CHAPTER – VI
Honey, de white man is the de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his women folks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see.

—Zora Neale Hurston 1937, 16

In 1974, a Black woman, Lucy Terry, gave birth to African American literature with “Bars Fight”. Since then, African American literature has performed a long journey. It has its own distinctive properties as regards themes and techniques. Today it has a strange power and vitality and become a dynamic branch of literature. Within this growing body of creative writing, the last four decades have witnessed the publication of some most vital works by African American women. African American writing has its roots deep in the historical circumstances of slaver

Reflecting the abiding forces of racism and discrimination, these traditions came to play a vital role, helping to forge community ties and establish a sense of identity out of which a distinctively black fiction emerged. These slave narratives followed a standardized form of autobiography in which personal memory played an important part. The narrators portrayed slavery as a condition of extreme physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual deprivation, a kind of hell on earth. Most of these narratives carried the subtitle “Written by Himself or Herself,” not only to support the claims of truth but also to assert the capabilities and humanity of these slaves, whose illiteracy was often considered a badge of their inferiority. African American women writers examine individuality and personal relationships as a means to comprehending complicated social issues while writing from the perspectives of being black and women. Thus they are in the best position to write on racism and sexism that are institutionalized not only in society, but also in one’s family and intimate relationships.

The critical responses to black women’s studies over the past few years have made booming proclamations that it was only in the seventies and not before it that black
women’s literary tradition really began. Such assumptions are far from being true because a parallel black women’s literary tradition within the larger tradition of African American literature has always existed. From enslaved Phillis Wheatley, who survived the slave ship to become the most renowned woman poet in eighteenth century America to Harriet Wilson who’s 1952 novel *Our Nig* holds an authentic reflection even today though through Zora Neale Hurston down to the remarkably gifted generation of Paul Marshall, Toni Morrison, it has been one continuous tradition.

Black women have a long history of activism that can be traced to pre-colonial Africa. Some black women writers have challenged the status quo in the cultural, political, and spiritual realms of their communities by using their craft to present women who defy traditional roles and resist strictures of oppression by using a cross-cultural analysis. All the emergent Black Feminist texts in the emergent phase such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Brown Girl, Brown Stone*, *The Color Purple*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Tar Baby* bear witness to history which forced the black women out of Africa, a paradise of human conditions and subsequently made them undergo the most traumatic, dehumanizing, and depersonalizing experiences of the chattel slavery of America. The journey from Africa to America through the Inferno of the middle passage was also a journey from blissful innocence to the most painful experience for the reason that the American slavery, through its weapons of economy, polity, and ideology, not only stripped the black women off of their African frame of reference but even conditioned them psychologically so as to transform them into near zombies or persons oblivious of their own culture and the authentic self. In other words, it is this history that wrested the ebony daughters from the heights of Edenic consciousness of the pre-slavery Africa and hurled them headlong into the dismal abyss of a typical colonial situation introduced by white America, a situation which devastated the black female psyche through poisonous fangs.

It is this triangular journey that stands central to these novelists’ functional design. However, being writers in the deconstructive vein, they reverse the journey and take all their heroines from the New World back to the source so as to restore the Yoruba
daughters to their paradisiacal consciousness which was forfeited during the first encounter with America. In other words, their texts successively illustrate stages of the historically grounded female quest involving the decision to investigate the historical past, difficulties in assimilating it and purposeful incorporation of the true historical past into the present self. The journey, which their women undertake, is at once literal and psychological extricating them from the shackles of “the imposed innocence.”

African American women’s oppression has encompassed three interdependent dimensions. First, the exploitation of Black women’s labour essential to U.S. capitalism—the “iron pots and kettles” symbolizing Black women’s long-standing ghettoization in service occupations—represents the economic dimension of oppression. Survival for most African American women has been such an all-consuming activity that most have had few opportunities to do intellectual work as it has been traditionally defined. The drudgery of enslaved African American women’s work and the grinding poverty of “free” wage labour in the rural South tellingly illustrate the high costs Black women have paid for survival. The millions of impoverished African American women ghettoized in Philadelphia, Birmingham, Oakland, Detroit, and other U.S. inner cities demonstrate the continuation of these earlier forms of Black women’s economic exploitation. Second, the political dimension of oppression has denied African American women the rights and privileges routinely extended to White male citizens (Burnham, 187–225).

Forbidding Black women to vote, excluding African Americans and women from public office, and withholding equitable treatment in the criminal justice system all substantiate the political subordination of Black women. Educational institutions have also fostered this pattern of disenfranchisement. Past practices such as denying literacy to slaves and relegating Black women to underfunded, segregated Southern schools worked to ensure that a quality education for Black women remained the exception rather than the rule. The large numbers of young Black women in inner cities and impoverished rural areas who continue to leave school before attaining full literacy represent the continued efficacy of the political dimension of Black women’s oppression. Finally, controlling images applied to Black women that originated during the slave era attest to the
ideological dimension of U.S. Black women’s oppression (KingKing, 42–72). Ideology refers to the body of ideas reflecting the interests of a group of people. Within U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal, and inevitable. In this context, certain assumed qualities that are attached to Black women are used to justify oppression.

From the mammies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, negative stereotypes applied to African American women have been fundamental to Black women’s oppression. Taken together, the supposedly seamless web of economy, polity, and ideology function as a highly effective system of social control designed to keep African American women in an assigned, subordinate place. This larger system of oppression works to suppress the ideas of Black women intellectuals and to protect elite White male interests and worldviews.

Denying African American women the credentials to become literate certainly excluded most African American women from positions as scholars, teachers, authors, poets, and critics. Moreover, while Black women historians, writers, and social scientists have long existed, until recently these women have not held leadership positions in universities, professional associations, publishing concerns, broadcast media, and other social institutions of knowledge validation. Black women’s exclusion from positions of power within mainstream institutions has led to the elevation of elite White male ideas and interests and the corresponding suppression of Black women’s ideas and interests in traditional scholarship (Higginbotham, 95–123). Moreover, this historical exclusion means that stereotypical images of Black women permeate popular culture and public policy.

Previously in African American women's history, some of the women had begged for greater voice as black women who were cognizant of the strengths and limitations of current feminist theory. In fact the practical exclusion from the literary process puts it, “female silencing”, has provoked the emergence of an African American feminist literature. The first book ever published by an African American, was written by a
woman. Since the publication of Phillis Wheatley’s Poems on Various Subjects, however, the literary discourse in African American literature has been dominated by male writers, similar to white literature; African American women had only a marginal position in the creation of their writing. In response to their begging, in the last century, writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker just to name a few, started to write against the grain of dominant racial and gender discourses.

Feminist scholars have moved rapidly forward in addressing theories of subjectivity, questions of difference, the construction of social relations as relations of power, the conceptual implications of binary oppositions such as male versus female or equality versus difference—all issues defined with relevance to gender and with potential for intellectual and social transformations. Notwithstanding a few notable exceptions, this new wave of feminist theorists finds little to say about race. The general trend has been to mention black and Third World feminists who first called attention to the glaring fallacies in essentialist analysis and to claims of a homogeneous "womanhood", “woman’s culture," and "patriarchal oppression of women."

The term womanism denotes black feminism. It may be defined as awareness among black women that they have been mistreated in life and misrepresented in literature simply because they are black, female and poor; and a commitment to unite against the racist, sexist and classist forces of American society, and assert themselves as intelligent, capable and sensitive human beings.

Some of the latest studies in Black Feminism are concerned with outlining its historical evolution as a discipline, as well as envisioning major tasks to undertake in the future. Other studies compile features underlining a common ground of thematic links among different arts, thus interrelating cultural expressions from different genres. There also seems to be a particular interest in compiling anthologies including outstanding, but often neglected, artists from different manifestations of African American culture. Taking the first premise into account, many critics have focused on outlining the evolution of Black Feminist literary studies from a historical perspective. V.P. Franklin (433-445) dwells upon the reasons why Black Feminism arose during the 1970s as a response to the
lack of attention African American women had to bear both in Black Studies, eminently male, and the Women’s Liberation Movement, primarily white.

By coining the term ‘womanism’ in her seminal book *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden: Womanist Prose* (1983), Alice Walker came to terms with these distinctions by bridging the gaps between disciplines such as Black Feminism, Black Studies and Feminism. By means of her ‘womanist’ perspective, Alice Walker highlighted the differences in strategies used in black and white feminist approaches while defending the wholeness of the entire black community, including both females and males.

In a similar way, Ula Taylor (234-253.), attempted to outline four main phases in Black feminist thought. To her mind, in the first wave, women created self-definitions to repel negative representations of Black womanhood. In a second phase, Black women confronted any structure of oppression in terms of race, class and gender. Subsequently, Black women became involved in intellectual and political activism, and finally, they came to terms with a distinct cultural heritage to resist discrimination. Thus, resembling Kristeva’s work (*New Maladies of the Soul*) to a certain extent, it is possible to argue they followed a scheme of difference, dominance, and eventually, understanding of a shared cultural heritage. Similarly, Frances Smith Foster (1965-1967) also reflects on the evolution of African American literary studies, stating that 1960s texts were characterized by being “predominantly twentieth century and overtly political”. (1967)

Nevertheless, as Black studies evolved, the consideration of gender relations among African Americans became a central concern with the increased availability of books written by women. Moreover, as Foster admits, “much ado was made about writing literature in genres that were accessible to ‘the people’” (1967), so that the scope of African American studies broadened in order to incorporate different cultural and artistic manifestations. Deborah E. McDowell complained about the lack of a developed body of Black feminist political theory and the eminently practical nature, rather than theoretical, of Black feminist scholarship approaches (154). In this respect, McDowell raised a note of caution so as to define a Black feminist methodology while outlining
three main tasks African American feminist criticism should take into consideration: examination of the works of Black male writers; revision of the scholarship of feminists in other disciplines, and isolation of thematic, stylistic, and linguistic commonalities among Black women writers (156-157). These two latter tasks, the concern about other disciplines and the identification of shared features in texts by different African American writers, have been the focus of many recent studies in Black Feminism.

A second major concern in Black Feminism following McDowell’s thesis, has been to outline commonalties and establish links between different cultural manifestations within African American women’s studies. Judith Musser states that “the Harlem Renaissance was a period in which diversity flourished” (27) and establishes a poetics of common characteristics that different short-stories of the period were found to share. Some of the characteristics Musser mentions can also be attached to other African American women’s cultural manifestations such as: urban settings; themes of struggle, conflict and oppression; female protagonists; use of dialect; a first-person narrator; female relationships, rejection of stereotypical representations of women; gender conflicts and violence. The subject of gender conflict and violence seems particularly recurrent as a result of poverty and oppression, to the extent that Barbara Smith considered it to be present in most African American women’s fiction (8).

A third main trend in African American women writers’ studies has been to compile or review anthology incorporating major names from different cultural manifestations. Aslaku Berhanu 1998, argued that important contributions by notable African American women were neglected by most mainstream scholars (296-305.), so she endeavoured to compile recent publications collecting outstanding names of African American women from different arts in important anthologies such as Darlene Clark Hine’s Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia (1993) and Black Women in United States History (1990); Jessie Carney Smith’s Notable Black American Women (1992), Donald Bogle’s Brown Sugar: Eight Years of America’s Black Female Superstars (1990), and Marianna W. Davis’ Contributions of Black Women to America (1982)
Bearing in mind the evolution of Black Feminism, Jordan offered an alternative view to the consideration of Hurston’s *Their Eyes* as one of the first canonical Black feminist novels. Despite acknowledging its importance in the field, Jordan describes Hurston’s novel as a ‘feminist fantasy’ since Janie “never perceives herself as an independent, intrinsically fulfilled human being” (115). Jordan argues black feminists have often turned to Hurston’s novel as an eminently feminist text, thus neglecting the reactionary atmosphere of the period and, at some points, of Hurston’s novel itself. Nonetheless, as Batker points out, Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* situated women at the centre of an African American women’s literary tradition and its transcendence takes shape, “within a broad continuum of African American women’s writing on sexuality early in this century” (199), thus concluding that “*Their Eyes* engages in early twentieth-century black feminist politics” (199).

Recently, the latest studies published with regard to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* have focused on the unraveling of *Beloved’s* identity in order to highlight the concept of a past common heritage, ultimately finding out that “*Beloved’s* lack of name signifies that she is everybody” (Koolish, 177), or that “*Beloved* represents the pain of slavery they all suffer in some way” (Parker, 12). Following another recent trend in Black Feminist studies, some critics have focused on depicting commonalities between black women writers’ novels and other cultural manifestations such as folk culture. Ferguson (1987) identified the male archetypes embodied by Janie’s three husbands in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Similarly, Jordan also put forward the importance of women’s relationships with one another as an important presence in both Hurston’s *Their Eyes* and Walker’s *The Colour Purple* (108).

Women have been subjected to the double yoke of slavery and patriarchy, both inflicted by men. *Beloved* is both a representation of the female victims of slavery and patriarchy, although her ghost returns to haunt all the living, females and males. Thus both Morrison’s novel and Bessie Smith’s lyrics share an important display of gothic imagery as a result of the haunting presence of past events that continue to exert their painful effects on the present. *Beloved* often resembles the character in Bessie’s
“Cemetery Blues”, when she sings “folks, I know a gal named Cemetery Lize, down in Tennessee/ she has got a pair of mean old graveyard eyes, full of misery/ every night and day, you can hear her sing a blues away”. These feelings are also present throughout Bessie’s song “Haunted House Blues”, when she sings “this house is so haunted with dead men I can’t lose/ and a sneaky old feeling gives me those haunted house blues”.

The black community around, aware of the situation, begin to sympathize with Sethe, and Paul D, a former slave of the plantation, finally returns to look after Sethe. Nonetheless, despite the fact that her presence is still noticed, Beloved disappears, and in a way, as Bessie sings in “I’m going back to my used to be”, Sethe feels at ease with her life again. However, as Bessie claims in “Yodling Blues”, Sethe goes on to feel “the blues, the blues, the yodling blues/ they seem to haunt me all the time”. Thus, Beloved represents the past grievous memories as a result of slavery, since Toni Morrison dedicated the novel to the slaves that perished during the transatlantic crossing from Africa to America. Sethe’s feeling of loss and her eagerness to overcome fear is similar to the blues that haunts Bessie all the time. Sethe experiences a curse similar to that of Bessie, so that the blues becomes an ever-present aspect in her life; an extrapolation of bitter pain and resentment from the past that expands to her present.

In Their Eyes Were Watching God, Nanny eloquently expresses her perspective on Black womanhood: “Ah was born back in slavery so it wasn’t for me to fulfill my dream of whut a woman oughta be and do. But nothin’ can’t stop you from wishin! You can’t beat nobody down so low till you can rob ‘em of they will. Ah didn’t want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn’t want mah daughter used dat way neither” (Hurston, 17). Like many African American women, she resisted the controlling images of “work-ox” and “brood-sow,” but her status as a slave prevented her fulfilling her “dreams of whut a woman oughta be and do.” She saw the constraints on her own life but managed to keep the will to resist alive. Moreover, she tried to pass on that vision of freedom from controlling images to her granddaughter.
Given the ubiquitous nature of controlling images, it should not be surprising that exploring how Black women construct social realities is a recurring theme in Black feminist thought. Overall, despite the pervasiveness of controlling images, African American women as a group have resisted these ideological justifications for their oppression (Holloway, 15–71). Unlike White women who “face the pitfall of being seduced into joining the oppressor under the pretense of sharing power,” and for whom “there is a wider range of pretended choices and rewards for identifying with patriarchal power and its tools,” Black women are offered fewer possibilities (Lorde, 117–118). In this context, individual women and subgroups of women within the larger collectivity of U.S. Black women have demonstrated diverse reactions to their treatment. Understanding the contours of this heterogeneity generally, and how U.S. Black women can be better equipped to resist this negative treatment, constitutes one important task for U.S. Black feminist thought.

Historically, literature by U.S. Black women writers provides one comprehensive view of Black women’s struggles to form positive self-definitions in the face of derogated images of Black womanhood. Portraying the range of ways that African American women experience internalized oppression has been a prominent theme in Black women’s writing. Mary Helen Washington (208–17) discussion of the theme of the suspended woman in Black women’s literature describes one dimension of Black women’s internalized oppression. Pain, violence, and death form the essential content of these women’s lives. They are suspended in time and place; their life choices are so severely limited that the women themselves are often destroyed.

Pecola Breedlove, an unloved, “ugly” 11-year-old Black girl in Toni Morrison’s novel The Bluest Eye (1970), internalizes the negative images of African American women and believes that the absence of blue eyes is central to her “ugliness.” Pecola cannot value her Blackness—she longs to be White so that she can escape the pain of being Black, female, poor, and a child. Her mother, Pauline Breedlove, typifies the internalization of the mammy image. Pauline Breedlove neglects her own children, preferring to lavish her concern and attention on the White charges in her care. Only by
accepting this subordinate role to White children could she, as a poor Black woman, see a positive place for her. U.S. Black women writers have chronicled other forms of Black women’s attempts to escape from a world predicated upon derogated images of Black womanhood. Fictional African American women characters use drugs, alcohol, excessive religion, and even retreat into madness in an attempt to create other worlds apart from the ones that produced such painful Black female realities. Pauline Breedlove in The Bluest Eye and Mrs. Hill in Meridian (Walker 1976) both demonstrate an attachment to religion that allows them to ignore their daughters. Eva Medina in Gayl Jones’s Eva’s Man (1976), Merle Kibona in Paule Marshall’s The Chosen Place, the Timeless People (1969), and Velma Henry in Toni Cade Bambara’s The Salt Eaters (1980) all experience madness as an escape from pain.

Taking into consideration the emphasis on the historical evolution of Black Feminism, along with the concern about identifying common features and the interdisciplinary approach to different arts within Black Feminism, several recent studies have focused on the importance of the blues, thus revealing this tripartite tendency in African American Women Studies. The blues interpreted from the point of view of African American women singers was described as the classic blues, as opposed to the country or folk blues which was particularly termed as male. The classic blues became popular during the 1920s and 30s; the period commonly known as the Harlem Renaissance. Thus, in a way, the classic blues originated at the same time that Black consciousness also began to emerge. Moreover, the blues, as specifically black music, broadened the scope of African American culture, thus considering popular culture in addition to mainstream literary manifestations. As Hamilton suggests “the years from 1920 to 1960 saw the publication of a diverse array of accounts of African American music, written by social scientists, folklorists, poets, record collectors and others who interpreted and documented black musical practice” (139). In addition, the classic blues lyrics included many of the features of cultural and gender politics commonly found in African American women’s fiction, even if rendered differently, emphasizing its sexual overtones.
Denial is another characteristic response to the controlling images of Black womanhood and their accompanying conditions. By claiming that they are not like the rest, some African American women reject connections to other Black women and demand special treatment for them. Mary Helen Washington (1982) refers to these characters as assimilated women. They are more aware of their condition than are suspended women, but despite their greater potential for shaping their lives, they still feel thwarted because they see themselves as misplaced by time and circumstances. Light-skinned, middle-class Cleo, a key figure in Dorothy West’s novel *The Living Is Easy* (1948), typifies this response. In one scene strong-willed Cleo hustles her daughter past a playground filled with the children of newly arrived Southern Blacks, observing that “she wouldn’t want her child to go to school with those niggers.” Cleo clings to her social class position, one that she sees as separating her from other African Americans, and tries to muffle the negative status attached to her Blackness by emphasizing her superior class position. Even though Cleo is more acceptable to the White world, the price she pays for her acceptance is the negation of her racial identity and separation from the sustenance that such an identity might offer.

U.S. Black women writers not only portray the range of responses that individual African American women express concerning their objectification as the other: they also document the process of personal growth toward positive self-definitions. The personal growth experienced by Renay, the heroine in Ann Allen Shockley’s *Loving Her* (1974), illustrates the process of rejecting externally defined controlling images of Black womanhood. Shockley initially presents Renay as a suspended woman who is trapped in a heterosexual marriage to an abusive husband and who tries to deny her feelings for other women. Renay retreats into music and alcohol as temporary spaces where she can escape having her difference—in this case, her Blackness and lesbianism—judged as inferior and deviant. After taking a White woman lover, Renay is initially quite happy, but she grows to realize that she has replaced one set of controlling images—namely, those she experienced with her abusive husband—with another. She leaves her lover to pursue her own self-definition. By the novel’s end Renay has begun to resist all external
definitions of herself that stem from controlling images applied to Blacks, women, and lesbians.

Renay’s experiences typify how Black women writers explore the theme of Black women’s resistance to these controlling images, a resistance typified by the emergent woman in Black women’s literature. Sherley Anne Williams’s novel *Dessa Rose* (1986) describes a Black slave woman’s emerging sense of power after she participates in a slave revolt, runs away, and eventually secures her own freedom. Dorine Davis, the heroine in Rosa Guy’s *A Measure of Time* (1983), is raped at age 10 by her White employer, subsequently sleeps with men for money, yet retains a core of resistance. Bad things happen to Dorine, but Guy does not portray Dorine as a victim. In *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni Morrison presents the character of Claudia, a 10-year-old Black girl who, to the chagrin of grown-ups, destroys White dolls by tearing off their heads and who refuses to share her classmates’ admiration of light-skinned, long-haired Maureen Peal. Claudia’s growing awareness of the “Thing that made her (Maureen Peal) beautiful and us ugly” and her rejection of that Thing—racist images of Black women—represents yet another reaction to negative images of Black womanhood. Like Merle Kibona in Paule Marshall’s *The Timeless Place, the Chosen People*, Vyry in Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966), Janie Crawford in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), or Meridian in Alice Walker’s *Meridian* (1976), Claudia represents a young version of emergent Black women carving out new definitions of Black womanhood.

Independent Black women heroines populate U.S. Black women’s fiction of the 1990s. Many of these Black female fictional characters express varying dimensions of the emergent woman thesis. Just as social class differences have become more prominent in Black women’s controlling images overall, images of emergent women in Black women’s literature also reflect social class diversity. Working-class women become emergent women by overcoming an array of hardships, many of them financial, that aim to keep them down. In Barbara Neely’s novel *Blanche on the Lam* (1992) Blanche evades the law by hiding out as a domestic worker for a rich White family. Another working-class heroine is Valerie Wilson’s fictional detective Tamara Hale. A single mother of a
teenage son, Hale juggles issues of financial well-being and raising her son in the Newark metropolitan area. Interestingly, in both Neely and Wilson’s fiction, working-class women spend little time bemoaning their unmarried, uncoupled status. Neither fictional heroine agonizes over the absence of a Black male husband or lover in their lives. In contrast to, middle-class Black women become emergent women by changing their expectations about their femininity and Black men’s expectations.

Terry McMillan’s two volumes, *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1996), can be read as companion pieces that advise Black middleclass women how to emerge. In *Waiting to Exhale*, four Black women friends struggle with issues of having satisfying relationships with Black men. By the end of the book, two of the women have found meaningful relationships with men. More importantly, what they have all learned is that their friendship with one another is as important as their ties to men. In MacMillan’s subsequent volume, Stella, a Black single mother who is a highly paid, successful professional, takes a trip to Jamaica by herself and meets Winston, a much younger man. By the end of the volume, Stella has shed the limitations of distinctly American controlling images, and decides that true love transcends differences of age and nationality. Whereas racism, sexism, and class exploitation do not preoccupy the emergent women created by Neely, Wilson, and McMillan, the social contexts in which these authors embed their characters are clearly structured by these oppressions.

The many documentaries and feature films where Black women appear as central characters constitute another arena where emergent Black women appear. Not only could Black women read about emergent Black women in Terry MacMillan’s fiction, audiences could view images of Black women trying to “exhale” and “get their groove” on the big screen. This theme of U.S. Black women coming to know themselves, and often doing so in company of other Black women, wove throughout a cluster of films whose subject matter differed dramatically. Feature films made by Black women directors, such as Julie Dash’s *Daughters of Dust*, Michelle Parkerson’s *Gotta Make That Journey: Sweet Honey in the Rock*, and Ayoka Chenzira’s *Alma’s Rainbow* all illustrate the value Black women filmmakers place on Black women’s emerging self-definitions.
Emergent women may have only recently made their appearance in Black women’s fiction and film, but such women have long populated everyday lived experience. In her autobiography, Lorene Carey, a working-class African American woman who helped to segregate a prestigious New England boarding school, tells of what happens when everyday Black women decide to “turn it out”:

My mother, and her mother, who had worked in a factory, and her mother, who had cleaned apartments in Manhattan, had been studying these people all their lives. . . . And I had studied them. I had studied my mother as she turned out elementary schools and department stores. I always saw it coming. Some white department-store manager would look at my mother and see no more than a modestly dressed young black woman making a tiresome complaint. He’d use that tone of voice they used when they had important work elsewhere. Uh-oh. Then he’d dismiss her with his eyes. I’d feel her body stiffen next to me, and I’d know that he’d set her off. And then it began in earnest, the turning out. She never moved back. It didn’t matter how many people were in line. . . . Turning out, I learned, was not a matter of style; cold indignation worked as well as hot fury. Turning out had to do with will (Lorene. 58–59).

Emergent women have found that one way of surviving the everyday disrespect and outright assaults that accompany controlling images is to “turn it out.” This is the moment when silence becomes speech, when stillness becomes action. As Karla Holloway says, “no one wins in that situation, but usually we feel better” (31).

“In order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers,” asserts Black feminist poet Audre Lorde. This “watching” generates a dual consciousness in African American women, one in which Black women “become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection” (p. 114), while hiding a self-
defined standpoint from the prying eyes of dominant groups. Ella Surrey, an elderly Black woman domestic, eloquently summarizes the energy needed to maintain independent self-definitions: “We have always been the best actors in the world. . . . I think that we are much cleverer than they are because we know that we have to play the game. We've always had to live two lives—one for them and one for ourselves” (Gwaltney, 238, 240).

Behind the mask of behavioural conformity imposed on African American women, acts of resistance, both organized and anonymous, have long existed (Davis 1981, 1989; Terborg-Penn 1986; Hine 1989; Barnett 1993). Despite the strains connected with domestic work, Judith Rollins (1985) asserts that the domestic workers she interviewed appeared to have retained a “remarkable sense of self-worth.” They “skillfully deflect these psychological attacks on their personhood, their adulthood, their dignity, and these attempts to lure them into accepting employers’ definitions of them as inferior” (p. 212). Bonnie Thornton Dill (1988) found that the domestic workers in her study refused to let their employers push them around. As one of the respondents declared, “When I went out to work my mother told me, ‘Don’t let anybody take advantage of you. Speak up for your rights, but do the work right. If they don’t give you your rights, you demand that they treat you right. And if they don’t, then you quit’” (p. 41). Jacqueline Bobo (1995), reports that the U.S. Black women in her study who viewed the film The Color Purple were not passive consumers of controlling images of Black womanhood. Instead, these women crafted identities designed.

According to many African American women writers, no matter how oppressed an individual woman may be, the power to save the self lies within the self. Other Black women may assist a Black woman in this journey toward personal empowerment, but the ultimate responsibility for self-definitions and self valuations lies within the individual woman herself. An individual woman may use multiple strategies in her quest for the constructed knowledge of an independent voice. Like Celie in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, some women write themselves free. Sexually, physically, and emotionally abused, Celie writes letters to God when no one else will listen. The act of acquiring a
voice through writing, of breaking silence with language, eventually moves her to the action of talking with others. Other women talk themselves free. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie tells her story to a good friend, a prime example of the rearticulation process essential for Black feminist thought (Hurston, Zora Neale. [1937] 1969. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Greenwich, CT: Fawcett. 1937). Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls* (1975) also captures this journey toward self-definition, selfvaluation, and an empowered self. At the end of the play the women gather around one woman who speaks of the pain she experienced at seeing her children killed. They listen until she says, “I found God in myself and I loved her fiercely.” These words, expressing her ability to define herself as worthwhile, draw them together. They touch one another as part of a Black women’s community that heals the member in pain, but only after she has taken the first step of wanting to be healed, of wanting to make the journey toward finding the voice of empowerment.

Despite the persistence of these four ideas about consciousness—the importance of self-definition, the significance of self-valuation and respect, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and the centrality of a changed self to personal empowerment—these themes do not find a prominent place in much U.S. Black feminist thought within academia. Sadly, Black women intellectuals in the academy find themselves pressured to write for academic audiences, most of which remain resistant to including U.S. Black women as students, faculty, and administrators. However interested highly educated, middle-class, White male and female academic audiences may be in Black women’s intellectual production, their concerns differ markedly from those of the majority of U.S. Black women. Despite this context, many Black women intellectuals within academia still explore this theme of consciousness, but do so in new and often highly important ways for example, criminologist Beth Richie’s (1996) book *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women*. Through interviews with women who were being detained in jail, Richie advances the innovative thesis that those Black women who had been self-reliant and independent as children and thus imagined themselves as strong Black women were more likely to be battered than those who did
not. Upon first glance, this is a curious combination—the more self-reliant simultaneously value themselves less. Richie’s explanation is revealing.

The strong Black women saw themselves as personal failures if they sought help. In contrast, those women who did not carry the burden of this seemingly positive image of Black womanhood found it easier to ask for help. Richie’s study points to the significance of external definitions of all types. By attending to heterogeneity among Black women, her work creates space for new self-valuations to appear that need not be attached to images of strong Black women. The increased scholarly attention to Black adolescent girls should reveal new reactions to intersecting oppressions among a population that has come of age under new social conditions. Within this tradition, *Sugar in the Raw* (1997), Rebecca Carroll’s published interviews from more than 50 that she conducted among U.S. Black girls provides a glimpse into the consciousness of contemporary Black girls. Despite elements of Black popular culture that bombard them with images of sexualized women and the plethora of “hoochies” populating music videos, many of the girls display an impressive maturity. For example, 18-year-old Kristen’s reflections on her struggles for self-valuation brought on by her crush on a Black boy who seemed unaware that she existed: It was obvious and evident that most if not all of the black boys in my school wanted nothing to do with black girls, which was sort of traumatizing. You can’t really come away from an experience like that without feeling like there is something wrong with you. In the final analysis, I ended up feeling that there was something wrong with him, but it was hell getting there. (Carroll 1997, 131–32)

The increased attention in Black feminist-influenced scholarship paid to Black women’s pain in abusive relationships of all sorts, and to the special concerns of Black adolescent girls both seem designed to create new intellectual and political space for the “hellish” journeys that many Black women still encounter. At least at this historic moment, the need to put up a united front seems less important than exploring the various ways that individual Black women are personally empowered and disempowered, even within allegedly safe spaces. Consciousness still matters, but it becomes one that
acknowledges the complexities of crosscutting relations of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Weaving throughout these historic and contemporary efforts at self-definition is the quest to move from silence to language to individual and group action. In this quest, persistence is a fundamental requirement for this journey.

Black women’s persistence is fostered by the strong belief that to be Black and female is valuable and worthy of respect. In the song “A Change Is Gonna Come,” Aretha Franklin (1967) expresses this feeling of enduring despite the odds. She sings that there were times that she thought that she would not last for long. She sings of how it has been an “uphill journey all the way” to find the strength to carry on. But despite the difficulties, Aretha “knows” that “a change is gonna come.” Whether individual struggles to develop a changed consciousness or the group persistence needed to transform social institutions, actions that bring about changes empower African American women. By persisting in the journey toward self-definition, as individuals, they are changed. When linked to group action, their individual struggles gain new meaning. Because their actions as individuals change the world from one in which they merely exist to one over which they have some control, they enable them to see everyday life as being in process and therefore amenable to change. Perhaps that is why so many African American women have managed to persist and “make a way out of no way.” Perhaps they knew the power of self-definition.

U.S. Black women writers and filmmakers have explored many themes affecting Black women’s relationships. One concerns the difficulties that African American women can have in affirming one another in a society that derogates Black women as a group. Albeit for different reasons, the inability of mothers to help their daughters come to understandings of Black womanhood characterize mother-daughter relationships in Toni Morrison’s novel The Bluest Eye and in the film Just Another Girl on the IRT. Another theme concerns how Black women’s relationships can support and renew. Relationships such as those between Celie and Shug in Alice Walker’s novel The Color Purple, among sisters in the film Soul Food, among the four women in Waiting to
Exhale, and among women in an extended family in the film Daughters of Dust all provide cases where Black women helped one another grow in some fashion.

Another theme involves how relationships among Black women can control and repress. Audre Lorde’s relationship with her mother in her autobiography Zami (1982) and Black adolescent Alma’s relationship with her overbearing mother in the film Alma’s Rainbow both illustrate ways in which Black women with some sort of power, in these examples that of the authority of motherhood, can suppress other women. Perhaps Ntozake Shange best summarizes the importance that Black women can have for one another in resisting oppressive conditions. Shange gives the following reason for why she writes: “When I die, I will not be guilty of having left a generation of girls behind thinking that anyone can tend to their emotional health other than themselves” (in Tate 1983, 162).

This issue of Black women being the ones who really listen to one another is significant, particularly given the importance of voice in Black women’s lives. Identifying the value of Black women’s friendships, Karla Holloway describes how the women in her book club supported one another: “The events we shared among ourselves all had a similar trigger—it was when someone, a child’s school principal or teacher, a store clerk, medical personnel, had reated us as if we had no sense of our own, no ability to filter through whatever nonsense they were feeding us, or no earned, adult power to make choices in our children’s lives” (Holloway 1995, 31). These women described cathartic moments when, in creative ways, they responded to these assaults by “turning it out.” Each knew that only another Black woman could fully understand how it felt to be treated that way and to respond in kind.

Audre Lorde describes the importance that the expression of individual voice within collective context of Black women’s communities can have for self affirmation: “Of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger” (1984, 42). One can write for a nameless, faceless audience, but the act of using one’s voice requires a listener
and thus establishes a connection. For African-American women the listener most able to
pire the invisibility created by Black women’s objectification is another Black woman.
This process of trusting one another can seem dangerous because only Black women
know what it means to be Black women. But if we will not listen to one another, then
who will? Black women writers have led the way in recognizing the importance of Black
women’s relationships with one another.

Mary Helen Washington points out that one of the distinguishing features of
Black women’s literature is about African American women. Women talk to one another,
and “their friendships with other women—mothers, sisters, grandmothers, friends,
lovers—are vital to their growth and well-being” (1987, xxi). The significance placed on
relationships among Black women transcends U.S. Black women’s writings. For
example, Ghanian author Ama Ata Aidoo’s novel *Changes* (1991) uses the friendship
between two African professional women to explore the challenges facing professional
women in contemporary African societies. Within U.S. Black women’s fiction, this
emphasis on Black women’s relationships has been so striking that novelist Gayl Jones
suggests that women writers select different themes from those of their male
counterparts. In the work of many Black male writers, the significant relationships are
those that involve confrontation with individuals outside the family and community. But
among Black women writers, relationships within family and community, between men
and women, and among women are treated as complex and significant (Tate 1983, 92).

In *The Color Purple* Alice Walker creates the character of Celie, a Black
adolescent girl who is sexually abused by her stepfather. Writing letters to God and
forming supportive relationships with other Black women help Celie find her own voice,
and her voice enables her to transcend the fear and silence of her childhood. By creating
Celia and giving her the language to tell of her sexual abuse, Walker adds Celie’s voice
to muted yet growing discussions of the sexual politics of Black womanhood. But when it
comes to other important issues concerning Black women’s sexuality, U.S. Black women
have found it almost impossible to say what has happened.
As Evelynn Hammonds points out, “Black women’s sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision; as a ‘void’ or empty space that is simultaneously ever-visible (exposed) and invisible, where black women’s bodies are already colonized” (1997, 171). In response to this portrayal, Black women have been silent. One important factor that contributes to these long-standing silences both among African American women and within Black feminist thought lies in Black women’s lack of access to positions of power in U.S. social institutions. Those who control the schools, news media, churches, and government suppress Black women’s collective voice.

Dominant groups are the ones who construct Black women as “the embodiment of sex and the attendant invisibility of black women as the unvoiced, unseen—everything that is not white” (Hammonds 1997, 171). Critical scholarship also has approached Black women’s sexuality through its own set of assumptions. Within U.S. Black intellectual communities generally and Black studies scholarship in particular, Black women’s sexuality is either ignored or included primarily in relation to African American men’s issues. In Black critical contexts, where Black women struggle to get gender oppression recognized as important, theoretical analyses of Black sexuality remain sparse. Women’s studies scholarship demonstrates a predilection for placing Black women in comparative frameworks. Interested in building coalitions among women across differences of race, theorists typically add Black women into preexisting feminist frameworks, often to illustrate how Black women “have it worse.” Everyone has spoken for Black women, making it difficult for us to speak for ourselves. But suppression does not fully explain African American women’s persistent silences about sexuality.

U.S. Black women have been discouraged from analyzing and speaking out about a host of topics. Why does this one remain so difficult? In response, Paula Giddings identifies another important factor, namely, the “last taboo” of disclosing “not only a gender but a sexual discourse, unmediated by the question of racism” (Giddings 1992, 442). Within this taboo, to talk of White racist constructions of Black women’s sexuality is acceptable. But developing analyses of sexuality that implicate Black men is not—it violates norms of racial solidarity that counsel Black women always to put our own needs
second. Even within these racial boundaries, some topics are more acceptable than others—White men’s rape of Black women during slavery can be discussed whereas Black men’s rape of Black women today cannot. In her essay “Remembering Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas: What Really Happened When One Black Woman Spoke Out,” Nellie McKay explains why Black women have remained silent concerning issues of sexuality: In all of their lives in America . . . black women have felt torn between the loyalties that bind them to race on one hand, and sex on the other.

Choosing one or the other, of course, means taking sides against the self, yet they have almost always chosen race over the other: a sacrifice of their self-hood as women and of full humanity, in favor of the race. “Taking sides against the self” requires that certain elements of Black women’s sexuality can be examined, namely, those that do not challenge a race discourse that historically has privileged the experiences of African American men. The cost is that other elements remain off-limits. Rape, incest, misogyny in Black cultural practices, and other painful topics that might implicate Black men remain taboo. Yet another factor influencing Black women’s silences concerns the potential benefits of remaining silent. For example, during the early-twentieth-century club movement, White women were much more successful in advancing analyses of intra-racial gender relations and sexuality than were Black women.

In a context of virulent racism, public disclosure could leave Black men and women vulnerable to increased sexual violence at the hands of White men. White women who forwarded a gendered analysis faced no such fears. In situations such as these, where regulating Black women’s bodies benefited systems of race, class, and gender alike, protecting the safe spaces for Black women’s self-definitions often required public silences about seemingly provocative topics. This secrecy was especially important within a U.S. culture that routinely accused Black women of being sexually immoral, promiscuous jezebels.

In a climate where one’s sexuality is on public display, holding fast to privacy and trying to shut the closet door becomes paramount. Hine refers to this strategy as a
culture of dissemblance, one where Black women appeared to outgoing and public, while using this facade to hide a secret world within. As Hine suggests, “only with secrecy, thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinary black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own in the often one-sided and mismatched resistance struggle” (Hine 1995, 382). In contexts of violence where internal self-censorship was seen as protection, silence made sense. The convergence of all of these factors—the suppression of Black women’s voice by dominant groups, Black women’s struggles to work within the confines of norms of racial solidarity, and the seeming protections offered by a culture of dissemblance—influences yet another factor shaping patterns of silence.

In general, U.S. Black women have been reluctant to acknowledge the valuable contributions of Black lesbian feminist theory in reconceptualizing Black women’s sexuality. Since the early 1980s, Black lesbian theorists and activists have identified homophobia and the toll it takes on African-American women as an important topic for Black feminist thought. “The oppression that affects Black gay people, female and male, is pervasive, constant, and not abstract. Some of us die from it,” argues Barbara Smith (1983, xlvii). Despite the increasing visibility of Black lesbians as parents (Lorde 1984, 72–80), as academics, as activists, within lesbian history, and who have publicly come out, African Americans have tried to ignore homosexuality generally and have avoided serious analysis of homophobia within African American communities. In this context, Black lesbian theorizing about sexuality has been marginalized, albeit in different ways, both within Black intellectual communities and women’s studies scholarship. As a result, Black feminist thought has not yet taken full advantage of this important source of Black feminist theory. As a group, heterosexual African American women have been strangely silent on the issue of Black lesbianism. Barbara Smith suggests one compelling reason: “Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women have.

None of them have racial or sexual privilege, class privilege, maintaining ‘straightness’ is their last resort.” In the same way that White feminists identify with their victimization as women yet ignore the privilege that racism grants them, and that Black
men decry racism yet see sexism as being less objectionable, heterosexual African American women may perceive their own race and gender oppression yet victimize lesbians, gays, and bisexuals. Barbara Smith raises a critical point that can best be seen through the outsider-within standpoint available to Black lesbians—namely, that intersecting oppressions of sexuality, race, gender, and class produce neither absolute oppressors nor pure victims.

The widely publicized 1992 Supreme Court Justice confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas shattered this multifaceted silence. During the hearings, Anita Hill, a lawyer and former employee of Thomas during his years of heading up the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, accused Thomas of sexually harassing her. For days, the U.S. public remained riveted to their television sets, listening to the details of Hill’s accusations concerning Thomas’s alleged abuse of power, and Thomas’s ingenious rebuttals. The hearings were remarkable in several ways—their highly public, televised format, the similar race/class backgrounds and politically conservative ideologies shared by Thomas and Hill, and the public disclosure of sexually explicit material. By putting questions of race, gender, class, and sexuality on public display, the hearings served as a powerful catalyst to break long-standing silences.

The reactions to the hearings highlighted significant differences among White women and Black men that left African American women scrambling to find ways to avoid “taking sides against the self” (Crenshaw 1992). White American women routinely viewed the hearings as a landmark event that placed the largely hidden issue of sexual harassment on the national agenda. Seeing a shared sisterhood around issues of sexual harassment in the workplace, they regarded Anita Hill’s race as of little concern. Instead, her Blackness operated as an unearned bonus—it buttressed claims that regardless of skin color and other markers of difference, all women needed to rally together to fight sexual harassment. In contrast, U.S. Blacks viewed the event through the lens of racial solidarity whereby Hill’s testimony violated Black “family secrets” about abusive Black men.
For many African American men and women, the integrity of Hill’s claim became erased by her transgression of airing “dirty laundry” in public. Even if Thomas was a sexual harasser, some argued, out of solidarity with Black men Hill should have kept her mouth shut. Cultural critic Lisa Jones describes a common reaction: “What happened to Hill sent a more forceful message than her face on the tube: Speaking out doesn’t pay. A harassed woman is still a double victim, and a vocal, critical black woman is still a traitor to the race” (Jones 1994, 120). African American women found themselves caught in the middle, with issues of sexuality on public display. For many, Anita Hill’s dilemma had a familiar ring. For one, images of a row of affluent White men sitting in judgment of both Anita Hill’s and Clarence Thomas’s sexual narratives smacked of pervasive silencing by dominant groups. Throwing in her lot with White women seemed foolish, because discourses of gender had long ignored the special circumstances of Black women. Because she had to live with the consequences of sexual harassment, the code of silence mandated by racial solidarity also had not served Anita Hill well. No place appeared to exist for Anita Hill’s story, because long-standing silences on Black women’s sexuality had failed to provide one. Much has been written about the 1992 hearings, much of it by U.S. Black women (see, e.g., Morrison 1992; Smitherman 1995).

Within this discourse lies a new readiness to explore how social constructions of Black women’s sexualities must become more central to Black feminist thought. Following patterns established by Black feminist-influenced studies of work, family, controlling images and other core themes of Black feminism, much of this work contextualizes analyses of Black women’s sexualities within structural power relations. Treating race, class, gender, and sexuality less as personal attributes and more as systems of domination in which individuals construct unique identities, Black feminist analyses routinely identify multiple oppressions as important to the study of Black women’s sexualities. For example, Black feminist thinkers have investigated how rape as a specific form of sexual violence is embedded in intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class (Davis 1978, 1981, 1989; Crenshaw 1991).
Reproductive rights issues such as access to information on sexuality and birth control, the struggles for abortion rights, and patterns of forced sterilization require attention to how nation-state policies affect U.S. Black women (Davis 1981; Roberts 1997; Collins 1999b). Black lesbians’ work on homophobia investigates how heterosexism’s impact on African American women remains embedded in larger social structures. This contextualization in power relations generates a particular kind of social constructionist argument, one that views Black women’s sexualities as being constructed within an historically specific matrix of domination characterized by intersecting oppressions. In understanding this Black feminist contextualization, it may be more appropriate to speak of the sexual politics of Black womanhood, namely, how sexuality and power become linked in constructing Black women’s sexualities. Due in large part to the politicized nature of definitions themselves, questions of sexuality and the sexual politics in which they participate raise special concerns.

Traditionally, women’s lives have been organized and manipulated by patriarchy in all ages, in all cultures, all countries by establishing values, norms, roles, gender perceptions, and idealism that prescribes unequal means, methods and routes to achieve the so-called ‘wholeness’ for women. It is uniformly believed that motherhood and wifehood are the dual crowns of womanhood and man has defined it in unequivocal terms. The images based on social conditions of woman drawn by male writers are either idealized versions close to angels or monsters in their essence permitting no moderate pictures real but different from the extreme. What patriarchy demands of women is very different from what women demand of women. Adrienne Rich emphasizes the absurdity of the situation by pointing out that though motherhood is the experience of women, the institution of the motherhood is under male control and the physical situation of becoming a mother is disciplined by males (!)

In the light of main trends in Black Women’s Studies today, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison can usefully be made objects of reflection in order to gauge the evolution of Black Studies through history and the main trends within Black Feminism today. Most anthologies compiling African American women writers’ fiction
include stories by Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. Taking into consideration the concern about the historical evolution of Black Feminism, these three main writers often stand out as representative characters in the phases of Black Feminism that Taylor (1998) outlines. In a way, they share a common cultural heritage that can be appreciated through their fiction, especially with regard to gender relations and sexual politics. Moreover, not only their novels per se but also the latest critical studies of their works exemplify these new trends within African American Women’s Studies.

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the narration by Janie, the protagonist of the novel. After a long absence, she returns to Eatonville, Florida. The town people gossip about her and speculate about where she has been and what has happened to her young husband, Tea Cake. But Janie’s friend Pheoby sticks up for her. Pheoby visits her and then she explains to her friend, Pheoby what happened.

Janie explains that her grandmother raised her after her mother ran off. Nanny loves her granddaughter and is dedicated to her. Her primary desire is to marry Janie as soon as possible to a husband who can provide security and social status for her. She finds a much older farmer named, Logan Killicks and insists that Janie marry him. After moving in with Logan, Janie is miserable. He is pragmatic and romantic and in general treats her like a pack mule. One day Joe Starks, a sooth-tongued and ambitious man, ambles down the road in front of the farm. He and Janie flirt in secret for a couple weeks before she runs off and marries him.

Janie and Jody, as she calls him, travel to all-black Eatonville, where Jody hopes to have a “big voice.” A consummate politician, Jody soon succeeds in becoming the mayor, postmaster, storekeeper, and the biggest landlord in town. But Janie seeks something more than a man with a big voice. She soon becomes disenchanted with the monotonous, stifling life that she shares with Jody. She wishes that she could be a part of the rich social life in town, but Jody does not allow her to interact with common people. Jody sees her as the fitting ornament to his wealth and power, and he tries to shape her into his vision of what a mayor’s wife should be. On the surface, Janie silently submits to Jody; inside however, she remains passionate and full of dreams.
After almost two decades of marriage, Janie finally asserts herself. When Jody insults her appearance, Janie rips him to shreds in front of the town people, telling them all how ugly and impotent he is. In retaliation, he savagely beats her. Their marriage breaks down, and Jody becomes quiet ill. After months without interacting, Janie visits him on his deathbed. Refusing to be silenced, she once again chastises him for the way he treated her. As she berates him, he dies.

After Jody’s funeral, Janie feels free for the first time in years. She rebuffs various suitors who come to court her because she loves her new found independence. But when Tea Cake, a man twelve years her junior, enters her life, Janie immediately senses a spark of mutual attraction. She begins dating Tea Cake despite critical gossip within the town. To everyone’s shock, Janie then marries Tea Cake nine months after Jody’s death, sells Jody’s store, and leaves town to go with Tea Cake to Jacksonville.

During the first week of their marriage, Tea Cake and Janie encounter difficulties. He steals her money and leaves her alone one night, making her think that he married her only for her money. But he returns, explaining that he never meant to leave her and that his theft occurred in a moment of weakness. Afterward, they promise to share all their experiences and opinions with each other. They move to the Everglades, where they work during the harvest season and socialize during the summer off-season. Tea Cake’s quick wit and friendliness make their shack the center of entertainment and social life.

A terrible hurricane bursts into the Everglades two years after Janie and Tea Cake’s marriage. As they desperately flee the rising waters, a rabid dog bites Tea Cake. At the time, Tea Cake doesn’t realize the dog’s condition; three weeks later, however, he falls ill. During a rabies-induced bout of madness, Tea Cake becomes convinced that Janie is cheating on him. He starts firing a pistol at her and Janie is forced to kill him to save her life. She is immediately put on trial for murder, but the all-white, all-male jury finds her not guilty. She returns to Eatonville where her former neighbours are ready to spin malicious gossip about her circumstances, assuming that Tea Cake has left her and taken her money. Janie wraps up her recounting to Pheoby, who is greatly impressed by
Janie’s experiences. Back in her room that night, Janie feels at one with Tea Cake and at peace with herself.

Walker’s novel, The Color Purple is the story of Celie, who ultimately manages to overturn the conventional definition of good and evil in relation to women. Celie begins her life as a physically and psychologically oppressed young girl raped by her stepfather and later, becomes the wife of Mr., a widower with three children and beautiful mistress Shug Avery who also continues to exploit her in different ways. In short, she is born to be the ‘mule’ of the family. From near complete degeneration, she fights against sexist and racist definitions of herself and enables the other women to realize that the entire black community’s attitude towards women needs to be revised and revealed. The interesting point of the novel is Celie’s process of regeneration that begins with an overt exploration of sexual relationships with Shug Avery, friendly and at times not so friendly, but definitely constructive.

Celie as a woman ‘muted and silenced’ by stepfather can write to God only and speak to none else. She can no longer consider herself to be a “good girl” (Alice Walker, The Color Purple (New York: Pocket Books, 1985), p.1) She is forced to become a ‘girl woman.’ Her experiences as a daughter are not happy. The dying mother had died “screaming and cursing” (3) her because she is ‘big’ with the child in her womb. Soon after, she is married to the grudging Mr. --- who ultimately marries her because she is a good worker, he can do anything with her and she has a cow to take as a part of the dowry. She is turned into a slave. Her step children bully her, her husband beats her because “she my wife. Plus she stubborn. All women good for.” (23) Her sister advises her to fight, “You got to fight” (18) but “I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive,” (18) says Celie. Alice Walker, through an intricate design of the plot, reveals repeatedly Celie’s desperate condition.

It is also the traditional picture of woman performing the roles of daughter, wife and mother. In fact, a woman is equated more with animals than with humans. Celie considers herself to be useless in every way because she is “ugly” (48). Walker picturises the inadequacies of women, viewed by men, from different angles. Celie is unable to
fight the world and reorganizes her life because her personal experience has not translated itself into self-conscious. Celie’s process of rehabilitation begins with the arrival of Shug Avery, her arch-rival, and Mr. ---‘s mistress. Walker gives an interesting twist to the story by indicating that the ‘other’ woman can never really be the enemy of the wife as is traditionally portrayed in the fiction of male writers. A woman of that class does not fragment but recreates from the decimated element. In The Color Purple, Celie’s liberation begins with the help of three strong women of the community: Shug, Nettie, and Sophie. The motif of liberation through one’s sisters is to be found in Shange’s Sassafras, Morrison’s Beloved, Andre Lorde’s Zami and many other novels written by African American female writers. Walker insists on the possibility of black woman’s empowerment through a community of sisters.

Sofia acts as a catalyst for Celie’s transformation. Despite all odds, she refuses to succumb before Harpo’s beating. In fact, she stands alone to pay him back. Celie the weak women cannot but admire her and it is from her daughter-in-law that she learns the language of revolt and successful resistance. Later, Sofia comes to know about her plight and advises her, “You ought to bash Mr._.”(44) If Sofia provides the atmosphere for the restructuring of Celie’s life, it is Shug Avery who finally teaches her to become psychologically and financially independent. Shug’s gracious act of dedicating one of her songs to Celie as ‘Miss Celie’s song’ enables Celie to appreciate her own worth. ‘First time somebody made something and named it after me.’ (77) Shug continues with the process of mending Celie by making her love herself. Walker suggests clearly that a woman should learn to respect the ‘self’ before she can demand respect from others. Shug teaches her to sew pants and wear them too and finally comes a stage when Celie convincingly asserts before Mr._: “I’m poor. I’m black. I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here.” (214,) She, at this point, has reorganized her life, achieved economic liberty, and gathered the knowledge of meaningful things and relationships to create a new Celie. Finally recreate Celie as a whole, confident, self-aware woman with an identity.
Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the design of personal growth and development directed toward creating a whole self is neither raped nor tortured by anyone. Though through her memory, we come to know about her mother, a slave who had been branded, raped repeatedly and ultimately hanged. This shattering experience has negative impact on her. It makes her more protective towards her child which ultimately culminates in the murder of her own daughter whom, by this act, she had tried to save from the terrible experience of being a ‘chattel,’ a slave. Paul D. the voice of patriarchy condemns her by stating “You got two feet, Sethe, not four” but her confident replay is: “It’s my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that.”(202) Fragmentation of Sethe’s personality begins with the coming of the schoolteacher and his nephews as masters. They make a “chokecherry tree on her back by a cowhide whip” (21), “steal her milk meant for the baby daughters.” (20) Celie had experienced the dark side of the Black men but not Sethe. Sethe had also not grown down with marriage and family life. She did not experience any dwarfing or maiming, after marriage. Marriage did not become an ‘enclosure of patriarchy’ for her as it did for Celie. She is not made to feel inferior as a woman, of mother and wife is challenged by the racist masters. The schoolteacher asks his nephews to “put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right.” (237)

Sethe is no ordinary woman. Her decision to escape to the free zone of America is doggedly carried out. She leaves her husband Halle behind and considers him to be dead because he had failed to protect her milk and a husband who fails to protect his wife is no husband. Morrison through Sethe challenges the concept of a traditional husband; she consciously questions the ideological code of married life and investigates the sensibilities of her protagonist against the rigid interpretation of marital codes. For twenty eight days, after the shattering experience of escape. Sethe remains fragmented and gradually begins to mend thereafter, but emerges as a determined woman, who feels no guilt for her act. She believes “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe.” (201) On her return from the Jail, she takes up a job and continues with the act of living. Later when Paul D questions her conduct, her confident statement is: “No more ticket but let me tell you something Paul D Garner it cost too much.” (18)
Deciding to go alone, all the way, is a wrong decision taken by Sethe and when her ghost-daughter Beloved manipulates to kill her it is Denver, the other daughter, who seeks the help of the community to liberate her mother. Morrison with the fictional situation insists that the role of the community sisters in developing a character is pertinent. Sethe was abandoned by the community because of her pride to go all alone. As the women of the community, comment, “she was trying to do it all alone with her nose in the air” (312). It is with Denver’s effort that Sethe is brought back to the fold; she regains her peace and stability. Morrison’s view is: a woman should not stand apart from the community and be an outsider while battling with the problems of life. The protagonist’s life in the novel is fully and finally organized by this awareness. Sethe is made aware that as an outsider, with a destiny in isolation, she cannot succeed in solving her problems. Though she has to move through a process of intensive introspection, yet she finally has to establish a meaningful relationship with other people.

Sethe’s journey is an internal as well as an external one. Her external journey remains chaotic in the absence of self-realization. In this pursuit, she is assisted by her ‘uncalled, unrobed, unanointed’ mother-in-law Baby Suggs (106) who repeatedly advises Sethe to “lay ‘em down; Sethe, sword and shield” (105). She preaches to all black men and women to love their flesh “hard because it is flesh that weeps; flesh that dances” (108). This vision of religion or rather the re-vision of religion is thought to be an essential ingredient of the self. Morrison too, like Walker, presents a new version of religion wherein the mother has the right to love the ‘self.’ In fact, deprived of this self-love, women cannot attain selfhood. Thus women are not envisioned only as the sacrificial goats, the mule of the world, the symbol of chastity and nobility but as human beings who have a right to organize their lives.

In all the three novels it is interesting to note that the protagonists rise from the condition of nothingness to the position of self-empowerment. It is not a miraculous change coming suddenly but a gradual reorganization of the broken threads. It brings out a pattern that is meaningful and worthwhile. Woman’s quest for self-identity, self-
awareness, and self-empowerment is made possible by their creator’s intense desire to construct organized lives of women free from all forms of liminality; physical, material, spiritual, emotional, and social. The difference among these writers is: one suffers from over-enthusiasm and the other enjoys recording the facts of life. In The Color Purple, all women triumph in the battle but in Beloved the victory is limited to the protagonist and her living daughter. Morrison seems to stress that if Baby Suggs has been defeated, others have won the war. His is the pattern of life. Women need to recognize their lives to develop and promote new systems, new attitudes towards the ‘woman’s questions.’

Thus, despite their written form, altogether present a chorus of experiences shared by African American women. Past and present merge in order to form a communal experience. Songs and texts are sung and written, listened to and read by a community of women who contribute with their voices to the formation of African American women’s life experience.

The thematic links outlined through this, such as love and women’s expectations, men’s economic power and women’s dependence, men’s meanness and women’s desertion, men’s violence and mistreatment of women, women’s sexual desire and lesbianism, women’s retaliation and reversal of gender roles, sexuality, gothic imagery, women’s loneliness and men’s impotence, and a shared grievous past of ownership can be identified and are actually presented in similar ways in different novels and writings analyzed. These shared experiences contribute to constructing a politics of sexuality within the new trends of Black Feminism, underlining the awareness of the historical evolution in African American Studies, the recovery of often neglected and forgotten artists, and the identification of common themes through multi-faceted artistic manifestations.