CHAPTER IV

THE WRITING SELF VS RACIAL LOYALTY

Modern critics, the structuralists and post-structuralists, tend to look upon the author as a by-product of the reader reading a text. Michael Riffaterre writes "Either he will be represented in the text or he will not." The author may insert himself into the text by using, for example, the first person narrative or the reader may read himself and the author into the text by considering it autobiographical.

The writer's name lends a certain degree of authority to a work. The reader expects a certain type of work from a writer. The work is therefore, already imbued with a certain degree of meaning imposed by the reader's expectations. As Michael Foucault, the French philosopher points out, the name of the writer seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being. An Afro-American writer by virtue of his African descent arouses certain expectations in both his white and black skinned readers. The readers have looked upon the particular genre of the novel itself as either a weapon or at least a vehicle for good relation in the hands of an Afro-American.

Saunders Redding claims that Black literature "has been literature either of purpose or necessity and it is because of this that it appeals as much to the cognitive as to the conative and affective side of man's being." In

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other words the Afro-American writer being committed to give first priority to his racial obligation could not create literary expression which is wholly an art in the sense that the poetry and prose of other European people is an art. The function of Black literature is "striving after an effect (or producing an effect) and the process of knowing in the widest possible sense, including those of perception, memory, judgement and the like."3 The early Afro-American fiction was generally addressed to the white readers and so conformed to the traditional white standards in theme, structure, modes of narration and style. Black literature thus had to perform a dual function — a political and an aesthetic one. The political function was to criticise white racism and the aesthetic one was to become representative of all Black people and to demonstrate their intellectual capacities.

The needs of the pioneers of Afro-American fiction veered mainly round their personal self; but in the later writers, the consciousness of others was also awakened, and as "the simplicity of the Negro's primary position in America changed successively to the complexity of the times of abolition, agitation, freedom, enfranchisement and social self-determination, the artless personality of his literature dropped away and he became the sometimes frenzied propagandist of racial consciousness and advancement."4 The anger of the Black artists at the democratic hypocrisy of America in indulging in racial discrimination, at the violence, injustice, poverty, disease and a lot of social ills, began to find expression in what came to be known as the protest novels, explosive narratives of exploitation and oppression.

To select any other theme than the trials and tribulations of Black men

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., p. XIX.
to achieve manhood was considered as the betrayal of the race. The ideas were perpetuated by Richard Wright and Langston Hughes in their speeches, critical articles in journals and newspapers. Wright’s *Native Son* was acclaimed by critics as the best of the protest tradition. Both Ellison and Baldwin have confessed that their initial inspiration and encouragement have come from Wright.

I. The Quarrel with Richard Wright

Both Baldwin and Ellison asserted their individuality in departing from the protest tradition adopted and advocated by most of the Afro-American artists in nineteen twenties and thirties. Inspite of affirming their racial unity with them, they were bold enough to record the realities as they saw and experienced. Irving Howe and others had accused Ellison and Baldwin of contempt for their own race, but both of them had different ways of creating fiction. To get a proper perspective on the ideas of Baldwin and Ellison as to the functions of a novelist, one must look into their quarrel with their predecessor, Richard Wright.

Wright’s *Native Son* was one of the last ones in the tradition of the protest novels. Written in a shocking, bitter and uncompromising style it brings out to the open the hatred, fear and violence that is part of the race relations between Whites and Blacks. Wright made it clear that the past sufferings of the Black men cannot go unpunished and that the Black man hated every moment of his suppression and was far from being patient and forgiving. The readers are forced to share the horror of Bigger Thomas’ experience as a Black man in America and to feel shock and pity at his inevitable and awful doom. Bigger murders a white woman and is executed for the crime. The tragedy that strikes one is that throughout his trial and
impending execution Bigger remains unrepentant. Instead, he seems to experience some relief after the killing, as if that was the only way for self-expression left to a Black man like him.

Baldwin's relation to Wright was complicated by his feeling that the latter was his spiritual father and mentor. His relationship to his natural father had been one of a complicated communion of love and hatred. Just as he felt the need to revolt against his biological father to prove himself, he revolted from his spiritual father to prove his integrity, manhood and skill. Actually it was Wright, who supported him early in his career and helped Baldwin to win his first writing fellowship. But, the two could not become friends.

There was a lot of difference in their spiritual and intellectual outlook. Wright was a product of the Depression and shared in the social and political consciousness of the times, of which, his novel is the most characteristic expression; Baldwin, on the other hand, began to mature as a writer at the end of the Depression and during the war years. Baldwin was born and brought up in Harlem while Wright was born in Natchez, Mississippi and lived in the South for a good part of his early life.

Wright's failure, as Baldwin sees it, was the confusion of his social and artistic responsibilities, a distortion of artistic truth into protest and propaganda. Both of them agreed that being a Negro in America meant to be always conscious of the fact and to be in a rage. But their ways of dealing with this rage are radically different. Out of this rage Wright made fiction itself, brutal, pure, violent and unconstrained. Baldwin tried to understand, to analyse it, may be to control and relate it to a recognizable human emotion.
Baldwin constantly admired Wright's power as a novelist and as a spokesman for the Afro-Americans. He describes the impact of *Native Son* on him. "Now the most powerful and celebrated statement we have yet had of what it means to be a Negro in America is unquestionably Richard Wright's *Native Son"." He had never encountered, he says: "a report so indisputably authentic, or one that can begin to challenge this most significant novel." Yet in "Everybody's Protest Novel" after criticizing sternly the sentimentality and untruth of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he comes to the conclusion that Wright's *Native Son* is almost similar to it. What he means must be that both Stowe and Wright have refused to deal with human nature in its wholeness and complexity but have created stereotypes with a carefully defined social role. In a larger sense it may be considered acceptable since neither Stowe nor Wright has dealt with the human experience in its wholeness. But, the difference of opinion between them came out in the open, when Baldwin published "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949). At the end of this essay, Baldwin added a few insulting remarks on *Native Son*. Wright was hurt by this and the conflict rose between them.

It is this dependence of the novel on a set of abstract ideas or principles, the subordination of art to ideology, that Baldwin is arguing against. According to him, the chief weakness of *Native Son* is the dearth of artistic qualities and humanness in its unrewarding rage. Bigger remains a social symbol without any consciousness as a human being. He "has no discernible relationship to himself, to his own life, to his own people, or to any other people." In this respect *Native Son* is a failure even as a social

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., pp.34-35.
novel, for it gives the impression that the Negro has no real society and tradition about which one can write. A necessary dimension of life has been cut away. "This dimension being the relationship that negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life." This is a necessary limitation of all protest novels. Baldwin is trying to outgrow this painful limitation and is striking out on his own in a rather unique manner.

The real psychological situation, the Afro-American has to face, argues Baldwin, is a choice between complicated patterns of love and hate. One is forced to accept life as it is and to fight injustice without despair. Baldwin’s main beliefs about man and the purpose of the novel resemble those of Faulkner’s Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech. Faulkner remarks that man is something indefinable and unpredictable. In overlooking, denying and evading his complexity we are diminished, "only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger and darkness can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves. It is this power of revelation which is the business of the novelist, this journey towards a vast reality which must take precedence over all other claims."

Like Faulkner, Baldwin resolutely affirms his concern with man, black or white, in all of his complexity. The hard deterministic world of *Native Son* denies this complexity and so it is rejected. As a critic of naturalism Baldwin allies himself with Ralph Ellison, who in his National Book Award Speech tries to define the sense of reality that governs his *Invisible Man*.

Thus to see America with an awareness of its rich

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8 Ibid., p. 35
9 Ibid., p. 15
diversity and its almost magical fluidity and freedom, I was forced to conceive of a novel unburdened by the narrow naturalism, which has led after so many triumphs to the final and unrelieved despair which marks so much of our current fiction.  

Although Ellison hints at his disapproval of the protest tradition in "Richard Wright's Blues" (1945) it was in an interview in 1960 and in answer to Irving Howe's strong defence of the Wright school of Negro writing that Ellison emphatically brought out the fullest attack on the protest tradition. Agreeing with Baldwin that the experiences of the Afro-American had been distorted through the over-emphasis of the sociological approach, he asserted that "any attempt to define the black American predicament in exclusively sociological terms" would take away the effect of the exploration of "the full range of American Negro humanity and obliterate those qualities in the race which are of value beyond any question of segregation, economics or previous condition of servitude."  

Ellison feels that to deny the special qualities of Negro life in America, that is, "its cultural heritage as shaped by the American experiences is to reduce 'Negroness' to a mere abstraction in someone's head." And, this is what the protest novel does when it insists for the sake of a militant posture, that unrelieved suffering is the only reality of Black experience. Ellison insisted that Black life does not exist solely in a vacuum of a Black

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12 Ibid., p.23
13 Ibid
ghetto but is part of the historical pattern of America and the Western world, and for a writer to see it in eccentric isolation is deliberately to reject "the complex resources for imaginative creation for the easy sanctuary of ideology." The ultimate effect of confirming the image of the "negro" to that of protest is according to Ellison the political policy of absolute separation of the races.

Arthur P. Davies had acknowledged the great creative motivation in the Nineteen twenties and thirties when full segregation was not only practised in the South but condemned by the whole nation. But, after the war, even though racial barriers did not crumble down completely, the legal advances made by Black men as well as the more tolerant spiritual climate in the U.S. had altered the aims and functions of literature and the depiction of the Black men and women as consonant with the changing reality.

One of the first steps towards this was a shift from the oppression aspect of racial life to the conflicts and tensions within the group. Writers like Petry, Killens, Ellison and Baldwin feel that this would ensure the Afro-American a place in the American cultural framework without lessening his uniqueness and creative faculty. But writers like Saunders Redding, for example, conceded that the Afro-American writer had been seriously damaged by accepting the notion that only when the Black writer "identifies with the stream of western culture that flows through America can he expect to be judged by the standards that prevail among Americans and Westerners as artists and men." But most modern writers and critics are of the view that the sufferings of the Black man in America are similar to human misery.

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14 Ibid., pp XI-XXII.
in the modern world as manifest in the works of Dostoevsky, Malraux, Mann, Camus, Sartre and Kafka.

A large segment of the world has been suffering from colonization of one type or another or from alienation from the larger community, isolation within abstract walls, loss of freedom, misery and despair. The picture of the Black life as represented by Ellison could never have been made by a white man. Yet, his *Invisible Man*, in giving an exact portrayal of Afro-American life in various fields is at the same time able to transcend this identity as a Black man, a Negro and become a man. Thus, Ellison without the fear of adverse criticism chalks out a new path by making his hero more human than negro. “It is this choice of individualism as opposed to racial unity that forms the connecting link between Ellison and the European Existentialists, and makes him one with James Baldwin.”

And it must be agreed that despite its assimilationist denouement — Ellison’s social and political ideas — the novel anticipates much of the creative direction of future novelists. “The heroism and courage of the racial past, the pomp and pageantry to be found in racial customs, the richness of varying lifestyles and the struggle of men and women to escape the limiting definitions of outsiders — this is the fruit of *Invisible Man*.”

The broad spectrum of racial loyalty has many strands related and unrelated, conformist and reformist, bipolar and unipolar. The melting of Afro-American literature has thrown up a highly evolved and complex self-concept. In the making of it, three literary personalities have played their due

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16 Ibid., p.212.
roles — Richard Wright with his unidimensional portrayal of the Afro-American reality. Baldwin and Ellison with their multidimensional, comprehensive and historically evolved attitudes. Out of this apparently chaotic conflict has emerged a new self concept with more emphasis on the conscious and on the unconscious owing to the success of educated response over benighted racial memory.

2. The Notion of Inter-textuality

The idea of inter-textuality was introduced by Mallarme, remark Michael Gresset and Noel Polk, when he argued that “all books more or less contain the fusion of a certain number of repetitions” and that “the difference from the one work to the next would afford as many readings as would be put forth in a boundless contest for the trustworthy text among epochs that are supposedly civilized or literate.”18 He stated that “this fusion of a certain number of repetitions is not only the basis but the very essence of literature.”19 Later, this became the founding principle of structuralists and post-structuralists

Considering the relationship between Ralph Ellison’s Black fiction and critical discourses of the literary mainstream writers and intellectuals, critics discovered that a dominant issue in Afro-American literary criticism was what Roland Barthes called the “Writerliness”20 of Ellison’s Invisible Man. John Wright in his essay “Shadowing Ellison” argues that an intense “war of invectives” was waged against Ellison by his more ideologically-oriented

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18 Michael Gresset and Noel Polk, eds., Intertextuality in Faulkner (Jackson: Univ. of Mississippi Press, 1985), p.3.
19 Ibid., p.2
opponents because the novel subverts much of what characterizes the “work” or “classic text” and because as defined by Barthes “What traverses from one end to the other are references and echoes of texts from systems that lie outside of the parameters of what was considered generally as the black experience.” 21 For example, the Black aesthetician, Clifford Mason finds fault with Ellison for violating what he calls the proper position with regard to Black literature and white American culture. He accuses that “Ellison by using a large number of literary references for which he gives credit to the mainstream writers.” (Faulkner, Hemingway Dostoevsky, Eliot and Joyce) instead of to Richard Wright, “makes even his nationalism suspect.” 22

It was Ellison’s interest in music and sculpture and his early exposure to the modernistic styles of expression, to Hemingway, Eliot, and Joyce, which led to the many intertextual instances in Invisible Man. Sandra Adell in her article “The Big Ellison’s Text and Intertext: Eliot, Burke and the Underground Man.” explains that when Ellison writes in the introduction to Shadow and Act that “behind each artist there stands a traditional sense of styles,” 23 he reiterates Eliot “whose notion of tradition is related to one’s perception of the past as a living present.” 24

Eliot believed that a new work of art must emerge out of the past, out of the ideal order of the monuments existing prior to it. It must reorder and readjust the ideal order so that there is conformity between the old and the new, and a parallel reciprocal relation between the past and the present; “the

23 Ralph Ellison. Shadow and Act (New York; Random, 1972), p. XVII.
24 Ibid.
past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.”25 “The imperative for the artist or poet in this relationship is that he surrenders his private mind or personality to a continuing developing consciousness of the main current while abandoning nothing en route, proceeds from the past through the mind of Europe and his own country.”26

Through this process of continuous development of the consciousness the artist’s mind must become a medium not for expressing his personality, but for combining in “peculiar and unexpected ways” the passions, impressions and experiences which constitute its materials. What Eliot therefore proposes is a “formal” approach to art, that is, that the poet or artist must become subordinate to the work of art reminding us of principles of modernism. Interest must be directed from the subject to the object, from the artist to the work of art, to the way everything that has come before is recombined, reconcentrated, recast and refined to form something new.

It is this traditional sense of style which was the source from which Ellison drew the forms and figures that inhabited the imaginary realm, which he often shared with his boyhood friends as they attempted to escape an environment, post-world war Oklahoma which Ellison described as one “which at its most normal took on some of the mixed character of nightmare and of dream.”27 He wrote that “part of our boyish activity expressed a yearning to make any and everything of quality Negro-American; to appropriate it, possess it, recreate it in our group and individual images.”28

27 Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act, op. cit., p. XIII.
28 Ibid., p. XVII.
There is, therefore, says Sandra Adell, "in his fiction a convergence of the style of black jazz and blues men with those of the heroes of American and African-American literature and folklore, which in turn combine with those of the literature of Europe."  

Although Ellison has been accused of embellishing his protagonist according to the tastes of white literary establishment, the "Invisible Man" engaged in a grand quest for self definition, enriches Wright's assault on oppressive society, so that the assault attains mythic stature. Ultimately, both Ellison and Baldwin claim literary antecedents and both draw from Afro-American history and culture. Ellison's knowledge of cultural heroes, music and history coalesce to produce Invisible Man. Likewise, Baldwin fuses music, history and doctrines of the Black church to create novels like Go Tell It on the Mountain. Obviously each work draws from the Afro-American experience. "Each must be regarded as a product of the same forces that shape Ann Petry's assimilationalist Country Place (1947) and the raceless novels of William Motley and Frank Yerby."  

Ellison and Baldwin respond to the period not by denying racial matters but by plunging into the white literary mainstream. Disenchantment with radical politics pervades not only Invisible Man but Norman Mailer's Barbary Shore (1951) and Saul Bellow's Dangling Man (1944). Like Baldwin and Ellison, Bellow depicts through the confessional form the internal world of his rootless protagonist. Joel Knox of Truman Capotes' Other Voices, Other Rooms (1948) is forced to enter an adulthood as terrifying and as surreally delineated as that of the "Invisible Man" and John Grimes.

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29 Sandra Adell, op. cit., p.382.
The preoccupation with the adolescent loss of innocence in the novels of Ellison and Baldwin is also central to Jean Stafford and J.D. Salinger’s novels. Such concern with initiation reveals the mood of fragmentation and disillusionment, the search for values and for autonomy common to the nineteen fifties. Published before desegregation began to be established their works portray how the American society thwarts all attempts for a normal positive self concept. Yet, both Ellison and Baldwin are able to offer “a carefully crafted, perilous affirmation of the self.”

3. Feminine Loyalties

Black women writers draw our attention to the distinctiveness of their experiences, ambitions and visions that differ from those of some Black male writers and from all whites in general. They claim to be part of the Afro-American tradition but insist on a separate recognition of their talents of expression and of their identity as Blacks and as females. They also set themselves apart from white feminists who consider sexism more important than racism and who cannot understand the particular fate of their Black sisters. Their writings are often deliberately disruptive and disturbing, a challenge to all sorts of authority or oppression. “In the process of interaction with a hostile environment, their writing takes shape and their artistic consciousness evolves a rejoinder” of the harshness of their life. “Their gaze, ever loving unforgiving stills, agitates stills again.”

Afro-American women writers although subjected to the same racial

31 Ibid., p. 16
prejudice and oppression as their Black male counterparts depict it in their fiction with a slight but obvious difference. They generally reveal their perspective, through the black female character whose distinct characteristics in their fiction often originate in gender and sex associated role or as an observer from a vantage point of view by virtue of their gender. Claudia Tate in her “Introduction” to the Black Women Writers at Work enumerates some of these difference. For example, the Black heroine seldom plays the role of the alienated outsider or the lone adventurer in her quest for self-affirmation. Like the Black heroes in the works of male writers, she does not journey in quest of self discovery or explore the underground region of urban civilization like Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man.

On the contrary, the Black heroine is usually tied to her children and to a particular place. She lives within her community and is dependent on friends and relatives. She conducts her quests within close boundaries, within a room as in the case of Sula Peace in Toni Morrison’s Sula. Even if she actually covers a lot of territory as Alice Walker’s Meridian, her physical movement is not very important since it is her spiritual development that demands our attention. The heroine’s quest is usually an internal one.

The Black heroine’s inclination to form complex personal relationships adds to the depth of her identity quest. These relationships may be either mutually beneficial adding to her self-discovery or harmful leading to her disintegration. There is “greater and greater commitment among Black women writers to understand self, multiplied in terms of the community, the community multiplied in terms of the nation, and the nation multiplied in terms of the world.”

34 Claudia Tate, Black Women Writers at Work (New York: Continuum Press, 1983), p. XXIII.
As more and more books by Black women writers are getting published, there is an increased tendency to associate them with all sorts of radical feminism. But, most of them are not advocating that women be egocentric and live in isolation or among themselves, excluding men, as some critics have suggested. At the same time, they are against the notion that women should base their self-esteem on self-sacrifice by caring exclusively for others, whether it be one's mate, children or one's extended family, without caring for one's emotional well being. These writers suggest that woman must assume responsibility for strengthening their self-esteem by learning to love and appreciate themselves, what Walker calls celebrating one's womanhood. Only then will she be able to become involved in mutually fulfilling relationships.

Another characteristic is that the Black heroine like the Black woman writer in real life carries the double burden of racism and sexism and yet continues to struggle with courage and dignity. "We hear her words rise from the centremost region of individual consciousness and gather into the collective chorus of self esteemed sisterhood." The words may vary but the message beneath is always to "survive with dignity." Like the male writers, the Black women writers also sometimes write about those men and women who were not successful in overcoming the racial obstacles but were defeated and destroyed. They insist that although fallen in battle, their fight was valiant and hence deserves artistic attention. Like Morrison's Pecola in The Bluest Eye, they remind one, that for every victor in America's racial wars, there were many who lost and were forgotten.

When Ellison was asked about his role as a writer he replied that he

35 Ibid.
never thought of writing fiction in which only Blacks appeared or only White’s appeared. “And yet from the very beginning I wanted to write about American Negro experience and I suspected that what was important, what made the difference, lay in the perspective from which it was viewed.” If the writer exists for any social good, his role is that of preserving in art those human values which can endure by confronting change. “I speak of the faith, patience, the humour, the sense of timing, rugged sense of life and the manner of expressing it, which all go to define the American Negro.”

Morrison says: “When I view the world, perceive it and write about it, it is the world of black people.” They are the people, who best manifest the themes she writes about. “It is not deliberate or calculated or self consciously black, because I recognise and despise the artificial black writing some writers do. I feel them slumming among black people.”

“Writing is discovery: it is talking deep within myself,” says Morrison “deep talking as you say.” Although she is an editor herself she confesses that publishing is only something very secondary to her. About The Bluest Eye and Sula she claimed that she wrote them because they were the books she wanted to read. Morrison has always made it clear that she expects participatory reading. “It’s not just about telling the story; it’s about involving the reader.” The reader supplies the emotions; the reader supplies even some of the colours and some of the sounds. “My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it. He or she can feel something

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37 Ibid.
38 Quoted in Caludia Tate, op. cit., p.118.
39 Ibid., p 118.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., p 125.
visceral, see something striking. Then we (You, the reader and I, the author) come together to make this book, to feel this experience," she says.

Morrison goes on to describe that it was not the story that was important but to make it mean something. She narrates how at the very beginning of *The Bluest Eye*, she tells the readers, what had happened. But, then she takes them along with her to show how things are, so that when they come to the scene, where the father rapes the daughter, which is an awful thing, it becomes almost irrelevant. This is because the reader's attention is, by then, focussed at his love of his daughter, his pain, helplessness and confusion. Morrison believes that one shouldn't think deliberately of an external audience and write with a purpose of educating them. The work then becomes artificial. She felt that Black woman writers were not much different from men except that they were more reluctant, in desiring change. They did not want to change everything, regarding change as important in itself. Women writers have a different way of approaching conflict, dominion and power.

"Twentieth century black women writers all seem to be much more interested in the black community; in intimate relationship with the white world as a backdrop," remarks Alice Walker. Unlike the male counterparts, they are more interested in examining intimate male-female confrontation within the community than in social confrontations with white society. Writers like Morrison and Walker seem to imply that by internalizing the racist notion of white superiority, Black community as a whole is responsible for the lack of self-esteem in individuals, leading to broken relationships and self-deterioration. Walker frankly declares that "the racist, sexist and

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42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., p 183
colourist, capitalist society doesn’t give a damn about art except art that can be hoarded or sold for big bucks. It does not care about art that is crucial to our community, because it does not care about our community.”

It is upto the Black community to support itself to provide within it a soul-nurturing, positive self concept.

Walker too confides that she does not write with an audience in mind. “Writing to me is not about audience actually. It’s about living. It’s about expanding myself as much as I can and seeing myself in as many roles and situations as possible.” She explains that her whole programme as a writer is to deal with history first, just so she would know where she was. It was necessary for her to begin with a story like The Third Life of Grange Copeland, which starts in the twenties and goes back much further, so that later she could move on to Meridian and then The Color Purple, which is about the celebration of womanhood. No one can be reconciled to the present without knowing the past. “Guided by my heritage of love and beauty and a respect for strength, in search of my mother’s garden,” she claims, she had found her own.

4. Writing Colonialism

The effects of colonialism experienced by a good number of countries in the world led to the evolution of a literature different in outlook and socio-cultural values from the assumptions of the imperial centre. The post-colonialist theories attempt to radically alter certain preconceptions of the colonists like viewing the natives as primitive and uncultured barbarians.

44 Ibid.
45 Alice Walker, “In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens,” Ms, May 1974, p.70.
46 Ibid.
urgently in need of the enlightenment brought by western civilization. "By questioning the rationale behind the native's sense of pride in his own culture, imperialism altered the structures of local culture itself and imposed alien thought patterns upon it." In *The Empire Writes Back* the authors remark that writers of post-colonial literature "emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension within the imperial power and by emphasising their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre." According to them "post-colonial writing refers to a process of progressive dismantling of canonical imperial discourse along with their value system."

Literary studies of all times very often focus attention on the phenomenon of colonialism. The approach is not exactly literary. It is more political and sociological than either cultural or artistic. As a result, scrutinising the authors under discussion from the angle of post-colonialism appears a matter of course. Hence the analytical presentation offered underneath.

Timothy B. Powell argues that "the battle becomes for the critics and novelists of Afro-American literature to decenter the white logos, to create a universe of critical and fictional meaning where blackness will no longer connote absence, negation and evil; but will come to stand instead for affirmation, presence and good." Many critics have approved of Walker's

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49 Ibid., p. 93.

and Morrison's attempt to devise strategies to overcome the signs of racial superiority. They use both abrogation, the rejection of imperial cultural values and appropriation, using English in such a way as to express the culture of the oppressed Afro-Americans. Their techniques of narration are different, following the oral narrative mode of Africa. The teller of the tale is also one of the characters taking part in it. For example Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Jazz* and Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*. Afro-American fiction especially of the Twentieth century comprises all the elements of opposition to established imperialistic systems. There is an increasing tendency towards complexity of expression, multiplicity of voices, self-reflection, use of the vernacular or native slang. This device serves to increase the level of authenticity of the experiences presented.

Frantz Fannon, author of *The Wretched of the Earth* explains how the colonizer fixes the oriental or what he calls "the other" with a look. The white Americans merely by looking at the Afro-Americans fixes him as a "negro," a primitive with his tom toms and Cannibalism, and makes it impossible for him to escape from the inferiority caused by his Black skin. Morrison and Walker depict that in spite of political independence, cultural imperialism continues to destroy Afro-American men and women. They suggest that the first step towards de-colonization is to make one aware of the injustice and harm racism is causing to the Black community both from within and from without. One of the most damaging influences of racist oppression of Black women, Morrison suggests, is "the deliberate perpetuation of the standard of female beauty as a measurement of self"
The worst of this situation as has been revealed in *The Bluest Eye* is the acceptance of the Anglo-Saxon values by the Black community with regard to their own women. "The concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the western world," says Morrison. In *The Bluest Eye* the self-esteem of both Pecola and her mother Pauline is completely destroyed by their acceptance of the standards of physical feminine beauty glamorized by the majority white culture.

Morrison explains how the dominant culture's "fear of merging or loss of identity through synergistic union with the other leads to use racial purification as a separating strategy against difference." She continues: "This is done by marking or supplying physically significant (usually visual) characteristics with internal value equivalents, sharpening by visual antithesis, their conceptual utility."

Racial separation was enforced by invectives and threats exemplified in random and unpredictable violence to punish real or imagined crimes. Morrison states that one need not be surprised that the White man with his enlightenment theory could accommodate slavery:

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54 Ibid.
For in that construction of Blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also with the dramatic polarity created by skin colour, the projection of the not-me. What rose up out of the collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an American-Africanism, a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm and desire.\textsuperscript{55}

All the writers, like Ellison, Baldwin, Morrison and Walker struggle for the acknowledgement and legitimacy of their African heritage in the face of constant attacks by the white communities or its allies. They undermine the stereotypes of the white and at the same time expose their insecurities and lack of a sense of self worth. Only by decoding the myth of white superiority and by loving and supporting one another within the structure of family and community can the genocidal effects of racism be overcome. Each of these writers advocates a self-conscious interest in and celebration of the separate values, beliefs and behaviours of the Afro-American culture, as a first step towards a fulfilling and optimistic concept of self.

The attempt at presenting the colonial reality from a post-colonial perspective has been haphazard, incomplete and rather inconsistent at times. Therefore the process of decolonization has not been very effectively carried out by the authors. Hence from the post-colonial point of view, what stands out is the inadequacy of their attempt in highlighting large chunks of the ugly colonial structures. Any one approaching these fictional works from the post-colonial point of view would be rather disappointed. Yet the attempt is

rewarding in that it throws much light on the situations of the immediate and remote past of the race in America.

5. From the Private to the Social Self: Broadening Visions

Although all the four novelists — Ellison, Baldwin, Morrison and Walker — have been grouped together under the title of post-war Afro-American writers, they are markedly different from one another in their diverse background, personality, morality, political attitude and so on. Though all of them are sensitive to the racial situation their responses to their experiences are specifically individual and the particularity of their responses is a measure of their individuality. Their racial identity isn’t necessarily related to the form and contents of their works and they don’t consider their blackness to define their essential self.

"From Baldwin’s first novel, Go Tell It on the Mountain, to his latest Tell me How Long the Train’s Been Gone, there has been an increasing broadness of concern, a movement in his fiction from the purely individual and private towards the social."56 Baldwin himself agreed that his first novel Go Tell It on the Mountain is auto-biographical or closely personal. Though it contains many scenes describing the lives of others, the events are primarily focussed almost entirely upon the central character, John. The novel’s purpose is to describe John’s deliverance from the world of the flesh, perhaps from the devil and from his father as well.

For the analysis of the data relating to the assertion of the biographical details at least the essentials are to be referred to, to show how they are able

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to go beyond what is merely personal and purely private. Born on August 2, 1924, during the early days of the Harlem Renaissance and the Jazz Age, Baldwin, unlike Wright and Ellison came from a poor family. His father was a factory worker and lay preacher and the boy was brought up under the disciplines of poverty and the store-front church. He was the first of nine children, small and frail. His father, actually his step father, David Baldwin, a stern clergy man, whom he came to dislike, hated and blamed the whole world for the oppression of the Black people and upset his son with his fury and old testament examples. Young James immersed himself in the lore of the Black evangelical church and was called to preach at fourteen. But, he soon began to hate the tyranny of the church and his father, and escaped both by leaving his house.

It is these two events — joining the church and turning away from it — that form the main events of his first novel Go Tell It on the Mountain. Though some attention is given to the role of society in influencing the character of John, the role is minimal. The forces affecting John stem directly from the other characters in the novel, especially his father and mother, Gabriel and Elizabeth. Giovanni’s Room is broader in scope dealing with the responsibility of David to another person. It asks the question of when does an individual’s desire to fulfil himself end and the responsibility to fulfil the obligations of love and friendship begin. David abandons his male lover and feels that his act of abandonment is responsible ultimately for his lover’s execution, though one cannot deny that he needed to do it to save himself. There is a third person, Hella, David’s fiancee, involved in it. He must eventually choose between Giovanni and Hella and the point is that the consequence of his own predicament impinges upon the fates of others.

James Baldwin had been trying to write short stories and plays since he
was ten. His drama teacher, by giving him books and taking him to see plays opened before him a world beyond Harlem and his stepfather’s religiosity. He began to read a lot and discovered Wright, to whom he took a great liking and made him his idol. “He became my ally and my witness and alas! My father,” says Baldwin.

After graduation, he determined to live on his own, while developing his talents as a writer. After six years of frustrations and false starts he had two fellowships but no publications. Moreover his hatred of America’s racism and Puritanism increased and made him flee to Paris. It was Baldwin’s stay abroad for nine years that gave him a world perspective from which to view the question of his own identity. It also gave him a love-affair which would dominate his later fiction. Baldwin returned to America in 1957. He must by then have felt ready to confront society.

*Another Country*, his third novel is a kind of general assessment and judgement of the whole of the American society. It is a further, broader statement of the responsibility of individuals to one another and to society and vice versa. The most powerful section of the novel on Rufus’ suicide, is placed first. The rest of the novel tries to pinpoint responsibility to determine the roles that each person has played and Rufus himself played in his own suicide. It is also about the responsibility the society has in determining the nature and quality of lives of its members. Baldwin points out that Americans didn’t consider themselves responsible for one another, let alone to the Blacks.

In *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*, Baldwin clearly reveals

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his social involvement and concern. Nobody can claim that it deals only with his own individual and private adjustment to the human condition. The novel strikes directly at the racist attitudes of American society by describing certain experiences of the central character Leo Proudhammer. Through the attitudes and feelings about race of one other character, Black Christopher, Baldwin protests against the society. When Leo goes to a dinner and is subjected to insult because of his race, when he is arrested and feels the possibility of undergoing the torment common at the hands of the police, Baldwin protests in the name of the countless numbers for whom the outcome is not so undamaging as for Leo Proudhammer. Each of the incidents in which he suffers is a protest against the conditions of Black people in America. Many critics have found fault with Baldwin, because in these novels Baldwin seems to fall back upon the tradition of protest which he denounced earlier. He seems to adopt the same tone, meaning and language that Wright had adopted for his *Native Son*.

This could be accounted for by the fact that Baldwin’s meeting with Wright was a year after his father’s death in 1943, which caused him to adopt Wright as his spiritual father. Perhaps, Baldwin’s habit of defining himself in opposition to his father was transferred to their new relationship. That was why he opposed Wright’s style of writing in his essay: “Everybody’s Protest Novel.” He announced that he would launch his own career totally different from that of Wright. With Wright’s death in 1960, Baldwin became free from all psychological restraints to be different. His last two novels are concerned chiefly with the emotion of rage. A violent and loud tone and a grand prophetic vision is revealed in *If Beale Street Could Talk* and in *Just Above My Head*. In *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Tish and Fonny are able to endure and transcend the agony of harassment in the ghetto and prison only through love and art. In *Just Above My Head*, Hall
Montana narrates the ecstatic possibilities of love in the lives of those touched by his brothers' journey on the gospel road.

Like Wright, Baldwin also focuses on a single aspect of Black experience. "His emphasis, however is not political but spiritual and sexual, not the terrifying possibilities of hatred but the terrifying possibilities of love." Baldwin sought freedom, spiritual freedom, from the tyrannical church and sexual freedom from conventional heterosexual love making. His indirect implications for sexual freedom transform the private issue, a homosexual relationship, to a public affair giving it a general significance. His short stories and novels are memorable "for the soul stirring eloquence and resonance of their pulpit oratory and black music as they plumb the depths of our (their) suffering and the possibilities of our (their) salvation."59

Ralph Ellison defines the purpose of writing novels as "converting experience into symbolic action" and this phrase incidentally captures the particular achievement of his novel, Invisible Man, "in which he creates a nameless narrator whose adventures always approximate and unspecific in time and place, represent in symbolic form the overall historical experiences of the most politically active element of the American Negro people."60

It is Ellison, who succeeds even more than Baldwin himself in practising Baldwin's theories about fiction, even though he wrote only one novel. In Invisible Man, the "narrator confronts a succession of possible individual choices, which as they imply changes in group behaviour, have

58 Ibid., p 219.
symbolic political dimension for negro people.” Each time he accepts a possible solution only to find it inadequate and moves on to another. In this way Ellison seems to test the viability of every known political possibility only to discover its futility. He goes through transformation of identities to come to the resolution that his true identity is in discovering his humanity and discarding all other identities thrust on him. At the end, the hero declares that even as an “Invisible Man,” he has a socially responsible role to play.

Ellison also, like Baldwin, denies that he was ever a protégé of Wright. Moreover he denies that his novel is in any way autobiographical. Unlike Wright and Baldwin, Ellison though poor, belonged to the Negro middle class. He was educated in a fairly good high school where the fine arts were taught. He studied music and wanted to compose a symphony.

Ellison was born in Oklahoma city, in 1914 and grew up in a frontier community during the era of South western Jazz. Oklahoma had achieved statehood only seven years before Ellison’s birth and had no tradition of slavery. Though it was segregated, relationships between Whites and Blacks weren’t so bitter and hate-filled as the older-states. In 1936, after the Harlem Renaissance was over, he went to New York to study sculpture, but when he met Wright his interest shifted to writing. Since Ellison was not subjected to much violence and brutality, he was more optimistic and this sober approach is reflected in his writings. Wright invited him to do a book review for the magazine, New Challenge, and encouraged him to study Conrad, Joyce and Dostoevsky. Besides them Ellison also learned and adopted the techniques of Eliot, James, Pound, Hemingway, Faulkner, Hughes and Wright. “When I began writing in earnest” says Ellison “I was forced to relate myself

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61 Ibid.
consciously and imaginatively to my mixed background as American, as Negro-American. 62 More important “was the necessity of determining my true relationship to that body of American literature to which I was most attracted and through which I would find my own voice and to which I was challenged, by way of achieving myself to make some small contribution.” 63

Thus, Ellison reveals that his major concern as a writer was with the relationship of Afro-American to Euro-American culture and the responsibility of the Black artist to his people and his craft. Perhaps it was his personal experience and his attitude to life that enabled Ellison to portray in his novel,

“the best balanced and most complete and comprehensive image of American Negro that has yet been presented by any contemporary writer. Some pessimism, a lot of disillusionment, bitter irony and satire and even some hate are found in the novel. But Ellison being a romanticist and an optimist includes some humour, some hope and some love also.” 64

Ellison’s mildness and sobriety and balance of outlook can be attributed to the biographical fact that as a person he was not subjected to atrocious social oppression as in the case of Wright and others. This very private experience becomes ultimately the corner stone of his outlook on the problems of his

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63 Ibid.
race. Obviously, it is the case of the private leading naturally to the author's public stance.

The novels of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker also deal with the responsibility of the individual towards the community but the community is depicted more from an insider's viewpoint than in confrontation with the white community. These women writers reflect the peculiar qualities of their particular community as well as their personal vision. They also portray the unique style, legends and rituals of each community and their role in defining the individuals. "By revealing the fantasies, myths and dreams" of the characters the novelists attempt "to penetrate the historical subconscious of their communities." 65

Walker's first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* are about the process of growing up into personhood comprising a variety of the factors. Ruth and Pecola, the heroines of these first novels, on the way to adulthood ask their respective communities what is expected of them. "It is through this confrontation buttressed by their often imperfect understanding of their own communities that they seek their identity." 66 The characters are made to understand the community's sense of womanhood and adulthood and compromise on their own notions of self-hood, wholeness and destiny. These First novels also bring out the main characters "Psychic connection to their community as well as their desire to articulate their mother's stories as a metaphor for human existence. The emphasis of the women writers on their own communities, then, while seeming to be narrow, is more complex, perhaps even broader

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66 Ibid., p.241
than many works in which the white world is prominent."67

In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker says that throughout her childhood “the artist that was and is my (her) mother” revealed herself to Walker in the “ambitious gardens” she planted so that “her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three countries.”68 Walker was born in 1944 to sharecroppers in Eatanton, Georgia. She was the eighth child of the family but was lonely and solitary as a result of a disfiguring scar. She was educated in local schools and suffered the cruel insults of her peers and relatives in her childhood. She migrated to the North to study in Spelman College, where she became active in the Civil Rights movement. She was transferred to Sarah Lawrence and received her B.A. in 1965. In the summer of the same year she travelled to East Africa, returning to college, pregnant, sick, alone and suicidal. It was during this crisis that she completed in one week most of the poems in *Once*, her first book of poetry. These biographical data of Walker find reflection in her novels like *The Temple of My Familiar* and *Meridian*. The experiences of Meridian in her novel of the same name, who is impregnated by Truman, a civil rights worker, who then left her to marry a white woman, the subsequent loneliness and desire for suicide, her giving up her son for adoption all find parallel to some of these real life incidents. When Walker published her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), she had remarked that for her, family relationships were sacred.

In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker explains that her mother turned to gardens, because although she liked telling stories, stories were always interrupted by the many chores, like getting dinner ready or

gathering cotton. It took her years to understand that her mother had turned domestic necessity to an art, when she took to gardening. And, it was not only the stories that Walker absorbed, she says “but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories — like her life — must be recorded.” Her mother was a sharefarmer, totally removed from what could be called literary culture, a woman who never wrote a word, but still Walker cites her as one of the main sources of her literary inspiration. But Walker means more than her biological mother when she uses the word “Mother”. She considers the whole history of Black women’s tradition as fiction writers, those stories which “contain strategies by which individual women overcame every conceivable obstacles to personal evolution and self-expression.”

For Walker these other mothers include Zora Neale Hurston, Flannery O’Connor, Virginia Woolf, Jean Toomer and Martin Luther King Jr. She also acknowledges her debt to those semi-literate slave women who through their autobiographies, and slave tales make it possible for the present generation to write fiction. In the nineteen seventies and nineteen eighties Black women novelists had become “metaphorical conjure women.” Writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker claimed that they were only mediums, through whom it was possible for the readers “to recognise their common literary ancestors” like gardeners, quilt makers, grandmothers, root workers and

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69 Ibid., pp 240-241.


72 Ibid.
women, who wrote autobiographies. “Focussing a connection rather than separation, transforming silence into speech, and giving back power to the culturally disenfranchised, Black women writers affirm the wholeness, and endurance of a vision that once articulated can be shared — through its heritage, roots, survival and intimate possession belong to black women alone.”

Born to a shipyard worker and choir singer on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio, Chloe Anthony Wofford changed her name to Toni after finishing school in Lorain and going to Howard. At Howard she majored in English, taking her B.A. in 1953 and M.A from Cornell University in 1955. Having travelled to the deep South with the Howard University players, she returned there after college to teach at Texas Southern University and then moved on to a similar post at Howard University. While teaching at Howard, she married a Jamaican and had two sons. She went on to become an editor in 1964. By the end of 1993, when she won the Nobel Prize she had published six novels: *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, *Beloved* and *Jazz*. In 1998 her latest novel *Paradise* was published. Toni Morrison always claimed that her works were not autobiographical and that there was nothing extra-ordinary about her life. But a few incidents she narrates in *The Bluest Eye* like the man who tries to molest the girls in Claudia’s house and is thrown out by the infuriated father did occur, in her family. She also claimed that her parents and grandparents were major influences in instilling positive self confidence in the children of her family.

Like Ellison and Baldwin, Morrison and Walker also expose the rage and frustration of being a Black (wo)man in white America, but they go to great lengths to point out that the Black communities themselves have

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73 Ibid.
internalized the stereotypes of Black inferiority. The community does not prepare its members for the reality of the life that awaits them. Pauline, in *The Bluest Eye* is totally unprepared for the harshness, poverty and misery that she would have to face when moved from the South to the North of America. Gradually, she internalizes the very stereotypes that threaten to dehumanize her. Further, she expects her husband to support her emotionally and financially when he can hardly do either for himself.

Margaret and Mem are also women who are trapped by the stereotypes inflicted on Blacks and on women. They believe that if they are faithful good wives and take care of their husbands physical needs they would be cherished. They are blind to the fact that their men are powerless and helpless totally unlike other white men in society. Toni Morrison begins each chapter of *The Bluest Eye* with a few sentences from the primary school reader. They make clear the contrast between the rich, beautiful, established happy family of the American and the impoverished wretched and miserable existence of the Black life. The majority of the women characters who give in to these false notions of a perfect life are confused and disillusioned. Gradually, they become the stereotypes they hoped to avoid. For example, Pauline becomes the perfect servant and mammy, who loves her white master’s children, abuses and ignores her own child. Mem becomes the domineering female threatening her husband with castration, in order to survive. Even when Pecola accepts the lie of the society and becomes insane in her great yearning for a bit of love and affection society offers no solaces. Morrison suggests that perhaps such scapegoats are needed by all communities for their own weaknesses. Walker’s novel, however, ends with a little hope because Ruth learns about the nature of racist society, the culture of her people and about the possibility of change. She is thus set on the road to self-discovery.
The second novels *Meridian* and *Sula* are an elaboration of the theme of the first. *Meridian* is about the private rebellion of an active civil rights worker and *Sula* is about the friendship of a Non-conformist, Sula, with a conformist Nel. Both of the novels challenge the community’s definition of a woman. They criticize the conservatism of the society which makes use of tradition and convention to restrict rather than free individuals. Yet, they also recognize the importance of the community without which the creative imagination cannot survive for it has no framework in which to structure its tremendous energy.74 Both Meridian and Sula reject motherhood but for totally different reasons. Sula wanted to find, to create and to recreate herself away from society. Meridian, on the other hand, was too involved in her community’s history to dismiss it and her self awareness takes place within the context of the society. Morrison and Walker seem to imply that unless accompanied by real personal change, changes in society are only external and not likely to last. Both of them extend their worlds further in their second novels and bring out the changes, as well as the benefits of the women characters’ efforts to venture out.

In her third novel *Song of Solomon*, Morrison shrewdly mocks the men-folk including Milkman, the hero who is an unbearable egoist who takes all women for granted. After fourteen years of living together with Hagar, he is naive and unfeeling enough to think that he could end it by sending her money and a “Thank You” note. Walker’s *The Color Purple* also looks down on men, whether it is Celie’s step father, who rapes her or her husband who abuses and batters her. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman in his quest for gold is aided by his aunt, Pilate, who though living on the outskirts of the city or community teaches him the intricacies of his community and finally leads

him to understand and accept the past. Celie is also taught the importance of herself by Shug Avery, who teaches her to fulfil her female nature and creative spirit within her. Both the novels dramatize the effects of women’s repressed creativity in the fabric of their community. They point out that the wholeness of a person is basically threatened by an assault on the definition of herself or himself as male or female and this rings true for men as well as women.

Morrison’s next novel *Tar Baby* is a modification on the attempt of Sula, to define herself in opposition to her community. Jadine too, like Sula tries to defy the conventions of womanhood put forward consciously and unconsciously by the Black community. Like Sula she does not find any self satisfaction in the role a woman is expected to play in life according to her aunt and the Black women of the past. Jadine finally identifies herself with the European part of the self and rejects her African past and genealogical part. Tashi in Walker’s *Possessing The Secret of Joy* undergoes a reverse mode of transformation. Though she had imbibed western culture and married an Englishman she shed off the signs of her acculturation one by one: “I had taken off my ginghan Mother Hubbard (that the missionaries had given the women of the tribe to wear). My breasts were bare. What was left of my dress now rode negligently above my loins.”75 She refers to her tribe — “We had been stripped of everything but our black skins. Here and there a defiant cheek bore the mark of our withered tribe. These marks gave me (Tashi) courage. I wanted such a mark for myself.”76 But Tashi as she tries to assert her tribal identity by undergoing the ritual of female circumcision is duped by her own community and their belief in traditions. Even so Tashi does not

76 Ibid., p.24.
consider her responsibility over after failing in all her attempts to expose the duplicity of the M’lissa who is responsible for her sister’s death and her own psychic and physical traumas. She resolves to take revenge for the scores of women, who have thus been maimed or killed. Going back to Africa she murders the Tsungi, M’lissa. She becomes a heroine to the oppressed and victimised women. Thus Walker completes the question asked by Meridian whether an individual should kill for a revolution. It is her stand that just as inter-racial oppression should be resisted, inter-racial oppression too should be opposed and resisted by the individual members. Tashi’s private revolt has vicarious implications and it gets highlighted as a common virtue to be followed by the members of her society thus proving that the movement is from the private to the public level of awareness and experience.

Thus all the writers in the sequences of their novels at first seem to stress the importance of individuality even if it means growing away from the social or racial group. Yet, they also scale broader horizons in their subsequent novels and move from the mere individualistic stand to one of responsibility to one’s immediate circle of family, friends or society. In the final analysis, they agree with Jung who argues that the total development of a self, what he calls individuation can only take place in the context of society and that it cannot go against the collective consciousness of mankind as a whole.