for the widespread sexual assaults by white men reported by Black slave women. "At the crux of the 'loose woman' image is the belief that black women, unlike white women, craved sex inordinately ... The rape of black women by white men or the use of their bodies for pleasure could be rationalised as the natural craving of the black woman for sex, rather than licentiousness of the white man" (1980:13), Barbara Christian has argued. In an attempt to put the sexual exploitation of slave women in a proper perspective, feminist sociologists like Brown-Miller use the term "institutionalised rape" while discussing sexual norms during American slavery.

Christian (1980) and Carby (1987) both perceive a correlation and interdependence between the images of white and Black women in the antebellum South. Carby argues, "...

... two very different but interdependent codes of sexuality operated in the ante bellum South, producing opposing
definitions of motherhood and womanhood for white and black women which coalesce in the figures of the slave and the mistress" (1987:20). Likewise Christian points out, "The image of the mammy, ..., cannot be seen in a vacuum; she is a necessary correlate to the lady. If one was to be, the other had to be" (1980:12). The "cult of true womanhood" that governed the lives of white women, prescribed piety, purity, chastity, submissiveness and domesticity. The white mistress, whose responsibility it was to provide legitimate heirs to the white man, was expected to be a paragon of virtue which also meant that she was free of any sexual passion. Delicate, fragile and ornamental, she could preserve her attributes because she had the female slaves around her to take over the tedious household work and even the raising of children.

The ambivalence in gender construction in the patriarchal institution of slavery is interesting to note. While the role prescription for white women was prompted by a patriarchal ideology, the role formation of Black women was motivated by an ideology that was both racist and sexist. To suit his vested interests, the white slave-holder deftly inverted the image of the slave woman to make it the opposite of the white woman. Out of all the virtues "the cult of true womanhood" glorified, the Black slave woman could only hope to conform to the virtue of submissiveness, the other attributes being beyond her power. Piety, purity and chastity were terms alien to her situation since these unfortunate women could not
exercise control over their own bodies because their sexuality was controlled by their owners.

If the Blacks were considered to be of a sub-human species, why did the slaveholder have sexual relationships with these women? Surely if the myth of Black woman's sexual relationship with orangutans debased her, then the white man's sexual interest in the Black woman should be considered an act of perversion, as Christian has also argued (1980:14). At any rate, this illustrates the double standards practised by the white patriarch. One reason could be that he desired variety in sex, but above all it enabled him to exert and exhibit his power over the slaves. He could thus subjugate and humiliate not merely the Black woman but also the Black man who was helpless to protect her.

While fragility was valorised as the ideal state of the white woman, the Black woman was associated with physical strength and the ability to endure fatigue and pain. Thus the slave holders could extort as much labor from the Black woman as he did from the Black man. "The quest for an 'efficient' agricultural work force led slave owners to downplay gender differences in assigning adults to field labor" (Jones 1985:15). Slave women often spent the entire day toiling under the hot sun. The definition of a distinctive category of "women's work" did not apply to the slave woman. She even suffered lashes from the overseer if he was displeased. Mothers with infants were not spared brutal whipping "so that blood and
milk flew mingled from their breasts" (Jones 1985:20). The dichotomy between the white and Black woman's images during slavery is very powerfully rendered by Sojourner Truth in her speech:

But what's all dis here talkin' 'bout? Dat man ober dar say dat women needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to have de best place every whar. Nobody ever help me into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or gives me any best places ... and ar'nt I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! ... I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me - and ar'nt I a woman? I could work as much as a man when I could get it, and bear de lash as well - and ar'nt I a woman? I have borne five children and I seen 'em mos' all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard - and ar'nt I a woman? (Schneir 1972:11)

Perhaps the only image in which the whites viewed her sympathetically is that of the loyal mammy, the faithful, obedient domestic servant. By showering her love upon her white wards, in preference to her own "ugly black children," she demonstrated her acceptance of the dominant group's superiority to her race, or so the dominant race believed. In reality the slave woman was compelled to neglect her children because of her long hours of work. As a loyal mammy she was treated well and
sometimes even favoured because she had accepted her subordination. She earned the approval of her master and mistress because she taught her children to hold the whites in deference. However, from a Black viewpoint she was a hated figure as Wallace notes, "...she often controlled the household, its white members as well, ...she was sometimes overly loyal to her master and guarded his wealth and position with great vigor" (Wallace 1978:21). The image of the loyal mammy has persisted in twentieth century writing also. The mammy in Gone With The Wind and Dilsey in Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury are some of the memorable examples. Dilsey embodies a moral vision that is alien to the Compson household. She is the only figure with a coherent sense of self in the midst of a number of fragmented beings. In holding the doomed family together, in her patience in dealing with Mrs. Compson and Jason and in her compassion for the idiot Benjy, she is indeed a loyal mammy. Yet there is a perspective lacking in Dilsey's presentation — her relationship with her own children. She is shown constantly chiding her grandson Luster and her concern for the Compson family always takes precedence over her own family. As Margaret Walker writes, "As a mammy, a faithful old retainer, she is unacceptable to the average Black reader as a real Black mother. It is one thing for her white folks to love her and for her to love their children — this is a carry over from the economic system of slavery — but it is utterly unnatural for her to
mistreat her own child at the same time by calling him a fool" (1990:148). Hence one can see that for Blacks Dilsey is a stereotyped loyal mammy presented from a white perspective. It is only lately that white feminists like Adrienne Rich have become conscious of "a sense of betrayal, of the violation of a relationship" (Rich 1977:259) when white women disown their Black mammies who had showered their motherly affection upon them. Remembering her own "black mother," Rich declares that she had learnt from her slim and dignified mammy "a great deal about the possibilities of dignity in a degrading situation" (ibidem:258).

Another stereotype that was perpetuated during slavery was that of the conjure woman. Because of her knowledge of herbal medicines and what might be termed folk superstitions the Black woman was often associated with witchcraft and magic. In African cultures, the universe is not silent; it gives out signs and warnings to those who know how to interpret them. These beliefs were handed down by the African slaves to their progeny. They believed that the world was filled with spirits. There were spirits of trees, animals, rivers and all the natural phenomena that surrounded them. Survival, happiness and health, they believed, was contingent on their ability to communicate with the spirits. This could be done through the spirits of their ancestors, who were considered to be intermediaries between the material world and the spiritual world. Dreams were also taken seriously and slave women
interpreted them as signs of good luck or impending tragedy. With such a world view, the slave women who communed with spirits were naturally regarded as conjure women. It suited the slave-holders to propagate this image because they could thus prove that the Blacks were a primitive people and needed to be civilised. However, the Blacks themselves, by nurturing the African world view were able to preserve their culture and with it their distinctive identity.

The stereotype that has perhaps done the most damage to the Black woman herself and to her relationship to the Black men is that of the emasculating matriarch. The myth of the castrating Black woman was founded in slavery because of the misconception that "in playing a central part in the slave family, the black woman related to the slaveholding class as a collaborator" (Davis 1972:82). Davis goes on to argue, "The designation of the black woman as a matriarch is a cruel misnomer ... It is cruel because it ignores the profound traumas the Black woman must have experienced when she had to surrender her child-bearing to alien and predatory economic interests" (ibidem:84). In a system in which family members were cruelly separated from each other and sold as a measure of capitalistic gain for the slave-holder, the question of matriarchy, which implies 'power', does not arise. Just because the mother was often the only legitimate parent of her children did not mean that she had any power to shape
their destiny. In fact, she could not even exercise control over her own body. It is indeed ironic that the Black woman who experienced extreme powerlessness due to race, class and gender oppression, should be associated with images of power. In a situation in which she was owned by the slave master and her sexuality and reproductivity was harnessed to suit the system of capitalistic exploitation, the Black woman was actually relegated to a subhuman status.

However because the Black woman was generally a domestic worker and hence in close contact with the members of the slave holder's family and because she was sexually exploited by the slave holder, she was accused by the Black man of complicity with the white man. The myth of matriarchy also gained weight because the Black female slave was strong enough to endure pain and hardship and could work like a man. Hence the Black woman found that both the white community and the Black man considered her to be a castrating female.

1.1.2 The matriarchal image perpetuated

The image of the matriarch resurfaced with a greater maligning power when Patrick Moynihan's report on "The Negro Family" was published by the US Department of Labor in 1965:

In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of American society, seriously
retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male (Wallace 1978:109).

These words of Moynihan enraged the Black community for it put the blame of the disintegration of the Black family on the Black woman rather than on the interlocking system of race, class and gender oppression. The Black man was misled by the report and he vented his anger on the Black woman for emasculating him. But Black women intellectuals like Davis (1972) and Wallace (1978) reacted vehemently to the report and condemned it as spurious propaganda aimed at fragmenting the Black community by creating a rift between Black men and women. "An accurate portrait of the African woman in bondage must debunk the myth of the matriarchate," Davis wrote, "Such a portrait must simultaneously attempt to illuminate the historical matrix of her oppression and must evoke her varied, often heroic, responses to the slave-holder's domination" (Davis 1972:82). Others like bell hooks and Frances Foster joined them in proclaiming that the blame lay on the American economic structure because of which Black men were often forced to remain unemployed. Black women were thus forced to become the providers of the family, they explained, because they took up menial jobs which Black men refused.

kinship systems have discovered highly supportive kin-networking in the Black community which "offset the ordeal of unemployment and racism" (Stack 1974:128). Strongly refuting Moynihan’s projection of "the Black families as fatherless and subject to a domineering woman's matriarchal rule," Stack draws attention to "the oppressive reality of our political and economic system and the adaptive resiliency and strength that Black families have shown" (ibidem:114). Tanner too rejects the Report as "a classic example of ethnocentrism in the social sciences" (Tanner 1974:152). She accepts the fact that the mother's role in Black families is exceedingly significant and of central importance and stresses that "Black women have always been socialized to be strong and resourceful and to know that motherhood - although an important and expected role - is not mutually exclusive to working outside the home" (ibidem:154). She however goes on to emphasize the detrimental effect of a sexist and racist society on the mother-child family units.

The image that emerges from these studies is that of a resourceful, resilient, strong and supportive Black woman, far removed from the emasculator and family destroyer image created by Moynihan. Ladner lucidly outlines the strength and resourcefulness of Black women:

One of the chief characteristics defining the Black woman is her (realistic approach) to her own resources. Instead of becoming resigned to her fate,
she has always sought creative solutions to her problems. The ability to utilise her existing resources and yet maintain a forthright determination to struggle against the racist society in whatever overt and subtle ways necessary is one of her major attributes. (1971:276-277)

Due to race, class and gender oppression the Black woman has been forced to become the head of the family. As Da Bois wrote, "... our women in black had freedom contemptuously thrust upon them" (1969:185). The myth of matriarchy, like the stereotypes of the loyal mammy, the conjure woman and the whore, has been created by the whites who wished to perpetuate negative images for Black women with the view to denigrate them. By shrewdly projecting the Black woman's resilience and resourcefulness in the absence of Black male support, as deliberate and domineering usurpation of the Black man's role, the oppressive and the exploitative race has tried to turn the Black woman into a hated figure. It is the price she has to pay for daring to violate the image of the submissive and self-effacing domestic servant. However, the Black women intellectuals of today have reacted strongly to the negative images foisted upon them and have taken on the enterprise of debunking the stereotypes by uncovering the reality. Conscious of the power of images, they have realised that for positive self-affirmation they must have complete control over their own images.
1.1.3 Images presented by Black male writers

Since one's cultural image is central to one's self-definition, Black women writers and critics have undertaken the task of investigating and eradicating the stereotypes of Black feminity and myths about Black familial roles. In order to achieve this they felt it was important for them to articulate their own experience of being Black and female in America. When Toni Morrison said that she wrote *The Bluest Eye* (1972) because it was the type of book she wanted to read, she was drawing attention to the fact that although Black literature has achieved a recognised status in America today, the representation of the Black female experience was absent from the writings of Black male writers whose main focus was on the Black male quest for identity in a society that has conferred invisibility upon them. James Baldwin, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison are major Black writers whose novels have been greatly appreciated. They sensitively present the disillusioning experiences of Black men in America. However the Black women they present are generally minor characters conceived in a stereotyped mould.

Baldwin in *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1954) depicts Elizabeth as a mother figure whose concern and encouragement lead to the spiritual upliftment of John, her illegitimate son. Gabriel is the typical male chauvinist who condemns his stepson John for his illegitimacy despite the fact that he himself has an illegitimate son through Esther. Baldwin presents Gabriel's
first wife Deborah as a tragic victim of a white gang rape because of which she becomes frigid and barren. Gabriel's sister Florence is presented as a victim of white ideology as she tries to beautify herself according to the white concept but ultimately is doomed to suffer. Only Elizabeth has a positive image of a nurturer, who, despite being considered a fallen woman by her husband, continues to provide nurture to John.

Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) begins with the image of a matriarchal Black woman waging a losing battle against racism and poverty. But soon the strong Black woman image is demolished as the family espies a rat that has invaded their tiny one room apartment. The mother and sister scramble upon the bed for safety, directing the boys to "kill 'im". Wright projects the male/female stereotype characteristics as he depicts the women as nervous and scared while the boys are violent and aggressive. Bigger's mother is concerned about her children but is helpless in saving Bigger from becoming a criminal because she can do nothing about the constricting effects of racism leading to criminal rebellion. Bigger's girl friend Bessie, oppressed by poverty is brutally killed by him because he is worried about his own safety. Hence, the two women, the mother and the girl friend of the protagonist, are depicted as tragic sufferers since the protagonist himself is caught in the vortex of crime.
Ralph Ellison likewise, does not have any major female characters in *Invisible Man* (1952). In the beginning of the novel he gives a surrealistic picture of a slave mother who speaks about her feelings of love and hate for her master who gave her several sons, but whom she gave poison because he denied them freedom. When asked what freedom is, she defines as "it ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head" (Ellison 1952:9). Depicting the ambivalence of love and hate in the slave girl, Ellison briefly touches upon the sexual exploitation of Black women during slavery. By presenting the image of the slave girl with "a voice like my mother's," being bid for by slave-owners, dissolving into the image of the anguished slave mother, Ellison evokes the memory of the traumas of slavery and at the same time acknowledges his link to that past. Mary, the landlady of the protagonist, is another mother figure who supports him when he needs help and inspires him with the ideals for race advancement.

Hence the dominant images of Black women in the novels of Baldwin, Wright and Ellison are - the supportive mother, the fallen woman and the victimised girl friend. Though these are sympathetic images, they lack the complexity of Black female experience which only Black women could write about. While Black male writers wrote poignantly about the constricting effects of racism and poverty, Black women writers needed to add the dimension of sexist oppression as well. A Black feminist perspective was hence necessary to
delineate the complexity of Black female experience in America.

1.2 A Black Feminist Perspective

Since the analysis of the images of Black women in the novels under study is made to a large extent from a Black feminist perspective, a review of theories of Black feminist criticism by some of the main critics will be useful here.

Black feminism stems from Black women's resistance against the masculinist bias in Black social and political organisations and the racist bias in the mainstream feminist theory (Collins 1990). For instance, Stokely Carmichael's infamous observation in a 1964 SNCC meeting, that the best position for women in the organisation was "prone" had led to a great deal of resentment and protest (Jones 1985:283), causing him a great deal of embarrassment. Black women intellectuals and activists started formulating a Black feminist stance that would project their standpoint. The Combahee River Collective stressed, "As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face" (Moraga 1981:210). They emphasize that their movement is "not an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy" (ibidem:212). However, that their feminist consciousness does not exclude their race consciousness is reflected in their statement that "we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalisation
that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race ... We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism" (ibidem:213).

1.2.1 **Black feminist criticism**

Barbara Smith, Deborah McDowell, Barbara Christian, Hazel V Garby and Patricia Hill Collins are some of the major Black feminist critics who have outlined a Black feminist perspective in literature. In her essay, *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*, Smith argues that Black literary criticism should carry "the realisation that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers" (Smith 1982:159). She complains that Black women writers have been ignored both by white feminists and Black male writers and insists that "Black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition" (1982:163). She goes on to point out that:

... not only is theirs a verifiable historical tradition that parallels in time the tradition of Black men and white women writing in this country, but that thematically, stylistically, aesthetically, and conceptually Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social and economic experience they have been obliged to share (ibidem:163-164).
Smith believes that the use of a specifically Black female language and the incorporation of the traditional Black female activities of rootworking, conjure and midwifery into their writing, not only enriches their work but also distinguishes it from white/male literary structures. Another significant principle presented by Smith is that the Black feminist critic should write and think "out of her own identity" and not employ the ideas of white/male literary thought. However, a major disputable point in Smith's essay is the definition of the term lesbian, which she expands to mean "pivotal female relationships" and because of which she interprets Morrison's Sula (1973) as a lesbian text.

McDowell in her essay "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism" voices her doubts about the feasibility of a fruitful relationship between political activism and the academy. "I am not sure," she says, "that either in theory or in practice Black feminist criticism will be able to alter significantly circumstances that have led to the oppression of Black women" (McDowell 1985:191). McDowell is reacting here to Smith's contention that Black feminist criticism would owe its existence to a Black feminist movement. Defining Black feminist criticism she says that she has used the term to refer to:

... Black female critics who analyse the works of Black female writers from a feminist or political perspective. But the term can also apply to any
criticism written by a Black woman regardless of her subject or perspective - a book written by a male from a feminist or political perspective, a book written by a Black woman or about Black women authors in general, or any writing by women (ibidem:191).

McDowell's stand that the perspective of the critic does not matter seems to be problematic. Surely Black feminist criticism should be based on a distinctive feminist perspective! Stating that Black feminist critics "must have an informed handle on Black literature and Black culture in general" (ibidem:192), she however emphasizes the use of a contextual approach which will expose "the conditions under which literature is produced, published and reviewed" (ibidem: 192). She agrees with Smith that a rigorous textual analysis is necessary to bring out the thematic, stylistic and linguistic commonalities among Black women writers.

Hazel V Carby in her book Reconstructing Womanhood argues that in Black feminist analysis issues of race, gender and class are inextricable. Concentrating on nineteenth century and early twentieth century literature she delineates "the sexual ideologies that defined the ways in which white and black women 'lived' their relation to their material conditions of existence" (Carby 1987:17). She is concerned with Black women and their writing in a situation when they were excluded from the definition "woman." Hers is a feminist effort to
rediscover Black female writing (that was hidden from history) in order to establish a Black female literary tradition.

In *Black Feminist Thought* Patricia Hill Collins makes a case for "an Afrocentric feminist epistemology." She proposes a knowledge validation process which is rooted in the everyday experiences of Afro American women, thus challenging white male epistemology. This epistemology will include concrete experience as a criterion of meaning; dialogue; an ethic of caring; and an ethic of accountability. Collins projects a vision of "power based on a humanist vision of self-actualization, self-definition and self-determination" (Collins 1990:224). She continuously stresses the interlocking nature of race, class and gender oppression, which needs to be resisted. An Afrocentric feminist perspective, she points out, will lead to the empowerment of Black women, not with the desire to dominate but with the objective of strengthening their community to resist domination. She identifies three levels of oppression that people experience and resist: the personal level, the community level and the level of social institutions. "Black feminist thought," she stresses, "emphasizes all three levels as sites of domination and as potential sites of resistance" (ibidem:227). Domination can be resisted if Black women reject those dimensions of knowledge, produced by the dominant group, that perpetuate objectification and dehumanisation. Collins emphasizes the centrality of Black women intellectuals in the production of Afrocentric feminist thought because their
experience as Afro-American women provide them a unique standpoint on Black womanhood and as intellectual women they have the gift of articulating their consciousness.

The stress of Collins is to a large extent on female empowerment through community empowerment. Considering the importance of self-definition she says, "self is not defined as the increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from others. Instead self is found in the context of family and community" (ibidem:105). A strong community, she feels, can serve as a source of support to the triply oppressed Black woman.

1.2.2 Black women writers and Black feminist consciousness

Maulana Ron Karenga, an activist against racism, said in a plea for togetherness, "What we do, we must do together as a people. There are no separate solutions ... We diminish and destroy the potential and power of our struggle when we give it names and goals that narrow the scope and content of our vision and when we, imagining fragmentation to be freedom, divide ourselves and our energies and pursue opposite paths" (Karenga 1975:16). Black feminists, while stressing the need to combat gender oppression, also laid strong emphasis on collective struggle against racism. Alice Walker has used the term 'womanist' as against 'feminist' to mark a distinct Black feminist perspective which highlights the solidarity of humanity. According to Walker one is womanist when one is committed to the "survival whole of the entire community. A
womanist is not a separatist but a universalist. Womanist consciousness incorporates racial, sexual, economic and cultural considerations. Defining womanism she says that a womanist is a responsible person and appreciates women's strength, and goes on to conclude, "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (1983:xi-xii). Chikmenye Ogunyami, who simultaneously advanced the term 'womanist' explains, "Its ideal is for black unity where every black person has a modicum of power and so can be a 'brother' or a 'sister' or a 'father' or a 'mother' to the other!" (Ogunyemi 1985:72). The womanist vision thus underscores the positive aspects of Black life. A womanist novel therefore produces an affirmative spirit and is packed full of female achievement.

Gloria Naylor, while believing in the celebration of Black womanhood, states about her act of creation, "When I am actually within a work I am not black, I am not a woman, and I contend that I am not even a human being. I have given myself over to a force. But the product of that force is always rooted in a specific body politic, both personal and historical" (Naylor 1988:20). Hence Naylor too believes that the creativity of the writer is effected by who the writer is and what is her historical experience. She told Ammu Joseph in an interview:

I am a woman. I think as a woman, as a woman who is very conscious of what that means as a separate
political and social entity. I am always concerned about my female characters, spend extra time with their world and how they might think (Naylor 1985:4).

Toni Morrison likewise accepts that her creativity springs from her cultural identity. Explaining the role of memory in her act of creation, she says that certain impressions about some people she came across inspired her to create some of her most memorable characters. "I depend heavily on the ruse of memory for two reasons," she writes, "one because it ignites some process of invention, and two, because I cannot trust the literature and the sociology of other people to help me to know the truth of my own cultural sources" (Morrison 1984:386). Claiming that her effort is "to reflect the aesthetic tradition of Afro American culture" (ibidem:388), she strives to centralise and animate that information which is discredited by the west as 'lore' or 'gossip' or 'magic' because it is held by a discredited people. In her recent book on literary imagination, *Playing in the Dark*, she, like Collins, challenges white male epistemology. Reflecting on "the validity or vulnerability of a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary historians and critics and circulated as "knowledge" (Morrison 1992:4), she observes that American literature has been the domain of white male views, genius and power which do not take into account the overwhelming presence of the black people in America. "The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national
literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination" (ibidem:5), Morrison emphasizes, and goes on to observe that silence and evasion have ruled literary discourse in matters of race. Her endeavour is to write literature that is "irrevocably, indisputably Black" by incorporating "those recognised and verifiable principles of Black art" (Morrison 1984b:389).

1.3 The Black Female Literary Tradition - Stereotypes Debunked

The Black female literary tradition can be traced back to the days of slavery. It existed not only in the form of slave narratives, but also in the oral tradition of song and folklore.

1.3.1 The Oral Tradition

One of the chief aspects of the Afro-American aesthetic tradition that Morrison gives significance to in her interviews and essays is the oral quality of her writing. She is very conscious that her stories "can be read in silence ... but one should be able to hear them as well" (Morrison 1984a:381). Sound is very important in her books. With the sound and oral quality she also anticipates a participatory relationship between the novelist and the reader.

The oral tradition for Afro Americans has its roots in Africa where there was an articulate literature in the form of 'griots' who memorised family and tribe histories and recited them. In slavery, when literacy was prohibited, stories and songs became an important part of their oral culture, and were often used for signifying purposes, like passing on messages to
other slaves or giving certain warnings. Ironically, because the slaves were denied literacy and were excluded from the main culture, they fell back on the resources of their oral tradition and thus preserved their cultural heritage. Since the oral tradition requires group participation, it provided them cultural solidarity through field songs, spirituals, folk tales and story telling.

"Oral cultures are functional, tactile, auditory and direct ... Oral cultures are dramatic ... (they develop) the resources of spontaneity, style, affective performance and catharsis" (1982:26-27) writes Ostendorf. He goes on to say that oral narratives favour performance words over content words and are often the breeding ground for slang. The response of the audience is very important since the narrator faces the audience. There is no passivity in the oral tradition since the narrative aims to move the audience.

The African oral tradition, which has inspired the contemporary black women writers, is spontaneous, has a performative quality and invites communal participation. The 'griot' is valued in Africa for the treasure of oral tribal history, legends, sayings, proverbs and songs that reside in his memory, which he narrates in musical form to a group of eager listeners. As Alex Haley shows in his famous novel Roots. With the increased literacy and a literary tradition, African intellectuals are making efforts to preserve their rich oral tradition and reveal its worth. "By asserting the
spiritual and moral richness, the didactic value and historical interest of their tales and legends, African intellectuals have sought to reply to their detractors: to answer the charge that Africans are a people without literature or culture, merely because they had no written records" (Wauthier 1978:64). They stress the richness of oral folklore which is a storehouse of practical wisdom and didactic value. The legends and folk tales have educational value for it is through them that elders teach the young wisdom and ethics. Listening to griots was not merely an entertaining experience but also an educational one. Wauthier considers the educational or functional side of African oral literature as its most important aspect.

Afro-American women's narrative, right from the time of slavery, is endowed with the qualities of an oral tradition. The slave narratives reveal a consciousness of the listeners as the narrator frequently intervenes to stress her anguish to them. Through the means of direct communication, the narrator is able to maintain her personal dignity and identity. Considering the degradation the slave suffered in her daily life, it became very important for her to preserve her self-respect and fight the negation of self. This tradition, essentially communal in spirit, is carried forward by Zora Neale Hurston to modern times. The contemporary Black women writers like Morrison and Walker have successfully integrated oral tradition with written tradition in order to create a
distinctive Afro-American fiction in which the community spirit predominates. The dominant image of the Black woman in these novels is that of a communal figure and hence the tradition is most suited to their type of narrative. These writers themselves emerge as contributors to the community spirit because they employ the oral tradition which requires a community. Moreover, as women writers, they are conscious constructors of Black women's history through language, a history they share with their Black readers. Orality also signifies the breaking of silence imposed upon them not only for being female but also Black and through that to a search for positive self-images and thence to a communal empowerment.

Black women writers are incorporating oral tradition into their written texts in order to keep the tradition alive and also to provide a distinctively "Black" identity to their works. Edward Sackey (1991) has voiced his fear that if the oral tradition is not integrated into the written tradition it may be lost to posterity. He proposes that the African oral tradition could be an instrument of defence to challenge the Western misconceptions about Africa. Black women writers use the tradition to challenge the white American misconceptions about Black womanhood and to construct new identities.

1.3.2 Black women writing in the nineteenth century

Autobiographical narratives written by Black women in the nineteenth century reveal a resistance to the constrictive
institutions and a desire for self-definition. Spiritual autobiographies Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw challenge traditional female roles in organised Black religious life in America. They recount in detail many kinds of trials that a Black woman had to face in order to make herself heard in a world the institutions of which are controlled by men. Jarena Lee was born to free parents but because of poverty she worked as a domestic servant at an early age. When she was twenty-one she was converted to Christianity and about seven years later she expressed a strong desire to preach. But the Black minister refused permission, stating that no woman could be accepted as a preacher. She was told that recognising any woman in an official capacity as a preacher would be contrary to the discipline of the church. However, later in life, after she had suffered many tragedies, she once again made a request and after she once displayed her talent in spontaneous sermonizing, she was granted the permission.

In her autobiography Jarena Lee challenges the roles prescribed for women, not only in the church, but in society as well. Raising her voice against the patriarchal tradition of the church she says:

... as unseemly as it may appear now-a-days for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God. And why should it be thought impossible, heterodox, or improper for
a woman to preach? Seeing the saviour died for the woman as well as the man.

If a man may preach because the saviour died for him, why not the woman? Seeing he died for her also. Is he not a whole Saviour instead of a half one? As these who hold it wrong for a woman to preach, would seem to make it appear (Andrews 1986:36).

Lee thus considers men and women equal and claims women's right to church office. Through sheer determination and zeal she is able to carve an alternative role for herself in the church and society. Both Lee and Elaw declare their independence from the constricting patriarchal tradition of the church and by achieving their goal acquire self-confidence and a sense of self-worth. Elaw, like Lee, was attracted to church service at an early age. After marriage she found it difficult to fulfil her religious calling because her husband did not approve of it. After she became a widow she started on her preaching career and even carried her message to slaves despite the danger of being arrested. She was very moved by the atrocities suffered by slaves. She writes, "Oh, the abominations of slavery! ... Every case of slavery, however lenient its inflictions and mitigated its atrocities, indicates an oppressor the oppressed and oppression" (Andrews 1986:98).

Lee and Elaw took their religious calling so seriously that they even left their children in the care of others for
long periods of time to go on preaching tours. They thus gave primacy to their mission rather than to the domestic sphere which is traditionally considered to be a woman's responsibility. Their autobiographies reveal their serious commitment to religion because of which they were not prepared to bow down to any patriarchal restrictions. It is surprising to see Black women, marginalised due to racism and sexism, exhibiting an awareness of equal rights for women in the nineteenth century. However, both venture out of their homes only after they have become widows. As married women, both submit to the wishes of their husbands. Once they enter the public sphere, they fling off domestic and familial constraints and act according to their own wishes.

While free Black women like Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw raised their voices against patriarchy in the church, Harriet Jacobs raised her voice against slavery and its dehumanising effects, specially on women. Hers is a voice against the slaveholder's sexual control over slave women and for the right of the slave mother to control the life of her children. The autobiographical narrative of Harriet Jacobs, written under the assumed name of Linda Brent for security reasons, is an invaluable account of the special kind of torture slave girls experienced on account of their female identity. The gender-based factors that distinguish her plight from that of the male slaves are - the slave-holder's control over her sexuality, commodified productivity and deprivation of mothering.
The narrative presents Linda Brent confronting her destiny in a domestic arena. It is a world of jealous mistresses and their innocent slave girls who are mentally tortured by their lecherous masters. From the tender age of fourteen Linda is harassed by her master's verbal sexual abuse. Adolescence for slave girls, specially the good-looking ones, was a cursed period of life. Linda Brent articulates the persecution of Black female adolescents:

She will become prematurely knowing in evil things. Soon she will learn to tremble when she hears her master's footfall. She will be compelled to realise that she is no longer a child. If God has bestowed beauty upon her it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in white women only hastens the degradation of the female slave (Brent 1987:28).

Far from being a seductress Brent emerges as a traumatised girl persecuted by her master for denying him control over her body. Brent suffers because she resists reification. Her determination to exercise control over her body and determine the parentage of her children projects her as a feminist. She is a bold and an independent minded girl who values her human rights. It is remarkable that a slave girl in the nineteenth century should assert her right to have control over her own sexuality. In an act of defiance she gives herself to another
white man Mr Sands who was unmarried and had shown an interest in her. She bears him two children and though she cannot own them she has the satisfaction of choosing their parentage. As Baker (1984) and Naylor (1988) have pointed out, she carves a path of dignity for herself by her own definition of piety and purity. Though she understood that she existed within a different set of moral parameters, she feels bitter that she could not follow the ideals of true womanhood, those of chastity, purity and piety. She exclaims:

But, O ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery. I wanted to keep myself pure; and under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect (Brent 1987:54).

The image is also that of woman as strategist who has to resort to bizarre survival strategies in a world that threatened not only her integrity but her very existence. In the tradition of trickster folktalese she makes use of her wits to defeat the
strong. Linda Brent also experiences a sense of power in the relationship she has entered into through her own choice. "It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment" (1987:55). By choosing her own partner and that too an unmarried man she is able to preserve her self-respect to some extent.

When Linda Brent learns that her second child was a girl, she reflects on the traumas that await her because of her gender. "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own" (1987:79), she specifies. Her narrative is significant in highlighting the gender-based sufferings of slave women which reveals the double oppression of Black women as slaves and as females. It also emphasizes the fact that sexual exploitation is as heinous and beastly an act as the different forms of brutal oppression that male slave narratives describe and condemn.

Brent's narrative also debunks the myth of the Black mothers' lack of love for their 'ugly' children. Since the birth of her children Brent's entire life revolves around them. Her sole obsession is to save them from her brutal master. The disruption of Black familial relationships at the level of mother and child are most poignantly depicted by the narrator.
She testifies to the suffering of slave mothers:

...to the slave mother New Year's day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning... she may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalised her from childhood; but she has a mother's instinct and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies (ibidem:16).

Brent reveals her own anguish at the ill-treatment of her children. On one occasion her son is hurled across the room by the brutal master. She sits beside her unconscious child in great agony, but when the child gains consciousness she doesn't know whether to be happy or sad, because death seems preferable to the inhuman degradation suffered by the slaves. It is her overpowering love for her children and her firm determination that they should be saved from the indignities of slavery that makes her take the extremely hazardous step of running away from Dr. Flint. Hiding in a garret for seven years she displays a remarkable power of endurance, a determination to survive and an unflagging zeal for freedom. She watches her children grow but cannot speak to them. "Season after season, year after year, I peeped at my children's faces, and heard their sweet voices, with a heart yearning all the while to say, "Your mother is here" (ibidem:148). Her
obsessive desire for her own and her children's freedom exposes the myth of the happy slave and uncovers the reality that slaves longed to be free of their life of indignity and suffering and tried to escape despite the hazards involved and despite the threat of greater tortures if caught. While slave history recounts the stories of numerous Black men who escaped, there are fewer records of women escaping. There are the celebrated names of Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman who helped many groups of slaves to escape. Brent's account reveals a similar resilience. Even in her hideout she exerts control over her life and also over her brutal oppressor. She contrives to write letters and have them sent to him from various places in order to mislead him. Deftly she has changed the situation so that instead of her being in his control, she exercises influence over him.

Brent finally gains freedom for her children through persistent efforts. Her narrative is a testimony to the immense love of a slave mother for her children, for whose sake she undergoes severe hardships.

Brent's narrative documents what it was like to be a female slave. The main focus before the escape is on slave women's sexual exploitation. It is ironical that her act of taking control of her body should be considered a fall from grace. She herself feels remorse for her "disgraceful past".
In Brent's grandmother one sees a peculiar combination of a forceful personality and utter powerlessness in protecting her children and grandchildren from the persecution of the slave-holder. While she can inspire fear in the Flint household she is helpless when her son is tortured. However she displays a remarkable capacity for dignity and forbearance in the most trying circumstances. It is noteworthy that despite the hostile environment she should emerge as a strong spiritual and moral force. She provides her grand-daughter comforts that are "spiritual and temporal." That she believes in a strong moral code is revealed by Brent's fear of facing her grandmother's wrath after she had submitted to Mr. Sands.

There is an overpowering evidence of female bonding in the narrative. Brent could not have escaped without the nurture and support of a sisterhood of women yoked together by the common experience of racist oppression. Besides her grandmother, her aunt, fellow slave women like Betty and Fanny, and her daughter Ellen collectively share her experience. Her object in writing is to create an awareness in the women of northern states of the suffering of "two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse" (ibidem:1). Her object therefore is to create a community of women who would sympathise with their sisters living in bondage and would perhaps make efforts to ameliorate their condition. By writing, Linda Brent also makes
a significant contribution to "herstory," by throwing light on female experience during slavery.

1.3.3 Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

The novelist who has left an indelible mark on Afro-American literature is Zora Neale Hurston whose now famous *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published in 1937. But even before her there was a tradition of Black female writing. Besides the autobiographers discussed earlier, there were fiction writers like Harriet Wilson, Frances Harper, Pauline Hopkins, Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen whose work was published between 1859 to 1932 and whose novels are now gaining visibility as the contemporary Black women writers and scholars have uncovered a Black female literary tradition. However, the novel that provided the greatest inspiration to the contemporary writers is Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. While it exposes the racist and sexist victimisation of Black women, it also depicts the female protagonist's search for identity.

The novel begins with Janie's grandmother Nanny's story of racial victimisation. Noticing that her grand-daughter Janie was now old enough to get romantically involved, she tells her about her experience of deprivation and brutal hardship and hopes that Janie's life will be a comfortable one. Since she was born in slavery, she says, she had no alternative but to suffer. "Fact is Ah been on my knees to mah Maker many's de time askin' please - for Him not to make de burden too heavy..."
for me to bear" (Hurston 1978:27), she says sorrowfully to Janie. She speaks about the sexual abuse of Black women in slavery and jealous mistresses who vent their wrath on the hapless victims, her escape with her child and the hazards she faced on the way, thus highlighting the tortured existence of Black women. She recounts her painful memory of her daughter's brutal rape when she was just seventeen, her pregnancy and subsequent promiscuity. Considering Janie an extension of herself she says that she would feel fulfilled if Janie could escape hardships and lead a decent life of material comfort and self-respect. "Ah can't die easy thinkin' maybe de menfolks white or black is makin' a spit cup outa you" (ibidem:37), she says. Significantly though Nanny's experience has been that of profound powerlessness, she had her aspirations, because "you can't beat nobody down so low till you can rob 'em of they will" (ibidem:31). Nanny didn't want to be used like a work ox but she had no alternative. Describing the fate of Black women in America she says:

Honey de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothing but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks.
De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you (ibidem:29).

Nanny is here drawing on a popular Afro-American folktale according to which the Lord threw down a bundle which the white man passed on to the black man who in turn passed it on to the black woman. Nanny thus warns Janie of the tendency of Black and white men, to treat Black women as dehumanised objects. The message to counter racial, sexual and class politics is clear. Though Nanny can do little about racism and sexism, she attempts to obliterate class oppression by marrying Janie to Logan Killicks who could provide economic security. But Janie soon discovers that material comfort does not necessarily provide true happiness. Her youth rebels against Logan's domineering ways as she learns that "marriage did not make love." Her romantic bent of mind is disappointed with Logan and she tells Nanny, "Ah wants things wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think" (ibidem:43). Janie's vision of marriage as an idyllic union is shattered as she finds herself tied to a much older and unromantic Logan Killicks. Soon after his initial passion cools down he starts resenting her rebellious ways. When Janie refuses to help him with his work saying, "You don't need mah help out dere, Logan. Youse in yo' place and Ah'm in mine," he gruffly replies, "You ain't got no particular place. It's wherever Ah need yuh. Git uh move on yuh, and dat quick" (ibidem:52). Ironically, Janie finds herself in the very
status that her grandmother had wished to avoid, that of a mule. She however is too strong spirited to accept it and hence she runs away with Jody Starks, anticipating a full and fruitful life with him.

Hurston sets out to expose male chauvinism in this novel. She depicts Janie experiencing marginalisation with Jody Starks too. Soon after he marries her he makes it clear that he regards her as his possession. When he becomes the mayor of a new township he generously shares his social standing with her, convinced that she will be happy to bask in reflected glory, "Ah told you in de very beginning dat Ah aimed tuh be uh big voice. You oughta be glad, 'cause dat makes uh big woman outa you" (ibidem:74). When the people ask her to give a speech he replies without consulting her, ".. mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin! Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (ibidem: 69). Thus rebuffed, Janie feels more and more stifled in her relationship with him. She resents being objectified and is very disturbed about the control over her voice. Prizing her as a possession, Jody refuses to let her participate in the porch gatherings where men collected to joke and tell stories. Janie is engulfed by the loneliness of silence as she longs to participate in their discourse. Hurston here effectively reveals female exclusion from male discourse and the frustration and pain that forced silence could cause.
Jody's oppression increases as he demands total submission from her. Emphasizing her lower status as a woman he chides, "Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chicken and cows. I god, they sho don't think none theirselves" (ibidem: 110). Objectified as an animal Janie cannot tolerate his sexist outlook:

She wasn't petal-open anymore with him ... She found that out one day when he slapped her face in the kitchen ... Janie stood where he left her for unmeasured time and thought. She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her ... It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams. Just something she had grabbed upto drape her dreams over ... She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be. She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about... She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them (ibidem:112).
This marks the beginning of the process of Janie's emergence as a self-defined Black woman. Her experiences with Logan Killicks and Jody Starks shape her consciousness which encourages articulation. From being equated to "chickens and cows" she emerges as a self-confident woman who rejects the patriarchal perceptions of Jody and his friends and values women's ideas and actions. When the men on their porch ridicule Mrs. Robbins for begging for groceries, Janie loses her patience and does "What she had never done before, that is, thrust herself into the conversation" (ibidem:117), thus earning Jody's rebuke that she was getting too "moufy." As Sadoff observes "Janie realises when she hears this exchange, female obedience and chatteldom are a figurative death" (Sadoff 1985: 17), therefore she elevates the position of women by claiming that God communicates with them too and proclaims men ignorant of women's true nature. While Nanny had dreamed about preaching a sermon about colored women but could not get a chance, Janie preaches her sermon to the men on the porch. On another occasion when Jody insults her about her aging looks she is quick to retort, "Humph! Talking about me looking old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life" (ibidem:123). Janie's attack on his maleness in front of his friends is the ultimate insult which Jody never gets over. She has attacked his phallus thus undermining his "phallic self," that was "constructed on the model of the
self-contained, powerful phallus" (Moi 1985:8). Stripped of his phallocentric position, Jody's health declines until death claims him.

Hurston links Jody's death to Janie's finding her voice. As Janie speaks her defiance, she peels off the false images inflicted on her for being Black and female and asserts her identity. Bethel has pointed out, "The codification of Blackness and femaleness by whites and males is contained in terms, "thinking like a woman" and "acting like a nigger" both based on the premise that there are typically negative Black and female ways of acting and thinking. Therefore, the most pejorative concept in the white male world view would be thinking and acting like a "nigger woman" (1982:178). Janie refuses to be stifled by the constricting image of "a nigger woman" and assumes an independent status after Jody's death. Her rejuvenation is apparent in her changed youthful appearance. "The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place. She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there" (Hurston 1978:134-135). Feeling herself free from constricting patriarchal pressures, Janie is a new woman, ready to take on life at her own terms.

Janie's choice of her third husband Tea Cake rests on his acceptance of her as a human being and not as an object. It becomes difficult for her to resist his infectious liveliness and though Tea Cake is much younger than Janie, she finds
herself saying yes to his proposal. He willingly accepts her desire "tuh partake wid everything" (ibidem:186). Janie feels that she is accepted on an equal level and for her his loving companionship matters more than the material comforts Jody had bought her. She leaves her house to join him in the Everglades and experiences real joy in picking beans alongside Tea Cake. Her first feelings for Tea Cake, "He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom — a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps ... Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God" (ibidem:161) are finally realised when they share their lives as man and wife in the "mucks."

Hurston's purpose in the novel is not only to expose overt male-chauvinism but also covert male-chauvinism. Though Tea Cake is devoted to Janie he nevertheless considers her as "mah woman" for whom he, as the male partner, must provide. Jealousy makes him possessive and even he objectifies Janie. "Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behaviour justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession" (ibidem:218). Whereas Logan Killicks and Jody Starks had oppressed Janie because of their phallocentric values, Tea Cake whips her because he is afraid of losing her. But the very act of whipping marks the price Janie has to pay for male fear. Though Janie does not react to Tea Cake's whipping and continues
to love him, Hurston makes her point that however loving and devoted a man may be, he likes to assert his power over his woman. "Tea Cake does not want to beat Janie, but he does because he feels, not thinks, he must" (Collins, 1990:189). The question ultimately is that of domination through domestic violence. However, since the violence occurs in a loving relationship, love triumphs and soon Tea Cake is found singing praises of Janie. Alice Walker observes, "An astute reader would realize that this (beating) is the real reason Tea Cake is killed by Janie in the end. Or, rather, this is the reason Hurston permits Janie to kill Tea Cake in the end. For all the "helpless" hanging on him, Janie knows she has been publicly humiliated, and though she acts the role of battered wife ... her developing consciousness of self does not stop at that point" (1984:305-306). Though it is true that Janie's consciousness continues to develop through her relationship with Tea Cake, it wouldn't be right to assume that Janie kills Tea Cake in the end because of this humiliation. Hurston presents a love relationship in which the woman is older than the man. Janie's maturity in love is evident from her overlooking Tea Cake's squandering away her two hundred dollars as an impulsive act of a man who had never had so much money. When he beats her she is aware of his feeling of insecurity and hence she can overlook it and win him over with love. Love emerges as a "catalyst for change." Moreover Janie's grief at his death is evident from her conversation with Pheoby. Later when she is
alone she feels his presence around her, "Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking" (Hurston 1978:286). With Tea Cake Janie has experienced fulfillment in love from a man who valued her for herself. Whereas during her marriage to Joe Starks she had become aged and haggard, after her relationship with Tea Cake she has regained her youth.

Hurston's Afrocentric consciousness is apparent in her mode of writing. Not only does she use the Black dialect to mark a distinct Afro-American perspective, she also makes a skilful use of the African tradition of story telling. Both Nanny and Janie are story tellers. While Nanny narrates her tale of the physical and sexual oppression of Black women during slavery, Janie narrates her experiences with her three husbands to her 'kissin' friend' Phoeby, after she returns to her home-town. The tale told in oral tradition captures her emergence from "uh mule uh de world" to an independent self-defined woman. As Meese (1986) points out, Janie's tale emphasizes her development from silent object to speaking subject. In the oral tradition there is always the consciousness and importance of the listener. Janie's tale is significant not only because articulation empowers her, but also because by sharing her story she empowers other women around her. Phoeby reveals her own transformation in her
words, "Lawd! Ah done grown ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo'. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin' wid him after this" (Hurston 1978:284).

Rearticulation according to Collins, is a "process essential for Black feminist thought" (1990:112), hence Janie through her orality creates a Black feminist consciousness in women around her. By orally documenting her developing consciousness, she aids Phoeby is reconsidering her life. Phoeby in turn will pass on the lesson she has learnt to others. Thus Janie becomes an agent for creating an awareness for a self-defined standpoint in her group.

It is said that "to manipulate an image is to control a peoplehood." The dominant race in America has exerted control over the image of the Black woman ever since slavery. Contemporary Black women writers and critics have undertaken the task of investigating and eradicating the stereotypes of Black femininity and myths about Black women's roles. Female slave narratives and spiritual autobiographies have been examined as the earliest expressions of Black female identity. The thoughts, feelings and experiences documented by these writers reveal what it was like being Black and female. While on the one hand these women express their deep concern over their rights as human beings and as women, they exhibit an immense sense of responsibility for their immediate family,
even to the extent of becoming self-sacrificing. However, they are strong, resourceful, and supportive women, providing physical, emotional and spiritual nurture to their community. Even in the nineteenth century writing by women, one can see the emergence of Black sisterhood.

A significant departure from the Black male writing is noticed in the significance given to female sexuality because of their peculiar gender based oppression. The chief object of all these writers and also of Hurston is empowerment of women—Lee and Blaw through recognition in the Church, Jacobs through sisterhood and Hurston through Janie's discovery of her voice and hence a female discourse. Janie's articulation strives to correct the perspective of the community by exposing its misconceptions about her.

Hurston, who is the immediate and highly valued predecessor of the contemporary writers, by presenting a Black cultural milieu anticipates Afrocentrism that is inspiring a subject position and a positive outlook in the present day women writers. Janie, in her effort to attain a self defined standpoint, emerges as a harbinger of Black feminist consciousness because she finally realises her "self" not only in terms of equality with men but also through her participation in Black cultural activities like story-telling, singing and dancing. Hurston's novel throws light on feminist issues such as women's place, her silence and the primacy of self-definition.
While Hurston presents an all Black milieu, Jacob's narrative exposes the wide gap between Black and white women. The sisterhood is limited to Black women while the white mistress projecting her white superiority adds to her misery. Brent is helped by white women after the escape, but the subtle distance between the races is always felt.