OF WOMEN BY WOMEN

Called Matriarch, Emasculator and Hot Mamma. Sometimes sister, Pretty Baby, Auntie, Mammy and girl. Called Unwed Mother, Welfare Recipient and Inner City Consumer. The Black American Woman has had to admit that while nobody knew the troubles she saw, everybody, his brother and his dog, felt qualified to explain her, even so herself (Collins 69).

Trudier Harris’ statement quoted by Collins shows how the African American women were commodified as ‘other’ and treated as objects and there was no one to comprehend their predicament and help them solve it. But they came out with the immense potential to stamp their difference despite the great ordeal they underwent. A deliberate attempt to go back to their roots and establish the rich wealth in their collective consciousness enabled to emerge as self actualized women.

From Sojourner Truth, a great abolitionist to Ms Oprah Winfrey – “Queen Of all Media”- black women have fought and endured a lot of physical and mental anguish and have risen above with indomitable will and mettle. The image of mammy of the plantation "Old South” during the antebellum period got concretized in the minds of blacks and whites. As type, Mammy is a large, black, head-ragged African-American woman-often depicted as ‘chicken stealing mammy’ by the whites.

Black in colour as well as race and fat with enormous breasts that are full enough to nourish all the children in the world; her head is perpetually covered with her trademark kerchief to hide the kinky hair that marks her as ugly (12 -13).
The stereotypes of African American women as evil, bitchy, stubborn and hateful, mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mammamas strengthened the legal sanction to the US constitution to perpetuate their oppression. A light skinned woman of biracial heritage was the tragic mulatto, who looked white enough to pass for a white but one drop of black blood made her remain black. As such, the "tragic mulatto" is depicted as the victim of the society which is divided by race, where there is no place for one who is neither completely "black" nor "white.

These negative stereotypes evince that whites could not see the heart, mind, skills or talents of African American women. Challenging these controlling images has long been the core theme of Black Feminist thought. Hazel Carby suggests that the objective of stereotypes is “not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise or mystification, of objective social reflections” (Carby 22).

Literature projected mammy as Kimberly Wallace-Stevens states, nothing more than an invented, “one-dimensional caricature”. The images of Mark Twain's nigger woman in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and mammy in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* offered the white supremacist view of the past. The writers of the Harlem Renaissance did everything possible to shatter these negative stereotypes that concretized in the minds of Americans.

Marcus Garvey, the father of the Pan Africanism, and Langston Hughes, the bright spark of Harlem Renaissance, have projected positive images of African American women in their poems “The Black Woman” and “The Negro Mother” respectively. Down the ages African American writers have celebrated their women as mothers.
I am the dark girl who crossed the red sea
Carrying in my body the seed of the free. …
I was the seed of the coming Free.
I nourished the dream that nothing could smother
Deep in my breast -- the Negro mother (Hughes).

African American women novelists after seventies blew up these stereotypes and recreated mothers, sisters and healers against mammies, witches and jezebel images projected by whites. Apart from the above discussed labels of African American women, the image of conjure woman, is based on the role of black woman as a professional- a witch doctor with traditional knowledge of voodoo, charms, black magic and supernatural powers who brewed magical herbs and potions for healing or killing, who could cast spells and foretell future (fortune teller) and were thus store houses and keepers of ancient tribal culture and medicine. The white American standpoint however projected these women as harmful witches who were revengeful and wicked. The most recent black women novelists have invested on these conjure women in their search for a selfhood and indigenous identity of black women in America.

The seeds of freedom from racism and sexism were sown in the minds of blacks by many a great women. Sojourner Truth was the first of her kind- an activist, speaker, and thinker who spoke fervently about abolishing slavery and women’s rights. Fondly called as Moses, Harriet Tubman was one of the great conductors of the Underground Railroad. Over the course of ten years (from 1850 to 1860), she steered approximately 300 slaves away to freedom. Rosa Parks the brave seamstress who would not give up her bus seat to a white passenger in Montgomery, Alabama ignited Civil Rights Movement.
In Sojourner Truth’s unprecedented models of female eloquence and heroism and in Harriet Tubman’s exemplary role, the traces of search for self and identity are found. Not only in the social activities but also in literature women were the first. Phillis Wheatley’s collection of poems initiated their creative output with her poems; slave narratives took different dimensions in their hands. A paradigm shift from slave narratives to fiction happened with Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig or sketches from the life of a free Black*. It was “a fictional third person autobiography” and “a missing link” between the tradition of black autobiography and the “slow emergence of a distinctive black voice in fiction” according to Gates (Gates Jr. Xi).

A preview of major women writers who set the trend and prepared the path for their successors will throw light upon this chapter’s discussion. During Harlem Renaissance, African American Literature served to "uplift" the race and prove their humanity and demand for equality and the new appreciation of folk roots and culture. Writers were inspired by this literary movement and rose to creative maturity afterward. Among them Zora Neale Hurston stands out as an anthropologist, folklorist, essayist and novelist who developed an artistic self –consciousness in her works. She was the first to articulate in unequivocal terms the “black difference” in a critical essay titled *The Characteristics of Negro Expression* which helped to develop a new yardstick to evaluate their literary creations. She particularized their difference- a source of condemnation in a tone of celebration for the first time.

The black woman in Hurston’s novel, *Their Eyes were watching God* (1937), finds her authority as a story teller both by her ability to ‘conjure’ up her past, and then to make story telling itself serve as a connection among ‘Kissin’ friends’. Hurston emancipates story telling powers: Words, walking without masters, walking altogether like harmony in a song”
(Hurston 10). It recreated “the tradition of female friendship and shared understanding and heals the lingering impact of separation imposed by slavery and sexism.” (ibid 20). The indications of black sisterhood, going back to folk and oral tradition explored in the fiction today are found in her works.

Robert Hemenway writes: “Her fiction represented the processes of folkloric transmission, emphasizing the ways of thinking and speaking which grew from the folk environment” (242). Hurston saw folk magic as art and fiction as a form of conjuring. Her *Mules and Men* (1935) called an abrupt halt to cultural attitude by writing down black folklore in a form which made it accessible to every reader and the power of the written text itself was a form of magic. Hoodoo, which uses conjure to work miracles is actually according to Hurston, a folk religion.

Hurston also wrote *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* so she spoke with authority on Hoodoo, or Voodoo, as it is pronounced by the whites. “Hurston indicated with one sly double-bodied verb that it is both a white error of dialect to pronounce the word hoodoo as Voodoo, and it is also a white error of academic authority to pronounce the practice of hoodoo as Voodoo” (32).

Margaret Walker’s “new humanism” carries with it a new respect for the quality of all human life as opposed to racism. African American Literature, she believes “is a reservoir of black humanism”. It is the standard –bearer of the values of ‘freedom, peace and human dignity’. “It is what America black and white needs.” (Walker 853).

Apart from fiction, a significant playwright Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, projects a mother -Lena Younger attempting to fulfill the dreams of seven generations to buy a house and has the son struggling to
have a business of his own and educated revolutionary daughter active in Afro centrism and Civil Rights Movement. Unlike a mammy she walks tall, exudes dignity, and carries herself, as Hansberry says, with the “noble bearing of the women of the Heroes of Southwest Africa [a pastoral people],” and Lena says, “Now - you say after me, in my mother's house there is still God”. To sharpen this fundamental debate, Lena Younger or Mama must be rescued from the persistent image of passivity, accommodation, and self-satisfaction associated with the Black Mammy stereotype.

In “the black women’s literary renaissance” of the 1970s like Harlem Renaissance of 1940s, writers focused on slave era to understand the present, revised the great black texts on slavery, incorporated African belief systems, spiritual and cultural rituals, used the power and potential of Black Language, the vernacular tradition - ‘kitchen tradition’ - as Bambara calls, refused age old definitions of black women and community and articulated their ‘difference’ that their writings have become a repository of their ethnicity.

Toni Morrison (1931) discussed the major issues of the contemporary life and insisted that an understanding of African American experience is very essential for the coherence of history and literature of United States. From Morrison onwards women assumed the central role as subjects in fiction and an exploration of the diversity of the black communities became characteristic feature of black women’s writing. Alice walker claimed Hurston as her literary fore- mother and The Color Purple highlighted her commitment to exploring the lives of black women. She created African American women who achieve some wholeness and create spaces for other oppressed communities in her fiction.
Alice Walker coined ‘womanism’ instead of feminism because the issues of colored women are different from those of the other women and defines "womanist" as "a black feminist or feminist of color”. Her works highlight the black folk expression of mother and its transmission to female children and also women who love other women, sexually or non sexually. As Munro put it, Walker “captures the voices of unsung heroines” with whom she has crossed paths. Walker commemorates her (African American women) ancestors’ experience and art based on spirituality as it is related to Nature in In search of our Mothers’ Gardens: The Legacy of Southern Black Women. The innate artistic talents emanated in their cooking, gardening, story- telling and quilting. Quilting is also termed as ‘heart and hands’ and ‘a piece of my soul’.

Alice Walker in In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens (1984) claims “I’ve been hacking away at that stereotype for years and so have many other black women writers” (324). In the process of self definition and liberation the heroines of Morrison, Walker, Shange, turn towards the community of their black sisters. For example, Walker’s Celie comes close to liberating herself through her black sisters Nettie, Sophie and Shug and is able to affect the men of her world positively. Barbara Christian asserts

Morrison sees no practical way out of the morass of sexism, racism and class discrimination in the Western world but she sees the possibility of empowerment for black women if they create a community of sisters which can alter the present day unnatural definitions of woman and man. (Spillers 243).

Morrison, Walker, Lorde, Marshall and Shange concentrate on delineating the essential African wisdom and culture still alive in the new world black communities. They consciously link African rhythms, dance,
style, folklore, magic to a uniquely African American women’s culture and ultimately to their literature.

Houston Baker remarks in *Working of the Spirit* that the “primacy of non-material transactions in the African’s initial negotiations of slavery and the slave trade led to a privileging of the roles and figures of medicine men, griots, conjures priests and priestess” (Baker 38). The sense of community of African American society is strongly established among women and African American women writers have focused on the bond among black women.

Naylor has posited that the strength of African American women is their sisterhood while becoming the victims of patriarchy and racism. In her first two novels this is reclaimed but in the third novel *Mama Day* the women gain power from the women’s tradition –“kitchen tradition, folk tradition, nature and fore mothering”. The power of the bond is gathered by the matriarchal lineage and bestows the strength for survival, identity by reinstalling black culture, history and the conjuring. By portraying the powerful women Naylor shatters the images of African American women constructed by their double jeopardy in the society. While Naylor chooses to delineate a microcosm of black women, Bambara depicts the coming of age experience of girls in the African American community.

In her *Gorilla My Love* Bambara’s realistic portrayal of the lives of young people focus on the ways gender roles, ideology, family and community condition their experiences. They depict the pre-adolescent girls who struggle with issues and learn from them. Bambara presents both constructive and destructive aspects of growing up in an oppressed community. The other theme is the fellowship -- brotherhood /sisterhood, love for family and community--a sense of unity and comradeship we find among the marginalised. Self-affirmation that blooms from the bond
between the oppressed is reinforced in the literature of African Americans. Bambara asserts “I am about the empowerment and development of our sisters and of our community. The sense of caring, and celebration is certainly reflected in the body of my work....” in her interview with Claudia Tate in *Black Women Writers at work* (19).

Bambara embraces what Alice Walker later called a Womanist aesthetic. Womanism speaks of a person who is “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (xi), and the environment in which they live. The Womanist approach is one that “supplies a way for Black women to address gender oppression without attacking Black men” (Collins 63). Naylor’s women turn towards Nature, whereas Bambara’s women attempt to conscientize the community about environment. Nature and its wealth enable women to become healers in Naylor’s fiction whereas Bambara’s women fight against the prevention of Environmental hazards, thus opened a new avenue of environmental racism. Both the writers’ locus is their community.

Minnie Ransom asks Velma in the very beginning of *Salt Eaters* “Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?” (SE 1). It is very explicit that the question is not just about getting well, but well being is a metaphor for the entire community. Well being is the thread that binds the novel. To bring about unity and a sense of wholeness, cooperation and bonding with community, there needs to be the well-being of individual and community. In a meeting, the women speak out. Spokeswoman Ruby announces,

Drinking at the bar is all we’ve witnessed yet. You all say we need a conference, we book the hotel and set it up and yawl drink at the bar …We caucus, vote, lay out resolutions, yawl drink at the bar. We’re trying to build a
union, a guild, and organization. You all are welcome to continue operating as a social club, but not on our time. (SE 37).

Here, it is evident that the women in the organization aspire for liberating people from oppressive ideologies and making them think differently. Bambara’s works draw attention to the solidarity and coalition among men and women to become activists and save the environment too. She realized the truth of what the Black Arts Movement “had been teaching for years- that writing is a legitimate way, an important way, to participate in the empowerment of the community” (Bambara 7) Naylor’s canvass is the African American mind whereas Bambara’s is the streets, as her leaning is more towards activism.

This chapter OF WOMEN BY WOMEN examines how both the writers annihilate the stereotypes found in white literary canon and create African American women with mental strength and knowledge of folk tradition - magic, conjuring, holistic methods of healing with herbs, quilting with a sense of past and ancestors and above all, an ability to heal the body, mind and soul of one another, as preservers of their ethnicity. Black women branded as mammies become mothers, witches turn into healers, sub humans elevated as activists in their literature. Their inherent qualities labeled and treated negative, revitalized them and became their fortitude commemorating their ethnic differences and tradition.

In Larry Andrews’ view one of the major concerns of Naylor is the relationship among women which bestows on them an identity and strength for survival. She believed that the communal harmony comes from communal memory which comprises of the oral and folk tradition benchmarks of African American ethnicity. It is quite reflective of the
African communal existence. This bond among women surpasses their age, education, class and other such man made walls.

In *The Women of Brewster Place* women come together on the basis of their common experiences as victims of patriarchy and they mother each other. In *Linden Hills* the goal of upward mobility distorts the sense of community but the central character Willa Prescott Nedeed—a total victim of patriarchal Luther Nedeed, left in total isolation—finds the stored documents of the women of previous generations with the same fate and establishes an authentic relationship with them. The letters, recipes, photo album of the dead women restore her strength to confront her husband with her dead son in her arms. The bond with her dead predecessors helps her achieve her identity and self-discovery. What Naylor portrays in *Mama Day* is a historical sisterhood, and Miranda Day is a grand-mother figure as (Eva Peace) in Morrison’s *Sula* and Petry’s *The Street* (Lutie Johnson’s grandmother). The central figure of Willow Springs multi-faceted Miranda is a Mama, midwife, conjure woman, authoritative guardian of the islanders, their tradition and history.

African American women writers have produced a rich body of creative writing to reconstruct and narrate their version of the past and also proved it to be a rich store house from which their identity and sense of self can be reclaimed. In the three novels of Naylor chosen for study, she has developed the concept of black sisterhood in *The Women of Brewster place* into one that transcends gender in *Mama Day* and in *Bailey’s Café* she crosses the liminal boundaries of gender, race and creates cultural mulattoes.

*The Women of Brewster place* unravels the story of seven black women Naylor calls as ‘colored daughters’ who live on the dead end street in an unnamed Northern city. Mattie Michael the central character of the
novel, seduced and ditched by Butch Fuller, leaves home pregnant and unwedded. Eva Turner living with her grandchild Luciela provides her refuge but Mattie’s son Basil turns out to be heartache for her. After Eva’s death Mattie becomes the owner of the house, but to get a bail for Basil who is accused as a murderer, she puts up the house. Basil disappears before the trial and she loses her son and the house. Not only Mattie takes the role of Eva as a mama to all the women in Brewster Place but others also accommodate each other extending helping hands going beyond their comfort zone.

Mattie’s friend Etta Mae Johnson looking seductive and labeled as irresponsible and immoral reaches Brewster place with her heart and hands full of Billie Holiday’s albums. When Mattie takes her to the church she is captivated by the visiting preacher Moreland T. Woods who invites her out after service and she dreams of marrying him and gaining a respectable position in the society. She guesses that like all other men in her life Rev. Woods too will throw her away after fulfilling his need. “She could turn now and go through the rituals that would tie up the evening for them both, but she wanted just one more second of this soothing darkness before she had to face the echoes of the locking doors she knew would be in his eyes” (WBP 72).

He is too happy and relieved that she understood the temporary weakness of flesh and did not “make it out to be something bigger than it is” (WBP 72). They leave the cheap hotel room early morning. She returns to Brewster place with the thought that Mattie will be always ready to accept her and it brings a smile on her lips and hope in her heart.

Luceilia suffers with-a no good husband- Eugene who never sticks to a job. She is forced to abort the second baby in her womb as they can’t afford it. During a quarrel between them, unattended Serena, her first
daughter pokes a fork into a plug point and is electrocuted. Heartbroken Ceil wants to end her life and it is again Mattie and her hard won strength becomes the force that fortifies other women. The most powerful scene in this novel is when Mattie rocks Ceil in her arms and bathes her helping her to be reborn with the renewed strength to face life. The language becomes musical describing Ciel’s hopelessness and magical rocking of Mattie bringing her back to life with hope. “And morning would come” (WBP 105).

Cora Lee is a happy mother as long as her infants are dependents but she neglects them when they grow up. She begets children just for the sake of getting a new baby every year like the dolls she got in her childhood, but hasn’t learned how to nurture or love her children. Kiswana steps in and helps Cora Lee to take the children to watch the black production of ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’ by her boy-friend Ahsbu. Reluctant Cora says “Babies don’t take up much space you just bring in a crib and a little chest and you’re all set”. “But babies grow up”, “Kiswana said softly and handed the child back to Cora with a puzzled smile” (WBP 120).

After Kiswana leaves her words linger in Cora’s mind echoing like a refrain just as Kiswana’s perfume remaining in the air, disturbing her. Naylor uses this refrain to indicate the conscientizing of Cora—her duty as a mother. She wheels round to finish all her household chores like her ancestors. Realizing babies grow up and the mother also has to grow up. Her story ends with Cora “breathing in hopeful echoes of order and peace that lay in the clean house” (WBP 127). Kiswana steps into the house and life of Cora bringing awareness, understanding and responsibility to lead a meaningful life.
Naylor takes a bold step to discuss the problem of lesbians who are treated as abnormal and ‘othered’ in the society. She names the chapter as “The two”, suggesting the erasure of their identity in the community, while all the other chapters are named after the women whose stories she narrates. She also reveals the queries of the two about their identity and acceptance by others. Lorraine is very much disturbed with the doubting looks and curt comments people make about their relationship. Theresa convinces Lorraine that there’s no need to feel guilty of their relationship and what people think and talk about them.

The women of Brewster place reject them and make silly nasty remarks about their living together and look for an evidence to confirm their suspicions. Lorraine runs to Ben in the basement, who sees the image of his lame daughter in her and they both console one another. Their solidarity is very exquisitely narrated by the writer but ironically gang raped Lorraine, unaware what she is doing, kills Ben. It is suggestive of the ties broken within black community. Unable to stand or digest the rejection of their identity as men by ‘the two’, C.C. Baker and his gang rape Lorraine to prove their power and strength over the weak lesbian. Naylor not only celebrates the black sisterhood but also points out the danger of community being broken, when some are rejected by its members.

The novelist asserts her strong conviction in the sisterhood and black love which is black wealth as stated by Nikki Giovanni:

Lorraine was not raped because she is a lesbian, they raped her because she was a woman….The repercussions of Lorraine’s being cut off from a female network, didn’t only stay with her. They came back and affected the entire black community, male and female. I feel very strongly that we as black people have to be there as nurturing
agents for each other, male and female, female and female. And when that broke down in “The Two”, I wanted to show how that could destroy the community (36).

This link among the women is a redemptive force which extends to their ancestors as Toni Morrison enunciates in ‘Rootedness’- great grandmothers Alice Walker articulates in her ground-breaking article, ‘In Search Of Her Mother’s Gardens’ also connects them with their past, history and African heritage. This is the evident in Naylor’s *Mama Day* as well as Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*.

Bambara has not only attempted to sculpt black women as they are, but also projects the redemptive nature of the communion of women of color. Her answer to the question, who is a black woman nullifies all the negative images coagulated in the black and white minds of America.

She is a college graduate. A drop-out. A student. A wife. A divorcée. A mother. A lover. A child of the ghetto. A product of the bourgeoisie. A professional writer. A person who never dreamed of publication. A solitary individual. A member of the Movement. A gentle humanist. A violent revolutionary. She is angry and tender, loving and hating. She is all these things and more. And she is representing a collection that for the first time truly lest her bare her soul and speak her mind (Bambara).

Toni Cade Bambara words quoted in the blurb of *Black Woman: An Anthology* illustrates the various roles and phases that black women assumed and went through in America. The preface to the anthology lays out the goals of the black feminist movement. One of the main focal points was black women’s ability to create an identity for themselves, to debunk
the myths of the black matriarch and the black bitch. The first words of the anthology deal directly with this problem.

We are involved in a struggle for liberation: liberation from the exploitive and dehumanizing system of racism from the manipulative control of a corporate society; liberation from the constricted norms of mainstream culture, from the synthetic myths that encourage us to fashion ourselves rashly from without (reaction) rather than from within creation (7).

It is hard to separate the work of Toni Cade Bambara from the era she lived in. She recognized that black society was ‘at war’ and the characters in her short stories are the response to that. Her works are ground-breaking and at the same time within this context revolutionary. Naylor’s works are concerned with racial suffering moving to gender issues while in Bambara’s fiction it takes political and ecological dimensions. Both the writers transcend black despair and treat human despair in their works. Immaterial of the boundaries the whole human race is taken into the world of Salt Eaters and especially the women of all ‘colors’.

The Salt Eaters has a very large canvass with a tightly knit community; many characters have relatives and past experiences in common. Velma, one of the novel's main characters, is the wife of James Obie Henry, head of the Academy of 7 Arts and Palma’s sister, one of the Seven Sisters, performing arts troupe, who is travelling by bus to Claybourne; Her friends are Jan and Ruby, who share lunchtime insights about Velma's life over the course of several chapters. The Academy of the Seven Arts, run by James Obie Henry, Velma’s husband, is the centre of intellectual and social activities with Claybourne city getting ready for spring festival and people pour in to celebrate it. Beyond the physical world there extends another world in Velma’s mind.
Through Velma’s wayward mind and psyche, readers enter the minds of her family and friends: her husband, Obie, and son, Lil James; her godmother M’Dear Sophie; the Women for Action, a group presided over by Velma until her breakdown, and the Seven Sisters, a performing arts group that includes Velma’s sister, Palma. The Seven Sisters are first seen as passengers on a bus driven by Fred Holt. They are travelling to Claybourne to perform at the black community’s annual spring festival. It is very well knit multiracial, multicultural and multinational community.

Velma Henry’s attempt to commit suicide brings Minnie Ransome the healer, the older doctor Doc Serge, the younger doctor Julius Meadows, and the 12-member Master's Mind. This community gets extended to the groups moving to the Academy and the city for spring festival. The seven sisters’ role is very significant on various planes. They represent various nations, culture, arts and crops:

But Jan didn’t hear her, she had turned round and round. Daughters of the crops. Sisters of the Fruit. Jan pursed her lips, on the half-chance that the memory cells in her mouth had better storage and retrieval faculties than her brain. Palma’s friends. The Asian sister had done a song about the pig-iron furnaces of China. There was a long piece they’d ended with, a colored sister solidarity piece, operatic almost, a fugue like interweaving of the voices, the histories the lore of the Caribbean, African, Native American- seven sisters remember? (SE 214)

The Seven Sisters take up this work as each sister lays herself down as a bridge between narratives of struggle. Within each of their selves, the Sisters traverse bridges through their own and their ancestors’ stories. They also create bridges between one another and across each other’s histories using
theatre and other art forms. While the Sisters sit around a table in the Café, Mai struggles to remember her great aunt’s story. The memory comes from deep within herself.

Something Cecile had been saying about the woman-charged culture of Dahomey had sparked it, thrown a light in a dark corner. The mamba priestesses of the voudon, the amazons. Perhaps the contrast of Mai’s story and Cecile’s, the two family stories rubbing against each other in Mai’s mind (SE 221).

She finally recalls the story,

Her great-aunt rescued from the burning flower boats at thirteen and taken to California. There chased in the streets, fingers pulling at her hair. Run down in the muddy streets, raped and scalped… an old story passed down on Mai’s maternal side huddled together in the internment camps of ’42, keeping themselves alive with the stories (SE 222).

As Mai writes this story into a piece for the Seven Sisters, the pain is reckoned with and transformed. It is the process of using salt to treat a wound, but not feeding off of the salt and becoming ossified, as Velma almost did. The Seven Sisters manifest a potential that Velma may fulfil once she is well, although Bambara leaves that phase in Velma’s journey unwritten. The Sisters’ presence within the collective narrative nonetheless serves as a guide to Velma and her transformation has a reciprocal effect on them.

Velma’s process of transformation, relayed to her sister, Palma in a dream is what brings the Seven Sisters to Claybourne in the first place. In the bus on the way there, one of the sisters asks “do you think Velma might join
us? Do the music?” (SE67). Later on, when they are eating in the restaurant Mai suggests they approach Jan and Ruby to find out where Velma is. These instances show the Seven Sisters, on a psychic level, inviting Velma to join them, meanwhile other sisters have left the group along the way to Claybourne. Collins describes the always-shifting composition of the Seven Sisters as a form of positive energy derived from simultaneous uniqueness and fusion. She says,

The Seven Sisters are not a static coalition. When one member leaves the group another joins. Like the constellation for which they are named, the group simulates a shining energy that is greater and more visible as a whole than as separate points of starlight. As a mixture of ethnic backgrounds, their otherness within the whole is identifiable in tension, but not in conflict with their integrated identity” (3)

The decentralized nature of power represented by the Seven Sisters is more natural and sustainable than hierarchal, static formations of power. The fact that each one of the sisters can leave the group at any given time, without causing a dissolution of the collective illustrates this point. When Palma arrives at the train station in Claybourne she sees Marcus and intuits Velma is in danger and “all the step-by-step-to-do-the-minute-I-hit-town went right out of her head. She never quite touched the curbstone. And she didn’t quite get a look at him before she smelled him and felt him…” (138). As she has urgent personal business to attend to, Palma leaves the group for a while. She can do this freely because the Seven Sisters value her as a whole person having a life autonomous from the collective and she is not expected to sacrifice parts of herself for the sake of an imposed unity.

As a model of radical political organization by women of color, it does not only apply only to women of color, but to all the women. It is a way of
relating to one’s self and others that should be the foundation of every struggle for transformation. It is also a way of seeing the world. This is “the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities…” making one “excruciatingly alive to the world.” Anzaldúa suggests that “those who do not feel psychologically or physically safe in the world are more apt to develop this sense… the females, the homosexuals of all races, the dark skinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign” (SE 60).

In *The Salt Eaters* Bambara posits The Seven Sisters as a powerful example of unity and a possible solution to the intra-community schism. The activist theater troupe performs at marches and rallies. In the theater collective the seven women represent main groups of women of color, containing Black, Asian, Latina, and Native American members. In the Greek myth the seven sisters or Pleiades are continually pursued by Orion until Zeus transforms them into doves and then to stars. In the Pleiades star cluster only six of the stars shine brightly, the seventh shines dully because the corresponding sister is mourning the death of a lover. This seventh dull star may represent Velma who is mourning the loss of herself in the face of her breakdown and suicide attempt. In direct contrast to the Greek myth they are not victimized, they are powerful, “bossy,” and self-determined. They free themselves; they do not wait for a patriarch to do it for them. Their cohesion is communicated by a mixture of voices. They speak in one voice, with many accents, and finish each other’s sentences.

If Naylor has instituted black sisterhood for the welfare of the lost and dejected, Bambara does it for the welfare of the society through activism. Naylor builds confidence in her sisters through love but Bambara builds her community through raising political consciousness and participating in the movements.
Larry Andrews rightly states in “Black sisterhood in Gloria Naylor’s Novels”, in the three novel progressions, that *Mama Day* arrives at a more complex vision of sisterhood.

Naylor has moved steadily from the merely naturalistic to the symbolic, mythical modes as well, as she adds historical depth to the presentation of the female bond. She has moved away from an exclusive focus on females to an exploration of the relationship between sisterhood and the resolution of male-female conflicts. She has moved from the severely limited and tentative possibility of sisterhood to a richer and more positive glimpse of its reality, even if it is not yet fully dramatized in action, for example, as it is in a community of women like those in Walker’s *The Color Purple* or Marita Golden’s *A Woman’s Place* (25).

Miranda’s relationship with her sister Abigail is the best example of sisterhood which transcends all worldly limitations and expectations. They have lived together for more than eighty years and Miranda became a mama first to her sister Abigail. Their mother and family lost peace with the loss of Miranda’s baby sister, Peace. Then onwards Abigail has looked up to Miranda for everything in her life and procured strength to bear the loss of Peace, Grace and Hope in her life. The eldest child taking up the responsibility of a mother is common in African and Native communities all over in the world. In George Ryga’s *Ecstasy of Rita Joe* Rita carries her sister Eileen Joe on her back and the world of sisters is full of joy and laughter. Whereas in Alex Haley’s *Roots* Kunta is unable to accept the arrival of his younger brother Lamin and the attention given to him ascertains that ties among women is stronger than among men.
Ophelia says that “those two didn’t breathe without telling the other what it felt like” (MD 57). The way they greet each other proves Ophelia’s statement, “It don’t matter when and it don’t matter where: Abigail bringing a fresh bunch of collards from across the main road. Miranda sliding into the pew beside her at church, and them running into each other at the post office.” “You, there sister?” “Uh-huh.” (MD 53). This holds good even after Abigail’s death as they are still connected in their spirit: you there, sister?-to listen for the rustling trees (MD 486). There is non-verbal communication between Mama and her ancestors. In any situation, Mama communicates with her ancestors in the other place or in the woods. The ancestors’ voices and answers come with the breeze. When Abigail dies, she joins them and continues to relate with Mama Day in the same manner.

The relationship of Miranda and Abigail with Ophelia is motherly and Ophelia is drawn towards them and to Willow Springs every summer despite her situation in New York. Ophelia renewing her ties with her friends Ruby and Bernice in the island, is a contrast to the picture of lonely black women in New York. They do not have a sense of community or sisterhood. Naylor has dealt in a detailed manner how the rich middle class black women lack the bond in her *Linden Hills*.

When Ophelia visits Willow Springs with her husband George, she realizes that she becomes a child in the presence of Miranda and Abigail once again. She values her bond with them and realizes that it is everlasting.” My bond with them was such that even if hate and rage were to tear us totally apart, they knew I was always theirs” (MD 177). Miranda and Abigail can read each other’s mind and sense what the sister feels. They write letters jointly to Ophelia in spite of fighting over the choice of words. (MD 66) George finds their head angle and laughter are identical (MD176).
The future of the two old women lie in Ophelia, the last woman of their family line. Miranda is proud to identify that Ophelia is after her “great mother” Sapphira. “And now she strides so proud… The lean thighs, tight hips, the long strides flashing light between the blur of strong legs – pure black. Me and Abigail, we take after the sons, Miranda thinks. The earth men who formed the time of Days, hard and dark brown. But the Baby girl brings back the great, grandmother” (MD 47-48). Ophelia becomes the inheritor of the female tradition of African American society, which is retained in Willow Springs. The Baby girl or Cocoa is addressed as Ophelia by Miranda for the first time explains the significance of Cocoa’s identity and role as the descendant of the powerful Days.

“Baby girl did have something lost to her, but she weren’t gonna find it in no school.”
“Ophelia…”
“What did you call me?”
“Don’t stand there with your mouth gaping open, I called you by your name”
“But in my entire life, you’ve never used that name” “That ain’t true. The day you dropped into my hands, I first used it. Your mama said, ‘call her Ophelia’. And that’s what we did.”(MD 235).

Then Ophelia learns the significance of her proper name, the name of her great grandmother who drowned herself in The Sound and her mother who named her so, to take revenge on her husband who deserted her. This knowledge about the family, the women and their history gives her the eligibility to be the interior of the rich heritage of Willow Springs as well as empowered Ophelia Day.
As Marjorie Pryse points out in, *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition*, such passing on of the oral tradition with its elements of genealogy, magic and naming, - there is ethnicity particularly - a female tradition that empowers the women who inherit it. The women, who are victims of the patriarchal society in Naylor’s first two novels, seem to transcend suffering caused by their men and they have power of their own in their lives in *Mama Day*. Ophelia Day comes in the familial and historical lineage which empowers the Days women. Her significant role is to pass on this sense of sisterhood to posterity.

Bambara’s works founded on powerful ideas: a need for Black women of all economic backgrounds and ages to work together, a need for action to take place so that help is guaranteed for all, and a desire to understand self and others in order to help the community become a place of nourishment and richness as it should be. *The Black Woman* is one of the earliest and one of the most significant anthologies for women of color feminists. As Bambara writes in her introduction, “[there] is a need for unified effort and value of vision of a society substantially better than the existing one,” in order for progressive social and political change to take place. Bambara’s introduction provides a rich context that speaks to the need for coalition building ---an idea that moves beyond the old pathologies and approaches to its relevance, importance, and potential in and beyond American society.

Toni Cade Bambara describes her writing as being one of the ways in which she participates in struggle. Through writing Bambara celebrated the tradition of resistance and attempted to tap the black potential, and to overcome their miserable plight. The chorus of voices argue that misuse and misery are neither inevitable nor necessary. Writing is one of the ways in which she participated in the transformation, one of the ways that she practiced the dedication to investigate bodies of knowledge for the usable
wisdoms they yield. She understood that she was being groomed to perform particular work in this world and she used her writing to do so.

*Gorilla, My Love* is political in a more stealthy fashion. Each story in *Gorilla, My Love* has a political message that highlights the need for a community to come together or the effects of a united community and family, such as in ‘Raymond’s Run’ and ‘Gorilla, My Love’. The opening story, ‘My Man Bovanne’, highlights the importance of recognizing all members, young and old, in building a movement. ‘The Johnson Girls’ highlight the beauty of friendship and the need for members of a community to take care of one another; such as helping pay tuition or working together to end a crisis. Although the stories in *Gorilla, My Love* are not as overtly political as those in *The Sea Birds are Still Alive* they create prototypes for the creation of liberated space, movements, and revolutionaries.

Bambara wrote to highlight the fact that the freedom struggle is not over. She worked to maintain the spirit of the movement in a time when voices were becoming silent. “Broken Field Running” a story in *The Seabirds are Still Alive* is about a teacher who has to maintain her faith in the aptitude for transformation, just as people during the time it was written were trying to maintain the ardent spirit of the struggle. Bambara wrote her works as a reflection of what was currently happening around her, in order to send a message and to provide solutions, most of all optimism. She believed that during times of high consciousness, one has to build the network and the foundation to uphold one through periods of high conflict and low consciousness. Bambara would not yield her writing to be laden with defeatism, death, or vengeance because she was focusing on resistance. Thus in her stories, people are not defeated, just as in any struggle the human race gets emboldened.
Bambara did not admire the writings that used despair, insanity, or suicide to protest oppression. In “Seabirds” from The Seabirds are Still Alive Bambara’s the combatant mother and daughter pair constantly repeat out loud, “Nothing, I’ll tell you nothing. You’ll never break out spirits. We cannot be defeated” (SBA 89). This quote is repeated throughout the story. This indomitable will has been sustained by the African American women for centuries since their slavery. This spirit in the African American women facilitated them to lead their families as well as the society.

In ‘The Lesson’, Toni Cade Bambara reiterates the need for positive black role models. The story focuses on an enlightened black outsider coming into a black community in order to make an impact on the children that reside there. “The Lesson” describes a community leader who takes a group of children on excursions, with or without their co-operation that exposes them to cultures outside of their own. The story ends with the children’s realization of the gross differences in income distribution. The teacher points out to the children imagine for a minute what kind of society it is in which some people can spend on a toy what it would cost to feed a family of six or seven.

Bambara’s title Salt Eaters is symbolic of struggle and transformation. Salt is "fuel" for nerves and symbolizes life itself. Basic physiological functions depend on a balance between salts and liquids in the body. When the balance is upset, disease may occur. Salt has been an essential, virtually omnipresent, part of medicine and served as a preservative for thousands of years. Anti-bacterial effect of salt qualifies it as a partial antidote for snakebite. This reflects the fact that to struggle, to develop, one needs to master ways of neutralizing poisons. ‘Salt’ also brings the parable of Lot’s wife to the forefront; without belief in the capacity for transformation, one can become ossified.
The importance of community, individuality, and political and social activism are explicit in the novel. So poignantly yearns for cataclysmic social upheaval and understands so clearly the roots of black people’s oppression in post-civil rights American society.

The form of this book, a collection of event, characterization, feeling and idiom, is as complex as any fall of the Odus of Ifa in the Yoruba system of prophecy. For *The Salt Eaters*, fate, faith and healing make themselves manifest in multiples of changes upon changes inside a great change (Prenshaw 11).

Africans had two strong relationships which sustained them in their life. One was with their God, who was not on the throne above in Heaven but lived in everyone and everything around them. This faith and conviction drew them towards Nature with which they had a bond stronger than their umbilical cord. Going to these roots enabled women to be grounded in affirmative contribution of Nature and all its elements. Going back to the roots meant not only reinventing their cultural practices and community values but also going back to the past. The past, which might be shameful for the generations of free blacks was very significant to the mothers and grandmothers. It is connecting with the past, revisiting the past, which unifies the shattered collective consciousness into a whole, like their quilt.

Quilt is not only the symbol of their artistic brilliance but also of their past. Quilting took them back to their ancestors, their memories and what they inherited from them, both consciously and unconsciously. Like the stream of consciousness technique in a novel, the art of quilting innate in the African Americans, interweaves the past and the present generations. Thus, the sisterhood is established between the living and the dead. Margaret Walker pioneered the reconstruction of the past from a slave woman’s perspective with her *Jubilee* (1966). Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*
(1975), Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Paule Marshall’s *Praise song for the Widow* (1983), Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1988), Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (1999) are but a few examples. All these women novelists have chosen to re-write the historic past in which black women have been repeatedly deprived of power and freedom. These writers have realized and recorded in their fiction that knowledge of their cultural history can heal the fissures in the psyche of individuals and relationships in African American communities.

In *Mama Day*, Miranda making a double-ring quilt as Cocoa’s wedding gift is an explicit metaphor of weaving past with present and the connection between the women of generations. The quilt is a patchwork of “daddy’s Sunday shirt”, “Abigail’s lace ship”, “collar from Hopes graduation dress”, “Palm of Grace’s baptismal gloves”, “Her needle fastens the satin trim of Peace’s receiving blanket to Cocoa’s baby jumper to a pocket from her own gardening apron”; The front of mother’s gingham shirt waist” “a piece of faded homespun” –“older than gingham, but only a woman would wear this color” –“Pushes the needle through, tugs the thread down –two ticks of the clock” (MD 214-215). The women down generations are bonded just as the pieces in a quilt. The older piece she uses gives Miranda a sudden premonition that George will not be coming. She says “She ain’t bringing that boy home mid-August” and it becomes true (MD 215). Quilt is symbolic of revisiting the past or history on two planes: individual and community.

The fabric of Sapphire used in the quilt reveals the unconscious sisterhood Miranda experiences with her great grandmother and the intuitive power and knowledge she gains through it. The act of quilting is very much analogous to Miranda’s mind recalling the woman who wore it, her story, her sons and her grandmother Ophelia and goes on and on.
Naylor takes this experience of Miranda to a culmination stating “when it’s done right, you can’t tell where one ring ends and the other begins” (MD 216). The connection with the legendary women of the past leads the women of the present towards a learning, understanding, acceptance that bestows power and strength in their own lives. It is the same connectedness that brings wholeness to Velma and her community and reaffirms their sense of ethnicity in *Salt Eaters.*

Like the quilt made by *Mama Day,* Bambara knits the past events in Velma’s life in the following excerpt from *The Salt Eaters:*

The prayer group moved closer to repair the circle, searching Sophie’s face for a clue to the break and odd leave taking. But the woman’s eyes were as still as water in the baptismal pit, reminding them that she had been there too the day the congregation had stood by waiting for a moving of the water, had shouted when Velma had come through religion, had cheered when she walked across the stage of Douglass High to get her diploma, had stood up at her first wedding, hasty as you please and in a night club too, and worn white to the railroad station as the rites of good riddance had been performed (SE 12).

The whole novel is like a quilt connecting Velma’s mind with her memories of her parents, sister, and husband and extends to her God mother, links to the recent past events and people related to the Seven Arts Academy and in Spring Festival. Velma’s mind begins,

the journey back from the kitchen was like the journey back from the woods to gather... You see nothing but what you're looking for... searching out eucalyptus, the eyes stay tuned
within a given range of blue-green-grey and cancel out the rest of the world...The gathering's demands stay with you, lock you into particular sights. The eyes will not let you let it go (SE 19).

The space outside the confirmary and the Academy takes one to the colourful multi-cultural gathering of the Spring Festival. The people of various cultures, races and nations, confluence with a great variety of beliefs, traditions, religions, healing methods, arts, expectations and faith that are knitted together as a quilt. The healing process of Velma comes to a culmination with the Spring Festival setting the background for the fissures in the society to be healed.

*The Salt Eaters* makes known that the “whole” picture must be shown in order for true understanding about an event or culture can take place. When Obie, Velma’s husband, is confronted with change for his Academy, an important place in the city of Claybourne, the narrator notes that outside forces caused a rift in the plan.

And so the Spring Festival had been designed as a holding action, way to reconcile the camps, to encourage everyone to work together until the plan could be put to them. But then the hotheads had brought the guns into the place and the splits widened and Obie had not moved quickly enough, been forceful enough, was overcome with ambivalence. Obie felt the image of himself coming apart in Ahiro’s hands. ‘Have to be whole to see whole,’ Mrs. Heywood had counseled them. (SE 92)

The Spring Festival was supposed to be the gathering where people are called to action. Obie’s dilemma in this scene arises because outside forces
have invaded his space, causing him to panic. Because his Academy was being dictated “from the outside,” Obie was left with the lingering wisdom about wholeness that Mrs. Heywood would always impart, but he could not act on his feelings.

Bambara notes that,

We’re so turned around about Western models, we don’t even know how to raise the correct questions. But raise them we must if we are to fashion a natural sense of self, if we are to develop harmonious relationships with each other … I’m not arguing for the denial of manhood or womanhood, but rather a shifting of priorities, a call for Selfhood, Blackhood (129).

Thus, Bambara is calling for unity within the communities, which is connected to her theme of wholeness in *The Salt Eaters* By showing the amalgamation of different people in the communities who attempted to fulfill different obligations and duties for the Academy, the interconnectedness of people is shown and how it is important for wholeness to abound; Bambara shows how important it is for coalitions to coalesce.

Susan Willis asserts it: “For black women, history is a bridge defined along motherliness” (6), the bridge between Willow Springs and the city connects the descendants of Sapphira Wade over centuries and the pure black culture with multicultural cities. Their matriarchal lineage and the link between the dead and living women are evident in the visit of Miranda and Cocoa to the graveyard within the circle of oaks. John Paul –Miranda’s father and Jonah Day his father seem to reveal their lineage, lives and Cocoa brushes her mother’s grave with tears in her eyes— and listens to her mother’s narration.
The young pale woman and the old brown woman look at each other over those mounds of time. The young hands touch the crumbling lime stone as her inner mind remembers. A question from those inner eyes: the two graves that are missing? The breeze coming up from The Sound swirls the answer around her feet: Sapphire left by wind. Ophelia left by water. (MD 237).

The ancestors of Miranda express and pass on the knowledge of the past through these narrations in first person. Naylor retains the tie among the Days women along with gardening-with Nature.

Remember this – A wave over a patch of Zinnias and scarlet petals take flight. And this – Winged marigolds follow them into the air. Listen – A thump of the stick: morning glories start to sing. The other place. Butterflies and humming birds. And the wisdom to draw them. Ancient eyes, sad and tried: its time you know. An old house with the big garden. And it’s seen its share of pain (MD 238).

The other place is the ancestral house in which Mama Day’s mother and baby sister died and believing that living in the house, they cannot get back the lost peace, the family leaves the house. Whenever Mama needs courage, to consult and relate with the past or to use her conjuring power against evil, she visits the other place. Revisiting the graveyard and the other place, Miranda has drawn her strength and knowledge of the past which she passes on to Cocoa. Thus the bond between women which started from Sapphira unfolds to Cocoa to carry on to the next generation. The family saga is partly narrated by Miranda and partly by the voices of the dead (for which you have to be listening).
Cocoa visits willow springs every August. During one of her visits she perceives the connectedness which sustains them. She understands that it is vital to establish her identity, which she was unaware of earlier. Mattie Michael and Miranda Day are everybody's Mama - strong, caring, and determined - the glue that held the families, women and community together. The writer has rescued them from the persistent image of passivity, accommodation, and self-satisfaction associated with the black mammy stereotype. The African Americans have not only inherited the colour from their ancestral land but also an affirmation of life and shared beliefs which help preserve their ethnicity. Their evolution from ‘the mule of the world’ to the ‘ebony phoenix’ traces not only the shattering of the stereotypes but also in constructing their ethnicity.

Naylor has also explored the relationship of men, and women who are close to their hearts: from Bascombe Wade, who freed slaves for the sake of his love for Sapphira, Ambush who offers rich love and understanding to Bernice and George who sacrificed his life to save Cocoa’s life proving that the bond among women is strengthened by men. Men support Miranda and there is a mutual respect in Miranda and the men who support her. Miranda admires George and also realizes that the female power has to be strengthened by his hands to save Ophelia. “It’s gonna take a man to bring peace—and all they had was that boy” (MD 410).

This solidarity between men and women qualifies the men and elevates George to become a healer with Miranda to save Ophelia.

Of his own accord he has to hand it over to her. She needs his hands in hers – his very hand – so she can connect it up with all the believing that had gone before. A single moment was all she asked, even a finger- tip to touch hers
here at the other place. So together they could be the bridge for Baby girl to walk over (MD 445).

Bascombe Wade’s ledger, (with the sale deed) John Paul’s walking Cane and George’s hands are needed to retrieve Ophelia. The opening of the well, sealed by her father John Paul after Peace’s death, makes Miranda realize the sorrow and misery of her father at the loss of Peace which was overshadowed by her mother’s grief and madness. Dr. Buzzard, Ambush, Junior Lee are the men who love and respect the women and have a positive role in the novel. Naylor institutes a relationship beyond gender which becomes meaningful that gives the peace the Days women lost in their lives. If *Linden Hills* drives home the point that upward progress at the cost of your roots leads to damnation, *Mama Day* sends out a message that achievement of purpose in isolation becomes a failure but a joint venture brings success. Hence, black sisterhood transcends gender in *Mama Day*. This is exemplified in George’s attempt to do it in his own way, without understanding what Miranda asks of him, he fails and loses his life. The death of Peace and her mother Ophelia – the suicides also reiterates this. The Days family is liberated from the negative impact of these deaths by establishing harmony with the islanders.

*Bailey’s Café* like *The Women of Brewster Place* is composed of mini plots dealing with various characters struggling in life and finding haven in the magical place Bailey’s Café. The solace of human compassion is enjoyed by the characters who are exploited physically or psychologically and abandoned by their own family members. Naylor introduces the most painful story of Sadie she lives to dance to the tunes of others in her life, not interested in knowing what she needs or wants.

Sadie -a whore, a wino is the daughter of an alcoholic mother who forces her into prostitution and abortion at a very early age. After her
mother’s death she meets Daniel, who is thirty years older than her, and she accepts his offer to marry her as she has no other choice. Their married life is very strange. He never talks and as she has learnt from her mother to live in invisibility. With commitment she creates a pleasant home remaining unheard. Daniel dies after twenty years leaving the house to his two alienated daughters of previous marriage who are unwilling to transfer the deed to Sadie.

In her attempt to raise money to purchase the house, she pleads with a plain clothed policeman to accept her body for $2.04 and spends two weeks in jail. Left shelterless, left with her only asset “her body” for livelihood, Sadie reaches Bailey’s Café. Bailey identifies her elegance and manners despite her ill reputation. She meets Iceman who befriends her and later proposes to her but she refuses his offer as she is still whirling in her bitter past. Her abode is Eve’s Boarding house which is next to the Café. Eve accepts only the women those who know what it means ‘to walk a thousand years’.

Brewster Place was an ‘illegitimate child’ whereas Eve’s boarding house is at cross roads, an abode for dejected women. Brought up in rural Louisiana by a stern minister whom she calls as godfather, Eve is thrown away by him when he discovers her longing for sensuality. Godfather bathes her every night and even after she reaches her teenage but halts the nightly baths as people find it queer but Eve’s body longs for human touch. Prevented from mingling with other children, Eve finds a way out for her yearning for relationship. Lying face down, pressing her body to the ground, she asks her only companion, mentally challenged Billy to march around her stomping as vigorously as he can. This gives her the physical pleasure that she missed, but discovering this game, the godfather throws her out. She goes to New Orleans where she develops her talent to make money without subjecting herself to prostitution. Eve reaches Bailey’s Café
and establishes a boarding house near it, which becomes a home to the abandoned women with a loveliest garden outside. Naylor introduces the dejected women who are supported and protected by Eve in her boarding house one by one, as in the Jam session.

Like Sadie, Jesse Bell longs for favor and love from her in-laws the Kings, who look down upon her, her family and their heritage. But dominant and cunning Uncle Eli, her husband’s relative has a great influence on her husband severs her bond with her husband as well as son. Like Mattie and Miranda, Eve creates a space for women, and becomes their provider and protector. The women, who are victims of the patriarchal society in Naylor’s first two novels, seem to transcend suffering and have power of their own in their lives in *Mama Day*. Naylor paints the image of Miranda at the closing of the novel, with the satisfaction of the handing over of women’s tradition, wisdom and power to Ophelia.

It’s a face that’s been given the meaning of Peace. A face ready to go in search of answers, so at last there ain’t no need for words as they lock eyes over the distance. Under a sky so blue it’s stopped being sky, one is closer to the circle of the oaks than the other. But both can hear clearly on the east side of the island on the west side, the waters were still (MD 487).

Nature plays a vital role in connecting Mama Day with her ancestors. Naylor illustrates how she becomes one with Nature. “She can still stand so quiet, she becomes part of a tree” (MD 126). Naylor’s statement about Miranda depicts Miranda’s oneness with nature that she almost turns into a tree. She has no fear in the woods about ‘haints’ like Buzzard. Dr. Buzzard doesn’t have a close bond with nature and he has fear.
An interesting observation is made by Lindsay Tucker Naylor differentiates between Miranda’s capability to listen to the voices of her ancestors in the woods, in the breeze from the sea or the sound, and she moves around the woods, whereas Dr. Buzzard is scared of the sounds heard in the woods and Miranda frightens him scowling “oooooohh…” and he hides himself behind the large trees. Miranda is thrilled looking at the man with gaudy hat and ornaments panicked as a mouse. Amidst the various techniques dealt by the writer, the readers can detect Naylor’s mild sense of humour too. Miranda’s child like nature and benevolent disposition are also contrasted to Dr. Buzzard’s weirdly appearance.

Miranda seems to have acquired her exceptional ability to see and hear from her lifelong acquaintance with the woods in Willow Springs. She hears her daddy’s voice when a bramble scratches her on her face: “Little mama, these woods been here before you and me, so why should they get out your way-learn to move around ‘em’ ” (MD 121). Africans had a close walk with God and Nature. All they had on Earth were God and Nature who were true to them unlike men. In their intimacy their inner mind opened making them sensitive to Nature. “But Younger, the whole island was her play ground: she’d walk through in a dry winter without snapping a single twig, disappear into the shadow of a summer cotton wood, flatten herself so close to the ground under a moss-covered rock shelf, folks started believing John. Paul’s little girl became a spirit in the woods” (MD 121).

Like Lucy Gray of Wordsworth’s poetry Miranda becomes one with Nature. Miranda could walk through those West Woods stone blind. She knows every crook and bent, every tree that falls and those that are about to sprout (MD 182) Ophelia says of Mama Day “her trees sang and her flowers took flight” (MD 349). This bond with Nature provided knowledge of Nature with which she became a healer. She could proclaim “I can do
more things with these than most folk’s dream of – no less believe” (MD 459). Miranda has immovable faith in her ability she gained from nature.

The knowledge and power the blacks get from the strong ties they have with Nature that provides ‘the second sight’ exalt them as healers and conjurers with supernatural power to rectify individuals and the community. These elements are of African origin including ancestors/ goddess of African tradition, necromancy, ritual, spiritual – exploration/ investigation, communalism and general celebration of culture. In Naylor’s words:

I wanted as well to look at women in history, especially at women connected to the earth who could affect behaviour. Until the Middle Ages, when the so-called ‘witches’ were persecuted, women were the primary healers who knew how to have control of their process of creation. So these wise women were chastised and burnt for stepping over those bounds… when I got to Mama Day I wanted to rest and write about what I believed. And I believe in the power of love and the power of magic. Sometimes I think they are one and the same. Mama is about the fact that the real basic magic is the unfolding of the human potential and that if we reach inside ourselves we can create miracles (42).

Many Afrocentric Feminist scholars agree to what Patricia Hill Collins says in her *Black Feminist Thought* who states that the Africans in America gained some authority by “retaining significant elements to West African culture and that knowledge produced in Black communities was hidden from and suppressed by the dominant group” (215). In her book *Black Feminist Thought* Collins traces Black American Women’s West African heritage and depicts the significance of “other mothers”, female
bonding evident in “ethnic of caring” negated from the white literary canon and projection of “controlling images” such as “the mammy” and Jezebel – “meshing smoothly with systems of race, class and gender oppression” and argues that these “‘controlling images’” should be replaced by an Afro-centric feminist aesthetic for beauty” (216).

In Mattie, the persona of the magic women, the healers, - the grandmothers and great grandmothers get epitomized. She is symbolic of mothering, nurturing qualities of the ancestral mothers who had therapeutic impact on the suffering women, like Ciel in the novel. After the service, Mattie found Ciel almost dying in front of them, and screamed:

No! No! No! Like a black Brahman cow desperate to protect her young, she surged into the room, pushing the neighbor woman and others out of her way . . . . she sat on the edge of the bed and enfolded the tissue – thin body in her huge ebony arms. And she rocked. Ciel moaned. Mattie rocked. Propelled by the sound, Mattie rocked her out of the bed, out of that room, into a blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time. She rocked her over Aegean seas so clean they shone like crystal, so clear the fresh blood of sacrificed babies torn from their mother’s arms and given to Neptune could be seen like pink froth on the water. She rocked her on the part the spilled brains of Senegalese infants whose mothers had dashed them on the wooden sides of slaved ships. And she rocked on.
She rocked her into her childhood and let her see murdered dreams. And she rocked her back, back into the womb, to the nadir of her hurt, and they found it – a slight silver splinter, embedded just below the surface of the skin. And
Mattie rocked and pulled and splinter gave way, but its roots were deep, gigantic ragged and they tore up flesh with bits of fat and muscle tissue clinging to them. They left a huge hole, which was already starting to pus over, but Mattie was satisfied. It would heal (WBP 103-104).

This scene is very much like Marshall’s redemption of Avey Johnson in *Praise song*, the older woman washes the younger woman in the ritual of cleansing and renewal. The language becomes musical describing Ciel’s hopelessness and magical rocking of Mattie bringing her back to life with hope. “And morning would come” (WBP 105). Mattie gives her a bath in a tub which is symbolic of baptism. The rocking of Ciel to the ancient times (The myth of Aegean seas turning pink with the sacrifice of children to Neptune), to her ancestral slave past (the spilled brain of Senegalese infants by their helpless mothers) and to her past (from childhood to womb) is the process of her rebirth.

The black sisterhood depicted in *The Women of Brewster Place* is elevated into the healing powers of women in her *Mama Day*. Its traces are found in Mattie rocking Ciel and move her into life and hope. The rejuvenating quality in the swing of their music is also captured in this scene.

It comes with the cultural territory: the beating of the bush drum, the rocking of the slave ship, the rhythm of hand going from cotton sack to cotton row and back again. It went on to settle into the belly of the blues, the arms of Jackie Robinson, and the head of every ghetto kid who lives to a ripe old age (BC 158).
This tells in a nutshell how their ethnicity and culture are preserved in their community and handed over to their progeny without any effort by women, connecting the rocking of cradle with it. Mattie’s rocking and bathing symbolify the renewal and rebirth of the shared beliefs with their motherland. Naylor has become what Marjorie Pryse terms as

a metaphorical ‘conjure woman’ a medium who, like Morrison, Walker, and others, make(s) it possible for… readers … to recognize their common literary ancestors (gardeners, quilt makers, grandmothers), root workers and women who write autobiographies and to name each other as a community of inheritors (6).

According to some scholars, the Middle Passage would have been so traumatic an event for the African slaves that it would have annihilated their African culture. Henry Louis Gates Jr., counters such an argument. He explains in his The Signifying Monkey that the Africans brought with them their cultures, music, myths, languages, metaphysical terms for order, expressive cultural practices which even the horrendous Middle Passage and brutality of everyday life on the plantation could not effectively obliterate (3-4). Naylor agrees with Gates’ view. She says:

When our people came to this country, they brought animism with them, what people used to call paganism. They brought their traditional beliefs, their traditional sense of religion. Then they made a coalition between what they brought and what they found here. You see that struggle between what is native practice versus what is orthodox and religious in practice (Ashford 81).
She reaffirms it in an interview with Matteo Bellinelli. “I am a cultural nationalist. That means I am very militant about who and what I am as an African American. I believe that you should celebrate voraciously that which is yours” (107). In all her works, Naylor celebrates the rich and varied African American culture. She is very proud of her Southern roots and keen on delineating its culture very close to African origin.

Moreover the female leadership has existed in West African secret societies and some of their beliefs and practices can be traced in African American societies in various forms –superstitions, folk medicines, and tales about conjurers or tricksters. Margaret Creel in *A Peculiar People: Slave religion and Community Culture among the Gullahs* portrays the obvious resemblance of secret society rituals in voodoo. Naylor has excavated all the remnants of such rituals and beliefs in *Mama Day*.

In Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo* Uncle John explains to Indigo that “Then whites what owned slaves took everythin’ was ourselves” leaving the slaves the role recourse to cultural crafts that accredit the “reality of the unreal” (Shange 27, 26). Naylor’s *Mama Day*, Lindsay Tucker argues, draws on African “magico-religious” views of the world in *Recovering the Conjure Woman: Texts and Contexts in Gloria Naylor’s Mama Day*.

Women have strong footing in their African roots so they are less acculturated than the other African Americans. Most of the conjurers have expertise in herbal medicines and mostly the supernatural power run in families and is inherited by the successors. The conjure women carry the name mother and ‘two-headed’ and have some authority in the community.(23)
Like Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*, Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*, and Sapphire's *Push* are among the works which deal with women who have become ill because of broken ties to their histories and communities, because of racial hatred, or because of domestic and sexual violence. Political and social factors are always at work influencing how each woman experiences her illness in physical, mental, and spiritual ways.

Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* again to raise connections between patients and social conditions, as well as to ask questions about bioethics and uncertainty, medicine and epistemology, and how medicine might resist dehumanizing trends through the "myriad possibilities of communitas" (218). There is a mutual respect and admiration for each other between Miranda and Brian. “For years Miranda and Brian Smithfield have had what you’d call a working relationship –some reasons it worked better than others. But each knew each other’s limitations and where to draw the line” (MD 129). Dr. Smithfield accepts that Miranda uses “plainer words and slower cure than them concentrated drugs” (MD 130). He recollects her picking up a knife on two occasions.

Once when Parris got bit by a water moccasin, and the time when Reema’s oldest boy was about to kill them both by coming out hind parts first”… “Them stitches on Reema’s stomach was neat as a pin and she never set up a fever”…“Being a good doctor, he knew another one when he saw her” (MD 130).
Miranda has first-hand knowledge about her patients too. When Bernice talks about fertility drugs which would work miracles: Miranda says “the only miracle is life itself and when it comes, it comes” (MD 64). She also adds “And your constitution can’t handle them strong drugs” (MD 65). Bernice then suggests Mama of going to the other place but she doesn’t heed to it. She pretends as if she didn’t hear what Bernice said. Mama Day doesn’t want to use anything against nature in the case of Bernice. She makes use of hen’s egg to determine Bernice’s ability to become pregnant and replaces the Greek study of entrails: Real careful she breaks a fresh egg so that the yolk stays whole. Cupping the shell in her hand, she watches for a while as the bloated yellow swings in the mucous—not this month” (MD 44).

And she says “Every time, you get your monthly, plant a gold one—let the life blood flow out of you into this seed. And come spring, she could tell Bernice, when you take the vines from them gold seeds out into the garden, you’re really taking the life time between you and the baby” (MD 150). Miranda tells Abigail that she is going to give Bernice the magic seeds—some pumpkin seeds shaken in saffron water and some in crook-neck squash and mixed in dew berry juice—she get yellow and black seeds. These yellow seeds are golden magic seeds for Bernice; Miranda says “mind is a funny thing, Abigail—and a powerful thing at that” (MD 149). Miranda uses the psychic power of her patient to work miracles. But Bernice loses faith in Miranda’s treatment and goes beyond the bridge—literally and symbolically—gets a child but loses him; because it was against Nature she thinks.

Miranda’s name means ‘worker of wonders’ and Naylor says she has ‘gifted hands’ which has received almost all the babies born in the island, cared and cured the sick and cultivated nurtured plants. She takes part in the process of creation. But in spite of her healing powers Miranda strongly
believes that mind is more powerful than the artifacts of voodoo. She treats Carmen Rae’s son. She combines common sense, basic cleanliness and mother’s sensitivity and duly towards her children along with the dose of medicine she prepares with senna pods, colts foot, horehounds, white cherry bark and black cohosh. Miranda senses that the medicine is powerful for the child’s underweight and stays to check the impact and then gives a list of fruits child should be fed with to regain energy. The real challenge to Miranda is that her hatred is more dangerous than her hoodoo. Women have knowledge of treating physical and mental diseases as it is in their collective unconscious as Africans have lived as one large family. This has permeated into their minds that it has been there without formal education or training. Eve in Bailey’s Café ensures that all the abused women who come to her boarding house are healed and become whole of their own accord. Eve performs the ritual of the laying on of hands on Jesse Bell who becomes a heroin addict due to the forceful separation from her husband and son. Eve miraculously heals her in just a few days to such an extent that the rehabilitated Jesse does not yield to the temptation of even the best narcotics.

Speaking to Claudia Dreiling about *Mama Day*, Naylor says:

It is collective memory. In Willow Springs they remember things they don’t even know. What they pass [down] is a sort of ancestral memory. So they can say everybody knows about Sapphira wade, but nobody speaks her name. Because what they got through the spirit, through the miasma, is knowledge of their history. That has always been very powerful for me. The fact that they had this collective memory, a memory that transcends the collective one (268).
After four years of marriage, Cocoa brings her husband to meet her family. For Cocoa, Willow Springs is home and a site of healing. She says George knew only one part of her while “the rest of me-the whole of me – was here.” (MD 176). Unfortunately, it was to be George’s first and last visit. Cocoa is hexed by a jealous root-worker Ruby. As a consequence of which Cocoa is dying. At the same time a hurricane severs all connections to the mainland. Cocoa’s sickness creates a cultural clash between George “a stone city boy” brought up in a shelter for boys, in reverence of rationalism and in profound distrust of superstition, and Mama Day, the healer and conjure woman. George is determined not to let his wife die. Mama Day with her wisdom understands that Cocoa’s sickness is not only physical but also psychic. After a cleansing bathing ritual given by Mama Day to ward off the evil spell cast by Ruby, Abigail performs the laying on of hands. It is fundamentally a religious act that helps the woman become physically and spiritually whole, through the act of touching. This ritual gives Cocoa peace so long as her grandmother’s hands were on her “when her hands passed over a place where they (worms) were burrowing, they would remain still until she went on to another part of my body” (MD 290).

Even as Abigail continues to pat down the worms in her granddaughter’s body, she sings the spirituals. Joanne V. Gabbin recognizes such contact as a “symbolic act of blessing, healing, and ordination…that bestow[s] some gift” (247).

Mama Day goes to the “Other place” her ancestral home deep in the woods to seek guidance from her ancestors. She operates on the premise that “[t]he mind is everything” (MD 90). The only source of magic is belief, while the mind of the believer does the rest –makes the magic work, makes it a lot more than a mere “hocus-pocus.” Mama Day falls on her knees to pray to the Christian God – the Father and Son who do not provide her answer to the problem. It is then she appeals to the ancient Mother – Sapphira who in a dream suggest that Mama Day should “look past the
pain”. This incident reveals the persistence of tradition and age old folkloric African practice of ancestral worship in the present time.

Abigail tells George that he should assist Mama Day to help heal the woman all of them love dearly. However, the rationalist and scientific George dismisses Mama Day’s healing powers as “mumbo jumbo.” On one occasion he belittles the herbalist Mama Day that natural remedies are “in” now in mainland America to which she retorts “they always have been “in” down here. When doctor is scarce, folks ain’t got much else” (MD 195). In the foreword to “Patricia Jones – Jackson’s When Roots Die”, Charles Joyner observes that

…for generations folk medicine of both the pharmaceutical and the psychological varieties continued to heal the sick on the Sea Islands, and natural phenomena continued to serve as a sign foretelling the future whether changing weather or impending death (xii).

Having failed in all his efforts to save his wife George reluctantly goes to the Other Place. Mama Day asks George to perform the ritual of going to the chicken coop and bringing whatever he finds there and hands it to her. She gives Bascombe’s ledger and John-Paul’s (her father) staff-symbols of knowledge and power of the men who had their hearts broken by the women they loved. George has a congenital heart condition and is petrified of chickens. His having a scientifically trained mind, rationality and logic take precedence over the blind beliefs of Mama Day. He reluctantly enters the chicken coop but is attacked by the setting hen. Enraged that “Mama Day wanted only his hands” he wreaks havoc in the chicken coop (MD 300). Due to the stress and the destruction he causes in the enclosure, George suffers a heart failure. Knowing that his end is near he goes to Cocoa and grasps her shoulder. As his bleeding hand slides down
her arm, he dies, peacefully (MD 302). George performs the “laying on of hands” on Cocoa. Soon after his death, she recovers. He sacrifices himself for love and thereby saves the Day lineage. “Having no past, and trained to believe only in the present, George is unable to make a genuine surrender of belief to Miranda and hence loses his life” says Lindsey Tucker (183).

Mama Day wanted George to confirm to her belief system and extend his isolated self, by way of his hands, to his dying wife. But his understanding comes too late. In the end,” he went and did it his way, so he ain’t coming back” says Mama Day (MD 302). Further the joining of hands suggests a communal working together so as to share their individual strengths. The group becomes more powerful than the individual. The healing process is hastened when nurtured by a community. Later, Cocoa remarries. She names her second son after George as a gesture of love. When the young boy asks how his namesake looked like, she replies “a man who looked just like love.” (MD 310).

Naylor strongly believes:

> we have within us the mechanisms to always keep going on … there is no end to what the human spirit can do… they have to reach within themselves and pull out either something spiritual or … psychological or… physical or something to go on and … find hope in some way… (Ashford 85).

If the quilt made by Miranda in *Mama Day* gives her the power to sense the future events, Bambara’s quilt of Velma’s mind releases the energy to get healed. The action of the novel spans two hours during the “the annual spring festival of celebration and rebirth” (Hull 221). There is forever threats posed by a local group of militant blacks and the locally stored nuclear chemicals and the
black community in Claybourne is caught up in turmoil. The “confusion, chaos, and social inversion of carnival” provide a symbolic backdrop for the individual and communal calamities featured in the novel.

During the process of Velma’s healing, she is not preserved and protected from the world. She is absorbed in it and it is engrossed in her. Her journey through and away from her pain is steered by the collective energy of the “Master Mind” encircling her in the infirmary and the hands of the healer, Minnie Ransom, on her shoulders. Like the tremors which shake the whole Earth, the energy behind her healing gets channelized to extend to the panorama of the community. It spills out over the Master mind and rocks the community with psychic vibration. The throbbing of Velma’s heart and mind back to life, strongly replicates the society’s regaining of life and wholeness.

As Velma delves into the memories of pain that have been fracturing her to the point of termination, she is also working through the fractures that have been threatening the community. The politics of Black Nationalism and feminism, spiritual wellness and political organizing, traditional healing and modern science, artistic expression and political action, motherhood and autonomy, the past and the present, herself and her community - all possible factions and strife around her recuperate the wholeness. Bambara quilts the individual and the society with the power of healing- the coalition, tradition and healing are knit together in the novel.

The novel opens in the Southwest Community Infirmary where Miz Minnie Ransom, community midwife and “fabled healer of the district” and Dr. Meadows, trained at Meharry medical school who practices traditional Western medicine hold hands to heal Velma(SE 4). With the maxim “HEALTH IS YOUR RIGHT” inscribed above its entrance, the Infirmary’s establishment represents the unified effort of the “Free Coloreds of Claybourne” (SE 120), underpinning the correlation between individual health
and wholeness and the communal bonding. In the Infirmary “conventional medical treatments are integrated into the traditional healings” coexists (Hull 69). “Over the years, the spirit of the institution has been shaped and informed by grannies, midwives, root men, and conjure women” (SE 107).

The immediate source of Velma’s psychological instability is twofold: anguish at home and anxiety at work. At home she is subconsciously distressed by her husband’s past faithlessness; at work, as a computer programmer, she learns about a pending nuclear threat to Claybourne. Velma’s concerns are both personal and political. Unable to balance between the two Velma experiences a nervous breakdown during which she has recurring visions of “mud mothers” (SE 38). Calabashes, yams, and tribal facial markings- West African cultural markers –suggest West African cultural connection. These mud mothers “reflect, on some level, [a] primordial women-centered world [. . .] originating in Africa” (Hull 64). Velma is frightened by them considering them to be disturbing hallucinations which indicates her ignorance of the West African spiritual tradition. As she is culturally disconnected, she is psychologically fragmented, and to recover from cultural “amnesia” (SE 258) and she should explore new spiritual possibilities. Bambara brings together the Western medicine practitioner, community healer and ancient mud mothers to the healing session.

Old Wife is an ancestral spirit present at Velma’s healing. Old Wife, known as “Old Karen, the Old One, Wilder’s woman, Wilder’s Wife”, (SE 52) is present throughout the novel both as a living being and as a spirit. Minnie recalls that Old Wife “had a way of teaching us kids things” (SE 57), and Old Wife serves as Minnie’s mentor “one way and then another” (SE 51). Old Wife “the teller of tales no one would sit still to hear anymore” (SE 52), continues to dispense wisdom, mainly through “messages” (SE 45) to Minnie and represents the trickster figure of West Africa. Bambara intertwines ancient wisdom and
African tradition to project a positive version of the witch image created by whites.

Characterized as a witch or haint, Old Wife asserts herself “that’s how I chose to manifest myself this time” (295). She epitomizes the sense of freedom and self-determination the African American women had inherited from their African ancestry. She is as powerful as Sapphira Wade of *Mama Day*, to decide how, when and where she wants to be present. In creating Old Wife, Bambara has destroyed the stereotypes which restricted the depiction of black women in literature and reaffirmed the presence of African American women with new dimensions. The writer also has set her as a model for the women suffering due to broken familial and social ties, to pursue the principle of self-empowerment. She also demonstrates how they too can consciously choose to “manifest” themselves.

Miz Ransom the healer, mothers ‘dis eased’ Velma Henry and rocks her like a babe, as Mattie does in *The Women of Brewster Place*. Ransom is a representative of the mothers and ancestors who have been healers.

Miz Ransom rocking that woman like the mothers of all times hold and rock however large the load, never asking whose baby or how old or is it deserving, only that it’s a baby and not a stone. But all that was changing. And that was the part that was really knocking Cora off her center these days. Cause she’d been there and she’d seen the little children brought into the place burned, beaten, stabbed, stomped, starved, drooped, flung, dumped in boiling water. It was a sign of the times. Too much to bear, but she held on and never fainted and never lost her faith.(SE,111)
The healing process takes place in the mindscape. The healer acts as a medium and unfolds the convolutions of Velma’s mind. The non-verbal communication between faith healer, old wife and Master mind strengthens not only their solidarity, but also their healing power. According to Ruth Elizabeth Burks “From Baptism to Resurrection”, “the characters speak little, because they have lost the desire to communicate through words. Their thoughts, as conveyed by Bambara, are more real to them than that that is real” (qtd. in Butler-Evans 173). For Bambara, this is purposeful; she looked for “a new kind of narrator -- narrator as medium . . . a kind of magnet through which other people tell their stories.”

By taking up the environmental issues related to the nuclear plant, Bambara embraces what Alice Walker later called a Womanist aesthetic. “In Search of my Grand Mother’s Gardens” Walker explains that womanism speaks to a person who is “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (xi), and the environment in which they live. The Womanist approach is one that “supplies a way for Black women to address gender oppression without attacking Black men” (Collins 63), and it draws on Bambara’s notion of environment as a pivotal portion of life for all people.

Instead of separating issues of place, culture, and justice, Bambara’s novel consistently constructs environmental justice as emerging from individual responsibility to community, and community responsibility for individuals. Environmental racism surfaces in *The Salt Eaters* when readers become aware of the function of the Transchemical Company as an environmental hazard that makes people sick. “Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?” (3) asks Minnie Ransom, a healer in the community, asks the protagonist Velma Henry. This question, which opens The Salt Eaters, is strategically placed as readers become aware of individual responsibility for a different kind of social and political wholeness of a community.
The image of the black woman, historically denigrated, is absolved and glorified in *The Salt Eaters*. The Infirmary is “the real place” and Minnie is “the real thing” (113). Her abilities seem boundless. She can calm fretful infants, treat nervous disorders, cure gynaecological ailments, and dissolve cancerous lumps (113). Her healing powers are far above the modern western medical methods, and her extraordinary capabilities elevate her from subhuman to superhuman level. In the novel, both Minnie and Old Wife are reincarnated in flesh; thus, their cultural status is elevated beyond the characteristic reverence granted to the ancestors. Unlike ancestral spirits who are reincarnated in spirit only, Minnie and Old Wife are deified as physically immortal. Velma, “divinely healthy [and] whole” (148), ultimately earns elevated status in the novel as Minnie’s successor. As Cocoa continues with the lineage of Days women in *Mama Day* inheriting the power of black culture in Willow Springs, Claybourne has Velma Henry, healed and whole take up the responsibility of reconstructing the Confirmary, Academy and the Society.

In this process, the writer takes one to the new world which has no borders and boundaries. The world outside the Academy is stretched far and wide embracing the whole humanity. People of different nations and culture flowing together despite their different faiths and art forms are suggestive of Bambara’s clarion call to the African Americans to coalesce with all those who are ‘othered’ in this world. By transcending borders she creates cultural mulattoes in *The Salt Eaters*.

It is this spirit that drives and binds the African American women and enables them to ascertain their ethnicity in their writing. Margaret Walker intended her novel *Jubilee* to be “a folk novel based on folk material: folk sayings, folk beliefs and folk ways” (62). Naylor and Bambara using the folk tradition empower their women who emerge as distinct and authentic reservoirs of their ethnicity. They also annihilate all the remnants of negative image bestowed on them by the whites. They have chipped off the old block of poor dignity and self-worth from them.