Chapter 4

Betrayed Innocence: The Black Girls at Home

Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor see black females as victims of violence in all relationships. The focus now is on the sad plight of black girls being maltreated and sexually exploited at home. It is natural to expect that the female children will be spared such violent experiences even when their grown-up sisters are subjected to the severest affliction. Cushioning the adverse effects of racism is usually undertaken within the family network. But if the child is abused within her own home, it becomes almost impossible for her to disclose it to the outside world. The majority of black children hardly ever feel secure or happy in the nuclear families. In fact, the very people who are entrusted to protect and safeguard the children are often seen to bring about their ruin. Their inexperience, innocence and lack of agency preclude any form of resistance on the part of children. However, such experiences are all the more traumatic.

Fromm takes note of the abuse of children as a form of sadism that can be physical as well as psychic. Dworkin underscores the pervasive sexual abuse of girls by fathers, stepfathers, and near relatives. Women who have been sexually molested as children experience confusion about their needs and accept the male as constant aggressor and forced sex as normative (58). So such violation poses long-standing effects.
In the novels of Morrison, Walker, and Naylor female children often become victims of violence in their homes. Victimization of children takes on various forms. The least of them is neglect by the parents, which forces them fend for themselves and exposes them to many dangers. Another is cruel punishment given to children, making them scapegoats for the mistakes of others. Infanticide is an extreme form of child violence as in Beloved. The female child is particularly vulnerable to oppression at home. She becomes the target of incest at times culminating in rape and resulting pregnancy. The culprit is often the father. Sometimes other relatives also become instrumental in the female child’s victimization. Thus protectors turn into predators. Rape connected with incest becomes the gravest offence against the female child. Even weak male figures find the family a site for consolidating their power and thus the family acts as “a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal world” (Millet 33).

Each episode in Eye presents an account of the victimization of Pecola and in each the damage becomes more intense. She is completely neglected by her mother Pauline who is disappointed with her own life. While she becomes the ideal servant, she neglects her home, children as well as her husband Cholly. Unable to overcome her self-hatred, Pauline the victim in turn becomes victimiser of her children. She only teaches them fear while she bends them toward respectability. “Into her son she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of
growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (128). By the time he is fourteen, Sammy, the son, has run away from home twenty seven times, but Pecola being younger and a girl has to endure the terrible atmosphere of the violent home. “The absence of a good-enough environment from the beginning creates a maimed, not necessarily destructive person” (Craib 166), and this explains Pecola’s condition.

Ironically enough, Pauline believes the conception of Pecola as something she had willed as relief from loneliness and considers this child special. So she plans having the child delivered in hospital. But the discrimination and insensitivity she encounters in the hospital, which is dealt with in detail in Chapter 1, puts an end to her illusion. Moreover, she is disappointed by the appearance of the baby who looks a “cross between a puppy and a dying man” (126). Pauline’s experience contradicts the popular notion of motherhood as a blessed state where the mother invariably loves her newborn child.

Pauline, the unfulfilled artist, orchestrates a substitute life at the Fishers with its beauty and order and a surrogate daughter who looks like Shirley Temple. She violently abuses Pecola who accidentally upsets a pan of berry cobbler while visiting her mother. Though the child is scalded by the still hot juice splashed on her legs, Pauline is furious about her clumsiness and knocks her to the floor, calling her “Crazy fool” for making a mess of “my floor” in words “hotter and darker than the smoking berries”
Pauline lives in a world of inverted values, which forces her to ignore her own child’s burns and bother more about the misgivings of her white charge and the ruined floor which she calls hers. The privileged white child calls her Polly, while Pecola must address her as Mrs. Breedlove. In a society that rests on power relations, even the mother-daughter relationship is not free from them. A powerless woman like Pauline employs motherhood as a channel to her own will to power. She lives in a society that has adopted the patriarchal contradiction between the laws and sanctions designed to keep women essentially powerless, and the attribution of almost superhuman power to mothers.

The mother represents the greatest experience of love and fellowship that the child will ever have. Her task is to relate the growing child that was formerly related to her physically, to herself psychologically (Ansbacher 372). However, this rarely takes place in families of poor blacks like the Breedloves. Vernessa C. White lists the different ways in which Pauline fails Pecola as a mother. First of all, she neglects to initiate Pecola into the mysteries of womanhood and the task falls to Frieda, a younger girl. Secondly, she demonstrates no affection for Pecola but only beats and berates her. But the ultimate outrage is the physical attack she launches on Pecola after her father has raped her. Pauline’s action destroys her child’s soul in addition to battering her body (31). She refuses to listen to what her daughter has to say about the incident and thus rejects her.
Pauline extends no tenderness or sympathy to the eleven-year-old girl who is unable to grasp the enormity of her tragic situation. Her beatings lead to a premature delivery. Her lack of understanding is largely responsible for Pecola’s descent into madness.

Both Pauline and Cholly have had unhappy childhoods, which they transmit to their children. Pauline has felt an outsider in her own home, blaming her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness on her foot that has a slight deformity. She has no model to follow, as her mother who has given birth to eleven children never seems to treat it as a rewarding experience but only as a burden.

The myth of motherhood as the sacred calling has been challenged first by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* where she argues that the institution of motherhood assists in the cultural conditioning of women for a passive existence. Much later, Adrienne Rich distinguishes between the institution of motherhood, that is, what women are programmed to expect out of motherhood and their actual experience. She makes a very crucial statement when she asserts that the experience of maternity and the experience of sexuality have both been channelled to serve male interests. “Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal instinct rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self” (42).
Barbara Christian also addresses this dilemma: “Since, in principle, society places motherhood on a pedestal, while, in reality, it rejects individual mothers as human beings with needs and desires,” mothers must “love their role as they are penalized for it” (Black Women Novelists 220). She also writes of the danger of the monumental myth of black motherhood which passes on only the stories of strong, successful mothers (Black Feminist Criticism 89). But such heroism has been undertaken by black women more from the exigencies of their uncertain life, and a great tension prevails between the images of black motherhood and the real experiences of black mothers.

For Pauline, the poor black woman with no attainable models, motherhood becomes a mixture of maternal rage and maternal regret. Though she feels guilty about beating her children, she cannot help beating them again. So she tries to justify herself: “perhaps it was having no money or may be it was Cholly,” but they “sure worried the life out of me” (124). Her children’s daily needs become lighted matches to the fuse of her disappointment as a black woman denied beauty and romantic love. Wade-Gayles says, “the notion of motherhood as a sacred calling lived out in Sistine tranquility is a rhetorical lie in Pauline’s culture” (72). Morrison destroys the stereotypical image of the strong, loving black mother through Pauline.
Pauline’s failure as a mother is paralleled by Cholly’s greater failure. Just as the novel begins by Cholly’s putting Pecola outdoors, an unforgivable crime in itself, it climaxes with his completing the process short of murder, which is raping his pubescent daughter. Reeling home drunk one Saturday afternoon, Cholly notices his daughter at the kitchen sink. “The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love” (161). At the same time, she happens to scratch her foot with her toe, the repetition of a gesture made by Pauline when Cholly met her for the first time. So he crawls on all fours towards her and tries to catch her foot. But Pecola loses her balance and Cholly supports her. He tries to love her but the love is confused with his sexual urges.

Cholly’s rape of his daughter Pecola is presented from his point of view. Butler-Evans finds the narrative focus on the rapist rather than the rape victim as a textual deconstruction in which the description becomes ironic. “He wanted to break her neck – but tenderly” (161) and after the rape, “Again the hatred mixed with tenderness” (163). He notes that the “oxymoronic construction itself undermines whatever sympathies one has for Cholly. The fusion of tenderness with acts of fantasized and real violence is experienced by the reader as a contradiction” (79). However, Dubey argues that Cholly’s role as a rapist yields primarily to his helplessness as a black man unable to assume a masculine, paternal identity
This helplessness derives from the sadistic treatment from the white hunters and also from his rejection by both parents, discussed in Chapter 2.

The importance of secure attachments for children can never be overemphasized, and abuse is the most extreme expression of a parent’s incapacity to form an attachment. There is relationship between early separation experiences, with the consequent failure to develop bonding, and child abuse. The term “battered baby syndrome” denotes abusive parents suffering from lack of parenting or “empathic mothering” (Featherstone 181-82). In his drunken state Cholly confuses Pecola with Darlene, whom he hated as a partner in shame and also with Pauline whom he loved. He rapes his daughter in the Section “Spring.” He is incapable of providing the fertile, parental soil that a child needs to grow and develop a positive sense of self.

The archetype underlying the rape of Pecola is the ancient Greek myth of Philomel raped by her brother-in-law Tereus and then has her tongue cut off. Pecola is the utterly helpless victim unable to communicate the crime committed against her. Her only response to the grotesque act is “a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon” (163). But unlike Philomel’s, the rape of Pecola occurs within her house. The metaphor of the bird effectively sums up Pecola’s state: “Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a
winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach” (204). The final catastrophe is the madness of Pecola who has prematurely delivered her own father’s baby, which is stillborn.

Awkward argues that Cholly’s rape of Pecola is a revision of Ellison’s depiction of incest in the Trueblood episode of *Invisible Man*. Just as Matty Lou is presented as her mother’s double and rouses the father’s lust, Cholly is sexually aroused by Pecola’s repeating her mother’s action. He contends that Morrison seems to take Ellison to task for the phallocentric nature the representation of incest that marginalizes the consequences of the act for the female victim (“Evil” 201).

Morrison presents an extreme form of mother love that becomes a killer in *Beloved*. The novel is based on the story of Margaret Garner recorded in *The American Baptist* in 1856 that Morrison came across while collecting material for *The Black Book*, a collection of memorabilia in 1974. Garner, the slave woman attempts to kill her four children when they are all captured in Ohio because she would rather have them dead than recaptured into slavery. However, she succeeds in killing only one child, a baby girl, whose throat she slashes with a handsaw.

Morrison follows the same pattern. As schoolteacher’s arrival seems the undoing of all the sacrifices she has made, Sethe takes the drastic decision to put an end to her children’s lives. She claims to put them where no one could hurt them, and where they would be safe. But Sethe gives
them “safety with a handsaw” (164) and the baby blood that “soaked her fingers like oil” (5) makes her dress stiff “like rigor mortis” (153).

However, her only consolation is: “They ain’t at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain’t got them” (165). The infanticide involves “sparagmos” or dismemberment and becomes sacrificial in a Dionysian sense by its orgiastic nature.

As Samuels and Hudson-Weems note, in treating the theme of the great mother, as nurturant and nursing figure, whose primary responsibility is that of caring for her children, Morrison returns to the concomitant image of the archetypal “terrible mother.” Sethe, like Eva, is a mother who kills her child to save its life, or give it new life (105). However, Sethe’s act is a dramatic breach of the rules in both the black and white communities. Though her crime is infanticide, the black community objects more to what it signifies rather than the act itself. Though black mothers might kill children born of whites, they do not kill the children born of their choice; they erect defences to spare themselves the anguish of their loss. They try not to love them too much. Sethe is different because of the ferocity of her mother-love (Randle 291).

Sethe’s act of infanticide demonstrates the extent of the dehumanization that slaves are subjected to. As Rich observes, motherhood without autonomy, without choice, is one of the quickest roads to a sense of having lost control (264). *Beloved* examines motherhood in its most
denied form, namely, the enslaved mother who is reduced to a brood mare.

Gerda Lerner too finds the term “black matriarchy” deceptive because “matriarchy” implies the exercise of power by women, and black women are the most powerless group in the entire society (xxiii). However, Sethe the slave mother claims her children as her own rather than as the property of the slave master. It is owning with a vengeance. Her extreme circumstances move her into extreme steps because hers is an unslaved psyche in a slave society.

The snapping of the mother-daughter bond has caused deep scars in Sethe’s childhood also. She suffers all along from a sense of deprivation—of her mother’s milk, her tender care, and finally the mother herself. It means that a slave can own neither her mother nor her child. Sethe has seen her mother only a few times in the field where by the time she wakes up, her mother would be gone. But mostly they did not even sleep in the same cabin, as the line-up was too far. Slave mothers do not find time or receive permission to look after their babies. Sethe was too young to understand the significance of the one meeting with her mother or the reason for her hanging. Sethe’s inability to remember much of her life before she came to Sweet Home at the age of thirteen may be explained as her attempt at consciously obliterating her past.

Sethe’s mother was able to nurse her for only two or three weeks and then Nan took care of her. But Nan also had white babies to nurse and
“Sethe got what was left. Or none” (200). Black women are forced to forego the welfare of their babies not only because they are workers but also because they have to act as wet nurses to white children. This too early weaning of black children from mothers endowed with an abundance supply of milk is both ironic and pathetic, for it benefits only white children. Sethe’s terrible resentment about this deprivation seals her determination to prevent the same plight for her children. Her solitary flight is motivated by her swollen breasts that remind her of the baby waiting for milk in Cincinnati. Again, the thought that schoolteacher’s nephews should presume to steal her milk creates greater rancor than the rape.

Michele Mock analyses the significance of breasts and milk to the mother-child dyad. If milk symbolizes a mother’s present and enduring love, then lack of it suggests maternal abandonment. The lactating mother enjoys a certain power in feeding the child or denying it. However, since the white masters have absolute ownership over their slaves, they can appropriate the slave mother’s nourishment as well. There are also several ways in which they can do harm to it. They can destroy the breast, which means that they destroy the woman as well. Secondly, they can maim the breast by branding and claiming ownership as in the case of Sethe’s mother. Finally, they can remove the breasts geographically through relocation of the woman, or separate the mother and child (119-22).
Sethe has no experience of nurturing from her mother and no examples of mothering to follow at Sweet Home. The absence of the mother and lack of knowledge of foremothers creates a void in her. So she depends largely on instinct and it is her tragedy that she carries her mother instinct to such an unnatural limit. To Sethe, love can never be too thick. “Love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all” (164). In her view, being a mother is to be good enough, alert enough, and strong enough. “Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer” (132). That is why Paul D muses: “For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love” (45). Thus literally and figuratively, motherhood is a killer for Sethe. Even though Halle has been unable to join them, she insists on keeping at least the bond between mother and children, which she considers to be the most sacred bond. So she says that she wouldn’t draw breath without her children and commends Beloved’s return. She also vouches her loyalty to her own mother who had been hanged, engaging in a maternal and filial fantasy. Sethe’s unsatisfied hunger for her mother’s love conditions her extremely possessive definition of motherhood.

In spite of such love, Sethe is forced to kill her daughter. As Stamp Paid says, “She was trying to outhurt the hurter” (234) so that “no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter’s characteristics on the animal side of the paper” (251). It is not only an act of resistance but also
one of mercy killing. Sethe explains that if she hadn’t killed Beloved, she would have died and she could not bear that to happen. The contrast is between the slow social death of slavery and the physical death through which the mother could release them which is kindness itself. De Weever discusses the theme of death as mother, though in Western literature death is usually represented as masculine. Since mothers create and sustain life, they are considered to have nothing to do with death, which actually extinguishes life. In *Beloved* Morrison explicates the theme of mother as death. (136-37). Morrison has already introduced the death image when the pregnant Sethe, on the run and exhausted, imagines herself “just a crawling graveyard for a six-month baby’s last hours” (34).

The myth of Persephone or Kore, the maiden daughter of the powerful earth goddess, Demeter, swallowed by Hades, explicates the mother/daughter bond in the novel. When Demeter withholding her power from the earth so that nothing grows there, Zeus sends a messenger to negotiate with her and Persephone is allowed to be with her mother for two thirds of the year and she has to be in the underworld for one third, and this explains the seasons’ division (Marks 16-17). All females begin as Kore the daughter before maturing into Demeter the nurturer. There are two sides to Demeter—one is the kindness of Sophia, the umbrella mother to the species and the other is the deadly killing anger of Kali. The benign and benevolent phase is very limited in Sethe who, “prematurely hurled into
Kali fury by the slave owner’s attempt to repossess her and her family, makes a split-second decision to kill her children” (Demetrakopoulos, “Maternal Bonds” 52). Jennifer Fitzgerald suggests that just as the infant refuses to see the mother as a separate individual, the mother may also be tempted to treat her child as a part of herself and believe that she killed her child for its own good (678).

Beloved represents all those who suffered under slavery and did not survive. The ghost is repressed memory that returns in one form or another into the present. Beloved’s treatment of her mother “associates violence and tenderness, a desire to kill, and a desire to caress (Harding and Martin 50-51), like Cholly’s rape of his daughter. Teresa Heffernan notes the multitude of parts that Beloved plays. She is the voice of the slaves in the Middle Passage; she is the brutalized girl who escapes from the white man’s cabin; she is the daughter looking for her lost mother; she is the ghost of Sethe’s baby girl and the sexual female who torments Paul D; she is among the freed slaves wandering the roads (569). The destructive nature of Sethe and Beloved’s relationship is suggested by the expression: “their two shadows clashed and crossed on the ceiling like black swords” (57).

The surviving children suffer the after-effects of Sethe’s act. Denver who takes in her murdered sister’s blood along with her mother’s milk accompanies Sethe to prison. Her vague memories of the prison house are so painful that when questioned about that phase of her life Denver suffers
from a psychosomatic condition of becoming deaf and mute for two years. She avoids the outside world as well as the shed where her mother committed infanticide. As Randle observes, avoidance, an even more primitive defence than denial, is severely crippling (296). When Beloved appears, Denver wishes to protect her from Sethe because of the terror of the mother who can love to kill. But later on she feels left out, as with the arrival of Paul D, and suffers from double isolation.

The children are starved for affection as Sethe retreats more into herself, trying to beat back the past. Howard and Buglar are scared of their mother, as they remember how she murdered their sister and attempted to take their lives as well. They never let go of each other’s hands in childhood. The ghost of the dead baby further makes them uneasy. Finally, they run away from home and are heard of no more. Thus, Sethe’s rigid idea of motherhood truncates her relationship with two of her living children (Kubitschek 168).

As mentioned, Sethe’s unnatural act is not the first of its kind. The novel delineates women under slavery who refuse to mother children conceived against their will. Sethe’s mother has thrown away all the children she has had by the slave masters, without naming them. Ella refuses to nurse the offspring of whites that dies after five days without uttering a word. By denying the baby milk, Ella denies it life as well as the word.
In *Sula* Eva becomes the arbiter of life and death. Eva has managed to stay alive for her children. She also keeps them alive with the insurance money she gains by sacrificing her leg. Moreover, her special efforts have once saved the life of her son Plum. But when he returns from war in a regressive state no better than a child in his broken down lethargic existence, she recognizes that such reversion to childhood dependency is a threat to the family. So she does not hesitate to put an end to it by burning him to death but she embraces him before dousing him with petrol. Thus it becomes an act of mercy killing as well. Eva’s murder of Plum can be read as a prefiguration of Sethe’s act of infanticide in *Beloved*. Both Eva and Sethe are strong mothers who are prepared to undergo any hardship for their children but they also recognize certain situations where death is preferable to an existence worse than it. So they take the harder decision to terminate their children’s lives. In *Sula*, too, as in *Beloved*, Morrison develops the idea of mother as death as well as death as a mother. In both, the benevolent ideal turned into a malevolent reality transforms the goddess of creation into the goddess of destruction.

*Sula* too feels the lack of maternal love when she overhears Hannah’s remark that she loves Sula but does not like her. It sends her flying up the stairs and soon after she gets involved in the accidental drowning of Chicken Little. These two incidents following closely have great significance to Sula. “The first experience taught her that there was
no other you could count on; the second that there was no self to count on either” (118-19). As a result, she turns inward and rejects society’s norms. So she coolly watches her mother burn to death. Hannah herself suffers from a feeling of being not loved enough by her mother. So she accusingly asks Eva why she never played with them as children. However, such love was not possible for Eva who was singly battling for the survival of her children. Morrison says: “That kind of sentimental love for children is not possible, except in a certain kind of loving society, where you can relish it. Children are easy marks in aggressively oppressive societies” (with Koenen 69-70).

Rejected by her thirteen-year-old mother who becomes a prostitute, Helene develops an obsession for middle class respectability which she tries to pass on to her daughter Nel and succeeds in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle she had. “Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers” (52), Sula and Nel are attracted to each other. Rushdy calls it the story of “two daughters who lose faith in mothers—one because her mother did not care, the other because her mother sold out to a dominating culture.” He compares Sula with Song where two sons, Milkman and Guitar, lose faith in their families, the former as both his father and mother use him as a ground for their struggle, and the latter because his mother sold out to the dominant culture by expressing more than gratitude to the white boss (310). Though Morrison admits that the
The detrimental effect of the denial of mother’s care is seen in the married life of Joe and Violet in Jazz. Violet rejects motherhood as a rejection of the mother who failed her. Caught in their youthful passion, they have no wish for babies and “those miscarriages - two in the field, only one in the bed – were more inconvenience than loss” (107). But this decision costs Violet dearly later when the lack of a baby becomes a neurosis. She begins to express maternal yearnings when it is too late. At forty she is seen staring at infants, trying to imagine how old the miscarried child would have been. Joe is horrified when Violet starts sleeping with a doll in her arms. She also makes an unsuccessful attempt at kidnapping a baby from a pram. Though she denies the charge, the longing remains and her original intention becomes meaningless. The novel explores the destructive influence of negligent mothering as it prevents children from developing their own identities. Joe, Violet, Dorcas, and Felice are all victims of imperfect mothering.

Ruth Dead suffers from lack of maternal bonding. Macon alternately looks upon his daughters with the pride of possession and personal scorn. Lena says, “First he displayed us, then he splayed us” and “he would parade us like virgins through Babylon, then humiliate us like whores in
Babylon” (216). They are brought up subordinate to Milkman who is many years their junior.

Most women who seek asylum in the convent in Paradise have been neglected as children. The five-year-old Seneca has been deserted by her teenaged mother Jean who poses as her sister. The terrified child remains alone in the house for five lonely days. She pathetically rummages for food and knocks on every door in the building looking for Jean till a caseworker takes her to a foster home. Pallas is also betrayed by her mother who appropriates her daughter’s lover for herself. Mavis’s husband bothers their daughter Sally when he is drunk. Arnette goes into premature labour as she punishes herself. She never touches or glances at the “three pounds of gallant but defeated flesh” (250) that does not live beyond a few weeks.

In Love Junior Vivian, an eighteen-year-old girl, responds to the barely literate Heed’s advertisement for a secretary. She belongs to the Settlement, an area with the poorest living conditions. She is named Junior by her father, Ethan Payne Jr., after him or because her four brothers were not fathered by him. However, he leaves them and when Junior is admitted to school, she gives her second name as Vivian after her mother. She develops a friendship with a boy of eleven, called Peter Paul Fortas who gives her a jumbo box of crayons for Christmas in exchange for a baby cottonmouth, a snake.
Junior’s mother’s teenaged brothers who “alternated between brutality and coma” consider her act as very offensive and rudely awaken her from sleep. Junior “tried to figure out what they wanted, there being no point in wondering the why of anything with them” (57). They demand that the cottonmouth be returned to its rightful home, threatening to hand her over to Vosh, an old man who walked with his private parts in his hand. So she dashes out of the house to be chased by her uncles in a truck. The front fender knocks her sideways and the rear tyre crushes her toes. Brought home in the truck, Junior lies in delirium, suffering from unbearable pain and fever. Her mother tells her that she has been lucky to be found by her uncles after being hit by some vehicle. But Junior never talks about what really happened and she watches her toes swell, redden, turn blue and finally merge. So in her adult life Junior never takes off her footwear even when she makes love.

When she gets well, she feels impatient to leave those who “chased her down, ran over her foot, lied about it, called her lucky, and who preferred the company of a snake to a girl” (59). Junior’s problems are typical of the poorest black families. She never experiences the love of her father. Her mother is incapable of checking the brutal ways of her younger brothers or protecting her daughter from them. At the age of eleven she runs away from home and is sent to Correctional for stealing a doll from a store. No one from her family visits her in the three years she spends at the
Correctional or the next three years in Reform and in Prison. Naturally, after prison, she drifts away from home.

In the last part of the novel Christine and Heed realize how Bill Cosey deprived them of their childhood. Cosey’s marrying Heed, an eleven-year-old girl eight months his granddaughter’s junior, changes the girls’ friendship into hostility. “He was the Big Man who, with no one to stop him, could get away with it and anything else he wanted” (133). Though they try to play together occasionally, it only ends in a quarrel. May, on her part, tutors Christine to move on to relentless criticism of her grandfather’s bride: her speech, hygiene, and table manners. Intolerant of Heed’s influence, May puts Christine in Maple Valley School and discourages even summer vacations at home. On Christine’s return from school, as they celebrate her birthday, her graduation, and the new house, Heed misbehaves and Cosey spanks her. Heed sets fire to Christine’s bed but Cosey takes his wife’s side and Christine has to leave again. This homeless wandering embroils her life altogether.

They remember the exact day on which their unsullied childhood came to an end. Once while waiting for Christine, Heed bumps into Cosey, “the handsome giant who owns the hotel” (190). After asking her name, he touches her chin and her nipple, “or rather the place under her swimsuit where a nipple will be if the circled dot on her chest ever changes” (191). Heed runs out to tell Christine about it. She notices Christine behind the
hotel at the rain barrel with something on her bathing suit that looks like puke. Christine looks sick and disgusted and does not meet Heed’s eyes. So Heed does not say anything but their picnic is spoiled. Christine says that she could not find the jacks. That is the first lie in their relationship that is followed by many more.

Heed thinks Christine knows what happened and it makes her vomit. She feels guilty for attracting Cosey. Meanwhile, Christine has witnessed something that causes a psychological scar in her life as well. Looking up to her own bedroom, Christine is surprised to find her grandfather standing at the window with his eyes closed and his hands moving very fast. Since she does not know that he is masturbating, she covers her laughing mouth. But the discharge falls on her and she rushes to the rain barrel to rinse the sick from her. Christine feels ashamed of herself as well as her grandfather. Now Heed thinks that her parents sold her to Cosey and says: “He took all my childhood away from me, girl” and Christine responds: “He took all of you away from me” (194).

May also fails Christine as a mother. She is always against her friendship with Heed and when Cosey marries Heed, she envenoms her daughter against her. She arranges for Christine to be away from home as long as possible and when she returns, there are always quarrels. So Christine becomes a wanderer involving a husband and many affairs and a stay in a whorehouse. Like Violet, Christine is unsentimental about
motherhood and considers the unborn children as “one less link in the holding chain” (164). So she has seven abortions without any qualms. Christine’s life has been messed up first by her grandfather and then by her mother. The severing of her genuine friendship at an impressionable age by Cosey’s unexpected marriage to Heed and later by Christine’s manipulations turns her into a hard-hearted woman. Motherhood holds no charms for her, and she leads a miserable life.

Alice Walker treats the pathetic plight of children who suffer for no fault of their own in Third Life and Purple. The children of Third Life become the victims of the inadequacies in their parents’ life. In a patriarchal society children assess their worth in accordance with the ways in which their fathers treat them. Brownfield grows up with the feeling that his father hardly ever speaks to him. An instance of the extreme form of detachment practised by Grange can be observed in the scene in which he leaves his home for good. Though he takes a step towards his son who pretends to be asleep, he cannot bear to touch him. His mother remains the centre of Brownfield’s life till she also takes a decision to follow the dissolute ways of her husband.

A few days after Grange’s desertion, Margaret kills herself as well as the baby, Star. But Brownfield, the child who is spared by the mother, fares worse. The loss of both parents, especially of his mother, is probably the most damaging blow Brownfield suffers during his formative years.
The disastrous consequences of this “battered baby syndrome” in his relationship with Mem have been examined in Chapter II. But his own children too suffer when he repeats the pattern of neglect and further orchestrates it into active violence.

Brownfield begins to abuse his children when he realizes his inability to protect them from the vicious system. Walker gives a poignant picture of Daphne, the five-year-old daughter of Brownfield hand mopping the cotton bushes of the boss with arsenic to keep off boll weevils. He observes her carrying the hot tin bucket, which is too heavy for her and makes a bloodied scrape against her leg. “At the end of the day she trembled and vomited and looked beaten down like a tiny asthmatic lady.” Now Brownfield realizes that his life is in no way an improvement on his father’s. “He could not save his children from slavery; they did not even belong to him” and he “felt himself destined to become no more than overseer, on the white man’s plantation, of his own children” (54).

The children suffer greatly because of his callousness born of despair. He feels that they are “not really human children” (74) and gives them the dregs of his attention only when he is half drunk. Daphne is as scared of her father as she is of the white boss that she never complains to Brownfield about the irksome nature of her work. But she treasures some pleasant memories of the love and care she received from him on rare occasions. She also tries to pass it on to her sisters, Ornette and Ruth, who
view their father as a terror. Daphne tries to apologize for her father so much that she even invents some details about his good nature. Thus fantasy becomes for Daphne a device for maintaining some balance in her otherwise dreary existence. But this duty of keeping up appearances, of being the Family Secret Keeper is too much of a strain on the sensitive child. Soon she develops symptoms of extreme nervousness that Brownfield nicknames her “Daffy,” and after her mother’s death she becomes a mental case.

Ornette, on the other hand, is tough and unencumbered, as she has no good memories of her father to confuse her. She only looks at him as the embodiment of evil. Later in life, the nonchalant girl becomes a prostitute.

Ruth also grows up developing hatred for her father. At the age of four she addresses her father: “You nothing but a sonnabit” (108). But she is the only Copeland to survive whole largely due to the efforts of Grange. However, Brownfield feels jealous of his father’s adopting Ruth and tries to have custody of her just to spite Grange. He only succeeds in frightening Ruth and developing in her an antipathy for him. Grange is prepared to go to any lengths to protect Ruth and he murders Brownfield after the judge grants him custody of Ruth.

Brownfield is also guilty of causing the death of their albino son by keeping it outside the house one winter night without the knowledge of
Mem. The baby is frozen to death. This callous act in spite of his knowledge that the baby is his, demonstrates yet another incident where the protector turns predator.

Mem’s victimization is partly due to the fact that she has never experienced the warmth of parental affection. Born of an affair between a married preacher and her mother, who is thrown out of home when she is pregnant, Mem has been brought up by Josie, her mother’s sister. Mem’s orphaned state may be the main reason for her accepting an unworthy suitor like Brownfield. When Brownfield abuses her beyond her endurance, she writes to her father whom she has never seen, but he never even bothers to answer her.

Josie too is a victim of parental outrage. Her case exemplifies the definition of patriarchy as not merely the rule of men, but the rule of the father, the autocratic, all-powerful father (Craib 55). Like her sister, Mem’s mother, she is thrust out of the house by her father when found pregnant. However, the sixteen-year-old Josie, in an effort to get back into the good books of her father, arranges a birthday party for him. Though he accepts the gifts she brings, he refuses to pardon or acknowledge her attempt at reconciliation. His outright rejection makes her gulp down the drinks. He cruelly mocks the drunken girl who falls down and lies “like an exhausted, overturned pregnant turtle underneath her father’s foot” (40). Judge, jury,
and now executioner, he presses his foot into her shoulder and forbids anyone picking her up even though she begins to go into labour.

Since then Josie has nightmares about her father that persist even after she establishes a thriving business as a prostitute. In her dreams her father’s foot continues to ride Josie. As Christian observes, the relish with which Josie carries on her business is “partly based on the anger towards her father, laced with an unsatiable desire for the love she never had” (“Everyday Use” 63). De Weever suggests that the focus on Josie’s nightmares outlines a subliminal incest theme and that her father’s exaggerated cruelty shows his own emotional involvement in his daughter’s affairs (68). But it is difficult to accept De Weever’s suggestion that Josie’s child could have been her father’s.

Josie never gives any care or affection to her daughter Lorene who follows her mother’s path. By the time she is fifteen, she becomes the mother of two baby boys. “With her mother’s boy friends always after her, she was tripped up from the very start by the men underfoot, and was the fastest thing going, next to her mother, in town” (43).

Walker, as Morrison does in Eye, presents rape connected with incest in Purple. Both the novels, set in the 1940s, present accounts of incestuous rape in the opening passages. Walker explores the relationships between parents and children, specifically between daughters and fathers and how the hatred a child can have for a parent becomes inflexible (with
O’Brien 197). But if Cholly’s rape of Pecola is a matter of confusion in his mind, in Purple it is a deliberate act of lust perpetrated on Celie by her stepfather, whom she believes to be her biological father till middle age. Butler-Evans notes that the presentation of the family as the site of oppression is a major defamiliarizing strategy of the novel. The graphic description of Celie’s rape by her stepfather forces the reader to confront the ugliness of child abuse (167). The detrimental effects of such premature introduction to sexual activity through nonconsensual relationships, based on Dworkin, have been touched upon in Chapter 3.

Kubitschek contends that intrafamilial rape is recognized as reality of life in African American literature in contrast to Euro-American tradition. She also compares Celie’s plight to that of Julia the child evangelist in James Baldwin’s novel Just Above My Head. Julia, like Celie, is barely pubescent, just fourteen, when her father rapes her. The fathers’ abuse occurs in part because weak or absent female figures cannot constrain patriarchal power, Julia’s mother having died and Celie’s sick and ineffectual mother being unable to share her husband’s bed. In both novels the physical and psychic effects of the rape initially devastate the girls. Both are forced to become accomplices in the act. Though Celie is only fourteen and considered ugly by her stepfather, he repeatedly rapes her. After her mother’s death, Celie continues the relationship in order to protect her younger sister, Nettie, in whom the father now seems interested.
Secondly, both are deprived of the children that are the product of the forced relationship and both are shattered by the loss. Julia’s father beats her into a miscarriage. Celie’s stepfather tells her that he has killed them, while in fact he has given them away. So having “destroyed or exiled the evidence of incest, the fathers hope to deny its existence publicly while enjoying it privately” (Kubitschek 50). Thirdly, the abuse of their bodies leaves both Julia and Celie sterile and this makes it all the more convenient for their oppressors. When he is tired of Celie, her stepfather blames her as immoral. He offers her in marriage to Albert who has his eye on Nettie. Unwilling to part with Nettie, he advises Albert that Celie is the better housekeeper and since she is sterile, he will not have any trouble. “And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it” (9).

Denial of education is an injustice that Celie suffers when she is found pregnant. This is a great shock for Celie who has been a good pupil, though according to her stepfather’s description, she is too dumb to go to school. Dworkin calls it the male power of naming over female, that is, naming her ignorant and then forbidding her education (18). However, she has to help dress wild game during the hunting season, though it nauseates her. Nettie tries to get Miss Beasley the teacher to talk to their father about sending Celie back to school. But seeing Celie’s condition, Miss Beasley gives up and leaves. So Nettie tries to take on the role of a mentor and pass
on whatever she learns at school to Celie but in her advanced state of pregnancy, Celie finds it very hard to concentrate. “She try to say something bout the ground not being flat [but] I never tell her how flat it look to me” (11). Hers is the apathy of the helpless victim.

Alfonso is guilty of economically exploiting Celie and Nettie by suppressing their father’s will that makes them heiresses to his property. They inherit the house and land only after the death of their stepfather. There is not even a marker to their father’s tomb.

Alfonso is unscrupulous enough to alienate Celie from the objects of her love. His lecherous advances force Nettie to leave, causing a long separation of thirty years between the sisters. Celie’s love for cutting hair is transformed into an act of terror, as it is usually a prelude to his incestuous rape.

Celie is a victim of patriarchal domination in which the father enjoys either actual or symbolic power, with women relegated to the subordinate roles of property and objects of exchange. This transaction, however, serves to bind men together. As Irigary observes, “Women are marked phallicly by their fathers, husbands, procurers. And this branding determines their value in sexual commerce” (This Sex 31). The exhibition of Celie before Albert resembles the inspection of slaves on the auction block. The negotiation goes on from March to June and finally, Celie is handed over to Albert along with a cow that is the main attraction in the bargain.
Celie receives little love or understanding from her weak mother. The loss of her first husband has placed Celie’s mother in a condition of shock from which she never completely recovers. She berates Celie when she becomes pregnant, without realizing her own lack. Though she dies cursing Celie, Celie never hates her. Since Celie has no confidant to advise or console her, all her sorrows are poured out in the letters she writes to God.

Through a great part of her life Celie has been subjected to male dominance grounded in control over speech. The opening words of the novel are a prohibition against speech: “You’d better not never tell anybody. It’d kill your mammy” (1). Celie is robbed, in the name of her mother, of her story and her voice (Froula 638). When she cries out in pain in the course of the rape, Alfonso orders her to shut up and get used to it. Abbandonato calls her an “invisible woman,” a character traditionally silenced and effaced in fiction” (296) like the protagonist of Invisible Man. The ultimate movement of self-negation is seen even in her first letter. The phrase “I am” is struck off and modified as “I have always been a good girl” (1), placing her present self under erasure and absence. “Stripped of any right to the privacy of her body, and sentenced to vocal exile, she manages to “speak” in public” only through her letters and undergoes a bifurcation into a subject and a subject-made-object-to-itself. (Berlant 215). Celie asks God to give her a sign to know what is happening to her. But
being herself a sign, a mere object of exchange, she cannot be given any sign. In short, Celie is denied a status as subject.

Shug Avery’s father makes uncharitable remarks about her illness and calls her tramp, strumpet, slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner. Sofia also says, “A girl child ain’t safe in a family of men” (42).

Meridian has a loveless childhood dominated by a mother who feels trapped by motherhood and a father whose sensitivity is not put to any instructive use. *Meridian* deals with the heritage of martyred black motherhood through generations. Walker joins the feminist critique of the tedious aspects of motherhood and implies that not all women are enamoured of its prospect. Mrs. Hill, Meridian’s mother is temperamentally unsuited to be a mother, yet she sacrifices her career, her professional ambitions and her peace of mind for her children. Her feeling on becoming a mother is that her personal life is over. “The mysterious inner life that she had imagined gave [women] a secret joy was simply a full knowledge of the fact that they were dead, living just enough for their children” (51). So in “the ironing of her children’s clothes, she expended all the energy she might have openly put into loving them” (79). She exemplifies Rich’s description of mothers who not only feel both responsible and powerless but also carry their own guilt and self-hatred into their daughters’ experiences (244). Patriarchal violence and callousness are often visited through women upon children. Though she is
furious that no one had told her the truth about motherhood, she fails to pass it on to her daughter. When Meridian plans to give away her son, Mrs. Hill blurts out about having had six children, “though I never wanted to have any, and I have raised every one myself” (203). Her attitude negatively affects Meridian.

Having constructed Mrs. Hill as a victim of the role of Black matriarch, the focus now shifts to Meridian’s rejection of motherhood. Meridian also suffers from the inability to communicate or develop a meaningful relationship with her child and it makes her feel very guilty. At sixteen, pregnancy comes as a shock for her and like her mother, she is the least prepared for motherhood. She is expelled from school and she feels “almost as if she’d contracted a communicable disease, that the germs had been in the air and that her catching the disease was no one’s fault” (62). The bodily changes also come as a surprise. “She grew and grew and grew” and her skin, “always smooth as velvet, became blotchy, her features blunted; her face looked bloated, tight” (63).

For the birthing, she goes into labour for a day and a half. The baby suffers from colic for a month and she tends the baby, “her body prompted not by her own desires, but by her son’s cries”. She thinks that it “is what slavery is like” and feels her baby “a ball and chain” (69). She begins to think of murdering her son and then to prevent it, contemplates suicide. Motherhood for Meridian is thus fraught with contradictory impulses.
Being denied access to the world of education and frustrated in her chances of being liberated from the private domain of the home, Meridian indulges in such murderous fantasies. This joining of motherhood myth with fantasies of murder and suicide heighten the argument against a romantic treatment of that institution. To Meridian, motherhood looks like “being buried alive, walled away from her own life, brick by brick” (51). Thus Walker undertakes a demystification of the Black matriarchy myth, resonant with the critique of the ideology of motherhood. While Mrs. Hill embodies the traditional position, largely self-effacing and destructive, Meridian represents the emergence of a feminist dialectic.

Unable to relish the role of a mother, Meridian gives away her child to go to college, aborts the second in disillusionment with its unfaithful father, and then at the suggestion of a callous male gynaecologist, has her tubes tied to avoid being further trapped by sex and motherhood. Here one can notice “the solitary confinement of “full-time motherhood” as contrasted with “the token nature of fatherhood, which gives a man rights and privileges over children toward whom he assumes minimal responsibility” (Rich 276). Eddie, Meridian’s husband attends school even after he becomes a father but expects Meridian to be the ideal wife and mother. Truman is not even aware of having impregnated her. She suffers the psychosomatic effects of guilt and becomes very ill. Her body reflects the conflict between her as a mother and as a self-fulfilling woman.
At a certain stage the absence of the mother terrifies Meridian. She endures wave after wave of an almost primeval guilt on account of the conflict between her love for her mother and the inability to establish a proper rapport with her. Earlier, sensing her discomfort Mrs. Hill had asked her, “Have you stolen anything?” and Meridian realized that she had felt guilty “for stealing her mother’s serenity, for shattering her mother’s emerging self” (51). Palmer notes: “The chain of guilt linking mother and daughter, once forged, is difficult to break” (101). Unable to withstand the tension, Meridian becomes sick and is in bed for a month. In her delirium she dreams of being on a ship with her mother who is about to drop her over the railings into the sea. She whispers to her mother, “Mama, I love you. Let me go.” Miss Winters, the teacher instinctively tells her, “I forgive you” (125), and this marks the beginning of her healing process.

Another unfortunate incident connected with motherhood is commemorated in the annual ritual dance in memory of Fast Mary, a student of Saxon College who concealed her pregnancy and later chopped her infant into pieces and flushed it down the toilet. Afterwards, the girl committed suicide at her home where she was kept a prisoner. With the exception of the son that Meridian gives away, no named child in Meridian survives. Christine Hall describes the children in this novel as in Third Life vulnerable, isolated, voiceless individuals (102). Each spring a black child drowns in water drained off from the reservoir into the black
neighbourhood. The Wild Child’s story, mentioned in Chapter 1, epitomizes many of the themes of children’s neglect, sexual exploitation and ultimate lack of voice.

Gloria Naylor also traces parental cruelty as the root cause of many of the problems that beset her characters later in their life. Male violence occurs more with attempts to subject black girls to patriarchal authority. Butch Fuller, a man strongly disapproved by her father, seduces Mattie Michael in *Women*. When she becomes pregnant, her father reacts with typical patriarchal fury. He hits her with his large calloused hand to extract the name of the man who had sneaked into his home and distorted the faith and trust he had in his child. But she stubbornly keeps to her decision not to speak, though blood drips down from her split lip. “Her silence stole the last sanctuary for his rage” and he tries to stamp out her disobedience. In his anger he picks up a broom and uses it on her. Mattie’s body “contracted in a painful spasm each time the stick smashed down on her legs and back, and she curled into a tight knot, trying to protect her stomach” (23). In a blind fury, he pounds the whimpering girl on the floor. When the broom breaks, he continues beating her with a jagged section of it. Finally, Mattie’s mother takes the shotgun and aims it at her husband and then only he comes out of his trance. He is shocked to see the girl balled up in spasms, and the pile of torn clothes and bruised flesh on the floor.
Knowing that her father will never forgive her for the stigma attached to single motherhood, Mattie leaves her home to continue her life alone. The irony is that Mattie has not loved Butch at any time. The rest of her life is devoted to her son Basil, compensating for all the love that she has been denied. However, in protecting Basil from the harsh realities of life she creates a void in his being padded and cushioned over the years, believing that God had given her what she prayed for, a little boy who would always need her. Mattie is the overprotective mother who imposes herself as a buffer between her son and the hostile world of both intra and interracial violence (King and Mitchell 15). Morrison has said, “Parents who simply adore their children and really and truly want the best for them may, in fact, destroy them” (with Bakerman 42). Mattie loses her house when Basil skips bail. Motherhood becomes problematic when children accuse mothers of doing too little or too much for them. Hannah is a case in point.

Lorraine suffers rejection from her father because she has opted to be a lesbian. He refuses even to acknowledge her existence. Nevertheless, Lorraine lives in the hope of reconciliation with her father, very much like Josie in Third Life. Every year Lorraine sends her father a birthday card which is promptly returned unopened. Then she sends the wishes without her address on them with the hope that one day her father might open her greeting card. Lorraine develops an attachment with Ben as she finds in him a surrogate father.
Ben’s daughter has been forced against her will to satisfy the lust of the white master. Economic coercion compels her to continue in the white man’s house. Her mother finds nothing wrong in the arrangement and calls the girl a liar when she complains against the white man. Ben can only watch her agony silently. Finally, she leaves for the city to earn money as a prostitute.

Cora Lee, another resident of Brewster Place, has transferred her excessive love for dolls into an obsession for babies. As an unwed mother she is saddled with an ever-growing family that makes too many demands on her. Though incapable of caring for or nurturing her children once they are past infancy, she nevertheless continues to enjoy each new addition to her family. She cannot tolerate her children who grow wild-eyed and dumb, coming home filthy from the streets with rotten teeth, scraped limbs, torn schoolbooks, and truant notices in her mailbox. She feels exasperated being answerable to neighbours, teachers and social workers.

Jill L. Matus notes that Cora Lee is a portrait of obsessive and arrested desire. She attributes Cora’s inability to absorb the baby as a developing child as part of the blocking of realities that are impinging and uncomfortable. She has a comforting sense of self because of the power, the sensuous pleasure, and the closely circumscribed world of the mother-child dyad that the newborn affords her. Since her dream projects a static
world in which the mother-infant relationship must never be ruptured, she
feels the need for replacement of the newborn baby. (132).

Naylor’s Café also contains many instances of parental outrage. Eve
is thrown out of the home by her godfather, a preacher, for a display of
sexuality. He burns all her clothes including the one she is wearing and
purges her as he wants her to leave him the way he had found her, “naked
and hungry” with “every ounce of food his hard work had put into [her]
stomach” (88) removed. She undertakes a hazardous journey to New
Orleans, trekking through the delta, “neither male nor female—mud” (91).
Eventually, she establishes a successful boarding house.

Sadie, a wino and a twenty-five-cent whore, has her life wrecked by
her own mother. Her mother, agreeing with her father never to have
children, aborts the pregnancies with the help of a friend using a coat
hanger, but has to seek the help of a professional when it is too late. Sadie
is born into this hostile atmosphere but her father has already left her
mother when she is seven months pregnant. Being left alone, Sadie’s
mother vents her ire on the hapless child and calls her “One the Coat
Hanger Missed” and Sadie considers that to be her name till she is four.
Her mother hardly ever speaks to Sadie or looks at her but only curses her
when drunk. She whips the four-year-old with a leather strap. Sadie tries
hard to please her mother and be very good to her so that she will be loved.
Sadie’s mother who has no sense of self-nurture forces her into prostitution
at the age of thirteen and takes her for an abortion six months later. This woman who belongs to the lowest stratum of society, cannot imagine for her daughter any better station in life than be a streetwalker like herself.

Mary, known as Peaches, finds her father’s friends sexually attracted to her. She feels guilty for the men’s attraction and looks in the mirror for the answer. When she breaks the mirror given as her tenth birthday gift, her father spanks her. As she grows up, she tries to avoid the men who are always after her, and finally gives up resistance as useless. Her father cannot understand her conduct and goes raging. He locks her in a room and beats her with razor straps, leather shoes and his fists. She is piqued by the wall her father builds around their house to keep the boys away from his beautiful daughter. In course of time it becomes the “internal wall she builds between her repressed self and her whore self that she sees reflected in every man’s lustful eyes” (Page, “Café” 30). Peaches, in fact, blames herself for rousing the men’s sexual urges even when she is only nine and learns to consider the image in the mirror as her evil self. She finally resorts to disfiguring her face.

Sweet Esther, another inmate of Eve’s Garden, has been as good as sold into sadomasochist service to her elder brother’s master at the age of twelve. The brother calls her little sister and seems kind. So when he asks her to do everything that her husband tells her, she complies. She also knows that her brother needs money to feed his fat wife and their eight
children. At home she sleeps on the smelly mattress her sister-in-law has thrown away. But Esther senses that the man to whom she has been sent is not her husband because there has been no ceremony and the relationship is absolutely without love. She also knows that her brother knows it. However, the brother gets higher wages each year and Esther endures her torture for twelve years in order to repay her debt to her brother who has taken care of her against the shrill protests of his wife for twelve years. Because her brother has cautioned her, silence becomes her mode (Page, “Café” 30) and she cannot find a word for what happens in the cellar. She develops a psychosis that allows her to exist only in the dark basement of Eve’s boarding house. Her visitors must bring her white roses and call her “little sister.” Claude Levi-Strauss’s argument that all primitive kinship systems involve the systematic circulation of women between men, and it is the woman’s brother who gives the woman away to the man from another group (Craib 50) is justified here.

An examination of the black families in the novels of Morrison, Walker, and Naylor reveals that the family fails to protect the children under its umbrella. The fathers are often absent, irresponsible, or they victimize children for no fault of their own. Some are guilty of raping the daughters. The extremely vigilant fathers disown their daughters who defy societal norms of morality, though the culprits in many cases are the friends of the father. At times, the elder brother who occupies the role of
the father figure also victimizes his sisters. The powerless mother figures are unable to ensure the protection of their daughters. Instead, they victimize the children for their own inadequacies. Feelings of deprivation in the mother can even turn protection into the violent act of infanticide. So black children become the victims of oppression endured by their parents and the complexities of black matriarchy.

Black females suffer due to multiple marginalities but they also devise ways and means to escape the trauma of isolation and marginality. All do not respond thus; some react violently, too.