CHAPTER VI

THE WOMANIST CONCEPT OF SELF

1. The Feminist Movement

Twentieth century witnessed a large output of "écriture féminine." It is a phrase indicative of a deviation in modern literature which lays emphasis on whatever is feminine in women’s writing. Helene Cixous, the French feminist who coined the phrase, put it into linguistic currency to mean “writing which is typically feminine in theme, style and approach, and quite distinct from phallogocentric feature in a literary work."¹ Women writers all over the world seem, consciously or unconsciously, to share certain common features. Frustration, anger or anxiety against being considered secondary or insignificant by the patriarchal society, an innate desire for self discovery and self sufficiency, dependence on females rather than on males for a sense of collective identity and the affirmation of positive cultural values as a woman are some of the important features. Yet some of the contemporary women writers like Toni Morrison, refuse to be strait-jacketed and labelled feminist. They are justified in doing so because their works carry gender diversity, variety and also some sort of uniqueness which cannot be easily categorized.

From ancient times woman has often been accorded secondary status in the family structure Rousseau who wanted to demolish monarchy in the Enlightenment era, considers Patriarchy as the most natural system. He remarks that “the most ancient of all societies and the only one that is

natural, is the family; and even so the children remain attached to the father only so long as they need him for their preservation. 1 Rousseau points out that it is the father who is to command because it is natural and that women should cultivate timidity and allied attributes. "They must be cultivated in women and any woman who disdains them offends good morals."3 Immanuel Kant considers men and women as "two sorts of human beings" and ascribes the proper reference points to masculine and feminine responsibilities: "a woman should unite solely to enhance the character of the beautiful, which is the proper reference point, and on the other hand, among the masculine qualities the sublime clearly stands out as the criterion of his kind."4 Women's secondary status was given some sort of scientific explanation with Charles Darwin's essay on The Descent of Man: "Man is more courageous, pugnacious and energetic than woman."5 Montesquieu observes that "Women in hot countries... are old at twenty, then reason, therefore never accompanies their beauty... These women ought to be in a state of dependence."6 The famous document of Manu, Manusmruti, also relegates women to an inferior position stressing that she should always be in a state of dependence on the father, husband, or son as the case may be. Manu divides women into two groups, one, "noble and good and hence needs to be respected and worshipped," the other "inferior, vile creature needing constant

5 Quoted in Rose Mary Agonito, ed., History of Ideas on Woman: A Source Book, op. cit., p.48
surveillance. 

The deification of woman as a Goddess, or eternal mother is another factor which serves to deprive her of her rightful inheritance as a human being. In *Aspects of the Feminine*, Carl Jung traces how the worship of Mary has affected the psychic culture of man resulting in a devaluation of woman. “Since the psychic relation to woman was expressed in the collective worship of Mary, the image of woman lost a value to which human beings had a natural right.” Jung goes on to explain that this value could find its natural expression only through individual choice, and when it was replaced by a collective one, the value sank into the unconscious. The patriarchal system through its domestic, familial, social, cultural institutions works on the female child from birth itself, and as she grows up, imprisons her in a protective and regressive enclosure. This prejudice against women is reflected everywhere, from psychology to literature and to commonsense. Women are viewed as passive sexual objects, dutiful wives or devoted mothers. Anthropologists too have largely ignored women and turned their attention on the activities of men mainly. The theory propounded by Freud most insulting to women was the conviction that “woman is a castrated man.” Arthur Schopenhauer in his essay “On Woman” in *Studies in Pessimism* (1851) retains all the negative aspects of traditional ideas on women and observes that a woman should show “submission to her husband, to whom she should be a patient and cheering companion.”

---

10 Rose Mary Agonito, op. cit., 194.
It was an English woman, Mary Wollstonecraft, in her pioneering essay "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" in 1792 who first saw "the logical connection between American libertarian values and woman’s rights."¹¹ In her article she spoke of woman’s proper place in society using political terms and man’s language. She stated that God had given natural rights to both sexes and that "it was women’s right to be free of the enslavement of men just as it was the man’s right to be free of tyrants."¹² Wollstonecraft’s work was widely read and "it helped to spearhead the antislavery and the women’s right movements in America in the nineteenth century by linking the abolition of slavery and feminist demands to the fundamental principles of American democracy."¹³

During the 1830’s a large number of women, many of them relatives of male abolitionists, organised female antislavery societies. Some of them became leaders in the feminist movement which held its first convention at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. At this convention, they campaigned to improve women’s plight by presenting a list of grievances. They strove to liberate women from religious and social bondage and demanded liberal divorce laws and suffrage for woman. The women’s movement struggled for equal treatment under the law, property rights, economic independence and for reproductive freedom and freedom from the nineteenth century cult of domesticity. In 1920, the right to vote was achieved but the women’s movements began to move towards more radical forms of feminism and became divided. During the nineteen sixties many idealistic young American

¹² Ibid., p. 77.
women both white and black participated in the civil rights movement but
they realized that even within the movement their gender was used as a basis
to deny them equal voice in policy-making councils. So these women,
skilled at civil rights tactics, rhetoric and political action created a new
movement — a women's liberation movement which by the end of nineteen
sixties succeeded in challenging nearly all of America's traditional cultural
assumptions about women's proper place in society.

In 1968, the national organisation for women was founded which
aimed at bringing American women into full participation in mainstream
American society. Professional activist women in the organisation demanded
"full partnership of the sexes, as part of the world-wide revolution of human
rights." Moreover consciousness-raising groups sponsored by women's
organisation throughout the country were prompting women to see and fight
against ingrained patterns of sexually-biased discrimination.

On the whole, women benefited from the many feminist lobbying
groups that had been formed during this period. A number of rape crisis
centres and shelters for battered women, job and family counselling centres
were opened. Newspapers and magazines addressing women's issues were
published. A new interest in women's literature, criticism and scholarly
studies on women was aroused. There was a general revaluation of the
fundamental values and experiences of being a woman. Women understood
that their true identity is smothered by the patriarchal culture through
assigning her experiences to the marginal existence. It has become her task
to reinforce this struggle for self-realization, this quest for a new identity that

forms the text of most of the contemporary women writers, poets and novelists.

During the past few years, Feminism has been tending to a more radical approach calling for a total exclusion of men from the society of women. The movement is to create exclusive communities of women, a sort of Alli Rajyam (Female dominated societies) said to have existed in ancient India. Within the existing Feminist movement also, man-woman relationship is characterised by antagonism, conflict and confrontation. This hostile attitude is seen in the feminist writings of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* and Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*. The feminist programme which began as chant for equality seemed to move in the direction of a demand for supremacy. Among other things, this was one of the main areas where the Afro-American Feminists began to differ from the European ones and American Whites. They turned away from the more radical forms of feminism. The majority of Afro-American women writers want more equality and freedom for the women, but within the structure of the family and society. Afro-American feminism thus withdraws from the more aggressive, extreme man-hating pattern of feminism of their white sisters. It seeks justification for a separate identity since the experiences of the Black women as slaves and the continuing racial discrimination can never be understood by their white counterparts.

2 *What is Womanism?*

Before defining womanism per se, a historical overview of the

---

development in feminist writing may be attempted.

Although during the anti-slavery civil rights movements, some of the idealistic white women had fought alongside their Black sisters, the Afro-American women could not find common ground for a feminist movement with the white women. For example Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* was a work around which many white women rallied as it brought out their frustration at being excluded from the positions of power and privilege occupied by the white mobs in American society. Accordingly, the goal of white mainstream feminism became “to eliminate sexist oppression imposed by the patriarchal society which, it was thought, would end discrimination against women on the job, in the home and in all areas of women’s life.”

Sexism was considered the enemy and equality of opportunity was sought. For white women, equality of opportunity meant achievement of parity with middle or upper class white men. As it is only to be expected, Black women did not see this as addressing their concerns.

One of the reasons that divide Black feminists from their main-stream white sisters is that they did not merely want to reform the contemporary social system but to revolutionize the complete social hierarchy based on class, race and sex. Frances Beal (1970) in her essay “Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female,” criticises the women’s movement for its limited focus. She says, “Any white group that does not have an anti-imperialist and antiracist ideology have absolutely nothing in common with the black women’s struggle.” Black women and men, unlike other minority groups, in America understand that equal opportunity with white male power elite is

---

not only almost impossible for the majority of them but also that it was not going to alter the oppressive system in any significant way.

The history of the Black women brought to America in chains, being deprived of every basic human right under slavery, having their reproductive, sexual and maternal prerogatives taken away for the benefit of the white master is something that compels them to understand the connection between racism, sexism and classism as no other white women can ever do. And they were conscious that the ending of slavery had not ended the systematic exploitation of their labour in American society. Bell Hooks, one of the eminent Black feminists, criticizes the mainstream white women’s movement for failing to speak of the economic, ethnic and racial discrimination along with sexism. Hooks remarks: “White women who dominate feminist discourse who for the most part make an articulate feminist theory, have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politic, of the psychological impact of class, of their political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state.”

She further adds that as long as any group, whether it is black or white, male or female, defines liberation as “gaining social equality with ruling class white men, they have a vested interest in the continued exploitation and oppression of others.” Hooks feels that the Black feminist movement should strive to create a system that does not rely on the oppression of one segment of population for the benefit of another. But American feminists, either because they have never experienced racial and class discrimination or because they are themselves unwilling to give up the

21 Ibid., p.15
privileges enjoyed by virtue of their race and class, do not take up the issue of minority and working class women as important targets for feminists. They are perplexed to find that the Black women are not eager to join the movement.

The Black women, on the other hand, feel that in spite of sexism they have more in common with their Black men than white women. Gerda Lerner points out that the Black women's aim in the history of America has been for the survival of her family and race. The racial subjugation has thus brought out a serious cleavage between black and white feminist movements. It is no wonder that Black women feel that the "representative movement" by which name the white feminist movement was called did not represent them. "And the question for us arises, how relevant are the truths, the experiences, the findings of white women to Black women?," \(^{22}\) asks Toni Cade Bambara.

The "cult of individualism" which is very strong in America was adopted by the feminists to suit their model of the "new woman" — assertive, strong, capable, the superwoman fit to take on any challenge. Unfortunately this resulted in the revival of the myth of the amazonic Black woman, the strong, powerful matriarch, nurturing, uncomplaining and capable of infinite endurance. This image corresponds neatly with the racist-inspired image of the "Black mammy" disguising the fact that Black women have been "the recipients of the lowest pay, the worst poverty, the least access to child care and the most frequent victims of all kinds of violence, including battering, rape and involuntary sterilization." \(^{23}\)


\(^{23}\) Faye Powell, *African American Feminist Issue: An overview*, op. cit., p.3.
The Black feminists also reject the white model of the ideal family of
the father, mother and children. Unlike white women, Black women in
America were never confined to the roles of housewives and mothers alone
because more often that not their husbands had deserted them either because
of some external compulsion or just because they did not want the
responsibility. Women in such situations have been glorified in works such
as "Race, Revolution and Women,"24 "But where are the Men?"25 "Slave of a
Slave No More,"26 Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman.27 Toni
Cade Bambara searches for a viable model in pre-capitalist, non-white
societies because she believes that "the woman was neither subordinate nor
dominant, but a sharer in policy making and privilege, had mobility and
opportunity and dignity."28 Again and again Black women have clarified that
to them feminism does not mean man-hating or lesbianism although some
lesbians have joined the feminist movement.

The Black feminist movement was given an added impetus by the
Black Power movement and also the particular cultural fabric of the sixties in
America. Dissent came to be accepted as the dominant artistic mode. There
was also an increasing impulse towards self-assertion which manifested itself
as much in urban riots as in the autobiographical writings of the period. They
laboured to recover and restore women’s role to historical and social events

24 Shirley Chisholm, "Race Revolution and Women," The Black Scholar, 9,7
(1971), pp. 17 - 21
25 Jacquelyne Jackson. "But Where are the Men?" The Black Scholar, 3.4
(1971), pp. 30-41
26 Francis Beale. "Slave of a Slave no More" The Black Scholar, 17.2 (1975),
pp. 19-25.
27 Michele Walker, Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman (New
York : Dial Press. 1979)
28 Toni Cade Bambara, ed., The Black Woman : An Anthology, op. cit.,
p.103.
in an attempt to redefine social process away from gender systems.

The Afro-American woman writer in the nineteen seventies thus found herself in a unique context where her Afro-American identity as well as her womanhood could be turned into assets of strength. This called for considerable change in the psychological environment because for so long Black women had been used to a subsidiary role in a male-dominant society which favoured the Whites. Till then Black women formed part of a doubly oppressed minority which never found expression even in the writings of Black male writers. The large number of autobiographies published by Black women in the nineteen seventies reveal clearly that their version of the American reality was excluded from Black male writings.

The consequence of the cultural effect of sexism was such that the writings of Black men bore close resemblance to that all white men. “One notices an astonishing similarity between the narrative style of Black male authors and the unhistorical and unsentimental style Hemingway perfected.”

Like the white male, the Black men seldom gave any significance to women in their works and when they did mention them, they were colourless stereotypes, either the angel-like submissive type or the wicked bitch-like creatures. This can be seen in the portrayal of women in the novels of James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison too. While their hatred and fear of white women can be understood in the context of racism, it is to be noted that their depictions of Black woman characters in the novels are generally not complimentary or, at least, very far from reality.

---

The large number of autobiographies published by Afro-American women writers and the variety of narrative modes employed can be regarded as evidence of their resistance to cultural oppression. "Black women writers can be said to have invented the novel for this purpose through their own experimentation's in the genre of autobiographical writings."\(^{30}\) While Black male authors were troubled by thoughts of power and invisibility, the female writers sought to establish the validity of their experiences from their point of view as women. In the comparably favourable context, they tried to define and redefine themselves within their historical, social and cultural milieu. The quest for a new identity was placed not only within the external world but by journeys into the innermost recesses of their own being. Gloria Naylor, Ntozake Shange, Gayle Jones, Paule Marshall, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison were prominent among these Black women writers and by the nineteen eighties they came to dominate the field of American fiction.

These writers understood that Black women were triply burdened by racial, sexual and class prejudices. Their female self and their humanity were denied by white men and also by Black men making them feel faceless, unimportant, subservient and devoid of identity. They considered it their responsibility to give back to these women their rejected humanity, selfhood and womanhood. They began to be labelled as Black womanist writers.

Alice Walker in her book *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens* explains in detail what the word "womanist" means. The term "womanist" is derived from "womanish" indicating the opposite of girlish, frivolous, irresponsible. "Womanist" refers to a Black feminist or feminist of colour. According to Walker, a womanist is "a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually, appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional

\(^{30}\) Ibid.
flexibility and women's strength.” 31 She “sometimes loves individual men sexually and/or non-sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female....” 32 Walker goes on to add that a womanist “loves music. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless.” 33

The above oft-quoted passages make it clear that womanism celebrates blackness, black roots and black aspirations within a balanced picture of Black womanhood. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi opines that the Black womanist will recognise that “along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic and political considerations....” 34 Sherley Anne Williams has also approved and accepted this term because womanism “believes in the wholeness of community.” 35 Womanism thus does not believe in dividing Black society from within on sex lines but stands for integration and has faith in the wholeness of Black society as such. The task of the womanist writers is hence to retrieve to the Black women their own concept of self, their beauty, physical and sexual strength, motherhood, sisterhood, wifehood and so on. At the same time they need to be educated about how to overcome the psychological effects of inferiority and diffidence. Both Alice Walker and Toni Morrison in their novels explore the many facets of inter-relationship, between woman and man, and between woman and woman as mothers, daughters, friends, lovers,

32 Ibid.  
33 Ibid.  
sisters, and wives and seek to transform women with a non-self into women with an assertive sense of self.

3. Of Mothers and Daughters

Throughout the world most societies have viewed motherhood as an important experience for woman. This notion may be applied in the analysis of Afro-American fiction. It was generally assumed until recently by the Americans that more than the white mother, the Black mother was eager for motherhood and was more capable of playing the role well. It was believed that Black woman took to motherhood as their chief justification in life and that they are physically and emotionally more capable of handling the responsibilities associated with it. Gayles Wade comments that "... all black women become superhuman mothers, not only for their own people but also for white people as well." In the Afro-American fiction mainly by males two contrasting images of motherhood emerge — that of destroyer and of preserver. The Black woman has been stereotyped as concubine, breeder, mammy, mule, bitch, witch, etc., on the one hand and as a saviour, angel, Madonna or helpmate on the other. The negative image comes to the fore mostly owing to the portrayals at the hands of Black male novelists like Ellison and Baldwin.

The concept of Afro-American motherhood was never considered so simple by the Black women writers. In the peculiar circumstances of racism and sexism even the so-called blind obedience of Black women to the dictates of the Whites was often just a method she adopted to save her family and her race. The views of Afro-American women often contrasted sharply on this

---

issue. Black women writers freed themselves from the roles assigned to them in the writings of their male counterparts where “depicted as queens and princesses or as earth-mothers and idealized Big Mamas of superhuman wisdom and strength, they were unrecognizable as individuals”\(^{37}\)

Black women novelists do away with such stereotypes and regard Black mothers as individuals with their particular strengths and weaknesses. They distinguish between the concept of motherhood and the experience in reality. Historical reasons have forced the role of mother, very strongly, on Black women. Separated from her man, during slavery, or deserted by him later for various reasons, the Black woman was compelled to be both father and mother to her children. And for her own emotional support she had to depend on her children, especially the daughter, since communication was easier with her. Mothers not only gave birth and brought up their children but also handed over their cultural heritage and creative talents to them. Writers like Alice Walker approach their writings from the point of view of daughters. They view themselves as inheritors of their mother’s creative spark, be it gardening or keeping house.

The daughters in Afro-American fiction know that their mothers are major forces behind them and can be depended on to rescue them if they fall into a trap. The mother passes on to her daughter her values, beliefs and attitudes by which she is able later to define and redefine herself. Through her interaction with her mother, the daughter imbibes a sense of who or what she is and should be. The daughters either admire, obey and accept or reject, question and deny the ideals set by the mother. They derive their self image from their mothers either by conforming to or by rebelling against them.

The positive and negative aspects of motherhood are viewed by Walker and Morrison with a deep understanding of the underlying conflicts as is possible only to a Black and a woman. *The Bluest Eye* is mainly about the failure of a mother, Pauline Breedlove to give her daughter Pecola any self-esteem. The whole Breedlove family consider themselves very ugly for the sole reason that they are black. Pauline Breedlove is not eager for the role of motherhood because she has seen how in her mother’s life it had brought only more work and not gratification. Yet, Pauline’s husband’s initial tenderness towards her during her first pregnancy fills her with high hopes but she soon becomes lonely. She then escapes into a world of fantasy of the movies and in identifying herself with the white heroines. When her daughter is born jet black, she loses all affection and tender feelings of a mother. She just ignores her baby and tries to become a mammy to her white master’s children. Pauline once again becomes pregnant “She experiences a sense of power and possession in this second pregnancy because she made it happen...The myth of maternal service is reversed here. Instead of taking up a ‘sacred calling’ to which she will give a life time of unselfish devotion, Pauline sees her second venture into motherhood as a retrieval from the pits of loneliness.38

Pauline is bitterly disillusioned in the labour ward in the charity hospital. She is cruelly insulted when the white doctors attending on her comment that “They deliver right away with no pain. Just like horses.”39 Since she sees her husband Cholly who is an alcoholic as a heavy cross she has to bear and her children Pecola and Sammy as reminders of her own

---

personal ugliness and the ugliness of her life, she ignores and beats them. She seems to look upon the white Fisher’s daughter as her own. When in Fisher’s kitchen Pecola mistakenly drops the hot berry cobbler, Pauline sweeps on her with a vengeance shouting and beating her even though she is burnt. At the same time she showers all her love and affection on the white blonde girl cooing and showing all sympathy to her. The effect of such cruel behaviour is to convince Pecola that she is unworthy of any love because of her black skin, her ugliness. Thus Pauline is “the mother who steals the daughter’s life beyond rescue, beyond salvation.” She is so disinterested in her home affairs that she does not bother to understand the sense of alienation and total despair of her daughter who is raped by her father. She is the main cause for her son running away from home and for the insanity of her daughter. Having fully internalized the values of white culture she does not have any positive thought about herself, and hence cannot transfer any positive value to her daughter.

Pauline can be contrasted with the mother of Claudia and Frieda, who is also troubled by questions of the white concept of beauty and virtue. The two children are able to survive because of the strong maternal love and care they receive. In spite of all odds against them the mother’s love forms a thick blanket protecting and nurturing them. Claudia remarks that when her mother sang the blues about being deserted by her man, sorrow itself seemed to be so sweet, thanks to her mother’s life-giving love and positive attitude to the harshness of life.

Alice Walker in her *Meridian* gives the picture of the negative influence of a mother which becomes positive when the daughter understands

---

their relationship. Like John who in Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* wants to be free of the suffocating influence of his father, Meridian too wants to be released from her mother’s suffocating depersonalised affection. Throughout her childhood Meridian feels guilty without really understanding the reason. Perhaps it is because unconsciously she recognizes the extra burden she places on her mother by being born to her. To compound her guilt feelings her mother often asks her if she has stolen anything. To assuage her guilt feelings she accuses her mother in her mind for her artificiality in making rose petals and for not telling her anything about sex. Yet Meridian finds she cannot break free of her mother’s influence and may be subconsciously she does not want to. It is “death not to love one’s mother.

Or so it seemed to Meridian and so understanding her mother as a willing know-nothing, a woman of ignorance and — in her ignorance — of cruelty, she loved her more than any thing.”

Meridian never forgets the advice of her mother, “Don’t go against your heart” when she was thirteen, and is weeping. Throughout her life it is this standard set by her mother that guides her. She decides never to go against her heart. It is this factor that makes Meridian overcome the harrowing experiences of an unwanted pregnancy and desertion by her lover and gives her strength to join the Saxon College. She hesitates to inform her mother that she has given up her son Eddie Jr. for adoption so she could go to college. Although Meridian follows a different path from her mother, she begins to understand her mother’s endurance and sacrifice. She remembers how her mother told her about young white boys desiring to have sex with Black women irrespective of their age. She also asked Meridian to work as a typist to support herself through college. Hence Meridian turns her thoughts “with regularity and intensity to her mother on

---

42 Ibid., p 20
whose account she endured wave after wave of an almost primeval guilt.\textsuperscript{43} She preserves her mother’s letters accusing her of not honouring her parents, which in itself is a sign of her not being able to dissociate herself from her mother. Meridian’s mother becomes symbolic of a past which no one can afford to ignore.

Walker, through her heroine, Meridian, posits that one need not give birth to one’s children to be a mother. In spite of her giving up her son and undergoing another abortion, Meridian, towards the latter part of the novel, rises to the position of an archetypal mother figure. When the 13-year-old witless half-woman orphan wild child is made pregnant, it is Meridian who takes upon herself the guilt of the whole society which allows such unpardonable things to happen. When the white Lynne Rabinowitz, for whom Truman had deserted Meridian, comes to her after the death of her child, Meridian treats her with sympathy and care. When Truman himself comes back to Meridian unable to find solace for his racist-inspired feelings of self doubt, she is able to mother him back to his true self. In giving him her sleeping bag to sleep in, Meridian in a way, symbolically gives birth or rebirth to Truman. Meridian is the nearest Walker comes to the picture of a Black woman who transcends sexism and to an extent racism to achieve a complete wholeness of self. It is to be noted that Meridian herself gets peace of mind only after she has pardoned and got forgiveness from her own mother, in a dream. She becomes at the conclusion of the novel a daughter of the race whose mind and vision of life are shaped by the collective consciousness of her people.

There are our different types of mothers in Morrions’s \textit{Sula} Eva,
Hannah, Helene and Nel but it is Eva who plays the most dominant role as mother and grandmother. At first Eva seems to be an ideal mother sacrificing, strong and domineering. Eva would go to any length to preserve her family. People had heard rumours that she deliberately stuck her leg under a moving train in order to collect insurance money to provide for her family. Eva is presented as a stereotype of the strong, self-sacrificing matriarch but soon the stereotype is broken. The rest of the portrait of Eva as a mother is less positive. In spite of her sacrifices, Eva somehow does not seem to love her children very much or at least to gain the confidence and trust of her children. Hannah asks frankly, whether her mother really loved them. “I know you fed us and all. I was talking about something else. Like, like Playin’ with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?”44 Eva explains how difficult it was to look after them with their “illness and all” and how she would put her hand over Hannah’s mouth to make sure Hannah was not dead when she was sleeping. Yet Hannah, also has a negative side to her motherhood. She never demonstrates her affection for her daughter Sula for which Eva seems to be responsible. Moreover when her son becomes a drug-addict and totally dependent on the mother like an infant Eva “decided that her son was living a life that was not worth his time.”45 Eva becomes the terrible mother, the destroyer, who pours petrol on her son and burns him alive. Her character thus becomes quite complex because she is the same mother who jumps recklessly out of the glass window to save her grown up daughter Hannah when her dress catches fire. She also reveals a negative desire to manipulate the lives of her children and grandchildren, thus trying to curb the emerging sense of self and individuality. Eva seems to contain within herself the polarities of good/evil, preserver/destroyer and giver/taker.

45 Ibid., p.218
It may be because of Eva’s detached unemotional love as duty that Hannah grows up to become a mother even less capable of loving or showing affection or care for her children. She considers it her duty to provide for their material needs but that is all she does. Hannah tells her friend, “...you love her like I love Sula. I just don’t like her. That’s the difference...” The effect of overhearing this conversation of her mother is one of the main reasons for making Sula the rebel she becomes. Sula doubly reciprocates her mother’s disinterest in her so much so that when she sees her mother burn to death, she just looks on like an interested observer. She does not feel any attachment to her mother and one quite believes Sula when she recollects later that she never meant her mother harm. She just wanted her burning mother to go on jerking like that forever. This is one of the most horrible and hard-to-explain scenes about the relationship of mother and daughter. Perhaps Morrison deliberately eludes any clear-cut analysis to bring out the complexity of the Black woman’s psyche and its unpredictable consequences on her roles as mother and daughter.

In any case Sula rejects the concept of motherhood altogether or at least the traditionally accepted roles of motherhood. Like Meridian, she considers it an unbreakable chain that keeps one bound to domesticity. According to Sula, the only contribution of motherhood to women was that it kept them from committing suicide. “…they had looked at their children... and one clear young eye was all that kept the knife away from the throat’s curve.” Sula thus recognizes that mothers often depend on their children for emotional support. But she is not going to be such a mother. She decides that she will not give birth to children. “I don’t want to make somebody else.

46 Ibid., p. 57.
47 Toni Morrison, Sula, op. cit., p.122.
I want to make myself."**48** Perhaps she is justified in her quest for selfhood because she wants to come to terms with herself without depending on others or one's children. Sula has an alter ego, her friend Nel, who is also suffering from a sense of alienation and isolation because of the lack of understanding of her mother Helene. Helene is over-strict and though she loves Nel, gives her no freedom at all. She is also excessively puritanical in sexual matters and maintains a distance from her children. When Nel is deserted by her husband she too turns to her children for support. But her relationship with them becomes too demanding and suffocating. Nel blames Sula because it was she "who had twisted her love for her own children into something so thick and monstrous."**49**

In *Tar Baby* Morrison presents a direct confrontation between a daughter's obligations to her mother, her race and ancestors and to herself as a modern sophisticated educated woman. Jadine had lost her parents at an early age. It was her Aunt Ondine and Uncle Sydney who brought her up as their daughter or rather they worked hard all their lives for the Valerian streets so that they would finance her schooling in Paris. Jadine is thoroughly Europeanised, a jet-set model, successful and intelligent with marriage proposals from three successful, rich and handsome white men. Yet the vision of the Black women in the supermarket makes her feel lonely and inauthentic. That woman "that mother/sister/she; that unphotographable beauty,"**50** stuns Jadine and upsets her by insulting gesture of spitting while she looked right at Jadine. Jadine cannot understand why she had wanted that woman to like and respect her. The woman becomes a powerful maternal figure who comes to represent a traditional female past, which is what Jade is struggling against

---

**48** Ibid., p.80.

**49** Ibid., p.138.

in her efforts at self-confirmation.

Jadine has a dream in which she is entrapped in the slime of a swamp. While women on the rafters of the trees look down at her, she struggles to escape from the slime as well as these women who try to make her one of them. However it is in Eloe, Son’s home, that Jadine experiences the stranglehold of these “maternal figures” most powerfully. Jadine is surrounded by a number of women of Son’s community who look at her with admiration. They symbolize the mothers, grandmothers and sisters whom Morrison wants to affirm. Even more upsetting than these visions is the visitation of the “night women” because they come to her in the form of women she knows and loves. They include Ondine, her aunt, her late mother, and these women each put out a breast shocking her out of her wits. “The night women were not merely against her, not merely looking superior over their sagging breasts and folded stomachs, they seemed somehow in agreement with each other about her, and were all out to get her, tie her, bind her. Grab the person she had worked hard to become and choke it off with their loose tits.” Jadine feels that these night women wanted her “to settle for wifely competence when she could be almighty, settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building.” Jadine thinks that the mamas have seduced their sons and are now trying to claim her. If she continues to live in Eloe she would slip into “a cave, a grave, the dark womb of the earth.”

Morrison thus posits the dilemma that if one is seeking total freedom, one may have to choose between ‘nurturing’ and ‘building’. Ondine tries to

\[51\] Ibid., p. 225.
\[52\] Ibid., p. 231.
\[53\] Ibid., p. 217.
explain to Jadine that one must be a daughter first, to be able to become a wife and a mother. Jadine feels that Ondine was asking a repayment for all that she had done for Ondine. She did not feel inclined for parenting her uncle and aunt. Jadine’s rejection of Eloë and all the traditional African values it stands for seems to go against the ideals of communal values upheld by most contemporary Afro-American women writers. Morrison herself in her other novels, interviews and non-technical writings, has emphasized the values of Black culture as a source of life-giving sustenance. Critics have suggested that perhaps Morrison has been influenced by the feminist movement. In an interview Morrison says that Jadine would certainly be “the recipient of the alertness of the feminine movement.”

She added that Jadine would not tolerate the things that Son being “old fashioned” and “rooted” would lay upon her because that is directly at odds with “her forward looking futuristic self.” In any case it must be agreed that Morrison is sympathetic to the negative aspects of maternal influence and that she makes Jadine define her selfhood in opposition to the traditional maternal figures. Jadine goes beyond the ideology of womanhood which identified her with nurturing and caretaking alone. She ends her relationship with Son fully conscious of the fact that there are not going to be dreams of safety any more. She knew “a grown woman did not need safety or its dreams. She was the safety she longed for.”

In Beloved Morrison narrates the story of a Black woman Sethe who kills her own child Beloved with a hand saw. Sethe is however not a picture of the mother as destroyer which is often found in the writings of male

55 Ibid.
56 Toni Morrison, Tar Baby, op. cit., p.250.
writers. Nor is Sethe a "Medea who kills her children because she’s mad at some dude, and she’s going to get back at him..."\(^57\) to quote Morrison. About Sethe’s act Morrison says "here is something about killing one’s children that is huge and very intimate."\(^58\)

Sethe like Morrison’s other female protagonists is a victim of both sexist and racist oppression. She is a runaway slave woman, a slave mother who is brutally treated by white men, the school teacher and his nephews. It is not only the sexual oppression that humiliates Sethe but the negation of her nurturing abilities as a mother — the stealing of her milk. Sethe herself had been denied her mother’s milk as a child. At a critical point when Sethe after having escaped is to be captured again she had killed her own baby. She explains this as "I took and put my babies where they’d be safe."\(^59\) She prefers to murder her daughter rather than see her suffer the cruel atrocities of slavery. "Murder" thus, "becomes Sethe’s act of mother love."\(^60\) By killing her own beloved daughter Sethe clearly demonstrates the degree of limitations she was bound by. Killing a child is an unnatural act but considering the context, it does not diminish Sethe’s stature as a mother.

As a result of this deed, society shuns Sethe and she is totally isolated and alienated living all alone with her slow-witted daughter Denver, at a house called 124. It is as Denver’s mother that she fails to function properly. Denver feels lonely and scared, and wants to contact her grandmother Baby Suggs. She also tries to be related to her sister Beloved whose blood she had swallowed along with her mother’s milk, soon after Sethe killed her. Beloved

---


\(^58\) Ibid.


does come back one day, as a sensual young woman, a greedy ghost come to claim her mother’s love. Sethe’s conversation with the spirit is moving. She asks her daughter if she had come from the other side because of her. The daughter’s ghost assures her that it was because of Sethe that she had come back. She then asks for her daughter’s forgiveness and pleads with her to stay.

In the final part of the novel, the roles of mother and daughter are reversed. And Denver who started with protecting Beloved from Sethe has to now protect her mother from Beloved. For Sethe no longer combed her hair or washed her face. “She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled with it, grew taller on it.”61 When the women of the neighbourhood assemble outside 124 and make the ghost of Beloved disappear, she wheels into her mother’s arms and then she flies, freeing herself.

Alice Walker and Toni Morrison thus give a realistic picture of Black motherhood as it is in the racist, sexist white America. The mothers are willing to go to abnormal lengths to protect their children and teach them to survive in this unfavourable world. They have positive as well as negative qualities in them thus bringing out the humane element as against the stereotypes and false conceptions of motherhood. Motherhood is demanded by society but not respected. That is why Meridian and Sula forsake motherhood. Alice Walker and Toni Morrison break fresh ground in depicting motherhood not only as physical creation but also psychological creation.

4. The Female Bonding

No major writer has dealt with the theme of female bonding or relationship of women with women with such complete understanding, sincerity and truth as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. Women have been conditioned to believe that their relationship with men is superior to any other relationship. Hence they try to act as inferior, non-achievers and non-thinkers since they believe that this is the only way to hold their men. Black women, however, often being separated from their men by circumstances were forced to depend on each other. This led them to understand the value of female bonding. Morrison remarks that "Relationship between women were always written about as though they were subordinate to some other roles they're playing. This is not true of men." 62

The best example of female bonding is that of Celie and Shug Avery in Toni Morrison's The Color Purple. Celie emerges from the brutal domination and abuse of men to a liberated, autonomous self due to her friendship and love for a blues singer Shug Avery, her husband's mistress. The novel is in the form of a series of undated and confusingly arranged letters to a patriarchal white God speaking of her repeated rape and impregnation by her stepfather and her violent marriage to a cruel man, Albert, who also beats and abuses her.

Shug Avery was brought to Albert's house when she fell ill and it is Celie who nurses her tenderly back to health. Shug tells Celie about the early part of her life when she had broken all conventions of community and custom and led a wild promiscuous life having sex with men indiscriminately

whether they were married or not. She had had three children by Albert. Gradually Shug begins to understand that the unbearable oppression of Celie occurred mainly because she did not have any sense of self worth and never tried to resist. Shug teaches Celie not only the importance of her own body and capacity to enjoy sex but also that God was not a “he,” nor a “she” but an “it”. It is a tenderly depicted lesbian affair between the two that forms the rite of passage to selfhood for Celie. Her song for Celie is the first recognition Celie gets of herself as an individual. She begins to believe like Shug Avery that people went to church to share God and not to find God. She tries to conjure up flowers, wind and water in her imagination, sharing the extent of her liberation.

“Morally and politically, both Celie and Shug are reliable narrators for the womanist norms of the novel.” The colour purple is the sign of these norms. “I think it pisses God off if you walk by the colour purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it,” Shug tells Celie. Together these two women learn to transcend all sorts of oppression to celebrate their womanhood and sisterhood. Celie becomes economically independent as a seamstress, is reunited with her family and buys back her ancestral house. Thus Shug Avery gives her back her real womanhood, physical beauty, womanly ego and creativity. In her company Celie learns to love her Black sisters as well as herself. They also try to establish a fair and sound relationship with men which is based on equality.

In Toni Morrison’s Sula she creates a woman centred universe and the values that rule them are also those beneficial to women. Though Eva Peace

and Hannah, Sula’s grand mother and mother are married women, they are never known by their husband’s name. After Sula’s father died, Hannah took on a series of lovers, the husbands of her friends and neighbours. Perhaps this gave Sula her unconventional ideas about marriage and sex. Sula was estranged from her mother at an early age. The only friend that she had, Nel, also has a distant mother who cares only for her physical needs, and is unnecessarily strict. Nel and Sula found something in each other that they liked very much.

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. There making was fortunate for it let them use each other to grow on... they found in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for.”

In each other’s company Sula and Nel discover their consciousness, start to learn who they are and what they want to do individually and collectively. Nel and Sula live in a way that compensates each other’s emotional needs. Each completes the incompleteness of the other’s personality, neither feels close to any person or forms any kind of human bond with anyone. Gradually they develop a “spiritual bond” with each other.

Sula decides that she does not want to live a limited life as a wife and mother. Her mission in life is to create or define herself. But Nel decides to live a conventional life as a wife. Morrison describes that Sula “had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both an ‘other’ and a self.” The moment Sula

65 Toni Morrison, Sula, op. cit., p.52.
66 Toni Morrison, Sula, p.108.
hears of Nel’s marriage to Jude Green, she feels alienated from her. She feels that she and Nel are not the same. There was nobody she could depend on. So she left Medallion. Once the girls are separated, they go back to the training they had received, Sula insists on orderliness and becomes just like her mother, merely using men for her selfish enjoyment. Nel too becomes totally domesticated, losing her ability for fanciful imagination which she had found in Sula’s companionship.

Nel settles down to a traditionally accepted view of wifehood as an extension of the husband’s selfhood. She is happy enough in her married life but when Sula comes back to Medallion after ten years, she is delighted. It is as if she has got back the use of an eye after years. She recalls that talking to Sula had always been like talking to herself. Sula too finds great happiness in her friend’s company. For her, the friendship she has nurtured and developed since childhood is more important than all other relations. She does not understand the conventional view which considered sexual relationship between man and woman more significant. That was why Sula has no qualms about going to bed with Jude, her friend’s husband.

But Nel becomes a picture of despair and disillusionment especially because Jude leaves Nel for Sula. Nel has not been prepared for a life without a man. She blames Sula for her broken marriage but Sula could only reply that she had not killed Jude, only had sex with him. She sees sex as a non-competitive and non-threatening activity. When Nel turns away from Sula, Sula withdraws herself even more from the community and becomes totally, destructively absorbed in herself. It is this self perception of the Black-American woman and her consequent reactions to self-concept that form the main issues in the novel. That is why in spite of male/female, parent/child, relationships, Sula is primarily considered a womanist novel.
Sula becomes conscious of being Black and a female. She also raises this consciousness in the mind of Nel. Sula recognizes that since in the white patriarchal male dominated world there is no love left for a Black woman, she must learn to love herself. She discards and is in turn discarded by the society. She comes to terms with herself and defies the white and male dominated societal norms. She realizes that:

a lover was not a comrade and could never be — for a woman. And that no one would ever be that version of herself which she sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand. There was only her own mood and whim, and if that was all there was, she decided to turn the naked hand toward it, discover it and let others become as intimate with their own selves as she was.67

Sula is thus a unique mind in pursuit of an activity both proper and sufficient to herself. Whatever she does is her own choice. Even loneliness which she calls “my lonely” was of her own making. Even though she becomes ill and dies a lonely death, she at last makes Nel realize the nature of their female bonding. Slowly it dawns on Nel that what she was missing all these years was not her husband Jude but the intimacy of her relationship with Sula. Sula had always been able to make her see herself more clearly. Sula never competed. she only let others define themselves. Nel, by breaking off from Sula had stopped the emerging sense of an independent self in herself. Though consciously she had never realized it till then, Sula had never taken away any thing from her including Jude. Sula is in effect a herald of the new concept of selfhood and womanhood.

67 Ibid., p 110.
Another novel in which the need for Black women to re-establish bonds with one another is tellingly brought out is Morrison’s *Beloved*. This female bonding was all the more important in the time of slavery which is the setting for *Beloved*. Considering the unbearable torture and humiliation slavery caused women, there was an immense need for them to develop meaningful relationship with one another for physical as well as psychological survival. Morrison comments: “We read about Ajax and Achilles willing to die for each other, but very little about the friendship of women, and them having respect for each other, like it’s something new. But black women had always had that, they have always been emotional life supports for each other.”

Morrison describes Baby Suggs as a woman whose “slave life had busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue.” Her eight children had six fathers and it was the last one, Halle, she had been allowed to keep the longest. It was Halle who bought her freedom but by then it meant nothing to her. Baby Suggs then struggled to belong to the community of free Negroes to love and be loved by them. It was to Baby Suggs that Sethe came, escaping from the cruelty of her slave master. She arrived with her new born daughter tied to her chest. The moment she fell into the wide arms of Baby Suggs, she knew the white folks had taken everything Sethe had

Baby Suggs welcomed her daughter-in-law. She bathed her in sections, cleaned and oiled, warmed and consoled Sethe and cleaned the eyes of the newborn with its mother’s urine. She teaches Sethe the female rites

---


which bring her close to her ancestors. She initiates Sethe into the wisdom and beliefs of her people. Through these rites and her care she awakens in Sethe a desire to know her past and to love herself as a person. This enhances her sense of womanhood and their bonds to one another are made stronger.

But when Sethe kills her own daughter to save her from slavery, the community that loved Baby Suggs stands back and watches. Like Sula, Sethe becomes an outlaw. Like Sula, she too is forced to come to terms with herself because society has discarded her. She becomes schizophrenic and sees the ghost of her murdered daughter after years come back to live with her. Baby Sugg's granddaughter too yearns to be connected with her grandmother. It is then Denver's love for her mother which protects and nurses Sethe. Even though Paul D. tries to establish his love for Sethe, he somehow knows that this is a household in which these women, ghosts and all communicate with each other and that he is a stranger there. Through these stories of how these women love, respect and restore one another, Morrison advocates the traditional qualities of beauty, strength and integrity attributed to Black women. Thus one of the main issues of the new feminist consciousness of Black woman writers is the life-saving and all-embracing power of female bonding. Whether it be between friends, mothers and daughters or sisters it gives them a new awareness of their own strength and weakness and also of methods to resist victimization be it sexual, racial or class discrimination.

Female bonding forms an important theme in Morrison's *Jazz* also. Although the novel begins with Violet's inability to understand Dorcas, the eighteen year old girl, her husband Joe Trace murdered, she finally does understand through her interaction with Dorcas' aunt, Alice and through
Felice, her daughter. Violet Trace tries to disfigure Dorcas at her funeral. Though stunned by such a violent act, it is the women who empathise with Violet, just as it is the women who understand Sethe and come to her rescue. Even a woman like Malvonne, who frankly admits that she hates Violet, cannot turn her back on her because one Black woman can never turn her back on another Black woman. “Okay there’s no love lost between Violet and me, but I take her part, not yours”70 she says. Such is the nature of female bonding. Through her identification with Alice, Violet learns to establish her own identity and becomes a person even Joe loves eventually. Black women bonding, to use the words of Lorraine Bethel, is simply the idea of “Black women seeking their own identity and defining themselves through bonding on various levels — psychic, intellectual and emotional, as well as physical — with other black women.”71

Female bonding, though inevitable in races marked by misfortunes and social pressures, is an important ingredient in the empowerment of women in any country at any point in civilization. The insights gained through this process benefit the parties substantially by enabling them to look at themselves from new angles in the light of their comparing of notes with one another. Needless to say that in the case of the Black women it was almost a historical necessity.

5. The Man-Woman dichotomy

The man-woman relationship among the Blacks must be understood

from the peculiar background of slavery and racism, as it governs this particular aspect more than all other relationships among the Black diaspora. The Black woman had been sexually assaulted and abused by the white men. She was forced to serve as the white woman’s maid and wet nurse for white children while her own children were starving and neglected. She was manipulated in such a way as to undermine both the Black men and her own children. While the Black men may have initially felt a lot of sympathy for her and rage and frustration at his own helplessness, it must be seen that at a psychic level it also made him feel inadequate and unwanted. Some of them at least may have imagined that Black women preferred white males to them. May be it was this unconscious feeling of inferiority that prompted him to agree with the image of the loose woman or the strong castrating female which many Black males later projected in their writings.

Even after emancipation, this condition did not improve much. After the world wars, the great depression totally disintegrated the economic situation of Blacks. Most Black men could not find jobs and surprisingly Black women did get jobs as maids, cooks, mammies, house keepers and so on. When women took on the role of breadwinners, males began to see it as insubordination and deeply resented this necessity. Women were thus again exploited to weaken their own familial and societal structures.

The awful predicament of the Black woman was seldom seen or recognized by Black writings especially by male writers. While Ralph Ellison projected woman in a derogatory light, Baldwin could justify a woman having sexual relations only in the context of marriage as approved by social norms. Even when Black women describe prostitutes and sluts like Morrison’s picture of the prostitutes in The Bluest Eye or Walkers depiction of Fat Josie in The Third Life of Grange Copeland, they make them human, vulnerable
and never as absolutely repulsive as the men do. On the other hand Alice Walker and Toni Morrison portray Black men as weak, incapable of dignity, alcoholics, parasites or strong, cruel, tyrants. Brownfield in Walker’s *Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Celie’s stepfather and Albert in *Color Purple*, Cholly in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Macon Dead II in *Song of Solomon*, and Joe Trace in *Jazz* are examples. Most of the novels written by them are about women as they struggle against these sexist male-dominated structures.

*Song of Solomon* is Morison’s only novel which posits a male protagonist Milkman Dead. In all his relationships with women Milkman maintains a typical male chauvinist attitude. His mother Ruth and his sisters do all the work in the house. They put him first before everything else, cleaning, cooking and keeping house for him. Milkman takes all this for granted and never bothers to acknowledge them and their sufferings. As Magdalene says in a rage:

> You’ve been laughing at us all your life... using us, ordering us; and judging us how we cook your food; how we keep your house... our girlhood was spent like a found nicked on you. When you slept, we were quiet, when you were hungry, we cooked; When you wanted to play we entertained you’... And to this day, you have never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee.72

Milkman treats Hagar in a much more selfish manner. He uses her as his sexual outlet, something to be used for his convenience. Hagar gives him

---

all her love unconditionally believing that he would marry her one day. But Milkman throws her out like soiled clothes with some money and a thank you note. The reason he gives for his heartless behaviour is that she did not excite his passion as she used to. As a result she goes into a decline and dies heartbroken.

It is his relationship to Pilate, his father's sister which finally moves him to a measure of self awareness. He was so full of his father's materialistic visions that at first he does not realize Pilate's great wisdom and her special significance to him. However when Pilate offers to lead him to the treasure of gold he readily follows her. It is in this journey to his past heritage guided by Pilate that he grows up to his manhood. Although Pilate dies in the end in his arms she succeeds in making him realize how selfish and vain he had been. At the conclusion of the novel Milkman has inherited Pilate's honesty, integrity and culture consciousness.

Alice Walker too brings out the love-hate relationship between Black men and women as the women provide their meals and make their beds, serve as vessels for their sexual outlets or as punching bags receive their beatings. She also implies that perhaps these women take on so much of suffering because of the unconscious guilt they feel for the responsibility of emasculating the Black males which has been thrust upon them. This can be the only explanation for the school teacher Mem in the Third Life of Grange Copeland not retaliating to the cruelties of her uneducated low class husband Brownfield.

Brownfield can be described as the cancer of the Black male-female relationship. He is a parasite — a worm, a wretched, contemptible creature and he brings everything he touches to his level. His mother Margaret herself
had been a victim of his father Grange's heartless dictatorial manners and had taken poison when he abandoned her. Brownfield was then left to make his own decisions. Throughout he consumed and destroyed all the women in his life including his daughter. He has an affair with the fat slut Josie and at the same time with her daughter Lorene. As he tried to accommodate them both often moving in the same night from one bed to another, he deliberately rubbed in their hurt and pain making it worse. Mem is Josie's niece and a school teacher. Even though she knew he was a good-for-nothing, she married Brownfield believing she could save him.

Brownfield blames Mem for all his failures. When he could not produce a crop and when the white men cheated him with dried potatoes and sickly hogs he takes it out by beating her. He even complains about her reading and her proper manner of talking. He makes cheap sexual jokes about Mem when they ask him how he happened to marry a school teacher. He is not afraid of her as he is of white men. So he makes it his mission to pull her down beneath him so he can rest his foot on her. Mem takes his punches, stops reading, talking proper and gives birth to her babies in cold damp rooms alone because Brownfield is often drunk or too uncaring to go for the midwife. Once she places a shot-gun to his head and reminds him that she had been allowing him to beat her because she does not want to hurt him. She has been suffering so much pain just to make him feel a little bit like a man. But nothing redeems Brownfield. He kills Mem in cold blood with a shot-gun just as he used to kill the insects and pests on his farm. He then tries to virtually destroy his own daughter Ruth who seems to bring some element of hope in the novel.

Joe Trace is another male character in Jazz who murders in cold blood the eighteen year old Dorcas whom he loved just because he was afraid that
he would lose that tender sentimental love. It does not matter to him that he is married to Violet and has a grown up daughter. He never thinks that Dorcas has as much right to love someone else as he himself has. Cholly Breedlove is another weak and contemptible character. He fights with his wife which Morrison describes as fighting like a woman. He is a drunkard who is so self-centred that he lived every moment as he pleased. He is such a depraved, degenerated man that he shows his love for his daughter by raping her and driving her insane.

In Paradise Morrison develops further the womanist characters in Tar Baby and Beloved. The chapters titled mainly as Mavis, Grace, Seneca, Pallas, Divine and Patricia narrate the tales of the different wayward and ravaged women who take shelter in the convent run by the Consolata who is herself bed-ridden. But the self-assigned guardians of Ruby, the grandsons of the founding fathers, consider the ways of the convent undesirable. They feel that the convent is the source of the moral pollution and that it is their duty to keep the order intact. So with weapons in hand they storm the convent in Oklahoma on a morning in 1976 and start shooting the inmates. The novel cannot be considered strictly a feminist essay but Morrison does cast Deacon and Steward with their companions in a very bad light as they kill innocent unarmed women without a second thought.

Celie too is raped by her stepfather, repeatedly. He impregnates her and when she has children he cruelly sells them away. When he has had enough of her he sort of sells Celie too in a marriage which can be described only as a bargain. He hands her over to her husband Albert telling him he could do everything he wanted with her and he would never have to feed or clothe it. She was just like a dumb mule sold from one man to another. In The Temple of My Familiar Walker describes how in the ancient Africa the
mother was worshipped as Goddess. The priests who performed religious rites were also women. But slowly as the women grew weak due to child birth and other diseases men took over. During the time of the slave trade in Africa, these men who carried on the ancient tradition of worship of the mother, tried to oppose the shameful selling of women. Many of them were themselves forced into slavery. “The men had decided they would be creator, and they went about dethroning women systematically. To sell women and children for whom you no longer wished to assume responsibility or to sell those who were mentally infirm or who had in some way offended you, became a new tradition, an accepted way of life.”

Thus the fiction of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison is replete with tales of the cruelty, indifference, materialism, laziness, weakness and unworthiness of Black men. Seldom are the Black men able to treat their women as their equals or as persons with their own individualities, with dignity, love or comradeship. Yet Black women writers are not totally pessimistic about doing away with gender discrimination. At least they do have a clear vision about such a situation. As Morrison expresses her views, Black women have been both mother and labourer, and have worked in the fields along with men. “They were required to do physical labour in competition with them, so that their relation with each other turned out to be more comradeship than male dominance/female subordination.” Thus the roots of the evil practice of sexism is intertwined with racism and European influence and these are to be weeded out from the male psychology. Black American feminism seeks to restore the shared life lived by ancient/

---

traditional Africans. Like Sula and Pilate, Black women create a space for themselves on the basis of mutual inclusion of males, not their exclusion. They emphasize true partnership or a mutual sharing between men and women. The best example of shared experience is to be found in Milkman’s interaction with Sweet whom he meets in Shalimar. Unlike Hagar, Sweet never wants to control or possess him. Morrison describes the complete absence of control of each other during lovemaking. They enjoyed each other’s company in sharing the experiences:

He (Milkman) soaped and rubbed her until her skin squeaked and glistened like Onyx. She put salve on his face. She sprinkled talcum on his feet. He straddled her behind and massaged her back. She put witch hazel on his swollen neck. He made up the bed. She gave him gumbo to eat. He washed the dishes. She washed his clothes and hung them out to dry. He scour ed her tub. She ironed his shirt and pants. He gave her fifty dollars. She kissed his mouth. He touched her face. She said please come back. He said I’ll see you tonight. 

In The Temple of My Familiar Nzingha tells Fanny how they were trying to bring back to people’s consciousness that it takes two parents to raise a child. “It is one of many beliefs the Africans have lost. In the old days what is happening now throughout the country would have been unthinkable,” she says. These Black women writers thus present a rather optimistic view that removed from the European racist influence, male—

75 Toni Morrison. Song of Solomon, p. 286.
76 Alice Walker. The Temple of My Familiar, p.62.
female relationship could be one based on equality and sharing as it was in ancient Africa during pre-slavery times.

6. The Liberated Self

In the works of major Black novelists such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin or Ralph Ellison, Black women appear as vaguely outlined mammas or as victims of racism or sexism or as sex kittens created for the mere purpose of sex. Black male writers are guilty too of perpetuating the myth of the monolithic Black woman though the images have been drawn with somewhat more sympathy than those by the Whites. Thus while white literature focuses on the image of the strong, nurturing, uncomplaining, mammy, the dominant Black female image in Black male literature is that of the tragic mulatto or the victim of sexual exploitation.

Black women’s writing focusses on the Black women as an individual struggling towards freedom and selfhood. Right from the slave narratives there has been a conscious or sometimes unconscious repudiation of the many myths and stereotypes that surround the Black woman. It was left to the Black woman to illuminate her own situation, reflect on her own identities and relationships with men and children and her own philosophy to their history, society and the world. Thus these womanist writers project the intensity, complexity and diversity of the Black women’s experiences from their own point of view. The relationship between Black men and women is scrutinized in less generic and more particular terms. Women are projected as thinkers, emotional beings and not as automatons to be used, and manipulated by others. Both Toni Morrison and Alice Walker project heroines who are able to break free of all the shackles of stereotyping and to strike out for a place and self she can call her own. Gloria Wade Gayles
writes about them: "Morrison is a Northern writer. Walker is a Southern writer. Their literary visions are shaped by these different perspectives and yet, out of their collective consciousness, Walker and Morrison speak a similar truth and create women who are spiritual sisters."\(^{77}\) Walker’s Meridian and Morrison’s Sula defy all traditional levels of womanhood and undertake symbolic journeys for their race and sex so that those who come later will not be denied space or self identity.

Meridian and Sula are two very fine examples of the new liberated women who free themselves from all the shackles of tradition-bound definitions of women. They reject the conventions of marriage because they know that it would repress their selfhood. They also reject motherhood because society has no value for mothers and it too would only curb their free flight towards a free independent self. Sula clearly knows that she wants to create her own self but Meridian is not so much conscious of what her search is for. Meridian finally makes peace with her mother and re-establishes her connection with her ancestry through the music of the church song. She also takes on the role of the life-giving mother. She sets Truman free from the guilt of deserting her. Thus Meridian’s search for wholeness can be defined as an attempt to express the totality of self and how that self is related to the world. It is a search for freedom, joy and contentment in being a woman, a search for self love and a yearning for communal love. She seeks to escape from the bondage of the body, to attain freedom for the soul and for self-affirmation. She transcends race and gender limitations, accepts her own Black heritage and her past. She is thus a truly liberated woman. Sula, too, though not as successful as Meridian, emerges as a new liberated woman who makes her own choices and decisions in life.

The Black woman is thus no longer the mule of the world. By casting off all her unwarranted burdens of guilt, fear and inferiority she emerges as an ebony phoenix. She feels elevated to the status of divinity. She feels "i found god in myself/ i loved her fiercely." It is this celebration of womanhood that forms the concluding part of The Color Purple. From a self, totally dependent on others Celie has become completely independent. She liberates herself from all the shackles created by white men, Black men and white women. She becomes an enterprising Black woman and abandons all her submissiveness, passivity and dumbness. From a dismantled, fragmented and distorted self, she becomes a real Black woman with wholeness and integrity. She liberates herself from patriarchal dictatorship and rediscovers herself. In the end she is able to celebrate her own genuine and real Black woman self. Toni Morrison has certainly not been influenced by Frantz Fanon’s idea of "an unmitigated antagonism to white/male oppressor." On the contrary she provides a syncretic view of the fictional world where there is a merger of black/white, male/female, parents/children binaries.

Thus these women writers have set the Black woman free to love herself, her family, her race and her world. She is set on the pedestal of humanity from where she can rule or be ruled according to her own free will. She is a woman with a new identity, who can withstand all sorts of psychological onslaughts, because she knows how to articulate and share her sorrows and how to mobilize her inner resources to suit the changing needs of the time. With dauntless spirit she affirms both the African and the American part of the self. While Morrison, and Walker emphasize the need to understand, accept and adopt the Black or African culture and traditions, they also allow their heroines to break away from them to find their own selfhood.

Perhaps that is why Jadine, who is Europeanised, is allowed to reject her culture and her ancestors in her search for selfhood. Whatever may be the outcome of the voyage, the novelists are bold enough to liberate their protagonists to find a way out and to fend for themselves as persons of self worth and dignity.