CHAPTER - II

Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition

The growth of women writing in general and black women writing in particular and its crystallisation as a tradition is viewed against the backdrop of African-American history that is split into six periods with a view to bringing into sharp focus the exodus of blacks to America, their struggle against slavery and racism, the civil war and its aftermath, radical orientation of black struggle and the contemporary scene.

A. Black Tryst with Destiny

I. Eighteenth Century - The Nascent Phase

The exodus of the blacks to the Western Hemisphere dates back to 1501 when Spain permitted the blacks to enter the New World. In 1619, a Dutch vessel brought the famous “twenty negars” to Jamestown. They were the first black people in the first British colony on the mainland of North America. They were the part of a larger black presence that, by the end of seventeenth century, was found in the Canadian forests, the Mississippi River valley, the West Indies, Mexico and Central America and all the colonies of South America as well as on the Atlantic seaboard of North America. In this regard, Richard Barksdale and Kenneth Kinnamon observe, "However diverse in culture, language, or condition, these Black people shared two common characteristics: African origin and subordination to white people."1

It is in this context that the role of slavery can be placed in its proper perspective for gaining an understanding of early African-American literature. Two factors stand out in this connection:
(i) Slavery robbed Africans of a significant part of their own culture. The literature, that survived the deracinating experience of enslavement, oppression and enforced labour in America, was oral in nature. As a result of it, the language and literary models, employed by the African Americans in the eighteenth century, were English and not African, although Phillis Wheatley and Laudah Equiano, the pioneers in this domain, were African by birth.

(ii) The institution of slavery destroyed the sense of culture and identity out of which literature could spring. Moreover, slavery as an economic institution denied blacks the opportunity to create written literature. The vast majority of both the slaves and free blacks, in colonial and revolutionary America, were illiterate. They were prevented “by custom and by expediency, later by law, from learning even the barest rudiments.”

Thus in British America, a palpable departure was made from the old Greco-Roman tradition of the learned slave. The raison d’être of this system was that blacks were to do manual work and the white masters the mental. As whites monopolized education, black literature, in written form, did not come into being for a long time.

In the British colonies two related cultural developments occurred that facilitated the commendable emergence of black literature in English. The literature, produced during this period, had the religious fervour of The Great Awakening and allied movements, especially American Wesleyanism that shook the land with full sway in the middle of the eighteenth century. Both the early poets of repute, Jupiter Hammon and Phillis Wheatley, were the followers of Evangelical Methodism. The radical implications of the American Revolution, particularly the ones, pertaining to liberty
and equality influenced the two most significant early writers of prose, Phillis Wheatley and Laudah Equiano. The appeal of Christianity and the quest for liberty formed the twin impulses behind African-American literary outpourings of the early period. In this connection, it will be apposite to quote Barksdale and Kinnamon:

For the first century and a half of Afro-American literature, these two themes - the appeal of Christianity and the quest for liberty and equality were paramount and the latter is still central today. In this light the first black writers acquire a prophetic quality. Their work can be viewed both as an intrinsic part of the general American literary experience and as the pioneering efforts of a specifically black literary tradition.³

Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin laid emphasis on the values of liberty and equality and opposed the institution of slavery. Their opposition to slavery cannot be dismissed as merely verbal. At the time of the outbreak of the revolution, slavery existed in all the thirteen colonies. Angela Davis looks at slavery from a feminist perspective:

The slave system defined black people as chattel. Since women, no less than men, were viewed as profitable labor-units, they might as well have been genderless as far as the slaveholders were concerned... For most girls and women, as for most boys and men, it was hard labor in the fields from sunup to sundown. Where work was concerned, strength and productivity under the threat of the whip outweighed considerations of sex.⁴

After opposing slavery for twenty five years, all states including Georgia and South Carolina legally abolished the international slave trade and the federal government followed suit in 1807. At the start of the nineteenth century, slavery was abolished in most northern states. It persisted a little longer in New York and New Jersey. However there is no denying the fact that the American Revolution largely belied the expectations of the blacks. At the back of the betrayal of the blacks was white racism, originating from a whole gamut of emotions and attitudes, political, psychosexual and
economic. Barksdale and Kinnamon observe: "Indeed, white racism in its myriad forms, has been the constant factor in American history with which black people have had to contend, though often they have been disguised under such evasive euphemisms as the peculiar institution or the negro problem or law and order."

II. Fighting Slavery and Racism (1800-1860)

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there were more than a million blacks that lived in the United States. They formed twenty percent of the total population. In the South, most blacks continued to be slaves, though some of them in Baltimore, Charlestown and New Orleans were nominally free. In the north, most of the blacks were nominally free though some continued to be slaves. By 1860s the black population in the United States sprang up to 44,41,830. Four million of them were slaves. The period in American history, beginning from 1800 to the outbreak of the civil war, was a turbulent period for both the whites and the blacks. Both the races struggled in the wake of the problems, posed by the interaction of the blacks with the white races. The proposal, laid forward by the whites for solution or evasion of these problems, constitutes much of American political history of this period. On the other hand, the proposals, laid down by the blacks for solution, provided the most important themes for black literature, written during this period.

In the first decade of the nineteenth century, the most vital racial question to be raised was the international slave trade. It posed a major threat to the slave owning class. After the abolition of international slave trade, the slave holding class resorted to inflicting further torture on female slaves by exploiting the reproductive capacity of female slaves.
Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, dealing with the white male abuse of black females under slavery bears testimony to the exploitation of the fertility of female slaves. It is based on the racist assumption that slave owners and white man, wielding economic power, have an indisputable right over the bodies of black women. It is an assertion of slave owners' presumed property rights over female slaves. The sexual violence against black women in *Beloved* is an invariable aspect of the socio-cultural and economic relations between slave masters and female slaves.

The perpetration of infanticide by Sethe in *Beloved* also validates Angela Davis's observation regarding commercialisation of the reproductive capacity of female slaves. Sethe kills her daughter to spare her the sexual abuse by the slave masters and their overseers who regard raping as an assertion of their economic mastery over the bodies of female slaves. They are regarded as "breeders" - animals whose fertility is exploited to ensure the regular supply of labour force for cotton growing industry and to ply slave trade.

Though international slave trade had been declared illegal in all states of America in 1800, it continued to flourish due to the completely complacent enforcement of the bans. In 1803, South Carolina repealed its law against slave importation. This generated much controversy. In 1807 the federal government outlawed the importation of slaves, but the trade was permitted under certain restrictions. The domestic trade remained entirely unaffected by the legislation. Again in the States the law proved to be ineffective due to lack of enforcement. Even at the time of the outbreak of American civil war, slaves bound for the southern plantations were still crossing the Atlantic.
The slave trade thrived in the first half of the nineteenth century because of the westward expansion. From South Carolina and Georgia, cotton cultivation spread to Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana and Tobacco crossed the mountains from Virginia and North Carolina to Kentucky and Tennessee. Meanwhile pioneers from New England and Middle Atlantic States were moving into the free territory of the Northwest, forming the States of Ohio, Indiana and Illinois. In 1821, Missouri entered the union as a slave state. Maine entered as a free state to maintain the political balance of power between the north and south. In 1820s and 1830s, Benjamin Lundy, William Lloyd Garrison and Theodore Weld began the monumental task of organizing public sentiment against slavery. In 1850, California was admitted into the Union as a free state.

The publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) generated antislavery feelings and promoted resistance to the Fugitive Slave Act, which was the most malevolent part of the Compromise of 1850. Angela Davis, however, argues that the novel does not take into account the suffering of women slaves, “who toiled under the lash for their masters, worked for and protected their families, fought against slavery, and who were beaten and raped.” Blacks were excluded from meaningful political participation and denied justice in the courts. Free blacks also had to endure the humiliation, associated with ostracism. In a bewildering variety of legal and extra-legal ways, free blacks were constantly reminded of their inferior status. They continued to suffer. Everywhere in the South a free black risked slipping back into slavery under the flimsiest pretext. As giant hurdles stood in the way of every black in all areas of life, the free black regarded agitation as his best weapon. In this background, Angela Davis records a slave woman’s heroic attempt at emancipating her daughter from slavery:
"Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave... killed her own daughter and tried to kill herself. She rejoiced that the girl was dead - "now she would never know what a woman suffers as a slave" - and pleaded to be tried for murder. "I will go singing to the gallows rather than be returned to slavery.'"

The story of Margaret Garner inspired Toni Morrison in the 1980s to write her novel, *Beloved*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

Sethe's killing her daughter to spare her the suffering of a female slave is the only avenue of resistance to slavery available to her in the given situation. The urge to take recourse to this avenue is prompted by her newly gained freedom from slavery and the accompanying fear of being swallowed by slavery again.

The whites denied education to the blacks. Public education was largely unknown and furthermore laws were passed to make teaching free blacks a culpable crime. In the Western States where public education was introduced, blacks had been deprived of receiving education before 1850. However, some segregated schools sprang up later. It was only in the north that blacks enjoyed an easy access to public education, segregated of course. In 1855, for the first time in the history of the blacks, desegregated public schools came up in Boston and New Bedford.

Inspite of the hardships, many of the free blacks managed to get some education and a few went on to become eminent scholars. A few privileged blacks, from New Orleans, received an elite education in France. James Smith received a M.D. Degree from the University of Glasgow in 1837 and Alexander Crummel graduated from Queens College, Cambridge in 1853. It was during this period that two institutions of black learning sprang up i.e. Lincoln in Pennsylvania and Wilberforce in Ohio. These institutions had grown into eminent seats of learning a decade before the civil war.
The economic life of the free blacks, from the turn of the century to the outbreak of the civil war, had been one of deteriorating conditions for masses and improving opportunities for a fortunate few. In general, "blacks were concentrated in the lowest paid, least desirable, unskilled jobs: agriculture, common labor, personal service, maritime work and domestic occupations." However, there were some exceptions to the general degradation of the free blacks. Some, in both the North and the South gained an adequate living as artisans or mechanics. Many availed themselves of the opportunities, created by better living conditions, to become businessmen or professionals. Many acquired handsome fortunes. Much more typical, however, were the canal digger, the hod carrier, the washerwoman and the cook. They were always underpaid and overworked and then displaced by competition from the Irish. Evidently the black people, in general, continued to be ruthlessly exploited in the free economy of young America.

At the time of outbreak of the civil war in America, the situation of the free blacks was desperate. As a result, literature produced by the blacks during this period was one of survival and protest. It was responsive to the pressing problems of racism and the aspirations of blacks. They yearned for a better world in which their burdens could be eased; they could enjoy comforts and luxuries and experience the glow of freedom.

III. Black man in the crucible of the civil war (1861-1865)

In the historic five-year war, which emancipated the slaves in the United States, the blacks participated as soldiers, sailors, scouts, nurses, teachers, medical officers, war correspondents and presidential advisers. The most significant, however, were
the "contrabands of war," i.e. more than five hundred thousand who crossed into the Union Lines from slavery to freedom.

Many black writers have told the tale of the black man's involvement in the civil war. Two years after the war ended, William Wells Brown published *Negro in the American Rebellion* (1877). After twenty years appeared Joseph T. Wilson's *Black Phalanx* (1888). As both Wells Brown and Wilson had been soldiers in Negro regiments, they reflected a participant's point of view in their works. The twentieth century, however, has witnessed several additional studies of the black man's involvement in the civil war. These include Herbert Aptheker's *Negro in the Civil War* (1938), Benjamin Quarles's *Negro in the Civil War* (1953) and *Lincoln and the Negro* (1962).

Another significant work is *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (1880-1901). This official record, comprising of 128 volumes, highlights the role of the black man as soldier, sailor, labourer and freed man. Besides the official records, journals and periodicals, personal letters, articles, speeches, pamphlets and memoirs reveal a great deal about the role of blacks in the civil war. In this regard, special mention must be made of Susie King Taylor's *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp* (1902).

In the midst of the turmoil of war, the twin issues of slavery's legal abolition and the emancipation of slaves were the chief concerns of the black leaders. The common expectation was that both abolition and emancipation would be immediately decreed. President Lincoln finally presented an Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862. Emancipation Day, falling on January 1, 1863, was a day of great celebration and jubilation among black communities in the North. But perceptive
black leaders were fast noticing that the proclamation was immensely conservative. It emancipated slaves only in the States, which had witnessed rebellion. Slavery continued to exist in the Border States. During the celebrations, black leaders were faced with the refusal of the war department to accept black volunteers in the Army. The army held on tenaciously to a “white only” policy. It stemmed from the belief that the civil war was a white man’s war despite the fact that in the early months of the conflict black “contrabands” far outnumbered the white troops in Union encampments on the Sea Islands or in New Orleans or in Missouri. The black leaders argued out that even if the War was “lily white,” the encampments were not. Thus the enlistment of blacks in the army was preceded by a grim struggle.

But the black soldiers continued to be discriminated against in terms of pay. The official explanation for the inequality of pay was that the black soldier was being paid labourer’s wages and not soldier’s wages. However, a discerning eye could see racist ideology at work in the war department. It was based on the assumption that the black soldiers were genetically inferior to the white soldiers. Many black soldiers were not paid at all. Consequently several black units became rebellious by the middle of 1864. As a result, they were charged with insubordination and put behind bars. After a lot of agitation, the Congress finally decided in June 1864 that the black soldier be given full and adequate compensation for the discrimination he had to face in the past.

Many issues agitated the Black Home Front during the course of the civil war. Racial prejudice and discrimination were prevalent in every northern city. Philadelphia, which had the largest and most prosperous black community, comprising of 22,185 blacks failed to get rid of segregated streetcars till 1867. Blacks were harassed, chased
and mistreated by white hooligans. In July 1863, the infamous Drafts Riot took place in New York. It left hundreds of blacks dead and maimed and about three thousand were rendered, homeless and destitute.

The atrocities, inflicted on the blacks, greatly agitated the Black Home Front. President Lincoln continued to be an active racial separatist, holding that the differences between the black man and the white man were uncongenial for their living together in a state of equality. Frederick Douglas criticized Lincoln for “his inconsistencies, his pride of race and blood, his contempt for Negroes and his canting hypocrisy.” Barksdale and Kinnamon analyze the complex psyche of Lincoln: “… he had come out of a poverty-stricken frontier background in middle America where white men feared Indians and hated blacks” … a land where the “border-state mentality” prevailed, producing a strong sympathy for the property rights of slaveholders.

Many black writers responded to the issues, raised in periodicals, speeches and pamphlets by Black Home Front. It was emphasized that the civil war was a significant period in the history of black Americans, many of them had fought and survived while others fought and died. Some had fought with arms on the battlefields and others had fought with pen and printer’s ink on the home fronts. Together the two groups had written a new chapter in the history of black America. But to their utter dismay, they felt betrayed and cheated after the end of the civil war.

Aftermath of the Civil War (1865-1915)

During the gloomy and weary months of the war, the black man’s present and future status was a subject of a great deal of discussion in the halls of the Congress and the White House. Lincoln pondered on how he could keep this “new birth of freedom”
alive and kicking. Should the slave, now freed, be colonized outside the U.S.A. as the emigrationists had advocated? If so, where? Panama? Liberia? Or Haiti? Or could the United States, with its great resources and potential for expansion, absorb four million former slaves and bring about some effective accommodation between slaves and defeated masters? These issues loomed large over the America of the post-civil War period.

After the civil war both the President and the nation were deeply concerned about the fate that awaited the newly freed black man. However, Lincoln was assassinated and the southern state legislators, infuriated by the defeat, enacted the infamous Black Codes, which deprived four million ex-slaves of civil rights. Fortunately these codes were stuck down. Military law was imposed in the south and protection was given to blacks. At this point, the Congress presented to the nation the Fourteenth Amendment which provided for equal protection to all the citizens, both white and black. This was followed, in 1870, by the ratification of Fifteenth Amendment which granted full voting rights to the newly freed black man.

The reconstruction years, however, constituted only a brief interlude in the black man’s long quest for real freedom. Soon the spirit of racial hostility began to reign supreme in the United States. This was confirmed in 1883 when the Supreme Court struck down the Civil Rights Act of 1875. This left the black man once again powerless before a vindictive south. Ironically the black man, who had been the major concern of America’s social and political idealists in the mid 1860s, had become, by the mid 1880s, the chief victim of America’s hostility and cynicism, stemming from the deeply embedded racial ideology and politics.
The literature, produced by the black man from 1865 to 1915, was systematically excluded from the body of the mainstream literature as it reflected his fears, his frustrations, his anxieties and his blighted hopes. Living in a hostile environment and threatened by emotional and psychological insecurity, the black man’s literature remained inhibited. William Wells Brown published *Clotel* (1853), the first novel by a black author. Clarissa Thompson’s *Treading the Wine Press* (1886) followed it. These works enjoyed considerable popularity. In the last decade of the century, Francis Watkins Harper published her novel *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892). At the end of the century, Charles W. Chestnut emerged as a major black novelist. He is considered as the first master of black fiction. The white literary establishment rejected his novels. Another eminent black novelist of the period was James Weldon Johnson. His *Autobiography of an Ex Colored Man* (1912) excited rave comments in both black and white communities in America.

The black poet between the period 1865 and 1915, like the black fiction writer, enjoyed no national recognition, with the exception of Paul Laurence Dunbar. His *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896) was the first volume of poetry by a black poet which had aroused nation-wide interest. The poems, in this volume, are largely in dialect and depict rural blacks as sentimental, emotional and primitive. Dunbar, however, remained unfulfilled as an artist. He found himself trapped in a problematic situation. His tragedy was that America would expect, from a black poet, only the struggling, sighing, slow talking, plantation stereotype and not the prophetic, poetic utterance of a man, protesting against racist ideology and white domination.
The period was highly receptive to the genre of black biography and autobiography. Many blacks of renown like John Mercer Langston, Frederick Douglas, Daniel Payne, and Booker T. Washington told the stories of their achievement. There were two reasons for the success of biographies and autobiographies during this period. One, America of this period had a great love for the individual success story, whether recounted by a black man or a white man. Second, these biographies and autobiographies were very inspiring to other black Americans. The black biography was a reiteration of the success myth and the American dream. It bore testimony to the fact that adherence to moral values and hard work could catapult the black man into the Promised Land.

Three additional factors promoted the growing interest in black literary expression. First, between 1865 and 1915 educational opportunities for the blacks increased manifold. Second, White America began to evince an excited interest in black folklore as a result of the interaction of volunteers, working with the Freedman’s Commission during the war, with the ex-slaves on the Sea Islands of Port Royal and St. Helena whose songs had kindled the imagination of the volunteers. Third, racial stereotyping which had developed as a kind of defense mechanism for guilt-ridden racists, influenced the black literary expression.

The black literary expression, though not richly varied, has not been of one piece. During the fifty year span (1865-1915), literary stereotyping, cultural alienation, discrimination in labour and housing markets and segregation in the use of public accommodation were the favourite themes. However, in several other respects, the literature of the period experienced change. For instance, the first fifteen years (1865-1880), marked by achievement and brave venturing, can be designated as the period of
reconstruction. This was followed by a twenty year period (1880-1900) in which the newly freed black man had to fight a lonesome and tiresome battle. He had to fight a vindictive and destitute south, an uncharitable north, and a cold and impersonal west. The contemporary historians describe this period as ‘the decade of disappointment’. The period (1900-1915) is marked by the emergence of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, a versatile and brilliant man of learning and the Reconstruction Congressman, Robert Elliott who valiantly advocated the black cause. Thus the period (1865-1915) was crucial in black history. It was certainly a harbinger of things to come and a marker to point out that the awakening stood right at hand for the black writer.

V. Rebirth and the Radical Orientation (1915-1945)

Booker T. Washington was hailed as the unchallenged leader of the blacks after the death of Fredrick Douglass. Washington favoured survival and progress through accommodation of and compromise with the racist establishment. The policy of conciliation failed miserably as it did not even attain modest economic goals. Furthermore, racial exploitation and violence, in all forms, continued to take an annual toll of black lives.

In addition, the civil war had also made an unsettling and disturbing impact on black lives. The war effort, by black people, did not contribute towards making the American democracy safe for them. Black servicemen had performed with great enthusiasm during the civil war in the hope of getting a better deal. But all they got in return was American racial prejudice. The collective awareness of the plight of the black man heightened a feeling of racial identity and solidarity. One important expression of identity politics was Garveyism, founded by Marcus Garvey, who aimed at
establishing a universal fraternity of the blacks and promoting the spirit of racial pride and love. In a world where blacks were despised, he proclaimed that blacks were beautiful. He taught the blacks to admire black things and black people. Blacks gathered around him and became his votaries. Garvey’s contribution to arousing self-pride and self-respect among the people of his race was tremendous. In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker has referred to the impact of Garveyism on the psyche of the Nettie who transmits it to Celie. It plays a considerable role in her quest for self-discovery and fulfilment.

Black men and women of letters, who shot into prominence as the 1920s began, included William Stanley Braithwaite and Benjamin G. Brawley. A number of poets also published in the first two decades of the century. They included James David Corothers, Leslie Pinkney Hill, Fenton Johnson, Georgia Douglas Johnson and Alice Dunbar Nelson. However, WEB Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson came to be hailed as the most influential precursors of the Harlem Renaissance. Du Bois emerged as the enunciator and crusader of the Negro cause in *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade To America, 1638-1870* (1896), *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), *The Quest for Silver Fleece* (1911) and *Dark Princess* (1928). He was recognized as an eminent historian and conscientious sociologist. In the African section of *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker makes a pointed reference to his role in promoting black radicalism and rage. James Weldon Johnson established himself as a leading man of letters with *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922).

The period (1915-1945) was the most significant period in black history. In Harlem, Negro life began seizing upon its first chance for group expression and self-determination. In a strict sense, Harlem Renaissance is not an accurate term for the
literary developments that took place during this period as far as the black literature is concerned. It was, in many ways, a birth rather than rebirth. It was the first opportunity that came the way of the black writers for a collective literary expression in contrast to the typically solitary efforts that had, so far, characterized Afro-American literature. Though only Countee Cullen seems to have been a native New Yorker while other leading writers like Claude McKay and Langston Hughes lived elsewhere during most of the 1920s. However, the name “Harlem Renaissance” seems appropriate because Harlem was a centre of great literary/artistic activity and Renaissance was suggestive of the vigour, power, versatility, and achievement, associated with the period.

The emergence of Harlem as “race capital” has been a fairly recent phenomenon. At the end of 1920s there were 1,64,566 black people, living in Harlem, making it the most densely populated black area in the world. Besides the writers, the artists like Aaron Douglas, Palmer Hayden, Hale Woodruff and Richmond Barthe were also attracted to this “Negro Mecca”. As such Harlem Renaissance represented something more than a mere literary movement. It was an immensely stimulating cultural phenomenon which pervaded every area of black life. Its arena was a vibrant neighbourhood which pulsated with vitality. It was different, in spirit and ambience, from the white New York.

The reason for the concentration of black literary activity in Harlem was the publishing opportunities that New York provided. Major publishing houses in downtown New York such as Alfred A. Knopf, Harper, Viking Press, and Harcourt Brace were opening up to black writers. Equally important was the fact that several magazines competed with one another in attracting the work of young black writers.
The four principal renaissance writers, hailing from diverse backgrounds, who won unprecedented fame in the 1920s were Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes. Their techniques differed but certain common themes brought them together as members of a common literary movement. McKay and Toomer were a decade older than Cullen and Hughes but all four wrote much of their best work before the age of thirty. In addition to McKay, Toomer, Cullen and Hughes, many other black writers like Jesse Fauset, Walter White and Nella Larsen wrote moving novels. Other writers of the period were George Schuyler, Wallace Thurman, Sterling A. Brown and Frank Horne.

The Harlem Renaissance is not to be taken as an appendage to the larger American literary movement of the 1920s. It has its own distinctive features. Its primary importance lies in being a cultural expression of a collective/racial experience. African American writing of the period should be placed parallel to the development of white drama and fiction in order to study it in its proper context. Black themes and characters had fascinated a number of nineteenth century writers, like James Cooper, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Herman Melville, George Washington Cable, Mark Twain, Thomas Nelson Page, Joel Chandler Harris, and Stephen Crane. In the 1920s the primitive energy and vitality of black life had cast a spell on the American literary imagination. Eugene O’Neil, the celebrated American dramatist, explored black themes. His plays The Emperor Jones (1920) and All God’s Chillun Got Wings (1923) gave to the black character a new dramatic dignity and stature. Other writers who enhanced the stature of blacks in American fiction include Waldo Frank and John Howard Griffin.
The issues and themes, addressed by Harlem Renaissance, revolved around the conflict between gentility and Bohemianism and literary Puritanism and Freudianism. The literary conservatives felt that exposing Harlem low life to white readers was an attempt at violating the accepted norms of good taste and condoning black sexuality, irresponsibility and immorality. It almost amounted to racial betrayal. It was felt that, for both literary and social reasons, a well-mannered fiction about the black middle class, the kind written by Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset, would better suit the purpose of the blacks.

However, such considerations did not match the rebellious spirit of McKay, Toomer, Hughes, Thurman and others. They felt that the smugness and artificiality of the black middle class in particular and American society in general were to be rejected in favour of primitive virtues of spontaneity, joy, energy and sensuality. The primitivism of African past was to be affirmed, not ignored or disparaged. Folklore and folk music of the blacks deserved to be preserved. Racial self-awareness and pride needed to be highlighted. This, they thought, would bring about the liberation of blacks and black literature from white standards, stereotypes and values. The foremost writers of the Harlem Renaissance were eloquently singing and celebrating, in their own ways, that black was, indeed, beautiful.

During the great depression, the blacks suffered longer, and more profoundly than the whites. In the south, the cotton economy was totally shattered. The Committee of Industrial Organization came into being in 1935 as a response to the depression. It later came to be known as the Congress of Industrial Organization. The CIO recognized the importance of uniting all industrial workers, irrespective of race. For the first time...
in the history of American labour, black workers were becoming part of the Union Movement. At this time the Communist Party also started making a serious bid for black participation and support. However, it never really attracted a sizeable black following although it did influence a number of black intellectuals, most famous among them being Richard Wright.

There were some other social, political and religious movements that also sprang into existence during this period. They were predominantly or exclusively black. The National Negro Congress was formed in 1936. It was a broad coalition of black groups. It aimed to develop plans for a massive march on Washington to press demands for the employment of black labourers in defense plans. As a result of its efforts, President Roosevelt finally issued an Executive Order, banning racial discrimination in defense, industry and government.

The World War II raised some problems, which were equally troublesome. As Jim Crow was universal in armed forces the navy first employed blacks only in base capacities. As the military training bases were mostly in the south, black trainees, from the north, were, often subjected to the most overt kind of discrimination. Riots were common at many military installations. Many riots took place in Los Angeles, New York and Detroit. The black man was disenchanted with his performance in the war. He was faced with a bitter irony and realized that while “fighting against Nazism and its myth of Aryan superiority, he had to contend with America’s own variety of virulent racism.”

The historical context of African-American literature from 1930 to 1945 was formed by depression and social upheaval. Most black writers felt that a literature of
protest was the only adequate response to the exigencies of the time. W.E.B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes turned to the left and embraced Marxism in the early 1930s. However the central figure in black literature during the 1930s and the early 1940s was Richard Wright. He dominated the period (1915-1945). His works *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945) constitute the enduring legacy of black literature.

The other writers who held a mirror to the consciousness of the blacks were Robert E. Hayden, Ralph Ellison and Willard Motley. Most of the radical black writers of the 1930s and 1940s dealt with the urban north but George Wylie Henderson and Zora Neale Hurston wrote essentially non-political works, drawing on their intimate knowledge of black folk life. Their moving portrayals of black womanhood, confronting the dual issues of gender and race, are marked by sensitivity and authenticity. They have exercised a formative influence on Toni Morrison's and Alice Walker's fiction. However, their works were exceptions to the general literary trends, pertaining to racial affirmation and protest, which formed the dominant theme of African American literature from 1915 to 1930 and from 1930 to 1945 respectively.

VI. Contemporary Scenario Since 1945

The end of the World War II in 1945 brought America to the centre stage of world politics and catapulted it into a superpower. At the same time, it plunged America into an unexpected situation. All of a sudden, black veterans of the war by the thousands came flooding back home, full of hopes for full citizenship. It was accompanied by an inundating migration of blacks from the south to the northern, eastern and western urban centres. These changes made white America keenly aware of the presence of
the blacks and forced it to find answers to questions that had not been heeded to since 1865.

Richard Wright's epoch making novel *Native Son* (1940) provided the best reflection of the changing black mood of the 1940s. The hero of the novel, Bigger Thomas, stepped out of the pages of the book to become a prototype of black youth in urban ghettos across America. However, even at this stage, black literature was far from coming of age. Nevertheless the years, between Wright's eclipse in the late 1940s and Ellison's rise in the early 1950s, witnessed notable developments in black literature. Saunders Redding, Arthur Davis, Hugh Gloster, Sterling Brown, Melvin Tolson, Nick Aaron Ford, Margaret Just Butcher and Nancy Bullock McGhee appeared on the literary scene. They believed that the black writer's goal should be full integration into the main stream of American literary life. At the same time, they feared that, as a consequence, the black writer would lose his/her distinctive black literary identity.

Several black have created a distinct niche for themselves in the domain of African American life and literature since 1945. These include James Baldwin, Annie Allen, Rosa Parks, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sonia Sanchez, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Paule Marshal, Lovell Harrison, Martin Hamer, Ernest Gaines, and William Melvin Kelley. The leading black dramatists of the period include Amiri Baraka, Adrienne Rich and Carlton W. Molette II and Barbara Molette. Black women writing touched a high watermark when Toni Morrison had the distinction of being the first black woman to receive the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. In the citation, Toni Morrison's sensitivity to language was specially commended. She has acquired this sensitivity by liberating the language from the formidable artifices, invented and legitimised by racism.
and sexism and the ideology behind the systematic oppression and exploitation of black women. Her evocative use of the colloquiel in *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* furnish an illustration of how she discards the linguistic stratagems and subterfuges to capture the black female reality in all its bleakness.

**B. Black Women Writing**

Black woman writing has come to be considered a distinct facet of American Literary life. It is marked by a sense of commitment, ideological direction and urgency. Black women writers, engaged in a persistent search for self-expression and identity, give an impassioned expression to rage against racial oppression and sexist discrimination and articulate the spirit of self-determination and black solidarity. They emerge as the authentic voice of the traumatized psyche of the black women and their intense craving for redemption. Mary Helen Washington outlines the manifesto of black women writing:

Black women are searching for a specific language, specific symbols, specific images with which to record their lives and even, though they can claim a rightful place in Afro American tradition and the feminist tradition of women writers, it is also clear that for purposes of liberation, black women writers will first inscribe their own name, their own space.\(^\text{12}\)

A discernible feature of black woman writing is the contribution that it makes to the radical revision of perspectives and subversion of conventional positions. Black women writers are, no longer, confined to the classroom, the library and conferences. Today seminars and television talk shows have become a part of their expanding universe. In the process, a new reality crystallizes, representing the emerging consciousness of a whole community.

The proliferation of black women writing gives the impression that a different literary culture and canon has sprung into existence. The works of black women writers not only redefine literary tradition but also rob it of much of its sense of adequacy. As a result, a counter tradition and a counter myth have come into being. Tradition, in the case of black women writers, comes to represent literary discontinuities that reflect different periods and levels of consciousness in the chequered history of the African American people. At this point, it will be appropriate to discuss, in passing, the ten outstanding black women writers who have played a historic role in shaping and strengthening the tradition of black women writing in America. The selected works of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker bear traces of their collective influence at the level of form and content both.

**Phillis Wheatley**

Phillis Wheatley received a New England education, which laid considerable stress on the Bible and the classics. Her poetry reveals influence of religion and classical
knowledge on her sensibility. Her education also equipped her to write neo-classical poetry, which was immensely popular during that time.

One of Phillis Wheatley earliest poems *The Kings Most Excellent Majesty*, was written in 1768. Her first poem to be published was *On The Death of Rev. Mr. George Whitefield* (1770). In late 1773, she published her first volume of poetry entitled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* by Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant of Mr. Wheatley of Boston. This volume of poetry proved to be very popular not only during the author’s short lifetime but also in the nineteenth century. Since her death, Phillis Wheatley has been subjected to both praise and censure. Many blacks are critical of her failure to protest against slavery in her poetry. Others have also been disenchanted with her rigid neo classicism and pious sentimentalizing. Adverse criticism notwithstanding, Phillis Wheatley enjoys the status of a path-breaker in the realm of black women writing.

**Frances Watkins Harper**

Frances Watkins Harper’s literary career blossomed in 1854 in Philadelphia when she published *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*. This volume of poetry was immensely popular and went through twenty editions by 1874. Slavery constitutes the central theme of the volume. Many of the poems were recited to great effect by the author in her lectures. Some of her poems can be called poor imitations of Longfellow. Despite its mediocrity, her anthology remained immensely popular throughout most of the second half of the nineteenth century.

After the civil war, Mrs. Harper’s literary activity increased manifold. Her famous narrative *Moses, A Story of the Nile* went through three editions by 1870 and in
the same year a volume entitled *Poems*, was published. A second edition came out in 1900. In 1892 Frances Harper published *Iola Leroy*, a novel. In 1859, she published a short story entitled *The Two Offers*. It happens to be the first short story published by a black writer. However, beyond its historical significance and value as an anti-slavery propaganda, it has little merit.

Her memorable work *Iola Leroy* is the melodramatic story of a typically tragic octoroon, who, after having been identified as a black, is sold into slavery. Francis Harper conceived of writing *Lola Leroy* after comprehending the immense sensitivities, predicaments and dilemmas, faced by the rural black woman. Her personal experience gave her the insight and the inspiration to write a book that moved an entire race and stirred its consciousness. It has been hailed as the first novel of substance by a black woman. She, herself, has recognized the potential of her attempt in the note with which she closes *Iola Leroy*: "There are scattered among us materials for mournful tragedies and mirth revoking comedies, which some hand may yet bring into the literature of the country... and thus add to the solution of our unsolved American problem." 13

**Charlotte Forten Grimke**

From the beginning Charlotte Forten Grimke had believed that if she got education, attained success and excelled, America would recognize her. She left Philadelphia in 1854, at sixteen, to attend school in Salem, Massachusetts. As a student and later as a teacher at Salem, she was applauded for her academic excellence. But her achievements did not lead to the rewriting of laws.

An analysis of her life and work reveals that Charlotte Forten Grimke was a person of considerable intellectual breadth. She was well acquainted with poetry and
philosophy. She was always eager to expand the horizon of her mind. She possessed an innate gift for writing. Lilting style and haunting imagery were her forte. Her poetry has been a major shaping influence on the black poets of the succeeding generation.

Elizabeth Keckley

In a lifetime of eighty years, Elizabeth Keckley actually lived three lives. The details of her first two lives are recounted in her autobiography, *Behind the Scenes: Or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*. It is a very well written interior account of slavery. It also provides some perceptive insights into the Lincoln family and as such, the book holds great significance for historians and Lincoln specialists.

Mrs. Keckley's description of her life as a slave is of significance as well. She makes the reader realize the hopeless monotony of a slave's existence. One also perceives the tensions and conflicts that mark the life of a slave and realizes how a slave's life could suffer radical alteration at the master's whim. Christian principles provide the reader with an understanding of the psychology, created by the depravity of human slavery. *Behind the Scenes* also gives scintillating insights into the character of Mrs. Lincoln. It also furnishes an interesting account of the first lady's pathetic attempts to sell her clothes and jewelry following her husband's tragic assassination. Besides this, it captures the vignettes of Washington as it was during the war years.

*Behind the Scenes*, having an elegant style and the best diction of the times, can be acknowledged as a great work by a woman, exceptional among black females,
never the yielding slave, never the willing concubine of a plantation lord, never the easy victim of brutality.

Zora Neale Hurston

Zora Neale Hurston has celebrated the spirit of black womanhood in her work. She has come to be considered one of the greatest black women writers of America.

Almost all of Ms. Hurston’s writings are immersed in black folk life, which she had both lived and studied. Her stories are set in the background of the Southern black community that she knew intimately. The same is true of her first two novels, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). The former has been called a biographical work as the protagonist, John Buddy Pearson, bears a striking resemblance to the author’s father. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was written in Haiti in the aftermath of an intense love affair. Eminent black woman writer and critic, Alice Walker, regrets that America did not realize that Zora Neale Hurston had given it one of its greatest novels. Today however, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is acclaimed by black writers and critics as a great feminist masterpiece. It is a sensitive poetic story of Janie Crawford’s search for identity through love. She refuses to obey the dictates of a ruthless patriarchy and lives life defiantly. She lives her life to the fullest with the support of a young, broadminded and liberated man. Rather than giving up when pushed to the wall by the cold and cruel ways of the world, Janie Crawford lived to celebrate life and tell her tale of self-affirmation to others.

As a folklorist Ms. Hurston major work is *Mules and Men* (1935). *Tell my Horse* (1938) further explores folk magic. Finally, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939),
combines fiction, folklore and religion in an unusual amalgam. In the 1940s, Ms. Hurston went to California and worked on her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on the Road* (1942). Her influence on subsequent black women writing has been historic in the sense that it has given a new direction to Black Women Writing.

**Angelina Grimke' and Anne Spencer**

Both Angelina Grimke and Anne Spencer began to write poetry before the Harlem Renaissance began. Their poetry first appeared in anthologies, published during that period, notably in Countee Cullen’s *Caroling Dusk*. The poetry is conventional and reminiscent of Braithwaite and Cullen. It is also non-racial and non-controversial. It has immense sensitivity and emotional acuity. They employ arresting images to give vent to some unique aspect of personal experience. Anne Spencer, in her poem *Lines to a Nasturtium*, plays with the paradox of beauty that attracts and fulfils but, in the very act of fulfilling, also repels and destroys. Grimke, using death wish imagery, pines to drown herself in Mona Lisa’s eyes.

The appeal of the poetry of Grimke and Spencer lies in its ability to communicate a uniquely private experience. Neither Spencer nor Grimke’s writing addresses a group or a class or a race. Historically, this is poetry of the period, lying between the time of Dunbar and the time of Langston Hughes.

**Margaret Walker**

Yale University Press published Margaret Walker’s first volume of poetry titled *For My People* in 1942. It captured the mood of the Depression years rather than of the War years and struck a new note. Not only was it tinged with racial consciousness and social protest but also possessed a verbal brilliance, unprecedented in black poetry.
Walker’s poetry, marked by order and coherence, is reminiscent of both the black folk sermon and the free verse techniques of Carl Sandburg.

However, Margaret Walker’s greatest literary achievement is *Jubilee*, a historical novel. The dormant potentialities and inner layers of the novel happen to be the subject of many heated debates in black women’s literary societies. Today, the novel is hailed as the epitome of the life of blacks in the United States.

**Gwendolyn Brooks**

Gwendolyn Brooks was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1960. She is one of the greatest black poets of contemporary times. She links a troubled past with an uncertain future. She emerges as a historian of black consciousness. In her poetry, she has attempted to record an enduring racial history.

Gwendolyn Brooks’ first volume of poetry *A Street in Bronzeville* was published in 1945. Her poems are characterized by zeal and freshness, unprecedented in black literary history. Her poetry is steeped in an essential blackness. In *A Street in Bronzeville*, Gwendolyn Brooks attempts to present a poetic chronicle of people in Bronzeville as they try to make agonizing and painful adjustments to the rigors of urban living. The theme and style is refreshingly alert. She emerges as a trendsetter in bringing poetry from the realm of academics to the big town.

Some have been in the city for many turbulent decades and others have just moved into the city from the South.

In an interview, Brooks says that the purpose behind her poetry is to unfold the universal truth. She does not try to deal with massive enigmas like Frost or Eliot. She writes about the small apparently unassuming psychological and economic webs in which the common black man is caught up. She does not present the deeds of her protagonist as heroic and nor does she plead their case by employing high rhetoric. Clinical brevity and emotional reticence are the distinctive features of her poetry.

**Ann Petry**

Ann Petry is the only novelist who possesses ability to record equally well the black life and the white life in a New England town. In her own life, she was in contact with both. This enabled her to develop a unique fictional perspective. Her powerfully graphic novel *The Street* describes a black woman's struggle to survive in Harlem. It won her great popularity and critical acclaim. The publication of *The Street* led many critics to place Mrs. Petry in the school of Wright.

The year 1947 witnessed the publication of *Country Place*. It captures the stagnant, oppressive life in a small town. Dealing mainly with white characters, *Country Place* is reminiscent of works by Sinclair Lewis. As *The Street* is predominantly the novel of black life, *Country Place* is primarily a novel of white life. *The Narrows* (1953) combines the two themes in an intense and moving story of interracial love in a small New England city.

In addition to her three novels, Ann Petry has also published a children book, *The Drugstore Cat* (1949) and two biographies, designed for juvenile readers, *Harriet*
Tubman, Conductor on the Underground Rail Road (1955) and Tituba of Salem Village (1964). She has also written a novella, Miss Muriel which appeared in 1963.

Mari E. Evans

Mari E. Evans holds a distinguished place among the contemporary black woman writers of America. A vehement social protest and militancy are the dominant themes of her poetry. Her conscience is tormented by racism and her traumatized experience finds expression in her poetry.

Her poem, Status Symbol is a burning denunciation of a society in which the possession of a key belonging to “white... John” bestows a kind of high social status on a black person. In her poem, Black Jam for Doctor Negro she presents the great hatred of the black ghetto dweller for the antiseptic and somewhat whitened world of the Negro middleclass. She uses the language and idiom of the ghetto to articulate interfacial disdain and distrust. Her use of black vernacular and black ghetto idiom is a far cry from the highly polished and sophisticated poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks. Her poetry reflects a trend towards the use of black folk speech: It further finds expression in the poetry of Sonia Sanchez and other Broadside Press poets.

Her use of black ghetto folk speech, discarding of literary embellishments, irony and satire are an index of racial self-assertiveness. It shows how the “fist” of language can be used to combat the white mainstream culture. Her poetry is committed to the cause of political, social and moral revolution. She believes that poetry and other artistic expressions should serve the ends of revolution. She expresses a deep pride in blackness and firmly believes that poetry should be written from an ideological position and captures the full range of racial confrontation.

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Barbara J. Molette

Barbara J. Molette, along with her husband Carlton W. Molette II, formed the husband and wife playwriting team. Their greatest work has been their play, *Rosalee Pritchett*. When New York City’s Negro Ensemble Company presented the play, it evoked an enthusiastic response because it highlighted the company’s topical emphasis on themes of black struggle. The play provides powerful insights into the dilemma and predicament of the black middle class, which under the influence of the values of the white dominant class has lost all sense of identification with its own race.

The Molettes’ *Rosalee Pritchett* is one of the first plays in black theatre, dealing with the growing paradoxes of the black middle class. The play is a moving and sensitive comment on the ever-changing social values of black America. It mocks at the desire of blacks to emulate white middle class values in spite of the untold suffering that the whites have brought to them. *Rosalee Pritchette* is a dismal play, absolutely devoid of hope. Its message is that the blacks have no chance of gaining respectability because they have snapped ties with their own culture and endlessly try to imitate the whites and imbibe their elusive culture and values. In this respect, it carries forward the tradition of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*.

The singular credit of starting and promoting the black arts movement in the theatre goes to the husband and wife team. Moreover, they played a historic role in the evolution of black aesthetic, the heralding of social revolution and the creation of an ambience for black resistance to racial discrimination and white supremacist domination.

As a crowning result of the collective contribution of the major black woman writers, discussed above, black women writing has come to be regarded as a vivid new
aspect of literary life in contemporary America. This body of writing has certainly come of age after moving from denial to acceptance, from oppression to revolution and from repression to a full-fledged quest for a distinct identity. The representations of black women in black feminist writing have acquired a particular cultural and historical resonance and authenticity, which spring from black women writers’ commitment to radical feminism and the impingement of the feminist critique on their sensibility. This body of writing offers refreshing and revolutionary perspectives on the family of issues i.e. race, racism, class, caste, gender, patriarchy, internalized colonialism, victimization, myths regarding the promiscuity of black women and black self-determination and resistance. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* capture the characteristic spirit that distinguishes black women writing from the white feminist discourse.

C. **Black Feminist Criticism**

Black women writing is studied in an ideological/theoretical frame by the practitioners of black feminist criticism. The theoretical divergences between the premises and postulates of contemporary white feminism and that of the radical black feminism form the basis of cleavage between conventional feminist criticism and black feminist criticism. Mainstream feminism posits woman as victim and man as victimizer/oppressor/adversary in the conceptual context of patriarchal/sexist/phallocentric/misogynist world-view. Radical black feminism goes beyond this primordial opposition. It is primarily concerned with understanding the strategies; the dominant culture employs to legitimize sexist/racist oppression of black women. Consequently opposition to male hegemony ceases to be the exclusive concern of the
black feminist movement. Instead it embraces the issues of race, racism, class, caste, colonialism and imperialism. Thus, the emphasis shifts from the rhetoric of victimization and male oppression to that of militant resistance to racism, and indictment of white supremacist domination and the ideology of colonialism and imperialism.

Along with it, the black feminist theorists, influenced by post-modernism, unmask the hegemonic, racist and elitist ethos of modernism/liberal humanism. They reject the notion of high culture, raised to the level of religion (also called liberal humanism) by the modernists and that of homogenization, represented by meta narratives, which tend to decimate the heterogeneity of sub cultures and thus threaten the very existence of marginalized groups.

Because of the pervasive influence of white racism, black women writing was, till recently considered a separate class of discredited, inferior and less authentic literature, a sub-category of American Literature. In this regard, Alice Walker makes an insightful observation:

There are two reasons why the black woman writer is not taken... seriously. One is that she is a woman. Critics seem usually ill equipped to discuss and analyze the works of black women. Generally, they do not even make the attempt; they prefer rather to talk about the lives of black women writers, not about what they write. And, since black women writers are not—it would seem—very likeable—until recently comments about them tend to be cruel.14

Black feminist criticism has changed this perspective by demonstrating that black woman writers engage the crucial issues of gender and race and denounce racist and sexist thinking. They treat race, class and gender in terms of inter-related systems of domination, exploitation and colonization. Black feminist criticism reveals how black women writing promotes a politics of solidarity and resistance, constitutes an
anti-racist and anti-sexist discourse of self-determination. It offers an incisive critique of white supremacist patriarchy and authoritarianism, racist/sexist notions of blackness and whiteness, muscularity and femininity. It throws probing light on sexual/racial politics of coercion and violence, negative representations of black women, racial integration, nationalism, internalized colonialism and inadequacy of Christianity for the blacks.

The African-inspired theological model of God that evolves out of the contradiction between Christian symbols and the lived experience of African American characters assumes the shape of resistance to white domination. The inadequacy and inefficacy of the Christological model is dramatized by its failure to come to terms with the epistemology of black suffering and subjugation. For instance, Paul D. in *Beloved* experiences the ineffectuality of Christianity in the cellar of the Church of the Holy Redeemer when the white/formalized God fails him in an intense crisis. On the other hand, Stamp Paid's role in Paul D's resurrection highlights the role of African religious traditions in empowering the blacks to cope with racial evil, represented by the white masters.

The portrait of the anglicized Jesus in *The Bluest Eye*, overseeing Pecola's racial oppression, symbolizes the failure of the white man's God to come to her rescue. Moreover, Pecola's vulnerability to the vagaries of blak protagonists of the myth of white superiority throws into bold relief the destructive effect of assimilation of the values of an alien culture. Pauline's embracing the trappings of Christianity while staying in the North also points out the inefficacy of the religion of whites for the blacks. Her association with the Church alienates her from African religious traditions
and causes the dismemberment of her family. On the other hand her husband, Cholly, cherishes the divine image which does not represent the white sanitized God. His humanized God resembles the deities of African religious traditions. The adoption of African religious beliefs by Cholly is reinforced by his boyhood memory of a Church picnic at which he is impressed by the God like posture of the father of a black family who raises a watermelon over his head to smash it on the ground. Cholly perceives this image as the opposite of the God of the whites.

Celie in *The Color Purple* stops writing letters to the white Christian God who has not protected her from sexual and patriarchal victimization. Her conceptualizing God as white, male, racist and sexist and her renunciation of this God contextualizes the ineffectuality of Christianity for the racially oppressed blacks. Celie's pgan, pantheistic vision is suggestive of the deities of African religious traditions. Shug's hedonistic/aesthetic concept of God is also posited as an alternative to the pallid, ascetic and unconcerned white God.

The existence of the black feminist movement has been the essential precondition for the growth of black feminist texts like *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved* and *The Color Purple*. Although the North American feminist movement has loomed large for a long time, a parallel black feminist movement has been slower in evolving. Therefore, black women writers and artists have been largely ignored. Barbara Smith points out:

"When black women's books are dealt with at all, it is usually in the context of black literature, which largely ignores the implication of sexual politics. When white women look at the black women's works they are of course ill equipped to deal with the subtleties of racial politics."

She laments that due to deep-rooted racial prejudices, not only are the books by
black women misunderstood and misinterpreted but also destroyed. The misrepresentation of black women writers by whites goes hand in hand with their utter neglect in the mainstream feminist criticism. Eminent white female critics like Elaine Showalter, Ellen Moers, Patricia Spacks, Mary Ellman and Sara Blackburn either make racist comments in their analyses or only talk of the black male writers and completely ignore the black woman writer.

The anxiety of black feminist criticism regarding the racial oppression and gender discrimination surfaces in the ideology of the black women critics like Barbara Smith, Alice Walker and Deborah E. McDowell, bell hooks and Angela Davis. They aim at discovering a common ground for a black feminist movement alongside the mainstream feminism. They feel that white feminists like Betty Friedan and Kate Millet fail to address the black woman. Hence doubts, about the programmes of the white feminist movement, linger in the minds of the black feminists. Toni Cade Bambara wonders, "how relevant are the truths, the experiences, the findings of the white woman to the black woman." The black feminist analysis of the problematic of Pecola, Sethe and Celie in The Bluest Eye, Beloved and The Color Purple validates the observation of Toni Cade Barbara.

Black male critics also behave as if they were ignorant of the existence of black women writers. If at all they read one or two black women writers, they do not have the capacity to comprehend black women's experience in sexual as well as racial terms. There are also some black male critics who are as virulently sexist in the treatment of black women writers as their white male counterparts are. They do not have the slightest compunction about attacking black women in print. Darwin T. Turner's discussion of
Zora Neale Hurston in *In a Minor Chord: Three Afro American Writers and Their Search for Identity* (1971) reveal his complete insensitivity to the sexual and political dialectic of Hurston's life and writings.

Black feminist criticism condemns the attitude of both black and white male critics who contend that black women are powerless in the face of their political and cultural oppression at the hands of the racist/sexist/patriarchal forces. Unlike the black and white male critics, black feminist critics perceive an integral relationship between author and text and exhort the black woman writer to chalk out her own identity and not to adopt the ideology and techniques of the white/male literary tradition. They call for the need to recognize the cultural difference between black authors and white authors. The cultural differences stem from varying subject positions, reflected in the prevalent concepts of blackness and whiteness that have been constructed by the white dominant culture. The black feminist critics question the distinction between "inside" and "outside," "private" and "public," "personal" and "political". The politicization of subjectivity, identity, sexuality and division of labour forms the basis of the feminist slogan "the personal is political." They hold the view that new forms of critical experience depend on rejecting the ideas of a coherent classical academic tradition. They assert that every act of criticism is political, including the use of language. Black women critics, having risen from a prolonged silence, are intensely sensitive to language. They wish to liberate it from the fetters of racism and sexism in order to express the black experience in its totality.

The burgeoning interest in black culture during the 1960s has kindled critical interest in the life and literature of black women. Until then, black women had been
marginalized in most critical texts. Anthologies, that had come out as late as 1979, either simply make no mention of the work of black women or dismiss them in a casual manner. Males have not taken note of the writing of black women while recording black literary history. In this situation, black women critics have had a two-fold task to perform. First, they have had to redefine the African American literary tradition to include women writers. Second, they have had to dismantle the stereotypes of black femininity and sexuality, created by the white writers.

Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Barbara Smith and Gloria T. Hull have re-evaluated black literature and literary history and focused attention on the cultural importance of the works of black women writers. They also highlight the differences and multiplicities of black feminine style. Mary Washington in *These Self Invented Women: A Theoretical Framework of A Literary History of Black Women* (1980) describes slave narratives and religious convergences as the earliest expressions of a black female identity. Audre Lorde in *Sister Outsider* (1984) creates an alternative, "intuitive" criticism to enable black women to articulate their experience in a universal mode. She rejects the conventional critical techniques, keeping in mind the linguistic and technical differences that exist between black women writing and white women writing. The black women playwrights best illustrate these differences by using the colloquial language of black community women and weaving the multi-dimensional surreal fantasies in the texture of their plays.

The preparation of bibliographies has been a challenging task. It was accomplished after identifying and locating all existing expressions of black female identity. J.R. Roberts, in *Black Lesbians: An Annotated Bibliography* (1981) has
collected many obscure and scattered black writings. She divides her work into four sections: Literature, Criticism, Periodicals and Music. She contends that the available bibliographical information unmasks the wilful distortion and systematic destruction of black experience. To undo the wrong, she seeks to reclaim the past by making black women conscious of their cultural heritage. Thus through her sustained efforts she brings recognition to black culture.

Barbara Smith is the first black woman critic who has drawn attention to the necessity of evolving a black feminist criticism. She begins her text with the comment: ‘I do not know where to begin. Long before I tried to write this I realized that I was attempting something unprecedented.’ In *Towards a Black Feminist Criticism* (1977), Barbara Smith tries to combine the aesthetic mode of formal criticism and the political dimension of black feminist criticism. She studies what it means to be a black woman writer in America, examines modes of critical academic tradition and discusses how literature can be related to black life. She also analyses the politics of feminism in the context of the experience of black women and their literature.

Black women critics incorporate a distinct political ideology in their analyses. For instance, Barbara Smith studies Toni Morrison’s novel *Sula* in order to prove that only a black feminist critic can understand the inner layers of meaning in black women writing. Moreover, black feminist critics address the socio-aesthetic problems of black women writers, seeking to acquire literary identity in the midst of racial and sexual oppression.

A supporting and nurturing female community has backed the black woman’s struggle for a literary voice. Today, black women critics give precedence to a common
black voice unlike the male critics who lay special emphasis on the role of single precursors in literature. In *What It is I Think I Am Doing Anyhow* (2000), Toni Cade Bambara refuses to accept the mentorship of white woman writers like Kate Chopin. She is also unable to decide on even one black author who best ‘captures’ the black experience. It is an instance of her total rejection of the meritocratic frame of reference. She feels that black critics need to adopt an interdisciplinary approach, involving the study of folklore, slave narratives and writings of black women in order to challenge the neutrality of universal criticism.

J. R. Roberts has mapped out the broad contours of feminist criticism. Barbara Smith has explored its ideological terrain. Toni Cade Barbara has studied its innovative techniques. Audre Lorde and Alice Walker have developed its recurrent themes. According to them, feminist criticism calls for a radical examination of how language functions in black women writing and how black women writers create and support, through the reworking of language, a vibrant counter culture.

Audre Lorde argues that the representation of black matriarchy as a ‘social disease’ in 1960 undermined the significance of a vital source of the strength of black women writers. She also emphasizes the fact that the psychic history of black women writers has great significance for critics because black women writers have chosen to appear in their own texts in varied ways. She, therefore, produces an alternative literary critique in order to dismantle the social model of the black woman, produced in the 1960s.

The black women writers celebrate their relationship with their mothers and regard it as an inspiration behind their aesthetic. By expressing enduring allegiance to
the mothers, black women have moved closer to their African ancestry and evoked the mystique of mother myths, which hold great power in African culture and form the basis of the traditional veneration and enshrinement of motherhood. Thus they have redefined the racist/sexist ideology of motherhood, which scaffolds the structure of power inequalities between men and women in the patriarchal society.

Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1984) discusses the lives and times of black women writers and regards it as a rich and vital means of enlarging the sphere of black literature. She brings her powerful, poetic and moving voice to bear upon the discussion of art, politics and social change in her collection of essays. Her incisive assessment of Zora Neale Hurston, acute analysis of the Civil Rights Movement in which she herself was so deeply involved, and her moving account of coming to terms with the childhood injury that had nearly blinded her are the hallmarks of the book.

In the essay *Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View* (1983) Alice Walker points out that reading Hurston has brought her into a living contact with her own cultural roots. She feels that while encountering black writers the blacks, as a community, recapture the racial stories and evoke the memories of forgotten past. What she appreciates most is the positive picture that Zora Neale Hurston creates of blacks, projecting them as complex, undiminished human beings rather than as the 'victims,' often figuring in white writing. She contends that all black women writers are involved in an immensely brave, physical and moral struggle. They seek to achieve a larger freedom, inspired by the black literary tradition, originating in slave narratives where freedom of the soul and the body go hand in hand. The defiant attitude
of black women writers is strengthened by their freedom from guilt complex. It flows from the realization that the blacks, as a race, have never committed any global, cosmic sins.

Taken together, Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde and Alice Walker have transcended the limited confines of white feminist criticism. At the same time, they plead that black feminist criticism should reconsider its emphasis on psychoanalysis and the post-structuralist literary theory. They regard black feminist criticism as an enclave within feminist culture.

More recently, black feminists have suggested that black feminist criticism needs to break more conclusively with the separatist, nationalist, historical and essentialist theories of language and subjectivity in order to adopt strategies for change and innovation. For instance, Deborah E. McDowell emphasizes the need to adopt a ‘contextual’ approach to black literature, which “exposes the conditions under which literature is produced, published and reviewed.” Susan Willis, regards black feminist writing as a distinct discourse: “Black women’s writings are not a mere collection of motifs and strategies, but a mode of discourse, which enables a critical perspective upon the past, the present and into an emerging future.” Both Deborah E. McDowell and Susan Willis acknowledge the significance of differentiating the black from white literature and creating well-defined black feminist criticism.

bell hooks, an eminent black critic, in *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (1995) argues powerfully and incisively that racism and sexism can only be eradicated if they are confronted together. She presents a penetrating critique of racism by highlighting
the inter-relatedness of race, class and gender, the dominance of white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal culture, relevance of black rage, image of whiteness in black imagination and significance of radical black feminism. bell hooks, thus, brings out the signification of whiteness:

During the period of racial apartheid... it was... hard for us not to know that the shapes under white sheets had a mission to threaten, to terrorize. That representation of whiteness, and its association with innocence... was a sign; it was meant to torture with the reminder of possible future terror.20

She also examines the phenomenon of internalization of victimization, which renders the blacks powerless and robs them of the spirit of aggressiveness and assertiveness. In this context, she observes:

In recent times conservative black thinkers have insisted that many black folks are wedded to a sense of victimization. That to speak about the way mainstream white culture offers the mantle of victimization as a substitute for the transformation of society. White people promote black victimization, encouraging passivity by rewarding those blacks, who whine, grovel, beg, and obey... The presence of black victimization is welcomed. It comforts many whites precisely because it is the antithesis of activism.21

She feels that a redemptive struggle for black liberation is possible only if a conscious effort is made to arouse collective black rage, build resistance and destroy the systems of domination through self-determination.

Angela Davis, the renowned black academic and social activist, denounces racism and sexism in *Women, Race and Class* (1982). She studies the lives and achievements of black women under slavery and industrialization to prove that both sexism and racism are deeply rooted in class oppression and that neither can be uprooted without dismantling the white patriarchal economic power structure. She proudly claims that black women have inherited standards for a new womanhood. She points out that
black woman is an heiress to “a legacy of hard work, perseverance and self-reliance, a legacy of tenacity, resistance and insistence on sexual equality, in short, a legacy spelling out standards for a new womanhood.”

The black women writing and black feminist criticism have many features in common with the lesbian feminist critics. First, the language and ideas of the two do not harmonize with the requirements and techniques of white/patriarchal criticism. Second, the two have been late in evolving because of the racist/sexist hostility of the white-dominated publishing industry. Black and lesbian feminists cannot be considered separately because the life and politics of both encompass the same person. Many important critics such as Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith are both black and lesbian and hence it makes a great deal of sense to consider the commonalities of the two cultures which represent subtle and innovative techniques for introducing changes in feminist criticism.

Both Lesbian and Black feminist critics take into account the political and cultural implications of the writing of their respective groups and the connection between their artistic and political situation. In America, lesbian discourse has been as much influenced by the black movement of the mid 1960s as by the women’s movement. The flowering of lesbian poetry in the 1960s was also promoted by the lesbian involvement with the black Civil Rights Movement. At the conceptual level black and lesbian critics explore common critical themes, which are an offspring of their shared political and social experience. The intimidation of colour and sexuality, reflected in the works of Alice Walker and Adrienne Rich, is part of the collective and historical oppression of blacks and the lesbian women.
By way of deriving a conclusion it can be stated that the black feminist critics have played a vital role in bringing recognition to the body of black women writing. The necessity of an unprejudiced and unbiased analysis of the works of persons, outside the mainstream of white/male cultural sphere, has been highlighted by the black cultural resurgence of the 1960s and the 1970s. The second wave of the North American feminist movement has taken quite some time to acknowledge that the black women writing preserves a stunningly accurate record of the impact of patriarchal paradigms and racial/sexual politics on the life practices of black women and provides an essential insight into the female experience.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* captures the impact of racial/sexual/patriarchal politics on the life of a poor black girl. In the third chapter, *The Bluest Eye* is analysed in the light of the tenets of black feminist criticism. The study aims at demonstrating how the chief female protagonist's alienation from black aesthetic values, and meek submission to the onslaught of white dominant culture, create her lethal fascination for blue eyes. The feminist analysis reveals that her lack of rage, radicalism and will to resist cultural pervertion and racial sexual and patriarchal oppression cause the failure of her search for authentic existence.
References

2. Ibid., p.2.
3. Ibid., p.3.
6. Ibid., p.29.
7. Ibid., p.21.
9. Ibid., p.252.
10. Ibid., p.252.
11. Ibid., p.478.


