CHAPTER 2
FRAGMENTED WOMEN

Introduction

Section 1 of this chapter examines the role played by the mass media and the formal education system in moulding the attitudes of the Black community. The white ideologies transmitted by the dominant race project the Black woman as the 'other.' The formal education system is used by the oppressor "to preserve a profitable situation." The stigma of race, color and class results in an identity conflict that often culminates in a negative self-image.

Sections 2 and 3 explore the factors that lead to the powerlessness and vulnerability of adolescent Black girls and Black women. Lack of demonstrative parental love and the hostile racist and sexist environment has a stifling effect on young girls who often suffer psychological fragmentation. Verbal and physical sexual abuse traumatisse the lives of young girls. Black women, physically abused by Black men and economically exploited by white employers, find themselves 'de mule uh de world.' The earlier novels of Morrison, Walker and Naylor are examined to reveal the "otherness" of Black women in America.

In their recent novels these writers reconstruct history to expose the victimisation of Black women and their extreme
powerlessness in controlling their lives. The gender specific experiences of Black women during slavery and the trauma of the Middle Passage have been explored to reveal Black women's denigration through history.

The oppression of lesbians is examined in Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* to reveal the link between sexuality and power. Since they resist being defined in relation to men, lesbians are anathemized by the patriarchal community. In Walker's novels Black women often suffer intense anguish due to the vulnerability of the female body. The experience of "the aloneness of the woman in the body" often has disastrous consequences.

2.1 The Dick-and-Jane and Shirley Temple Syndrome

The study of the creation of stereotypes in the previous chapter reveals that the images of a subordinate group are created, controlled and nurtured by the dominant group with the view to project its own superiority. The stereotypes of Black women have been controlled by the white image makers ever since slavery with the intention of ensuring their subordination. The white group has thus maintained its ideological hegemony through cultural domination. This section discusses how the dominant group has made use of the academic and cultural institutions under its control to transmit its ideologies that create negative self-images in Black women.
The mass media, the education system and other cultural agencies over which the dominant race has control are the chief means of conveying ideological messages. These institutions perpetuate the ideologies of the dominant culture and reinforce the stereotypes about the minority group it seeks to subjugate. These stereotypes are socially constructed images, that are one-dimensional and distorted because they are created with a specific bias, and are designed to influence public opinion. In America, the mass media and the education system help to legitimate the inequalities between the two races. The images that are perpetuated fuel misperceptions about the subordinate race, because these representations are totally at odds with the reality of Afro-Americans as individual people. The Black women writers of America write with the objective of exposing the misrepresentations of their reality, while they simultaneously explore how the ideologies projected by the institutions controlled by the dominant race, effect the construction of the Black woman's self-image. It was W.E.B. Dubois who first drew attention to the deeply rooted "double-consciousness" which afflicts Afro-American existence. In his own words:

After the Egyptian and the Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets
him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (1969:45).

This identity conflict is caused by the stigma of race, color and class. Robbed of their African heritage and cut off from their African roots for several generations, Black Americans themselves have been deluded into thinking that the mainstream ideology is the only valid ideology. The American media sells the white way of life and white American values to its multi-ethnic society. Afro-American women learn the meaning of race, gender and social class without obvious teaching and conscious learning. Through golden haired dolls, Shirley Temple mugs and Mary Jane candies, the dominant group sells an idea that is beyond the access of Black girls. Black parents unintentionally validate this idea as they fondly present these gifts to their impressionable children and thus encourage them to internalise the concept that denigrates their racial features and objectifies females.
Morrison presents Pecola and Pauline in *The Bluest Eye* (1972) and Hagar in *Song of Solomon* (1978) as victims of this internalization. Pecola craves for blue eyes because of her fascination for blue-eyed Shirley Temple and blue-eyed Mary Jane on candy wrappers. Nobody has ever told her about the beauty residing in African features. Having internalised the denigrated images of Black women, and the idealised concept of white beauty, she believes that the absence of blue eyes is central to her "ugliness." This concept also leads to intra-racial color prejudice since the Black race in America, due to widespread miscegenation during slavery, consists of both light skin colored as well as dark skin colored people. As a result the lighter complexioned women hold dark complexioned women in contempt, as Morrison reveals through Maureen Peal and Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye*. However a light skin does not solve their problem but rather increases their vulnerability. About Nel in *Sula* (1973) Morrison says that if she had been lighter-skinned she would have constantly needed her mother's protection against lecherous males. Hagar in *Song of Solomon* (1978) sets out to make herself beautiful by buying an assortment of cosmetics, so that she can regain the love of Milkman. The cosmetics she buys are meant to bring her closer to the white ideal of beauty.

The idea of physical beauty is according to Morrison, "probably the most destructive idea in human history and thought" (1972:97). Barbara Smith relates her feelings:
There is not a Black woman in this country who has not, at some time, internalised and been deeply scarred by the hateful propaganda about us ... When I was growing up, despite my family's efforts to explain, or at least describe, attitudes prevalent in the outside world, I often thought that there was something fundamentally wrong with me because it was obvious that I and everybody like me was held in such contempt (1985:9).

Joyce Ladner (1972:80), Michelle Wallace (1982:5), and Maya Angelou (1971:5) also describe their first agonising confrontation with their blackness which scarred their ego. The self definition of females generally depends on their physical attractiveness. Dark-skinned, kinky-haired girls in America become aware of their 'otherness' at some stage in their girlhood. Claudia in Morrison's The Bluest Eye (1972), with her precocious wisdom realizes the role of white ideology in moulding the viewpoints of the Black community. She says, "Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world" (1972:61-62).

Pecola's mother Pauline tries to emulate white film stars in an effort to forget the ugliness of her life. Her education is from the movies from which she learns to equate physical
beauty with virtue. In a moving scene Morrison shows how Pauline, identifying herself with the silver screen goddess in the picture show, forgets her true self until she breaks her tooth on a candy. The lost tooth becomes for her the symbol of her own ugliness, the gap in her teeth symbolising the wide gap between the white ideal of beauty and her own black appearance. Discussing the dynamics of Black self-hatred, Grier and Cobbs have said, "Racial prejudice is a pitiful product of systematised cruelty, in which frightened people climb on to the stand with the oppressor and say, "yes we hate them too!" (1969:199). Having internalised white ideology, it does not occur to Pauline that the scale she used for measuring beauty, which she had absorbed from the silver screen, was not applicable to the Afro-Americans because of their different racial identity.

Celie in Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983) judges herself harshly because of her lack of physical attractiveness. She believes that she is ugly, therefore she doesn't feel offended when Shug says to her, "You sure is ugly." As long as Celie has a negative perception of herself she remains a fragmented being. 'Poor, black and ugly' is the label applied to most Black women of America and Celie by accepting this evaluation of herself represents those women who have accepted this definition by the dominant race.
Besides the mass media, the education system of America also transmits ideologies that objectify the Black woman as the 'other'. Education, according to Joyce Ladner, is viewed by the majority of Black girls as "the most viable way to improve their lives" (1972:93). It is the key to good jobs and thus helps them to rise above the poverty level. Education, as far as it imparts reading and writing skills, is a great asset to the women in Morrison's and Walker's novels. But its content has either negative value or no value to the learner. Celie in The Color Purple (1983) finds no significance in the history lessons at school and Columbus sounds like cucumbers to her. However, knowledge about African history, communicated by Nettie through her letters, becomes meaningful and self-affirming. Nettie herself realises her ignorance despite her school education and writes, "The little I knew about my own self wouldn't have filled a thimble! And to think Miss Beasley always said I was the smartest child she taught" (Walker 1983: 123). Miss Beasley symbolises the formal education system, the aim of which is to propagate white values.

Paulo Freire, a noted educationist, argues that the education system of the oppressor, though ostensibly humanitarian, is used by the oppressor "to preserve a profitable situation." He goes on to say, "Indeed, the interests of the oppressors lie in changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them ... for the more the oppressed
can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated" (Freire 1972:47). The goal of education, Freire stresses, should be to awaken the critical faculty which would lead to the obliteration of race and class distinctions. The oppressed, dehumanised by the oppressive system they live in, must learn to see "themselves as men engaged in the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human" (ibidem:41). But if they accept the passive role imposed upon them, they will adapt to the world as it is and accept the fragmented view of reality communicated to them.

With the conventional system of education in which the students learn that the only truth is the one presented by the teacher, students are liable to internalise a biased and faulty view of reality. In Morrison's The Bluest Eye (1972) Pecola is confused by the dichotomy between the beautiful image of the family life presented by the primer reader and the ugly reality of her own untidy and incompatible family. The text in the school reader mythicizes reality by presenting a false ideal. The primer reads, "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy." (Morrison 1972:7). Young students, reading this primer, learn to associate beauty and order with white Americans and ugliness and chaos with Blacks. Education thus becomes an obstruction in the process of positive self-construction among the Blacks.
Morrison, Walker and Naylor condemn the internalisation of white values by educated Black women. Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye* (1972) and the students of Saxon College in Meridian exemplify a situation in which the education system has successfully effected a submerged consciousness. These Black women have imbibed white values and in the process of liberation have erroneously decided to side with the oppressor. Freire has pointed out that such a situation is likely during the initial stage of the struggle for liberation:

> But almost always, during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors or 'sub-oppressors'. The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them to be 'man' is to be an oppressor. This is their model of humanity (Freire 1972:22).

Morrison reserves contempt for women like Geraldine. "They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul" (Morrison 1972:68). Geraldine's house matches the pretty house in the primer and she has taken care that her son is not identified as a "nigger." Saxon College in
Meridian (1977) produces 'young ladies' patterned after white cultural values. It promotes superficial gentility and restricts critical awareness of their reality. The chapter on Wile Chile reveals the institution's preference for decorum over compassion. While Geraldine dismisses the less fortunate Pecola contemptuously as "nasty little black bitch," the Saxon College students recoil in horror when Meridian compassionately brings the ghetto urchin Wile Chile into the campus. The matron grimly warns Meridian, "She must not stay here. Think of the influence. This school is for young ladies" (Walker 1977:37).

Naylor in The Women of Brewster Place (1983) presents Kiswana's mother disappointed with the fact that her daughter left college to pursue activism. Education for her means a better standard of living than the one Kiswana had opted for. Naylor in her novels equates material advancement with spiritual emptiness. She depicts the inhabitants of Linden Hills in her novel of that name, as damaged by the pursuit of wealth and power.

Thus while exploring the factors that lead to the objectification of Black women as the 'Other,' Morrison, Walker and Naylor expose the institutional sites that are responsible for their subordination. The mass media and the education system, controlled by the dominant race, have ensured ideological hegemony of the whites and thus stressed the marginality of the Black race. Understandably, it is children,
young and vulnerable, who suffer the most. Black girls, bewildered by the messages school education sends out, attracted by the glorified media images, have to put up a valiant struggle against the development of a warped psyche.

2.2 Black Girlhood : Trials and Tribulations

Black women writers reveal the powerlessness and vulnerability of Black girls within the Black community. They often grow up in an atmosphere of domestic violence and parental strife. The daily sight of the mother being battered by their drunken father fills them with the sense of their own powerlessness at being young and female. If their mother, with whom they identify, is vulnerable to male brutality, so can they be. The father as a figure of trust and security is absent from their world view.

2.2.1 "Mama Did You Ever Love Us?"

The Bluest Eye (1972) and Sula (1973) by Morrison and The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970) and The Color Purple (1983) by Walker depict the marginality of young girls in Black family life. Pecola, Claudia and Frieda in The Bluest Eye, Nel and Sula in Sula, Daphne, Ornette and Ruth in The Third Life of Grange Copeland and Celie and Nettie in The Color Purple lead a peripheral existence, since their parents are so busy coping with their own marginality in a racist society that they tend to ignore their children as mere appendages. In The Bluest Eye Claudia is conscious of being introduced to Mr. Henry as a part
of the furniture, "Frieda and I were not introduced to him — merely pointed out. Like, here is the bathroom: the clothes closet is here: and these are my kids, Frieda and Claudia" (Morrison 1972:16). The Breedloves ignore the presence of their children as they carry out their love making or engage in their 'darkly brutal' quarrels. To Brownfield his daughters "were not really human children" (Walker 1970:74). Sula and Nel became close friends because of parental neglect. Morrison says, "Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula's because he was dead; Nel's because he wasn't), they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for" (1973:52).

Indifference and contempt from their mothers have a negative effect on the psyche of Pecola and Sula. Pecola's contemptuous rejection by Pauline in favour of her pretty white ward and Hannah's dismissal of Sula "I love Sula. I just don't like her" (ibidem:57), are instances that have a disturbing effect on the impressionable minds of the young girls. Lack of parental love and the emotional security it provides, turns Pecola into a pathetic recluse and Sula into an irresponsible rebel.

Parental love in the form of fondling and indulging their children is a luxury that Black parents cannot afford. Yet there is a practical and silent form of loving that manifests itself in unconventional ways. In Sula when Hannah asks her mother Eva, "Mamma, did you ever love us?" (ibidem:67), Eva
responds indignantly:

No time. They wasn't no time. Not none. Soon as I got one day done here come a night. With you all coughin' and me watchin' so TB wouldn't take you off and if you was sleepin' quiet I thought, O Lord, they dead and put my hand over your mouth to feel if the breath was comin' what you talkin' 'bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can't you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer? (ibidem:69).

Eva's exasperation reveals that the demands of providing for children in the interlocking system of race, sex and class oppression are so taxing that the mothers have neither the time nor the patience for demonstrating their affection. Black daughters, brought up by mothers struggling against hostile environments, may feel bewildered with their experience as opposed to the idealised version of maternal love, but they eventually realise that their mother's physical care and protection are indeed acts of maternal love. Like Hannah, Claudia in The Bluest Eye (1972) does not feel coddled. Her illness means additional work for her mother who grumbles about being overworked. Though she feels humiliated at that time, later when Mrs. McTeer rubs the salve on her chest and readjusts the quilt at night, she can translate it as motherly love and concern. "So when I think of autumn," she recalls, "I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die" (1972:14).
In an interview with Robert Stepto, Morrison speaking of motherly chastisement as love says, "And when they punished us or hollered at us, it was, at the time, we thought, so inhibiting and so cruel, and it's only much later that you realise that they were interested in you" (1977a:474). Black mothers place a strong emphasis on protection against the hostile environment they live in. While Hannah, herself an indifferent and uninterested mother, fails to interpret Eva's gestures of protection as motherly love and concern, Claudia, when mature, realises that in spite of her humiliating outbursts her mother really cared for her. In Walker's The Color Purple (1983) Celie is also very understanding about her mother's angry behaviour towards her. She writes, "May' be cause my mama cuss me you think I kept mad at her. But I ain't. I felt sorry for her" (1983:15). Morrison and Walker show that Black girls understand that parental love manifests itself in various ways and that even the anger and chastisement by their parents was prompted by genuine concern for them. But when even the 'practical' form of love is absent, as in the case of Pecola, the Black girl is likely to suffer fragmentation.

Morrison and Walker depict the agony and helplessness of young girls as they constantly witness brutal violence at home. Pecola in The Bluest Eye and Daphne, Ornette and Ruth in The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970) grow up in an atmosphere of domestic violence. Morrison very effectively
portrays the mute suffering of Pecola who, unable to bear the violence between her parents, "struggled with an overwhelming desire that one would kill the other, and a profound wish that she herself could die" (Morrison 1972:38). The three sisters in Walker's novel on the other hand provide mute support to each other as they huddle together in sheer fright and wish Brownfield, their father dead. The most traumatic moment in their lives is the one when they realise that Brownfield intends to shoot their mother. While the younger sisters Ornette and Ruth hide in the hen house, Daphne runs out to warn Mem. They are powerless in aiding her and become mute and horror stricken witnesses to their mother's brutal and senseless murder. The vulnerability of their mother and their own powerlessness imprints on their young minds a sense of their own profound marginality. Haunted by their own devaluation in society because of their Blackness and their marginality in the family because of their youth and gender, they develop a very fragile concept of 'self.' Their fanciful fabrications about a 'good' daddy reveal their longing for a loving and protective father figure. It is therefore the interlocking system of race, class and sex oppression that is responsible for ruining their lives. While Daphne ends up in a mental hospital, Ornette, who had always been bold and rebellious, eventually becomes an easygoing 'lady of pleasure.' By choosing to lead such a life she denies male control over her life and thus makes sure that she won't suffer like Mem. She prefers to be defined as a whore
rather than suffer emotional and physical abuse at the hands of a man like her father.

Ruth on the other hand, escapes the tragic fate suffered by Daphne and Ornette because she comes under the shelter of her loving grandfather Grange Copeland. For Grange striving for "survival whole" for Ruth becomes a mission in life and a form of penitence for his heartless neglect of his own wife and child. The mission is not easy since Ruth has witnessed a lot of violence and tragedy when she was living with her inhuman father. She cannot forget the freezing house, Daphne’s sickness, Ornette’s waywardness and finally her mother’s murder. All these experiences, which are a part of her Blackness and femaleness, are enough to traumatisé her for life. But there is hope for her "survival whole," because Grange, at the cost of his life, eliminates Brownfield from her life.

Walker highlights the suffering of the girl child in a racist and sexist society. Had Daphne and Ornette been boys they would have escaped the oppressive conditions at home by running away, as Pecola’s brother Sammy does and Danver’s brothers Howard and Buglar do in Morrison’s Beloved (1987). Denver, Howard and Buglar cannot understand their mother’s act of ‘infanticide for love.’ Hence they feel in danger of their own lives. Denver, being a girl, has to live with her mother despite the fact that there were moments when she feared her. “I love my mother,” she says, “but I know that she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I’m scared
of her because of it" (Morrison 1987:205). She feels so insecure that she imagines, "she cut my head off every night. Buglar and Howard told me she would and she did" (ibidem:206).

In *Beloved* (1987) Morrison gives a very moving picture of a bewildered young girl trying to understand her mother's behaviour. The effort to negotiate the polarity between murder and love, destruction and preservation, turns her into an introverted girl, alienated from the community. She is scared that "the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again" (ibidem:205). Denver clings to her sister's ghost to ward off her loneliness and is miserable when Paul D beats it away. When Beloved appears in human form, Denver tries to protect her from Sethe, while she herself feels secure in her company. The fact that the favourite story that she likes to tell is that of her own birth, is an indication of her need to affirm her own existence. Taking us back to slavery, Morrison unravels the complexity of the Black response to the dehumanisation suffered by them. In children and specially young girls, the consequences of the experiences during slavery and at times the strange and bewildering response of Black adults to their degradation could lead to a mass of contradictory emotions which had a profound effect on their psyche.

Morrison imaginatively explores the psyche of the dead child by bringing her back from the other world. When Denver asks Beloved why she had come back, her answer is "To see her
The one memory that stays with Beloved is of being betrayed. Her seeming lack of interest is not lack of sisterly love but indicates an all-consuming passion for the love denied to her by her mother by snatching away her life.

Morrison movingly presents the perspective of the child denied her mother's love:

I am BELOVED and she is mine. Sethe is the one that picked flowers, yellow flowers in the place before the crouching ... She was about to smile at me when the men without skin came and took us up into the sunlight with the dead and shoved them into the sea ... Sethe went into the sea ... Why did she do that when she was just about to smile at me? ... Three times I lost her ... I will not lose her again. She is mine.

(ibidem:214)

Morrison's Beloved (1987) is a poignant statement on a Black girl's attempt to understand the complex nature of mother love. Moreover, Morrison also sets one thinking about the issues that brought about such a situation. Why should black children, unlike other children experiencing a carefree childhood, be afflicted with such traumatic experiences? By deliberately fusing Beloved's experience of death with the middle passage as in the extract quoted above, Morrison accentuates the displacement of Beloved. Why did she have to leave the world when it was her right to be in her mother's
arms and "see her face"? Beloved's fragmentation is displayed in concrete terms. After she pulls out a tooth she -

.. looked at the tooth and thought, This is it.
Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once. Or on one of those mornings before Denver woke and after Sethe left she would fly apart. It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself. Among the things she could not remember was when she first knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces (ibidem:133).

Beloved's obsessive love for Sethe and her total control over her is depicted by Morrison in terms of a fragmented psyche.

2.2.2 Stepping over into madness

While fragmentation of 'self' in Ornette in The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970) manifests itself through her promiscuity, in Daphne it takes the shape of nervous convulsions. Whenever she is in the grip of fear she breaks out in sweat and trembles. Brownfield's violent outbursts have broken her to the extent that she is frightened of the world itself. "Her fear encompassed the world and included darkness, buildings, ancient trees and flowers with animal names" (Walker 1970:119), Walker elaborates. It is pathetic that Daphne should end up in a mental hospital. The hostile environment in which
she lives has a stifling effect on her which results in her psychological fragmentation.

Morrison and Walker depict insanity in relation to racial and sexual politics and reveal Daphne's and Pecola's madness as connected to the Black female social condition. Their novels present a world of interlocking systems of race, class and sex oppression, which is seen as threatening to Black women's psychological survival. Application of R.D. Laing's theory of mental psychosis further strengthens this point. According to Laing, mental psychosis is the intensification of the divisions within the self that mirror the compartmentalisation and fragmentation of modern society. The racist and sexist structure of American society compartmentalizes its various ethnic groups and denigrates the colored people as inferior, as it also categorises female and male as margin and centre.

Psychological fragmentation, according to Laing is "an attempt to preserve a being that is precariously structured" (1969:80). It is, he argues, a revolt against the stifling elements of the society. An analysis of Pecola's characterisation in terms of Laing's theory of "the divided self," reveals her gradual descent towards insanity due to "ontological insecurity." *The Bluest Eye* (1972) begins with Pecola being rendered 'outdoors' which is defined by Claudia as "the real terror of life ... the end of something, an irrevocable physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition" (Morrison 1972:18). By the end of the novel Pecola's physical displacement
culminates in a tragic mental displacement. Pecola's home is more of a battleground for her parents who have neither time nor patience for their children. Her distancing from her mother is evident in her calling her Mrs. Breedlove and not 'mother'. Restricted by her youth and gender, Pecola survives the chaotic conditions at home by employing strategies of endurance. She attempts to actualize her metaphorical condition of invisibility by willing herself to disappear. By doing so she also tries to blot out the sordid ugliness of her life:

She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly, now with a rush. Slowly again. Her fingers went one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to the elbow. Her feet now ... Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left (ibidem:59).

This sort of fantasy is described by Laing as a strategy of disembodiment psychotic cases employ in an effort towards self-preservation. The being of a nervous and insecure person like Pecola is very precariously structured. One's sense of bodily substantiality or embodiment depends on one's sense of unity between mind and body and this gives one "a sense of personal continuity in time" (Laing 1969:69). Implicated in bodily desires one relates to other human beings as a whole individual. But one who is ontologically insecure experiences the self as split in mind and body. Such a split, Laing points
out, is a starting point for a line of development that ends in mental psychosis. Pecola's world is full of misery. The white society either looks at her with distaste or simply looks through her. Her schoolmates deride her for her ugliness and even her parents find her a burden. Hence she has a shaky ontological foundation. She longs to be pretty, to be appreciated by others and therefore she prays for blue eyes. She believes, "If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, 'Why look at pretty eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes'" (Morrison 1972:40). Pecola's desire to be perceived as pretty indicates her need for the recognition of her existence. Her parents' brutal quarrels make her conscious of the ugliness of her Black reality because she relates their behaviour to her Black identity. Her 'self' feels threatened in this destructive and claustrophobic environment and in order to preserve her 'self' she attempts to detach herself from the objective world through 'disembodiment.' Toni Morrison has depicted Pecola, to use Laing's words, as "persecuted by reality itself" (1969:84). The racist and sexist world in which she lives is a source of grave danger to her. Ontologically insecure, Pecola is doomed to fragmentation.

It is significant that when Pecola seems to succeed in making parts of her body disappear, her eyes are always left. Her eyes that resist disembodiment symbolise the faulty perception of her existence which is responsible for her
fragmentation. The "Eye" of the title emerges as the central metaphor of the novel embodying the problem of perception in a society, the ideology of which is constructed by sex, race and class factors. Morrison illustrates W.E.B. Du Bois' point about 'double consciousness' through the Yacobowski sequence. The blue eyed Jewish shopkeeper "does not see her because for him there is nothing to see" (Morrison 1972:42). As Samuel and Weems, analyzing the sequence through Sartre's theory of "the Look" have pointed out, "The total absence of human recognition Pecola sees in Yacobowski's glance corresponds to her own negative self perception. She can be only thing, object, being-for-the-other" (1990:19). Morrison goes on to emphasize the grotesqueness of blue eyes in a black body through Geraldine's cat. It is the narrator Claudia who understands Pecola's dilemma: "She would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of the people" (Morrison 1972:40). Defeated by the American ethos Pecola sees herself as the color conscious American society sees her. Chikwenye Ogunyemi draws attention to the pun in the title of the novel, "... the bluest eye can be a pun on "the bluest I," the gloomy ego, the black man feeling very blue from the psychological bombardment he is exposed to from early life to late" (Ogunyemi 1977:114). Through Pecola's obsession Morrison throws light on the devastating effect of the power of images controlled by the mainstream society. In all her novels Morrison is concerned about the preservation of Afro-American
identity in the face of the ideological hegemony of the white race. The 'Eye' in The Bluest Eye (1972) also posits a collective 'I' which has to be saved from disorder and chaos that would be imminent from a complete surrender to the mainstream culture of bourgeois materialism.

Pecola's intense nervousness and experiments of disembodiment reveal that she is moving towards insanity. She finally becomes insane towards the end of the novel. In her insanity she is convinced that she has the prettiest eyes. In a poignant dialogue between her split images, she seeks confirmation about her mythical transformation:

See how pretty they are.
Yes, they get prettier each time I look at them.
They are the prettiest I have seen.
Really?
Oh yes.
Prettier than the sky?
Oh yes much prettier than the sky.
Prettier than Alice and Jerry Storybook eyes?
Oh yes much prettier than Alice and Jerry story book eyes (Morrison 1972:156).

Pecola experiences herself divided in mind and body. The inner or true self is disembodied and becomes a detached spectator of the behaviour of the 'false self' located in the body. Laing is revolutionary in considering madness as a sane
response to life in a destructive society. It is, he feels, a special strategy a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation. Pecola retreats into madness because she is unable to cope with the hostile environment. It is ironic that Pecola should "know her beauty," thus discover her authentic self only in her state of insanity. The discovery of the prettiest eye / I is an affirmation of her Black identity, which if she had attained earlier in her sane condition, would have saved her from her suffering and consequent insanity.

Through Pecola's and Daphne's insanity, Morrison and Walker deal with the theme of female victimisation and psychological fragmentation due to racism and sexism. They criticize not only the imposition of white ideology on Afro-Americans but also the tendency of the Blacks themselves to create categories under the influence of the very community that rejects them.

2.2.3 "A Girl Child Ain't Safe in a Family of Men"

Explaining how she acquired her spirit of defiance, Sofia tells Celie in The Color Purple, "All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (Walker 1983:46).

Morrison, Walker and Naylor have boldly ventured into an arena which had hitherto remained untouched, that of the female child's sexual abuse within the family and community. Ladner (1972), Wallace (1978) and Collins (1990) in their studies of
Afro-American women have shown that concerned mothers, to ensure the physical survival of their daughters, constantly warn them about the threat of rape and other forms of sexual abuse that they would encounter, being Black and female. Wallace writes about the advice given by her mother to prepare her for the oppressive conditions she would find herself in:

My mother has since explained to me that since it was obvious her attempt to protect me was going to prove a failure, she was determined to make me realise that as a black girl in white America I was going to find it an uphill climb to keep myself together (Wallace 1978:98).

Morrison depicts in *Sula* (1973) Nel and Sula's growing awareness of their limitations, "Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be" (1982:52). Together they brave the lustful stares of old and young men as they walk to school. When they are threatened by a group of Irish boys, Sula makes use of a bizarre strategy to save herself and Nel. Slicing off a part of her finger with a knife she frightens the boys off with, "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?" (ibidem:54–55). She successfully conveys the message to the boys that she prefers self mutilation to threatened 'colonisation' of her body. She exhibits control
over her body by demonstrating that only she reserves the right to preserve it or mutilate it.

All young girls do not possess the grit of Sula. In The Bluest Eye (1972) Morrison depicts the vulnerability of young girls to lecherous males in the guise of friends and well-wishers. Claudia and Frieda are bewildered by the "picking" of men like Mr. Henry and Soaphead. Men "showing their privates" and inviting innocent girls for their sexual pleasure are some of the disagreeable experiences these girls have to cope with. Morrison shows the effect such experiences can have on their innocent minds in the episode of Mr. Henry's attempt to molest Frieda. While he is dealt with sternly by the protective parents, Frieda seeks the company of her sister, frightened that she may be "ruined". With no adult to comfort them, they rely on their own limited knowledge about sex and go in search of whiskey, which they feel will save Frieda from being "ruined". The episode illustrates not only the hazards that young Black girls have to face in their community, but also the lack of adult guidance which adds to their misery.

Walker in Meridian (1977) shows the protagonist Meridian as a victim of sexual abuse when she was twelve years old. Though it is said that it was Meridian who allowed herself to be chased by Mr. Daxter and his assistant, the description reveals how uninformed and curious young girls are sexually abused by lecherous men. Walker exposes the tendency of such men to
consider females as sexual objects. It is only later in life that Meridian learns to resist such objectification.

Role socialisation in a patriarchal society induces the attitude of aggressiveness in boys and mute submission in girls. Morrison in The Bluest Eye exposes the racist and sexist role socialisation of young boys within the Black community through Louis Junior's chauvinistic treatment of Pecola. Brought up to consider himself superior to "niggers" because of his light skin, Junior passes his time bullying young girls. He invites Pecola to his house and then terrifies her by flinging his black cat at her, taking sadistic pleasure in her fear and helplessness.

Discussing the plight of pre-adolescent girls in the Afro-American community, Joyce Ladner points out that, "... an eight year old has a good chance of being exposed to rape and violence and neither parents nor community leaders have the power to eliminate this antisocial behaviour" (Ladner 1972:62). Morrison and Walker boldly reveal the fact that the perpetrators of this antisocial behaviour could be the fathers themselves. Pecola in The Bluest Eye (1972) and Celie in The Color Purple (1983) are both victims of incestuous rape. Child abuse is depicted by these writers as a fundamental betrayal of childhood trust and an affirmation of the powerlessness of being young and female. Walker begins The Color Purple with Celie's sexual abuse by her father. Unable to comprehend her experience she starts a one way communication with God. Walker's intention in making
Celie narrate her experience in coarse and vulgar language is to break the silence around the heinous act of child abuse. She effectively exposes the outrageousness of the act. In *Living By the Word* she explains:

> Because once you strip away the lie that rape is pleasant, that rapists have anything at all attractive about them, that children are not permanently damaged by sexual pain, that violence done to them is washed away by fear, silence, and time, you are left with the positive horror of the lives of thousands of children ... who have been sexually abused and who have never been permitted their own language to tell about it (1988:57-58).

Perhaps the most insidious aspect of rape is the victim mentality that is instilled in the mind of the developing young girl. Such a traumatic experience can become a devastating source of a damaged self-concept. Both Celie and Pecola, due to continued self-deprecation, become fragmented beings. While Pecola's experience of sexual abuse adds to her already fragile concept of self, Celie's experience makes her convinced of her ugliness and worthlessness. A 'Victim mentality' is so embedded in her that when Nettie advises her to put up a fight against Albert's brutality, she replies "But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive" (Walker 1983:26).
Sexual abuse is a visible dimension of a more generalised system of oppression. The rapist, by violating the sanctity of the woman's body, attempts to humiliate and degrade her. Moreover, by making the victim rather than the criminal rapist appear guilty, the patriarchal society underplays the seriousness of the insidious act. Alphonse's grim warning to Celie, "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (ibidem:11), makes the telling not the act criminal. It is an illustration of how rapists silence their victims and make them appear guilty. For both Alphonse and Cholly the act of incestuous rape is linked to their attitudes towards their wives. Both reify women as objects of sexual gratification. Alphonse uses Celie as his wife's substitute when his wife is very ill and Cholly violates Pecola's body when her action of scratching the back of her leg with her toe, reminds him of his wife Pauline. Celie and Pecola suffer because like their mothers they are female and powerless.

In order to emphasize the heinousness of child abuse, Walker and Morrison depict Alphonse and Cholly as dehumanised beings. While Alphonse considers Celie a dehumanised object, to be used, abused and discarded, his excessive sexual drive and repeated abuse of his teenaged daughter makes him more an animal than a human being. Cholly is reduced to an animal status by Morrison in her description of the rape scene, "... and he sank to his knees, his eyes on the foot of his daughter. Crawling
on all fours towards her, he raised his hand and caught the foot in an upward stroke" (Morrison 1972:128). Patriarchy has perpetuated the myth of the heroic rapist and that "rape is pleasant." But these writers firmly demolish these myths by examining the problem of rape and incest from a female perspective. Not only do the men appear beastly and cowardly but the victimised young girls undergo intense suffering. Moreover, these writers display a remarkable boldness in dealing with a taboo subject and examining a sensitive issue within the Black community, thereby risking the wrath of Black men.

Sexual abuse generally accompanies imposition of silence by the assaulter and by the society which ignores the criminal aspect of this act of degradation and dwells on the shamefulness of the experience. Celie and Pecola suffer alienation from their mothers and also from society. The gossiping women talking about Pecola's victimisation have little sympathy for her. Their conventional belief is, "she carry some of the blame" (Morrison 1972:147), thus supporting the myth that no woman can be raped against her will. Pauline, who had distanced herself from her children, does not sympathise with her daughter, but beats her mercilessly. Like the community women, she too transfer the blame to the victim. Morrison ends the novel by presenting a pathetic picture of Pecola, 'picking and plucking' her way through the garbage dump. Claudia and Frieda are the only ones who are distressed about Pecola's suffering and are eager to help her.
The community women have internalised patriarchal values and therefore they fail to empathise with the suffering of Pecola. Walker too depicts Celie alienated from her family because of her traumatic experience to such an extent that she has only God to communicate her intense distress to. She writes, "My Mama dead, she die screaming and cussing. She scream at me, she cuss at me. I'm big" (Walker 1983:12). Her suffering is more intense because no one understands her victimisation. Like Pecola, she has to leave school. The school teacher, Miss Beasley, who comes to persuade Alphonse to let Celie continue her schooling, becomes silent and leaves when she sees Celie's pregnant condition.

Through the depiction of Celie's and Pecola's suffering, Morrison and Walker raise questions about the pitiful plight of young Black girls doomed to suffer because of their femaleness. Victimised by men and society, they are doomed to fragmentation which takes the shape of insanity in Pecola and diminished self-esteem in Celie.

Adolescent Black girls depicted by these writers often grow up amidst domestic violence, experience parental neglect and even the indignity of sexual abuse. Distanced from parents too engrossed in the business of the family's survival, they try to cope with the hostile environment and sometimes buckle under the pressure. Being Black, young and female signifies an existence with many difficulties and problems. However, if
girls like Ruth in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), Claudia and Frieda in *The Bluest Eye* (1972) and Celie in *The Color Purple* (1983) are endowed with supportive family members or friends, they emerge stronger and wiser.

A positive feature that emerges is that daughters do not seem to be unwanted in Black American families. Mothers do not show exceptional preference for sons. Even when they are indifferent towards their daughters, it is not because of their gender. However, the oppression Black girls experience is gender specific and men, whether they are at home or outside, are often a source of threat to them.

2.3 "De Mules' Uh De World"

One of the major concerns of the Black women writers of America is to expose the marginalisation of Black women in a racist and sexist society. They have presented Black women like Mem and Margaret in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), Pauline in *The Bluest Eye* (1972), Celie in *The Color Purple* (1983) and Mattie in *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983) facing dual oppression of white hegemony and Black patriarchy, coping with unrelenting degradation and abuse and often succumbing to the nightmarish experience of complete powerlessness. These women are physically abused, economically exploited and maliciously maligned just because they are Black. Since she has to cope with the dual oppression of racism and sexism, the Black woman has been called the "slave of a slave" by Frances Beal (1970) and the "other of the other" by Michelle Wallace (1990).
2.3.1 "We were bred for domestic labor"

Pauline, Mem, Celie and Mattie toil ceaselessly at home cooking, cleaning and washing, trying to stretch their meagre budgets. Celie's pathetic efforts to cope with house work at a young age and in her pregnant condition are described through Celie's own language: "I can't move fast enough. By time I git back from the well, the water be warm. By time I git the tray ready the food be cold. By time I git all the children ready for school it be dinner time" (Walker 1985:12). After her marriage to Albert she works hard looking after the house and her four step-children. None of the Black women depicted by these writers is afraid of hard work. Laziness and indolence are characteristics foreign to their nature. Even when, in the absence of supportive husbands, they are the sole bread winners of the family, as Mem and Pauline are, they carry their double burden of working at a job and at home and yet suffer denigration from their husbands. Mem works to provide a clean and comfortable home for her family. Her one ambition in life is to rent a decent flat so that her children can lead a better life. She tells Brownfield:

I already told you, you ain't dragging me and these children through no more pig pens. We have put up with mud long enough. I want Daphne to be a young lady where there is other decent folks around, not here in the sticks on some white man's property
like in slavery times. I want Ornette to have a chance at a decent school. And little baby Ruth, I don't even want her to know there is such a thing as outdoor toilets (Walker 1970:84).

With diligence and hard work Mem realises her dream for a short period but is ultimately defeated by senseless male vindictiveness because Brownfield's ego cannot accept her success. Through the depiction of Mem's decline from a school teacher to a domestic help and finally to a physically ill dependent wife of a drunkard husband, Walker exposes the debilitating effect of the interlocking system of race, sex and class oppression on Black women. Mem's meaningful efforts at improving her lot are defeated by forces outside her control.

While Mem persists in her efforts to improve her standard of living and meets a tragic end, Pauline rigidly compartmentalises her two worlds, that of the luxurious house of her employer and her shabby storefront, and seeks satisfaction in the order, beauty and comfort of her employer's house. Through Pauline's experience as a domestic servant, Morrison shows how Black women are exploited and objectified by their white employers. Making them work as if they were animals or 'de mules uh de world' is one form of objectification. Pauline's employers, the Fishers, employ the exploitative strategy of praise to subjugate her and to make her scrub and shine quite willingly. Mr. Fisher's remark, "I would rather sell her blueberry cobblers than real
estate" (Morrison 1972:101), is clearly hypocritical and
exploitative. In order to keep her firmly in her place he
adds, "Really, she is an ideal servant" (ibidem). But Pauline,
tired of the unwarranted brutal abuse from her husband, and
hungry for praise, is easily fooled into total submission.
Because of her love for beauty and order, and because she seeks
refuge from the frustrations that accompany her Black and
female identity, she revels in the power, praise and luxury
that are hers in the Fisher house. After experiencing power
that went with her employer's name, security that came with
abundantly stacked cupboards and comfort because of the
convenient gadgets, she is understandably irritable in her own
house.

While, through the Fishers' treatment of Pauline, Morrison
depicts subtle exploitation of Black women as domestic workers,
through the behaviour of her earlier employer, she exposes the
insensitiveness of whites to the problems of their Black
employees. While Pauline loved the order and beauty of the
Fishers' house, she hated the dirty habits of her first employer
"Nasty white folks is about the nastiest thing they is" (Morrison
1972:95) she says. She has to leave the job because of her
husband's interference, but the employer refuses to pay her
salary. Even when Pauline is desperately in need of some money
to get her cooking gas reconnected, the lady refuses to pay her
and advises her to divorce her husband and ask for alimony.
The preposterousness of the suggestion is apparent from Pauline's
indignant comment, "What was he gone give me alimony on?" (ibidem:96). Morrison not only emphasizes the wide gap between Black and white experience, but also exposes the heartlessness of the white employers. For a Black woman, caught in the interlocking system of race, sex and class oppression, getting her daily food is more important than any other concern. Morrison also shows how when a Black woman is confronted with a choice between her two oppressors, her husband and the white employer she invariably chooses to stay with her husband.

"Deference rituals such as calling Black domestic workers "girls" and by their first names enable employers to treat their employees like children, as less capable human beings" (Collins 1990:69). While Pauline is nicknamed Polly by the Fishers, thus relegating her to a child-like status, the Streets in Morrison's *Tea-Baby* (1982), insist on calling Therese 'Mary'. To them, and also to Jadine who has acquired white values, all Black maid servants are 'Mary', which is a subtle way of robbing them of an identity other than that of a servant and thus putting them firmly in a subordinate position. Naming has power, and by using stereotyped names for their domestic servants, the employer exercises control over their image. The use of such generic terms to ensure subordination has also been seen in our country. In Bombay it is a common practice to call all maid servants "Ganga" and all man servants "Rama" irrespective of their actual names. Hence the objectification of the subordinate and their treatment as less capable human
beings, is a universal phenomenon. Bell Hooks observes:

As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject (Hooks 1989:42).

Since Blacks are seen strictly as menial workers, their identification through a common name groups them together. In *Tar Baby* Morrison shows how even when whites appear to be benevolent and proclaim their belief in equality, their subversive racism comes to the surface when their "humanistic" pose gets stretched beyond a limit. In the crucial Christmas dinner scene, there is a confrontation between Valerian and Sydney, Margaret and Ondine. Suddenly Valerian is not the benevolent employer but a racist oppressor. Ondine, who had always considered herself to be a member of the family is curtly ordered by Valerian to leave the house because she dared to argue with him over the dismissal of Gideon and Therese. Suddenly the entire facade of Black-white coexistence is broken and exposed for what it was, white exploitation of Blacks. It reveals a profound truth about Black and white relationship in America today, "that white folks and Black folks should not sit down and eat together ... They should work together sometimes, but they should not eat together or live together or sleep together. Do any of these personal things in
life" (Morrison 1982:211). When the mask is broken, Ondine and Sydney emerge, like Pauline in *The Bluest Eye* (1972), as the devoted servants of the exploiting white master.

2.3.2 "Slave of a slave"

Gloria Naylor has argued, "In the writing of Afro-American women, the test of love is what the black woman stays through. It is normally only death or desertion that tears her from the man" (Naylor 1988:29). Pauline in *The Bluest Eye* (1972) Margaret and Mem in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and Celie in *The Color Purple* (1983) are all battered wives, but none of them desert their husbands. Celie leaves Albert but in the end he starts living with her. Both Mem and Margaret stick to their husbands despite consistent abuse. Margaret does change into a loose woman because of Grange's brutality, but as soon as he leaves her she curls up and dies. Mem tries to mould herself to Brownfield's liking, even though it meant leaving the culture she had acquired through education and slipping back into the 'culture of poverty' which entailed speaking in Black dialect. Socialised in her gender role as a woman, she thinks that she would have to be a man to be able to face up to Brownfield's brutal force. She thinks, "If I was a man ..., I would give every man in sight and that I ever met up with a beating, may be even chop a few with a knife. They so pig headed and mean" (Walker 1970:84). Only on one occasion she displays 'manly' courage when she aims a gun at him and turns him into a cowering, whining figure. "I done got
my head beat by you just so you would feel a little like a man, Brownfield Copeland" (ibidem:94), she says to him. She leaves only after he has assured her that he will henceforth behave himself. But beaten as she is by the system of oppression and by her own female body, she once again becomes a powerless, vulnerable and fragmented woman.

Despite their best efforts Mem and Pauline are doomed to suffer. Their attempts at a decent and peaceful existence are frustrated by their husbands. Morrison begins The Bluest Eye (1972), with the shattered Breedlove family, their house having been burnt down by Cholly in a drunken fit of violence, and ends with Pecola's rape and insanity. Pauline at the end of the novel still does housework and lives with Pecola at the edge of the town. Her positioning "on the edge of the town" significantly highlights hers and Pecola's marginality in the community.

Mem meets a gruesome end at the hands of her drunken husband. In a poignant scene Walker shows Brownfield cruelly aiming a gun at his wife who is returning home, tired and worn out and carrying several packages for Christmas. The next moment she is lying faceless in the gravel. Brownfield unrepentent and indifferent turns "still cursing, into the house." Through Mem's and Pauline's tragic fate Morrison and Walker portray the existential dilemma of the Black woman confronting the negating glance of the 'other'. The racist bias pins them down to poverty while the sexist attitude of Black men adds further
misery to their lives. The questions these writers seem to be asking are - why should women suffer because of their men's frustrations? Aren't they also living in the same racist power structure? Don't Black women have more reason to be frustrated because they have to combat double oppression? As Susan Willis points out, "In capitalist society, where race is the means by which the white bourgeoisie defines its domination, the hatred of the oppressed class is deflected away from the source of domination and channelled upon these in inferior position: black women" (1985:230). As the "other of the other," the Black woman's lot, as depicted by these writers, is most pathetic. However, it is to their credit that they do not react with brutality as men do and those who escape the clutches of death and insanity collectively move towards self-empowerment.

Calvin Hernton has interpreted *The Color Purple* (1983) as a slave narrative pointing out that the only difference is that "it is an all black milieu in which men are masters and women are slaves" (Hernton 1987:7). Walker in this novel depicts Black men as oppressors and brutalisers of Black women. Celie's dehumanisation by her father and husband illustrates the complete objectification of women's sexuality that Gerda Lerner writes about:

But it is not women who are reified and commodified, it is women's sexuality and reproductive capacity which is so treated ... Since their sexuality, an
aspect of their body, was controlled by others, women were not only disadvantaged but psychologically restrained in a very special way (Lerner 1986:213-214).

Before Celie's marriage it is her step-father who dictates his terms over her sexuality and the resultant offspring. Used as a sex object by her step-father and rendered sterile after her second pregnancy, Celie is physically and emotionally fragmented. It is as a fragmented person that her step-father presents her to Albert, "God done fixed her. You can do like you want to and she ain't make you feed it or clothe it" (Walker 1983:18). Celie's sexuality is thus reified and commodified by her step-father who offers her as an object for sale and even uses the commercial marketing strategy of adding the offer of a cow to attract the customer.

In the first half of the novel Walker depicts Celie suffering every indignity that is possible for a woman to suffer. Subjected to violent battering by her husband, she devises a strategy to cope with the pain. She writes, "He beat me like he beat the children ... It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man" (Walker 1983:30). By pretending to be wood Celie tries to distance herself from a threatening situation. Filled with despair at her oppressed condition, her 'self' disowns participation in the harrowing experience and because her 'self' is very precariously structured, she has to
resort to such a strategy to preserve her identity. Objectifying oneself or "petrification" according to Laing occurs in an ontologically insecure person. "It is a technique," he observes, "that is universally used as a means of dealing with the other when he becomes too tiresome or disturbing" (Laing 1969:48). Celie at this stage, having experienced nothing but denigration and violence, is struggling to preserve her 'self' and is therefore close to mental psychosis. Placed in a threatening situation she reacts like the mythical Daphne by pretending to be a tree and thus shielding herself from physical onslaught. To Celie at this stage, survival means passively enduring the brutality of her husband.

Naylor in The Women of Brewster Place (1983) narrates the stories of seven Black women to expose the different forms male oppression assumes. In the stories of Mattie and Ciel she suggests that victimisation of women by men is a consequence of disparate power relationships. Men in the roles of fathers, husbands and sons control and exploit women. Mattie suffers not so much due to her unwanted pregnancy (she lovingly brings up her child), but because of the insensitive and heartless attitude of her father, lover and son. Likewise Ciel suffers because of the cruelty and selfishness of her husband. In these stories Naylor ruthlessly exposes men's selfish pursuit of women's sexuality as they decline any responsibility for the consequence of the sex act. Ciel's husband leaves her because he feels she comes in the way of his progress. "Babies and
bills, that's all you good for," (Naylor 1983:94) he accuses her bitterly. Mattie and Ciel are "mules uh de world" who must tote their burdens alone. Etta Mae, after her adventures away from Brewster Place, decides to settle down but is frustrated to learn that men are only interested in her as a sexual object and not as a person. Cora Lee, the welfare mother, does not even realise her status as a 'mule'.

A prominent oppressive symbol in this novel is the wall which makes Brewster Place "a dead end street." Erected to segregate the poverty-stricken Blacks who lived there, it turns into a symbol of racism in the country. In Naylor's own words, "For that is the reductive experience for all blacks, regardless of their status. Now, it is not something you dwell on everyday of your life, but it is something you know is part and parcel of your existence" (Goldstein 1983:36). Like the wall that is constantly present, reminding them of the limitations imposed on them, experience of racism in some form or other permeates every facet of their lives.

Since most of the novels of Morrison, Walker and Naylor have an all Black milieu, cases of Black and white open confrontation are very rare. In The Color Purple Walker depicts Sofia's racist oppression to reveal that out of the two forces, racism and sexism, racism is the more oppressive force for Black women. Sofia, a strong willed, self confident woman, refuses to be undermined by her husband. "I loves Harpo," she
says, "God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me" (Walker 1983:46). But the same Sofia is pitifully broken after her rash confrontation with the mayor. Her skull and ribs are cracked and she is blinded in one eye. Though she says, "White folks is a miracle of affliction" (ibidem:103), when she works as the mayor's maid, she is constantly at their beck and call. In a scene depicting Sofia's visit to her children after five years, Walker shows how due to the stupidity and insensitivity of Miss Millie, she is able to spend just fifteen minutes with her children.

Another novel which depicts the dehumanising experience of Black women due to racism, is Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1972). In the labor room scene in which Pauline gives birth to Pecola, Morrison emphasizes her feeling of loneliness because she is the only Black woman in the room. She experiences further humiliation at the hands of the insensitive doctor who examines her crudely. Adrienne Rich has pointed out:

> The experience of lying half awake in a barred crib, in a labor room with other women moaning in drugged condition where "no one comes" except to do a pelvic examination, or give an injection is a classic experience of alienated childbirth (1977:172).

Pauline's alienation is even more intense because she is a Black woman surrounded by white women and a white doctor. The racist words of the doctor are even more demeaning than his
behaviour. "These here women you don't have any trouble with," he tells the interns accompanying him, "They deliver right away with no pain. Just like horses" (1972:99). Rich, with a sensitive understanding of labor pains points out, "Pain is also experienced differently in different cultures ... Emotional display is more acceptable in some cultures than in others, and behaviour during childbirth may reflect an overall style of expressiveness" (1977:151). Stoic endurance of immeasurable pain and suffering has been the distinctive characteristic of Black women ever since slavery. Pauline naturally feels indignant at being treated like an animal, and so she too starts moaning like the other women in the room. Her cultural discipline advocates silence but her desire to be considered human necessitates articulation.

Racist and economic oppression has a negative impact on the psyche of Pauline. As a mother she is distant and uncaring. She extends her own dehumanisation to her new born daughter whom she considers "a cross between a puppy and a dying man" (ibidem:100). However, not all the Black mothers depicted are like Pauline. Most of them emerge as caring mothers despite the onslaught of triple oppression experienced by them, as Chapter 3 will reveal.

2.3.3 Revisioning history

The writer who most explicitly presents the reification and commodification of women's sexuality and reproductive capacity is Gloria Naylor in *Linden Hills* (1986). As Christian
points out "Once these women (the Nedeed Wives) have produced one male, once they have carried out their function for patriarchy, they are isolated from life until they no longer exist" (Gates 1990:360). Through Willa Nedeed, Gloria Naylor traces the history of the earlier Nedeed wives. From the first Mrs. Nedeed, Luwana Packerville, to the present Mrs. Nedeed, Willa Prescott; all the Nedeed wives have merely been necessary props to fulfil the primary function of patriarchy, that of providing a male heir. The Nedeed men follow a strict patriarchal code. The Nedeed wife should be presentable, she should be grateful to her husband for giving her a home and his name and she should provide him with a son who looks like his father. Naylor underlines the fact that patrilineal descent for Nedeed men also meant their duplication in looks. Once this is achieved, the wife is discarded to languish in loneliness and eventually disappear. Willa Prescott Nedeed, the present Mrs. Nedeed, suffers the misfortune of giving birth to a son who looks like his mother. This is sacrilege in the eyes of Luther Nedeed and through his reaction Naylor exposes the extremes to which male chauvinism can go. The event indicates to him the ungratefulness of his wife because she did not rightfully fulfil her function and she is branded a whore to facilitate the denial of Luther's share of responsibility in the child's creation. As a punishment she is imprisoned in the basement along with the child. Through Willa's voice Naylor recounts the mental and physical anguish suffered by her.
Naylor goes on further to establish that Willa's fate was not unique but that through generations women have suffered a similar fate. Luwana, the first Mrs. Nedeed, Willa discovers, was bought by her husband and was thus literally objectified. While the son she bore was manumitted, she herself lived on as a slave of her husband and son, viciously alienated because she had outlived her usefulness to them. Evelyn, the next Mrs. Nedeed, suffers a similar fate and drowns her sorrow in mammoth cooking and in herbal concoctions by which she desperately tries to capture the interest of her husband. Unsuccessful with her strategy, she starts balancing her food with laxatives which wear out her body. Priscilla on the other hand communicates her marginality and subsequent invisibility through the family photo albums. The early photographs highlight her reification through the possessive dark hand of Luther planted firmly on her shoulder, as if to check her vivacious spirit. Naylor effectively portrays a sinister side of Luther by contrasting the gay abandon of Priscilla with his stern, dark, immobile face. In the next picture his hand is not on her shoulder because he doesn't need her any more since he now has a son. The subsequent pictures graphically record her increasing marginality as she seems to be lost in her son's shadow. Willa notes, "She was no longer recording the growth of her child; the only thing growing in these pictures was her absence" (Naylor 1985:209). The final picture captures her overshadowed by two men, and a 'me' scrawled where her face should have been.
Naylor thus traces the history of Black women from slavery to present times, and reveals that marginality and invisibility has been their common experience. Walker has said in an interview, "The gift of loneliness is sometimes a radical vision of society or one's people that has not previously been taken into account" (1983:264). It is from her lonely position that Willa is able to reconstruct the lives of the Nedeed wives before her and discover their status as "mules". Naylor presents the basement of the Nedeed house as the archives of Nedeed women where Willa discovers their history by deconstructing the entries in Luwana's diary, Evelyn's recipe book and Priscilla's album. The deconstruction of their subjectivity however triggers the reconstruction of her own subjectivity, empowering her to face Luther defiantly, in the powerful denouement of the novel. By tracing the history of the Nedeed women, Naylor not only exposes the extreme limit to which patriarchal oppression can go but also reveals the complete powerlessness of Black women in controlling their own lives.

While reconstruction of history to recover women's submerged or unrealised past is a significant concern of all feminists, for Black women the restructuring of their past indicates a powerful desire to exist historically in a world which had denied them humanity and identity during slavery. It is for this need to establish a link with history and to empathise with their anguished ancestors in order to understand their experience, that the Black women writers under discussion
are going back to the past in their recent novels. Morrison and Walker in *Beloved* (1987) and *The Temple of My Familiar* (1990) recreate history imaginatively. Just as Sethe in Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) keeps the past of slavery alive in Denver by telling her stories, these writers seek a continuity with the past by reconstructing history, because "what is unwritten and unremembered can come back to haunt us, troubling the boundaries of what is known" (Anderson 1990:137). Answering a question asked by Marsha Darling, Morrison said:

> There is a necessity for remembering the horror, but of course there's a necessity for remembering it in a manner in which it can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive. The act of writing the book, in a way, is a way of confronting it and making it possible to remember (Morrison 1988:5).

Morrison by writing the novel indicates that the actions of Black women like Margaret Garner, whose story inspired her to write the novel, have to be viewed in the context of the horrors of slavery. Sethe's homicidal act has to be viewed along with her deeply scarred back. The tortures suffered by the Sweet Home slaves and the merciless whipping Sethe received in her pregnant condition, which left ugly scars resembling a tree branching out, reveal the inhuman victimisation of slaves. Morrison exposes the attempted dehumanisation of slaves by their masters in the scene depicting the school teacher
chastising his nephews, whom he held responsible for Sethe's flight: "... just think — what would (your) own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education ... Suppose you beat the hounds past that point that away. Never again could you trust them in the woods or anywhere else ... you just can't mishandle creatures and expect success" (Morrison 1987:149-150).

The main reason why the school teacher wanted Sethe back was because she had "at least ten breeding years left" (ibidem:149). It is from this animal existence and this animal identity that Sethe attempts to save her children. Structurally too, the horrifying experiences of slavery are interspersed throughout the novel so that the past is always connected to the present.

As Sethe tells Denver:

> What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there ... Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm — every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more ... it will happen again. Denver, you can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over ... it's going to be there waiting for you. That's how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what (ibidem:1987:36).
Morrison's intention in writing *Beloved* (1987) is not just to retell the story of Margaret Garner imaginatively but also to remind the Black women of today of the tortured lives of their ancestors. It is also a reminder that the horrors of slavery, though in the past, are a reality that happened and cannot be wiped out. Along with Sethe's story Morrison tells the story of Ella who was kept locked in a room by a father and son for more than a year. "You couldn't think up," she says, "what them two done to me" (ibidem:119). In the story of Sethe's mother Morrison reveals her brutalisation by white men and the resultant pregnancies the fruit of which she threw away. She only kept Sethe because she was conceived through a Black man. Her life is so marked with brutal violence and degradation that she prepares Sethe for her death. Sethe painfully remembers that her mother was hung when she herself was very small. Baby Suggs' story reveals that the greater part of her life was spent as a slave and her traumatic experiences are summed up in her words to Sethe, "There is no bad luck in the world but white folks" (ibidem:89). Her eight children had six fathers, "What she called nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children" (ibidem:23). The sufferings of all these women are gender specific. They are denied control over their own bodies and also over their offspring. In such a situation they could only lead a fragmented existence. Baby Suggs however, with her abiding
strength, overcomes her fragmented state and emerges as a preacher of the community. She was manumitted when she was too old to be of proper service to her master's family. Even as a free woman she lives with the uncertainty regarding her son's survival and the suffering of her daughter-in-law. She had silently agreed with Sethe that the past was "unspeakable." Nevertheless, she becomes a source of strength for Sethe in her hour of misery and to her community she preaches the gospel of self love.

Sethe herself is a broken woman because of her dehumanising experiences as a slave and because of her act of infanticide. Her greatest sorrow is that nobody understood her. Her dead daughter haunts the house because she was rejected and is therefore enraged. She longs for a chance to explain to her why she had snatched away her precious life. "But if she'd only come, I could make it clear to her" (ibidem:4), she cries out in anguish. Her sons, Howard and Buglar, desert her because they could not understand the connection between murder and love. Denver too is bewildered by her action and is afraid for her own life. The community ostracizes her and even Paul D deserts her when he learns about the murder. Torn by her need to be understood by her dear ones, Sethe becomes a fragmented woman. She feels as if she is broken into pieces when Beloved leaves her and when Paul D wants to bathe her she wonders, "will the parts hold?" (ibidem:272). It is ultimately when Paul D reaches out to her with a deep understanding of her suffering
that Sethe finally finds her subjectivity. To Sethe's sorrowful cry, "She was my best thing," Paul D replies reassuringly, "You your best thing, Sethe" (ibidem:273). The novel ends with Sethe attempting to reconstruct her subjectivity as she says "Me? Me?," as she becomes aware of the concern shown by Denver and the warmth extended by Paul D.

Morrison in *Beloved* (1987) and Walker in *The Temple of My Familiar* (1990) also explore the trauma of the Middle Passage, the horrifying journey from Africa to America in which a number of slaves did not even survive to tell their tale of abuse and degradation. Morrison herself pointed out to Marsha Darling in an interview that she intended Beloved to function not only as the spirit of Sethe's daughter but also as a survivor from a slave ship because, "the language of both experiences - death and Middle Passage - is the same" (Morrison 1988:5). When Denver asks Beloved "What's it like over there, where you were before?" she replies as she curls up, "Dark, I'm small in that place. I'm like this here" (Morrison 1987:75). Later, Beloved again fuses her experience of death with the experience of African captives chained and tied down in a slave ship:

Small rats do not wait for us to sleep someone is thrashing but there is no room to do it in if we had more to drink we could make tears we cannot make sweat or morning water so the men without skin bring us theirs we are all trying to leave our body behind the man on my face has done it (ibidem:210).
This death-like experience is described by Lissie in *The Temple of My Familiar* (1990). Lissie is presented by Walker as an embodiment of Black womanhood from past to present. She provides her with a historical consciousness with which she can recall her earlier lives. Describing the life in which she was sold by her uncle into slavery, she recounts the trauma of the Middle Passage:

- the rats, the smell of dead head covered with sores in your lap, the screams of women and men violated for the sports of the devil that passed as crew ... the pleas for mercy from everyone ...

(1990:69).

Once in the hands of the slave catchers, "balded, branded and naked," they were reduced to animal status. Thus robbed of their humanity, they disappear from history. Lissie's description highlights the gender specific anguish of Black women in the slave ships as she recalls "the painful menstrual periods of the women and the blood running over one, the miscarriages ... the young women ... pregnant by force and too young to know it ... left with this bitter seed, and unfair to the children - burdened with our hatred of the fruit" (ibidem: 69-70). Black women thus, displaced from their native land, brutalised by the slave traders and sold as objects or animals, were emotionally and psychologically fragmented. Morrison and Walker explore the traumas of the Middle Passage from a female
perspective and discover that the female captives suffered even more acutely because of their biological identity.

2.3.4 Lesbianism: A threat to male sexuality and power

Another hitherto uncharted territory Walker and Naylor have boldly ventured into is that of lesbian experience. Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* advocates and affirms the necessity of women writing about women's experience, "For if Chloe likes Olivia and Mary Carmichael knows how to express it, she will light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been" (1977:80). Adrienne Rich has voiced her strong protest against the suppression of such articulation:

> Along with persecution we have met with utter, suffocating silence and denial: the attempt to wipe us out of history and culture together. This silence is part of the totality of silence about women's lives. It has also been an effective way of obstructing the intense, powerful surge towards female community and women to woman commitment, which threatens patriarchy ... (1979:224).

While Walker in *The Color Purple* (1983) explores the positive ramifications of lesbian experience, Naylor in *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983) depicts the persecution of lesbians with the intent of examining the link between sexuality and power. In the story entitled "The Two," Lorraine and Theresa suffer alienation and castigation because of their
sexual 'deviance'. Though the majority of women in Brewster Place have suffered betrayal, rejection and desertion by men, they shun 'the two' because they refuse to define themselves in relation to men. Mattie, thrice betrayed, by her lover, father and son, is the only one who seems to understand their experience:

But I've loved some women deeper than I loved any man ... Maybe it is not so different, maybe that is why some women get so riled up about it, 'cause they know deep down it is not so different after all (1983:141).

Naylor examines the myths surrounding lesbians and depicts the persecution they face as a consequence. She exposes the homophobia within the Brewster Place community in the very first sentence, "At first they seemed like such nice girls" (ibidem:129). The community becomes antagonised as soon as it discovers their unorthodox sexual allegiance to each other. Naylor recounts the experiences of Lorraine to reveal her suffering at being rejected and disowned by her father, loss of jobs because of her lesbian identity, the compulsion to move from place to place due to social castigation and her present humiliations by the self-appointed caretakers of society. Sophie's persistent intrusion into their lives to discover something devious in their life style to justify her censure, reveals the unwarranted condemnation and harassment lesbians
have to endure. The contemptuous silence and sly insinuations of the community women drive them close to a nervous breakdown. While Theresa tends to accept her marginality, Lorraine's anguish is apparent in her protest, "- but it doesn't make me any different from anyone else in the world" (ibidem:165). She is thus attacking the assumption that heterosexuality is the only social norm regarding sexuality and asserting that her different sexual preference is a personal matter which should not concern others. Naylor, by highlighting the persecution of Theresa and Lorraine underscores the patriarchal stance of the society which defines women solely through their relation to men. If feminism threatens patriarchy, lesbianism threatens it even more.

While Lorraine and Theresa cope with the humiliating behaviour of the women of the community they are utterly powerless against male aggression. One of the most powerfully written scenes of the novel is that of the heinous gang rape of Lorraine, through which Naylor presents rape as a deliberate hostile act of degradation and possession, designed to intimidate and inspire fear. She makes a vehement indictment of males who validate their manhood through their sexuality, by condemning them as "the most dangerous species in existence" (ibidem:170). The alley boys assault Lorraine because she is a lesbian. Since lesbianism implies rejection of the phallus, symbol of male power, they feel threatened by Lorraine whose sexual preference for another woman is an insult to their
maleness. The alley boys consider it their natural right to exercise control over female sexuality. Naylor points out:

The thing is Lorraine wasn't raped because she is a lesbian, they raped her because she was a woman. And, regardless of race, regardless of sexual preference, the commonality is the female experience. When you reduces that down in this society even to something as abysmal as rape, there is no difference between women (1983:36).

Lorraine's inhuman victimisation by the alley boys is undoubtedly gender specific, but their assault on her is also prompted by the fact that she dared to define herself independently of men. Their phallocentric consciousness is threatened hence they use rape as a weapon of humiliation and a means of establishing their power. Theresa and Lorraine suffer because they defy reification and refuse to become sex objects for men.

Naylor emphasizes the monstrosity of the crime by giving it mythical dimensions. The horrible sight of Lorraine's viciously victimised body reverberates in the minds of women and children causing fitful dreams. Naylor describes Mattie's dream of the block party featuring the brickwall seemingly spattered with blood. The party ends abruptly as hysterical women tear down the wall in a frenzy and hurl bricks into the avenue. The dream implicates the community in the crime and
the wall that symbolised racist oppression now signifies sexist and lesbian oppression as well. Simultaneously, Lorraine's victimisation and suffering is also projected as the suffering of all women in a phallocentric world, as Ciel's dream indicates. Ciel, who was away at the time of Lorraine's tragic death and hence did not know anything about it, describes to Mattie her dream in which she saw Lorraine's victimised body, but she feels that it was her own body. Lorraine's tragedy thus becomes the tragedy of all women in Brewster Place.

2.3.5 Betrayed by the body

Woman has always been relegated to a secondary position because she is considered to be the weaker sex. It is her body that puts her in a vulnerable position. While sexual freedom in males is considered a mark of 'manhood,' for a female any sexual indiscretion can have disastrous consequences. The 'biological contingency of motherhood' instils fear in the minds of adolescent girls. The ultimate humiliation a woman can suffer is rape, as sections 2.2.3 and 2.3.4 reveal, and her suffering is intensified when she discovers that she has become pregnant because of it. She feels betrayed by her own body.

Myths about matriarchies and female tribes in pre-historic times, specially in Africa, depict women living in separate tribes, independent of men. In a popular myth Ananse the trickerster spider uses his wile to make the members of the female tribe pregnant. Ultimately, the female tribe is
overpowered by the male tribe and taken control of because the women, in their pregnant condition, were too weak to face the physical strength of the male invaders. The myth highlights the fact that women are at the mercy of their bodies and one sure way men can exert their power over them is by taking advantage of this. In The Temple of My Familiar (1990) Walker presents one of Lissie's many lives in which she was born in a pygmy tribe. In this transitional phase from animal life to human culture, when she reaches the age to mate and becomes pregnant, she prefers to live with her mate and rear a family in defiance of the tribal custom according to which men and women lived separately. Others soon follow their example and start living in families. This arrangement continues until

... the idea of ownership - which grew out of the way the forest now began to be viewed as something cut into pieces that belonged to this tribe or that - came into human arrangements. Then it was that men, because they were stronger, at least during those periods when women were weak from childbearing, began to think of owning women and children. (Walker 1990:86).

Walker links the reification and subjugation of women to man's lust for power through ownership. Historically, women have remained the subjugated and oppressed sex whenever men and women have tried to live together. Walker views separate living and family system as a cyclic pattern, one giving way to another and concludes, "This is the pattern of freedom until man no
Walker's intense concern about the vulnerability of the female body is perhaps because of her own personal experience of anguish over an unwanted pregnancy. In an interview with John O'Brien she said about her experience, "I felt at the mercy of everything including my own body" (1973:187). She felt so depressed that she considered suicide and kept a razor blade under her pillow until her friend arranged for an abortion. She understood then, "how alone woman is, because of her body" (1973:189). Hence for many of her women characters in her novels "conception articulates oppression." Mem in The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970), Meridian, 'Wile Chile' and Past Mary in Meridian (1977) and Celie in The Color Purple (1983) suffer acutely because of unwanted pregnancy.

Walker depicts Mem Copeland broken and defeated because of repeated pregnancies. It is her body ultimately that lets her down after she had realised her dream of finding a decent house for her family. Brownfield, enraged by her defiance, plans to humiliate her by "planting a seed to grow that would bring her down in weakness and dependence and her ultimate destruction" (1970:103). He is confident that, "Her body would do to her what he could not, without the support of his former bravado" (ibidem:101). Brownfield makes use of his sexual rights as a husband to humiliate and oppress his wife. Through the tragedy of Mem, Walker shows how an enterprising and resourceful woman
of strength and courage is ultimately defeated because she is at the mercy of her own body.

In her next novel *Meridian* (1977), Walker weaves in the stories of 'Wile Chile' and Fast Mary to emphasize the suffering unwanted pregnancies can cause. 'Wile Chile' is a thirteen year old ghetto urchin, brought into the campus by Meridian who is moved by her pregnant condition. But 'Wile Chile,' who also seems to be retarded, is oblivious of the help she needs and runs away from Meridian only to be tragically killed by a speeding vehicle. With the story of the 'Wile Chile,' Walker confronts the reader with the abuse of the female body, even though it may be of a retarded and filthy ghetto urchin. As Daniel Ross points out:

To confront the body is to confront not only an individual's abuse but also the abuse of women's bodies throughout history; as the external symbol of woman's enslavement, this abuse represents for woman a reminder of her degradation, and her consignment to an inferior status (1988:70).

'Wile Chile' has survived without parents or friends for thirteen years on rancid food from the garbage. She has alienated herself from the community, bolting whenever approached by a neighbour. The only contact with the community, presumably forced, leaves her pregnant. When Meridian first sees her, filthy and pregnant, suffering the penalty of femaleness and representing the utter degradation of woman, she is so shocked
that she lies like a corpse in her room. Her confrontation with female degradation due to the vulnerability of the body shakes her profoundly.

Along with the story of 'Wile Chile,' Walker also narrates the story of Past Mary, who secretly gave birth to a baby in a tower room and killed it, and was nevertheless caught, flogged and locked in a room. Like Wile Chile's, her suffering is gender specific. She commits suicide because she cannot cope with suffering and indignities brought about by her body. Susan Willis has noted that the two tales "pose the problem of the individual's relationship to the group" (1987:113). Both suffer not only because of unwanted pregnancies but also because of their inability to communicate and find support. While 'Wile Chile's marginalisation is self imposed because of her eccentricity and ghettoised background, Past Mary's secrecy and isolation marks society's tendency to blame and ostracize the victim rather than the culprit in case of illicit pregnancy.

Walker presents Meridian, the protagonist of the novel, as an antithesis of 'Wile Chile' and Past Mary because she refuses to become a prey to her own body and decides to establish her own control over it. She finds the strength to deny male control over her body after she experiences the anguish of becoming pregnant by Truman who is more interested in Lynne. As she gets aborted she is enraged at the injustice of her painful suffering and "disgusted with the fecundity of her body" (1977:114). The experience of 'the aloneness of the woman
in her body' makes her resolve to possess her body so that she never feels betrayed by it. (Meridian’s experience of motherhood will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.)

Proof of virginity is another spectre that haunts young women, specially brides. If a woman’s body lets her down on the crucial wedding night, her life is liable to turn into hell. Walker in *The Temple of My Familiar* (1990) narrates an instance in which a young girl’s life was ruined because of it. Lissie speaks about one of her lifetimes in which she suffered gender specific oppression because she could not prove her virginity on her wedding night. Denounced by her husband and her parents, she finally becomes, "the lowest sort of prostitute for the men of the village, including the husband I'd loved, until I died of infection and exposure at the age of eighteen" (1990:87).

Walker thus in her novels examines the suffering of Black women because of the vulnerability of the female body. Due to unwanted or illicit pregnancy or due to the seeming lack of virginal purity, Black women suffer mental trauma and economic deprivation which may often lead to their death. It is necessary for Black women to repossess their bodies to realise self-empowerment.
The novels discussed in this chapter portray the victimisation of Black women as the Other of white society and Black men. As objects, their reality is defined by the dominant class. As sex objects and exploited 'mules,' they lead anguished and constricted lives. Ineffectually grappling with race, class and gender oppression, they suffer psychological fragmentation. Black women writers of today are challenging the externally controlled stereotypes that denigrate Black women and hence they expose the factors leading to the manipulation of negative stereotypes. They simultaneously assert the right of Black women to define themselves and present emergent Black women like Claudia, Meridian, Ruth who carve out new definitions for themselves. These emergent women, possessing a new self-affirming consciousness, successfully negotiate the contradiction between their positive self-definitional and their objectification as the Other.