

CONCLUSION

THE DREAM TODAY: THE NEED TO IMAGINE AMERICA AS SAFE SPACE

The times are so scary. It's so frightening that people are grouping back together. But I see it even in the people who are away from home. They make up substitute families, you know, work families, commune families or avocation families. Even if you are not with your family you make up another group of people that serve or function almost as your family.¹

Toni Morrison

The family in any culture forms a conduit between the individual and the community. For the Black individual in America, this triad of the self, family and community is present in a system of interlocking grids. With the Afro-American history of Middle Passage, Slavery and quest for civil liberties, the Black individual could not always depend on his/her family and if the family failed to provide support there was always the kin group in the form of a sisterhood and brotherhood that came to the rescue. Toni Morrison's comment in the epigraph above makes it clear how Americans have learned (perhaps from the Blacks) to expand the concept of a family as embracing different spheres of their lives.

In the earlier chapters of this thesis I have tried to establish how the Black men and women novelists have responded to this individual-family-community configuration in their works. The Black novelistic tradition (that can boast of a strong autobiographical element) has also represented the ways in which the political and social impediments of living in America have forced the Black writers to observe the evolution of family and community vis-à-vis their political/social status. Black men

and women after the emancipation have had to revise their roles within the family as well as to create their individual identities. The novelists have been conscious of their racial legacy, but in their quest to become African Americans they have also had to alter the individualistic ethos of the American Dream in order to accommodate their community-centric existence, whereby achieving ‘connectedness’ with one’s own people becomes as important as establishing one’s own identity.

I have tried to arrive at a general trend or pattern of behavior from the 1940s to the present, characteristic of the representational differences in the writings of Black men and women, by undertaking comparative studies of African American novels in each chapter of this thesis. The decade wise division of the chapters has helped to delineate the progress of the community and the evolution of the family in African American culture. The markers of such progress have been the community’s successful engagement in socio-political movements to resist the various domains of oppression, and its capacity to enhance the family’s ability to create a healthy atmosphere for socializing the younger generations and teaching them to resist such structures of oppression. The Black writers have documented these strategies of resistance and have also shown the ways in which the identity of the self has evolved. This has provided an interesting counterpoint to the study of evolution of the family and community, by taking into account the development of Black femininities and masculinities which have also evolved simultaneously.

Before arising at a final conclusion, I will now proceed to summarize the findings of each of the preceding chapters, which suggest a definite temporal progression.

Concluding the First Chapter: The Early Decades of the 30s and 40s.

Richard Wright in his *Black Boy* was writing a protest novel—perhaps the first of its kind. The period of the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance was one of great turmoil for the Black community. While the Harlem Renaissance sought to assert a Black creative/artistic tradition, this period was also important because the Blacks were trying to negotiate the subtle structure of segregation practiced in the North.

Wright's novel highlights the protagonist's coming of age by representing him as a hero who triumphs against the oppressive environment of his family and a ghetto-centric community. Richard in *Black Boy* is neither the Christ-like martyr hero nor is he a Black malcontent. In his desperation to escape from his environment and experience the freedom of the American Dream, Richard is willing to overlook his responsibilities to his community and (more importantly) to his family. As a Black male novelist, Wright pioneered a tradition which was later to be followed by a number of Black male novelists. It emphasized the social and political identity of a Black man in the context of a larger American society. Renowned critics like Ralph Ellison have lauded Wright's attempt in *Black Boy* to represent a Black man trying to confront the world without taking recourse to 'self-annihilation'.² The resultant critique of American society, Ellison remarks, is only a throwing back of Wright's findings to the 'guilty conscience'³ of America.

Ellison's remark might be pertinent but in Richard's final transition to a self-made man, he does not represent his contemporary Black generation. Rather he is

acting out the dream of being an exceptional American who succeeds by his own resources. Richard's exploration of the Black family is so limited that one can easily conclude he is not eager to engage in the problems of the Black man or woman in the family. The emphasis is solely on reinventing the self; the other two components of community and family are important only in so far as they help to aid his mission to live up to the American Dream.

Although *Black Boy* was lauded as a social document fiction, I feel that it is best read as an ascent narrative, which follows the trope of a man journeying to a place of least oppression, where he can live true to his dreams. Richard's total lack of interest in home and a disregard for the healing or nurturing abilities of the Black family and Black community shows that, for Wright, survival by engaging in any 'activism' aimed to heal the world, especially one's own community, was never on his mind.

It is easy to see how Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes were watching God*, was able to pioneer such an effort. Hurston's depiction of the community, of the family and the folk-based living of the South was not intended as much to point out the glaring racism of America as to assert that the individual, the family and the community in Black culture were equipped to help one another to survive. She tried to suggest in this survival the possibility of a kind of activism which Black men and women could undertake by re-organizing their day-to-day life with the help of the principles of love, sharing and equality.

Tiffany Ruby Patterson⁴ has made two valid points about Hurston's depiction of the South. These points will also serve to bring out how different Hurston's

objective was from that of Wright. First, Hurston had believed that ‘the average....non-morbid Negro’⁵ was perhaps the best kept secret in America. By ‘non-morbid Negro’ Hurston meant the stereotypical Black men and women who were depicted in fiction as oppressed, pathetic characters victimized by the racist, white society. In comparison with Hurston, Wright’s characters bear the stamp of the Southern, Black experience and are defined by their Jim Crow upbringing. Hurston’s characters are more self-actualized in that she sees racism as only one aspect of the Southern Black experience and not the most predominant one as Wright chooses to see in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. Therefore she deliberately sets out to depict a south ‘permeated by Jim Crow’ but not ‘defined’⁶ by it. Secondly, Patterson praises Hurston’s ability to create a wide range of characters because all these fictional creations attest to her love of the South as a community comprising ‘family and friends, acceptable and unacceptable’.⁷

Hurston is thus able to show characters (both men and women) who try to undertake different roles within the family and community, played out in ways that are not always the same. Some of them succeed in providing support to each other as part of the same community, while others fail. In this context, the comparative analysis of Janie’s two marriages can be used as an example. Whereas her marriage to Jodie is based on a dominator-dominated model,⁸ her marriage to Tea Cake is more of a partnership. As I have explained in Chapter 1, Janie emerges from these two marriages with a stronger acknowledgement of her self. In conclusion, however, I would like to point out that Hurston’s compassionate treatment of men shows that she had enough faith in them as well as in their potential to evolve a kind of activism to survive in America by collaborating with the women.

In this regard, Hurston anticipates the progress which would be made in later decades towards the ideology of womanism and the idea of feminist masculinity. Yet, Hurston's Janie, even while trying to connect with the community and not annihilate her self, ends up being a solitary figure. Perhaps her strength makes her a kind of singular hero, and we see in the characters of Janie Hurston's inability to bypass the enduring matriarchal stereotype of the strong Black woman, even if she is not a biological mother. Janie's eagerness to embrace her circle of friends also shows that she is always maternally attentive towards the health and wholeness of the community. In the later decades of the century this would become a recurrent trope, especially in the works of Black women novelists.

Concluding the Second Chapter: The 60s and The 70s.

The 60s and the 70s were decades in which Black Power Movements proliferated in America. As Elliot Butler Evans has there was a noticeable tendency of 'subjecting'⁹ Black feminist discourse to the 'politics of race'.¹⁰ Black Aesthetic activity similarly engaged in responding to the socio-political scenario of the decade. There was a distinct interest in Pan-Africanist movements that led to an awareness of the existence of the Black diaspora. These movements thus enhanced the sense of connectedness of the American Blacks with the Blacks in the African mainland.

Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, Timeless People* addresses these issues of diasporic identity by locating the action of the novel in an imaginary Caribbean island, the Bourne Hills. In the character of Merle Kinbona we see a woman who is an activist and takes on the duty of caring for the people of the island as if they are her

own children. Kinbona, according to Patricia Hill Collins, represents one of the first attempts by African American women writers to create characters which would effectively counteract the stereotypical images of Black women fostered by the white academy to enforce a kind of ideological oppression.¹¹ The self, community and family configuration in Marshall's novel should definitely be read as community-self-family re-configuration. Merle's priority is given to the survival of the community of Bournehills and, to this end, she is even ready to subordinate her self and her other interests. Only at the end of the novel, when she gives up her dream of improving the life of the islanders, does she consciously decide to move back to America and try to resume the familial role of wife and mother. In Marshall's novel, race appears to be the major concern as a community; yet we cannot simplistically conclude that Marshall, following contemporary tradition, subjects the feminist discourse of her novel to that of a racial community. Like Janie, Merle is a survivor because she is a woman and it is this knowledge of survival which she wishes to impart to her community, so that it is able to formulate a strategy of resistance. The resistance in this case is not only against racism but against a more powerful adversary—capitalism. Marle's efforts are definitely directed towards reclaiming her community rather than towards reinventing a racial identity. Alexis De Veau's quotation, which I have cited earlier¹², highlights just this aspect of women's writing in the 60s—a trend which she describes as a method of writing whereby the self is multiplied in terms of community and then expanded to embrace the national interest. It should also be mentioned that De Veau made this observation specifically in the context of Paule Marshall's novels.

Merle's anxiety attacks and nervous breakdowns are due to a lack of healthy self-esteem. As Marshall characterizes Merle, this lack of self esteem seems to have its origins in her earlier failure in reprising the roles of a wife and a mother. Merle tries to embrace the cause of the community with sufficient zeal, but at times it is evident that she does so in order to substitute the void in her life caused by the absence of a biological family.

Marshall explores the option of sisterhood and inter-racial co-operation only tentatively. The first option, represented through Merle's affair with a white woman—fails, thus limiting the chances of an inter-racial lesbian sisterhood. The other relationship, i.e. of Merle with Saul, is more important for the novel. The two of them come together because they know the pain of losing loved ones and also because both of them care for their communities—Saul with an anthropologist's passion and Merle with her activism. Yet Marshall denies any fulfillment to this 'communion'¹³, perhaps because the predominant racial consciousness of the decade denied the maturing of any such possibility.

Although Merle's character is successfully portrayed as a woman of resistance and as a probable successor of Janie, Morrison's 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye* implicitly criticizes the notion of singular women being able to reclaim the community with their individual zeal. In her various interviews Morrison has spoken about the strong Black mammy character and its resilience.¹⁴ She has also made it clear that she does not believe such women to be exceptional, since the Black woman in a community has always had the strength, resilience and support of her sisters. Pecola's tragedy is Morrison's indictment of her community which fails to heed its own slogan of Black is Beautiful and Morrison systematically reconstructs the events which lead to

Pecola's alienation, rape and finally her madness. Claudia's narration is actually the articulation of her guilt and her relearning of the ancient Black wisdom of survival as a group. She blames herself as a participant in the victimization of Pecola because she was not old enough to harness the Black community's power to heal and nurture.

Although Barbara Christian¹⁵ has noted that Morrison and her contemporaries were able to create a 'trajectory' of their selves by articulating women's issues, Morrison squarely puts the blame on the family and community because they are the institutions which have the power to heal the individual and foster a sense of positive self-esteem. Pecola's tragedy is, moreover, a critique of the very same aesthetic which empowered the Black Power Movement of the 70s, inasmuch as Black leaders proclaimed that Black is Beautiful, but did not attempt to reconstruct their community by inspiring it to withstand victimization based on skin colour and White standards of physical beauty.

Morrison is critical of the Black attitudes of living which fostered the habit of emulating the Whites and forced the Blacks to unlearn their legacy of dedication to the well-being of the community. In her characterization of Cholly we see Morrison insisting that the singular Black man as hero, omnipresent in mainstream American literature, is doomed to fail in the Black community. The Black man, enacting the agency of a 'free man',¹⁶ is unable to create a positive self identity and invariably fails to help his family and community. In the later decades African American feminists as a group engage with the question of womanism and its emphasis on racial survival. Morrison was perhaps the first writer who hinted that such a womanist activism could be successful only if the Blacks went back to their roots to re-learn their legacy and apply it to the task of healing and connecting with each other, men as well as women.

Alex Haley's *Roots* followed the same implied method but he did not have such a critical approach to the problem of negotiating the association between the self, family and community. James Baldwin's novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, was more successful in that direction and can be credited with creating the kind of hero who is a responsible family man, has a healthy sense of selfhood, wants to be an artist (like Richard in *Black Boy*), but is mindful of his commitment to his peers and thinks of saving them from their dissipated lives on the streets.

The 60s and 70s, with their agenda of the Black Power Movements, specifically summoned the Black man to renew his vision of manhood. This challenge to the stereotypes of Black manhood had a lot of takers, since it prioritized the Black man's quest for self-identity as the most important agenda to renew the self-esteem of the race as a whole.

Roots went back to the African beginnings of the Black race. Haley took great pains to establish the principles of tribal living, with its ethics of sharing, mutual understanding and co-operation. Although the first part of the novel highlights the life and experiences of Kunta Kinta, Haley dwells on Kunta's role as progenitor and creator of a new lineage once he reaches America. Bereft of his African identity, Kunta tries to hold on to his Gambian past but has to make adjustments while living in America. Thus his progeny of African Americans learn the Gambian dialect in snatches but do not imbibe any other Afro-centric principles of living. By the time we come to the end of the novel, Haley has transmuted the philosophy of tribal / communal living to one of individualism, as inherent in the American Dream. Kunta's grandsons and their families become successful Black entrepreneurs by immersing themselves in the American myth of material success. Haley also shows that they

have happy family lives, but in none of the families of the succeeding generations is there any problem of tensions arising due to the strictly codified gender roles. Haley does represent the character of Kizzy as emblematic of Black womanhood, but one feels that he is still trapped in the convention of the larger-than-life African mother figure. Neither Kizzy nor the other women characters are sufficiently developed or individuated as real women by Haley.

It is only at the end of the novel that Haley makes mention of his great-aunts congregating in the porches of their homes to recollect the ancient lores about Gambia, mainly in order to record his debt of gratitude to those storytellers who compelled him to undertake this project of reconstructing his family history. Having made this confession, Haley would have been in a convenient position to observe the continuities of the past in the present African American community. He does not, however, mention any such continuity, neither does he suggest ways in which the social/political movements might benefit if an ideology of tribal kinship was incorporated into the common heritage of the African American community. Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* does a much better job of suggesting a feasible agenda for racial renewal as well as familial happiness along these lines.

Like Dubois, Baldwin was able to understand the unique racial character of Black Americans as a people who had a 'double consciousness'.¹⁷ Thus the problematic areas of negotiating a better understanding of African American masculinities in particular, and gender relations in general, is best represented in Baldwin's novel. Fonny, the hero of the novel, approximates to an epitome of what came to be described in the later decades of the century as feminist masculinity. Fonny's involvement with his family and his willingness to shoulder the

responsibility of his unborn child are perhaps a concerted attempt on the part of Baldwin to foreground a characterization of the Black man as striving to relocate himself in a domestic space. Fonny is definitely a precursor to the 'new man'¹⁸ as desired by the Afro-American feminist academy, to the extent that he eschews the political demands of his time in order to fulfill his significant domestic responsibilities.

Tish and Fonny, in their joint decision to be available for each other, evolve a strategy of effective resistance against the dominant ideology of gender oppression. As Emmanuel Nelson¹⁹ has remarked, Fonny is the embodiment of a Black masculinity that understands and enacts the self-family-community intrinsic bond. Fonny finds his own sense of self, but in allowing himself to respond to the needs of his family he also recovers the principle of harmony with one's communal identity. In this sense of self is also embedded his responsibility towards his ghetto brothers who are more troubled than him.

Fonny is given such an enlightened and superior outlook precisely because Baldwin seems to imply that it is his love towards Tish that redeems him through the acquisition of these qualities. Barthold²⁰ has seen in this plot a deliberate attempt to present Tish as an ideal woman who serves to rescue Fonny from 'Chaos'. Tish does qualify as a woman of resistance, but it appears that her sense of self is only based on her relationship with Fonny and later on, with her own family. She does not, or maybe she is too young, to evolve any committed activism out of the way in which she scripts her survival. Baldwin is far too busy contrasting the characters of Mrs Rivers and Tish's mother in terms of their maternal merits to bother with Tish's capacity to be a loving wife and mother. Although at the end of the novel Tish sufficiently

redeems herself, when she recognizes the effects of the oppressive American culture of containment on Blacks and decides to give birth to her child, there is a certain amount of wistfulness in her realization that Fonny is gradually going to become a totally different man when (and if) he comes out of the prison. Her description of Fonny at the end of the novel, where Tish remarks that ‘he is in a cell by himself’²¹, is a reminder of the way American culture forced Black men to give up their interdependence on the family and community and learn to rely on themselves. Fonny’s transition corroborates that in American culture, a Black man could very easily be alienated from his own family and community, and was compelled to rely on his own self for better or for worse. For this reason, a call to one’s manhood was perhaps the need of the hour, but Baldwin is explicit that this manhood is not that of a militant hero or a Christ-like martyr figure. Perhaps emulating Hurston, Baldwin seems to admit of the necessity that a communion between African American men and women is not only possible but urgently required. The way in which the Tish-Fonny episodes are constructed also suggests that Baldwin anticipated later developments in Afro-American women’s writing, especially its need to recreate community as a ‘safe space’²², to borrow the phrase of Patricia Hill Collins, and the need to understand the emotional crisis of Black masculinity.

Concluding the Third Chapter: The Decade of the 80s

The 80s were a decade when the Black women novelists began to address issues regarding women’s rights and empowerment. Barbara Christian has chronicled this trend as starting from the seventies and culminating in the 80s. However, she has

suggested a flaw in the women protagonists of African American novels of the 70s. She remarks.

The heroines of the mid 1970s are socio-political actors in the world. Their stance is rebellious...yet they are wounded heroines, partly because their communities are deeply entrenched in their view of woman as essentially a mother or as the lover of man. But although these characters are critical of the communities, they come back to them and work out their resistance in that territory.²³

In the novels of the women writers of the 80s there is a comparable engagement with the community, but the protagonists appear to be more evolved as women of resistance in that they incorporate a critique of sexism which is now prevalent in the Black community itself. As Patricia Hill Collins²⁴ has also noted, the 80s were the decade when Black women's activism became effective enough to create a separate cultural context, which would be able to redress not only sexism but also racism.

Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* begins as a sexually abused Black woman but goes through an amazing transformation to finally become a successful entrepreneur, living with a family that includes her biological children, her former husband's family and her own former lover. It is obvious that Walker deliberately uses a 'bildungsroman' trope in the novel and Celie's journey towards mature selfhood signifies the Black woman's coming of age as much as it is a fulfillment of the success myth inherent in the American Dream. But more significantly, Celie's transformation also indicates the ability of the Black woman to rectify the wounds of sexism inflicted on her by her community and her family, and thereby create a positive cultural context worth emulating and giving a new direction in history. For a woman of resistance, Celie starts out as a rather meek woman. It is her relationship

with Shug which liberates her and helps her to understand the possibility of healing which is present in lesbian love. Then as she graduates to become her own woman, Celie is able to provide care and love to others. It is only through her lesbian relationship that Celie is able to tap into the resources of love and nurturing which she was unsure of possessing in heterosexual relationships.

The community also rallies round her when Celie finds her own voice and stands up against her husband's abuse. In my discussion of Morrison's novel in Chapter 3, I have shown how Celie is given a 'better deal' and appears to be convincing as a survivor because of a certain amount of good fortune on her side, which is not there for the likes of Sofia. Sofia represents another aspect of the Black woman's struggle towards selfhood, in which the most vocal efforts at resistance are systematically thwarted by the community as well as the white society.

Although the emphasis in *The Color Purple* is on the emotional growth of Celie, her ability to be a 'sister', an 'othermother' and create her own family comprising of her blood relations as well as her kin, show us that Walker was trying to implement her agenda of womanism in this novel and transmute the community into a 'safe space'. Patricia Hill Collins²⁵ has defined the home and domestic scene as a safe space for Black women, for it is here that she feels empowered and can go about healing the people around her. Walker's Celie creates her family as a safe space, almost as an oasis away from the sphere of the social-political oppression that was faced by Blacks in the 80s.

Naylor's womanism in *Mama Day* appears to be a bit more radical in its outlook. The novel seems to imply that healing should come from within the

community itself and the agent who undertakes to heal (in this case, George) must have a sufficient understanding of and belief in Black folklore and wisdom in order to be able to purge the community. George's urban roots make him an outsider in the island of Willow Springs. Although he undertakes to save Cocoa by trying to dispel the Black magic cast on her, there is a strong sense that this community offers up George as a sacrifice to its folk tradition in order to ensure its survival.

The maternal figures of Ophelia and Mama Day are invested with great magical power as they are believed to have descended from the mythical conjure woman Sapphira Wade. To ensure this line of succession, Mama Day has to protect Cocoa's life so that it may continue the conjure woman's legacy. The individual women characters for the most part conform to the image of the superstrong Black mother who not only embraces her family but is also mindful of the community. Mama Day is the matriarch of the island and all the residents including Cocoa acknowledge her as such.

In her attempt to leave the island Cocoa follows the quest of the woman of the 80s to create her own identity. Cocoa is part of the 'emergent woman'²⁶ thesis (discussed in chapter 4) which, according to Hill Collins, consisted in the attempt of Black women to define themselves in roles other than the ones constructed by white society in order to enforce an ideological oppression. Cocoa is a professional woman of the 80s and, in her marriage to George, we can say that Naylor tries to envisage a partnership model of marriage. George is the perfect model of feminist masculinity. In his love for Cocoa, Naylor creates an effective context of cultural transcendence, perhaps to prove that gender warfare between Black men and women at the level of

the family could be overcome more easily than political estrangement in public life , whether due to race or gender.

Naylor's use of Black mythology and magic in the novel is very powerful, and it easily takes precedence over the Black woman's ability to self-actualize (as seen in Cocoa) and the capacity of Black men and women to achieve a loving communion (as seen in the relationship of Cocoa and George). Cocoa's return to Willow Springs is Naylor's way of suggesting that an empowered woman of the 80s, who fulfils the roles of mother, wife and career woman, still needs to come back to connect with the past in order to ensure a survival of the racial legacy. Naylor may even be harking back to Claudia's cautionary tale of Pecola's madness as penned by Morrison, to underline the importance of Black ancestry in the lives of the women in the Black community.

The male novelists of the 80s also seem to be exploring their own avenues of self-actualization. In Gaines's novel *A Gathering of Old Men* and Wideman's *Sent for You Yesterday*, the process of creating a positive Black male identity proceeds in conjunction with the protagonists' need to be seen as valuable and responsible men within their communities and families.

Gaines's novel tries to reconstruct the conservative Southern ideal of Black manhood. It is one of dignified resistance. Old men congregating in the plantation following a shootout transform themselves into angry men demanding redressal of their grievances. Mathu is clearly the father figure amongst them. He appears to be the only man in the community who had ever stood up against oppression. In his stoic stance we see a replica of what Baldwin described as the heroism of the South,²⁷ with

its undercurrents of patient endurance and uncompromising integrity. It is Mathu's heroism that inspires the entire community (especially the men) to stand up against oppression.

Perhaps, in the narrative method of multiple voices that gives birth to an emergent communal voice, Gaines tries to create a cultural context which is especially relevant in the Post-Moynihan era, after much had been written about the lack of responsibility in Black males. Although the community portrayed in this novel is primarily that of old men who have suffered the wounds of racism, the women are visible but not allowed to speak their minds. Thus the individual-family-community connectedness is only partially realized. As readers we do not get any critical insight into the families of these men. There are only a few cursory mentions of their struggles against oppressive Southern racism. But it is to Gaines's credit that like his women peers, he also effectively creates a new cultural context to be built upon the 'salt and pepper camaraderie'²⁸ of the sports field, as a sure method to overcome and negate racial tension, thus suggesting a solution which would be feasible in the not too distant future.

Wideman's focus, on the other hand, is totally community centric. Like Morrison²⁹, he believes that the term 'Black community' is a new fangled critical creation and a more appropriate term would be neighbourhood.³⁰ It is this neighbourhood of Homewood that he explores and tries to find the magic in it amidst glimpses of the underbelly of a ghetto-centric existence. In order to create a meaningful cultural context which might work effectively to counteract oppression, Wideman makes the residents of Homewood, a neighbourhood past its prime, tell

their stories as survivors. In their limited ways, Brother Tate, Doot and Albert Wilkes try to be responsible men but their efforts are frustrated.

Like Richard Wright and James Baldwin, Wideman seems to suggest and highlight the difficulties in assuming and executing the role of responsibility that a Black man is supposed to undertake. Brother Tate, the scat playing, mute-albino is an unlikely hero of Homewood. He defines its spirit through an existence that is ultimately tragic, although he tries to assume the role of a father and successfully becomes a Brother to Lucy and Doot. Unlike Wright, the element of protest is not made explicit by Wideman; rather it is evident in the individual survival stories that are grafted into the fictional landscape of Homewood. Like Baldwin, Wideman tries to emphasize the difficulties of Black men as part of a community, in finding themselves and leading meaningful lives in consonance with their communities and families. Thus the loneliness of his male characters is quite well documented. There is a similarity between Baldwin's characterization of Fonny and Wideman's creation of Brother Tate; both Fonny and Brother are isolated individuals, and this isolation is integral to their heroic manhood.

Like Naylor, Wideman seems to suggest that knowledge of the racial past is important, and such knowledge in his novel is an amalgam of Jazz music, nostalgic anecdotes and vignettes of community life. I believe that both Naylor and Wideman were performing an important literary function as far as the Black academy was concerned. This function, according to Deborah McDowell,³¹ is the creation of distinct mythical structures and these two authors were attempting it in different ways in the limited space of fictional Black communities. In her essay 'New Directions in Black Feminist Criticism' (cited in chapter 3) McDowell had suggested that resistance strategies in Black women's fiction included ways and methods of using

language/characters in a distinct way as well as creating separate mythical structures. In *Mama Day* and *Sent for You Yesterday*, Naylor and Wideman do something similar by investing the community/neighbourhood with a mythical significance so as to commemorate the validity of the lives of those Black people who are a part of such apparently unreal spaces.

Thus the 80s sees different authors giving divergent expressions to the self – family- community theme, investing faith in one or more of the components to suit their individual agenda of evolving an activism aimed at counteracting oppression. Celie’s oppression occurs inside the domestic space and her relation with Shug helps her to find her own identity outside the home; this in turn helps her to overcome the trauma of sexual and physical violence. In *A Gathering of Old Men*, a group of Black men are able to assert their manhood and protest after the murder of a white man. Walker and Gaines both seem to suggest that bonding with same-sex members romantically or otherwise helps in overcoming oppression whether sexual or racial. The intimacy of Shug, Celie, Sofia and Squeak has its parallel in the camaraderie of the old men. These two novels present a kind of activism whereby brotherhoods and sisterhoods can issue a valid challenge to the subtle structures of oppression permeating the lives of the Blacks. In *Mama Day* and *Sent for You Yesterday* the focus is not so much on oppression as it is on preserving the community and its heritage, while trying to overcome death and other tragedies. Although there are strategies of resistance in these two novels as well, the message is directed to the community, which is urged to regroup itself even if it means trusting in magic (*Mama Day*) or living upto the quiet heroism of a ghetto-centric existence (*Sent for You Yesterday*).

Concluding the Fourth Chapter: The 90s And The Millennium.

During the 1990s the Afro-American Black community began to feel secure under the Democratic administration. Strategies for resistance to oppression were now being transmuted into strategies for integration. In Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*, as well as in E. Lynn Harris's *Just As I Am* the characters are deviant in one way or the other; yet they try to construct some sort of safe space within the society to share with other like-minded people. This safe space consists of family and friends, and sometimes members of a different race or class, who are able to understand the quest for such a space.

The activism in these novels is channelled through the various ways in which the self discovers a family and community in this safe space. In *Bailey's Café*, the magical, surreal café operates as just such a safe space, where people step in to find emotional succor rather than food. Bailey, the proprietor of the café, observes his clientele as each of them recounts his / her story. All of them come to the cafe as lost souls who are down and out on their luck, but after reaching this place they finally learn to live. They gather in Eve's boarding house, the inmates of which have all escaped oppression inflicted on them by their families or their erstwhile communities, and sometimes by the society in general. Thus Bailey and Eve become surrogate guardians though neither of them is a father or mother in the biological sense. Naylor probably creates these unusual characters in keeping with the charmed space of the café. They in turn create their own community of shelter for these misfits, but the ultimate emphasis is on the community's need to heal and be healed by the others who make up the community.

Eve, as I have discussed in Chapter 4, begins as a self-made woman and by the time she opens her boarding house she is quite a different person. As all the characters in the novel give vent to their stories, one finds a common vein in their narratives, which is the desire to be loved and accepted by others. Writing in the 90s, Naylor shifts from her earlier emphasis in *Mama Day* on racial knowledge as imperative for identity-formation and seems to advocate broadening the limits of the Black community so as to include misfits and cast offs, who have been treated as pariahs in their family and community, even when they are from other ethnic groups. In this novel, therefore, the principles of healing, care-giving and sharing become crucial requirements for fostering any positive sense of a Black community when it is embedded in the multiracial and multicultural fabric of America.

The patrons of Bailey's Café recount stories which also add sufficiently to our understanding of Black masculinities and femininities, but the focus is now on the community which results from their union. The final episode of the novel, in which all of them assist in the birth of a child who has been conceived by a virgin, is a remarkable attempt at revising the Christian myth of the birth of Jesus. In this a revision of the myth, Mary (Mariam) travels through Addis Ababa with her baby in her womb having been cast off by her community as none of the Jews believed in Mariam's claim that it was an asexual conception. Mariam's mother, having subjected her to the painful process of genital mutilation (that would effectively ensure that she remained a virgin), shows no sympathy for her. Like Mary, mother of Christ, Mariam too travels a long way to give birth to the child but unlike Mary she does not have the assurance that she is carrying a child who was destined to be a Saviour.

In a different context Naylor had written in *Mama Day*: ‘The only miracle is life itself.’³² This birth is such a miracle. The characters of *Bailey’s Café* are all survivors of social oppression, but they build up a new community away from their biological families. Though their individual struggles are significant narratives of counteracting oppression, they also feel that they are misfits, living in a world away from the real one. Mariam’s baby connects them to the real world as they become surrogate parents in some capacity or the other. It is the only time in the novel when all of them are depicted as being together in the same place and celebrating this occasion as any community would like to do. Nadine understands the magnitude of the moment and its collective symbolic significance when she remarks:

A child isn’t supposed to be born in this street. I don’t care what kind of worlds we all came in from; there isn’t much of a prayer for life itself if a baby has to be born here. But maybe its meant for this baby to bring in a whole new era.³³

There is an underlying certainty in these lines. Nadine knows that the customers frequenting the café have no hope of bringing forth their own progeny but the baby given to them upsets their secluded lifestyle and gives them a viable connection with the world outside. The baby, however, is given up to be raised in a foster home at the end of the novel. Naylor might be suggesting that a child eventually needs a traditional family to help him survive. But the folks at the café start him off in this process of survival by celebrating his birth with aplomb.

Naylor’s *Bailey’s Café* and E. Lynn Harris’s *Just As I Am* are also good examples of the popularity of the New Black Aesthetic which deliberately foregrounded hybrid identities as an essential corollary to the multicultural reality of America. In *Just As I Am*, the bisexual protagonist Raymond Jr. calls himself a sexual

mulatto and at the very outset makes two things clear. One, that he is unsure about his sexual preferences and two, that he is looking for a perfect place, a perfect world where he could be himself. Even in these novels by male authors, we find the same emphasis on the protagonist's deviancy and his quest to find a perfect place, i.e. a safe space.

The quest for the safe space, which, according to Hill Collins, was a pre-occupation of Black women in order to escape multiple forms of oppression, has now inspired Black men as well. Lynn Harris addresses concerns about Black manhood such as the ability of a Black man to be a good 'brother' in spite of being sexually flawed. Harris sees these concerns as tangentially related to the agenda of the Million Man March³⁴ by Louis Farrakhan. Farrakhan issued the call for this March by reminding African American men that they now needed to be conscientious brothers and fulfill the responsibilities that their community bequeathed upon them. The movement was launched to rectify the misconceptions regarding Black male subjectivity that always found Black men wanting in familial and social attributes when compared to Black women. Raymond Jr. tries to be a responsible son and brother in his family, but in his steadfast caring for his H.I.V. Positive friend (in the second half of the novel) we get to see a Black man's ability to provide sustained nurturing. Lynn Harris seems to suggest that resolving one's sexual identity in relation to one's family is important but such concerns should always be subordinated to the need to be meaningful members of the community by providing love, compassion and support to others. Thus we see that in the 90s the ethnic tropes of identity formation are more or less discarded in favour of a new trope of resolving and incorporating hybrid gender identities into Black literary discourse.

Both these novels insinuate that the quest for a safe space in America might not be conducive to a realization of the American Dream of material success. Instead, they represent a shift towards definitions of family and community as non-traditional spaces. Similarly in the third novel, *A Day Late and A dollar Short*, we see Terry McMillan engaged in the documentation of a Black family which appears dysfunctional to outsiders, but is actually a representative Black family of the millennium in trying to achieve a sense of balance by being honest to individual identities as well as becoming responsible members of the community.

McMillan's urbane women have long embodied the qualities inherent in the emergent woman of Black feminist discourse. In this instance the protagonist is Viola Price, who decides at a very late age that it is time to give up on her children and husband in order to assert her separate identity. Viola Price is the type of a strong Black mother but honest enough to confess that a lifetime of assuming responsibility for her husband and family has taken its toll on her. Although McMillan is famous for a genre of writing which is widely described as urban romance, here she represents a Black mother's dilemma as to whether to create her own identity or be a nurturer to her family and continue to fulfill the role prescribed for her by the Black community. It is to McMillan's credit that Viola Price emerges as a woman of resistance who tries to establish her own identity at an age when most would have succumbed to their maternal roles and responsibilities. However, in keeping with the needs of the time in which the novel was written, there is very little documentation of resistance to overcome white or dominant structures of oppression. Rather, Viola Price prefers to confide in her white neighbour.

There is a certain sense of desperation in Mrs. Price trying to create her own identity outside the familial sphere by buying a new house, but she never really does forsake her children. She helps them to connect with their own selves and their own children, thus teaching her offspring not to be imprisoned by the weight of responsibilities that they have to shoulder after they have married and started a family. It is this lesson which she passes on to her family in the letters which they receive after her death. Through Viola Price, McMillan tries to show that the engagement with one's family may itself be a kind of activism as it seeks to make them meaningful members of the community. Most of Viola Prices advice is practicable (listen to Oprah Winfrey following her precepts—"Accept your son's sexual orientation, try to have a love life alongside a career")³⁵ and surprisingly contemporary. The success of the novel lies in its representation of a family which achieves communion and is thereafter able to rectify its dysfunctional traits. It also indicates the ability of the Black woman to convert the family into a safe space even when her children have widely divergent personalities and have achieved varying degrees of success in their personal and professional lives.

The novels in Chapter 4, therefore, represent the evolving trends of resistance in the stability of the millennium. Black writers at the turn of the century advocate a cultural context which comprises of deviants within the family and community, but they are equipped to do the 'work of love'³⁶ as much as to resist oppression at social/political levels. These novels also blur the distinction between the Black male protagonist as an entity envisaged primarily in its social / political dimensions and the female protagonist as occupying a domestic space only. Even the Black male writers seem to be following a model of feminist masculinity while creating male characters.

In Chapter 5, I have tried to relate this change to how other ethnic minorities have similarly fashioned their identities in America and evolved their own forms of activism in the process of defining the self- family- community continuum as it emerges in the millennium.

Concluding the Fifth Chapter: Other Minority Communities

In multicultural America different ethnic groups are mindful of celebrating their ethnic identities by protecting their cultural differences. Yet it is evident that these groups had invested faith in the democratic ideal of the American Dream but have had to pay the price for neglecting to attend to the subtle patterns of exclusion sanctioned by it.

The Native American tribes had various strategies of survival to help them overcome oppression by mainstream culture. As I have pointed out in Chapter 5, Native American folklore has enough myths which prioritize the tropes of regeneration and motion so that the culture's affinity with nature and the natural world, as well as the equal man-woman relationships in the community and family empower them to successfully create a safe space. The older generation can also reinvent itself through these myths in order to perform the nurturing and healing which a Native American child might need.

In *The Education of Little Tree* the protagonist survives by emulating the Cherokee Way of life so as to to create (with moderate success) a safe space for the growth of his individual identity, even while safeguarding his racial knowledge and

finding his place in the community. The activism of this community is evident in its ability to launch a discourse which prioritizes the Native American racial past while acknowledging the community's success in extending its boundaries to embrace the natural world and, by extension, the universe. In this way, Native Americans are able to move beyond the specifications of the standard American Dream, and retain their past in the present.

The Jewish Americans have had better success in following the American Dream as far as their keen business sense helped them to realize the American myth of material success. Although the Jewish American community was able to overcome the inferiority of its immigrant status and establish an American identity with surprising ease, the individual identity of the Jewish American could only be fashioned by acknowledging and remembering the racial past of the Jews. The family as well as the community have become sites for the creation of a multicultural identity by preserving racial differences through the practice of certain rituals and customs that are distinctly Jewish.

In Erica Jong's *Of Blessed Memory*, the Jewish heritage is celebrated by four generations of Jewish American women who are artists. These women pursue the American Dream of material success while adjusting to the American lifestyle, as well as to individual tensions of the mother-daughter relationship. The community, as represented through the lives of these women, tries its best to protect the Jewish cultural heritage and evolve different schemes to benefit those Jews who could not make a smooth transition from being victims in Europe to being immigrants in America.

This faithfulness to the past and a willingness to realize familial roles in conjunction with racial responsibility marks a unique strategy of resistance. As the last member of the matriline in Jong's novel remarks (when she decides to record Jewish history in America as a history of survival rather than victimization), memory should be able to construct positive identities. These Jewish women position their identity within the larger American society as a group which is materially successful, but has managed to create a cultural context that enables Jewish Americans to fulfill their roles as mothers, wives, sisters, brothers and husbands by adhering to their racial past. In this manner they are able to overcome a separate set of controlling images (like that of the rich business magnet, or that of an exploitative race) to create interpersonal narratives of survival and success.

In the fifth chapter I have discussed how Native American and Jewish fictional narratives, like African- American novels, also address themes of healing and survival by bearing witness to the past. American identity is no longer homogenous, and writers of different ethnicities writing in the Millennium acknowledge this fact even as they are critical of the democratic promise inherent in the American Dream. Family and community have become safe spaces for them, and they see themselves as Americans as long as their distinct ethnic identities are honoured. More than the Jewish Americans the Native American community (perhaps because of having lived in reservations) has reconciled itself to the fact that its own dream is always going to be 'deferred'. For the Native Americans this dream does not only entail seeking civil liberties; it is a struggle for the affirmation that their indigenous heritage is not a primitive remnant of bygone days but a condition for universal regeneration that is integral to their American identity.

Concluding Remarks:

From the early decades of the twentieth century, the African Americans have been engaged in multiple efforts to overcome oppression by the dominant American society. At one level such efforts are indicative of the capacity of the Black race to organize itself and map out agendas of resistance. However, as I have tried to point out in this thesis, strategies of resistance are not simply directed towards building socio-political movements: they also give impetus to writers to resist ideological oppression, by counteracting the controlling images fostered by white patriarchal culture.

The writers, therefore, are also engaged in evolving their own forms of resistance strategies. This engagement can be described as Black writers' activism towards developing the Afro-American self as that of individuals who seek to heal the community and keep the Black family rooted to its heritage of collective living. Manning Marable, in the introduction to the *New Black Renaissance* (2005),³⁷ has observed that the Blacks and other oppressed peoples have a different conception of history than those at the 'centers of power'.³⁸ They 'live history',³⁹ differently and therefore in their accounts (fictional and documentary) of the oppressed they 'privilege myth over accuracy, romantic resistance over silent subordination'.⁴⁰ Black writers only had to fall back upon their tradition of political resistance to produce narratives where the protagonists continued to struggle against oppression (domestic or otherwise), individually and collectively. By creating these characters, Black writers have turned into artist-activists from the beginning of the twentieth century. Moreover, at the turn of the millennium, African American narratives emerged as the forerunners of immigrant fiction produced by writers of other

ethnicities, where concerns over identity and the need to resist homogenous Americanization are omnipresent themes.

Contemporary Black literary theorists like Bernard Bell point out that this ‘double consciousness’⁴¹ of African Americans has been compounded by differences and fractures which not only pertain to race but to gender, class, culture, sexuality etc in a post-industrial, post-modern society.⁴² Black writers have to represent the self, family and community in such a manner that these aspects of their African American existence are authentically recorded. But over and above all, they have never been able to totally disregard the need to fix the model of Black culture which has been adversely affected by the events of the Middle Passage as well as by the more recent history of the Civil Rights Movement. Even in the twenty first century the need to heal is very much present as a recurrent trope, along with the other trope of double consciousness, and manifests itself in the changing paradigm of the family as well as in the changing gender relations. The anxiety of bearing witness to the racial past, however, has considerably diminished as now the Black writers speak of ‘authentic witnessing’.⁴³ Young Black writers like Tayari Jones have argued that African American writers must explore ‘contemporary narratives’⁴⁴ even though they applaud the previous generation of writers who have tried to render in fiction the ‘lost voices of the generation’.⁴⁵ Authentic witnessing, for these writers, includes ‘depictions of their own meaningful lives’⁴⁶ as African Americans and they consciously distinguish themselves from the Black fiction writers of the hip-hop genre. Noted critic Gerald Early has remarked that these ‘contemporary narratives’ are an integral part of the contemporary Black literary discourse since they do not

‘repudiate the Black literary past’⁴⁷ but suggest that there are ‘other ways and means of producing Black literature and ends for it as well’.⁴⁸

Black women writers and Black women critics of literature were among the first to think of resistance strategies which would empower their individual selves, while addressing the need to heal the community from within. They were also the first to observe the inextricable connections between the Black family and Black community and to further re-imagine the domestic space as a site where Black women could effectively counteract controlling images of Black men and women. Black feminist critic bell hooks, in commenting upon the negative representations of the Black family, remarks:

The Black family in the United States has been primarily represented in a negative light by the unenlightened mainstream culture that is utterly biased in the direction of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.⁴⁹

She adds that slave narratives represented the first attempts to keep alive a concept of the Black family which was totally different from that of the white nuclear family of the America.

Slave narratives recounted stories of exceptional individuals ‘striving to keep both their biological and chosen kin’⁵⁰ together in the face of various kinds of opposition to community-building. bell hooks, in her study of the evolving paradigm of Black family and community in America, has advocated two theories of healing the community. The first is to prioritize ‘communion’,⁵¹ which is a female search for love. In a departure from traditional advocacy of womanly love hooks stipulates that the female search for love must proceed from self love and move on to create ‘circles of love’,⁵² a concept which recalls the Black kinship networks of collective living.

The second is to remodel Black men as specimens of feminist masculinity.⁵³ In this process, the community would learn to feel proud of its men who might successfully practice the ethics of care giving and thereby negate the representation of Black men as bearers of the 'love and trouble'-⁵⁴ motif of blues music. Another Black feminist critic, Patricia Hill Collins, has also commented upon the Black women's (artists' and others') ability to create narratives which would serve as survival stories, aimed at reordering the interpersonal domain of power⁵⁵ by recounting the day-to-day experience of social living.

As I have tried to show, Black women writers were able to follow these theoretical suggestions and in certain cases (e.g. Walker, Hurston, Marshall and Morrison) they actually anticipated such critical turns of thought in the Black feminist academy. A novel like Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* integrates its protagonist's journey towards selfhood with her search for communion through marriages and friendships. Tea Cake is a prototype of latter day feminist masculinity, especially in the way he expresses his emotional need for love to Janie. In their marriage we also have an example of what bell hooks later propounds as an ideal state of mutual connection, where both men and women can continue doing the work of love.⁵⁶ In her book *Rock My Soul*, bell hooks has also suggested the need for the Black people to see within, to rectify their mistakes instead of trying to blame racist behavior for all the ills plaguing their community. She remarks:

We begin to create the foundation of healthy self-esteem by recognizing that we have the capacity to heal ourselves..Healing must come from within.⁵⁷

Again, this is just the solution that Morrison seems to suggest in *The Bluest Eye*.

The projection of individuals who are strong in their ability to heal from within and inspire the people around them to heal themselves is found in Black women's literature, especially in the way they choose to depict their female protagonists. Janie survives because she heals from within; Claudia in *The Bluest Eye* blames herself because she is unable to aid Pecola to heal herself. In the fiction of the 80s and the millennium this tradition continues in characters like Celie, Viola Price and the clientele of Bailey's Café. Although Black feminists⁵⁸ reacted vehemently to the Moynihan report (discussed in Chapter 2) and saw it as a systematic attempt on the part of 'white, supremacist patriarchal culture'⁵⁹ to devalue Black womanhood, no such anxiety was noticeable in the works of Black women novelists. They continued to create female characters who were self-actualized and had the power to heal their families and communities. The notion of the domestic space as a 'safe space' of empowerment was actually borne out by Black women writers. Moreover in their bid to create a distinct cultural context while staying within the American society, writers like Alice Walker have propagated the ideology of womanism, which integrates the two separate ideals of personal empowerment and communal/racial well being. Womanism is not just an alternative brand of feminism; Walker defines it both as a form of Black activism and as a trait that can be observed in Black men as well as Black women.

All Black women writers including Walker have chosen to use and emphasize the myth of the super-strong Black mother. This figure, replicated endlessly in varying forms as an archetype of the empowered women of resistance, has been elevated to the status of an indispensable trope in Black literature. Even Black male writers have hardly ever attempted to resist this indestructible trope. In a way, the

matriarchal image of Black women characters, designed to counteract the controlling images of Black women propagated by white patriarchal culture, has itself become a controlling image in its renewed version. Thus a Black woman character who does not have heroic abilities is very seldom found in the African American literary canon. The difference is that their heroism does not stop at individual resourcefulness, but goes on to embrace the well-being of the community. Sometimes we see that their problems in achieving communion with the family is subordinated to the more important function of creating circles of love, and often of sisterhoods in their communities.

This aspect of Black women's writing separates it from the mainstream literature of America which for the most part focuses on the experiences of a single exceptional figure. However, in this recycling of the Black female figure as the most empowered individual in her family as well as her community, Black women writers have represented her as an isolated being and her loneliness is comparable to the isolation of such all-American fictional heroes like Moby Dick or Huck Finn. Although Michelle Wallace has pointed out that Janie's Zen-like isolation is unnatural⁶⁰ at the end of the novel, characters like Pecola, Claudia and Merle, as well as the feisty Viola Price, are essentially women who are all alone. No matter how well-connected they are with their families, their search for love or communion continues indefinitely. In this context I would like to cite the example of Octavia Butler's novel *Parable of the Talents*,⁶¹ (1998) where the protagonist Laurean Olamina creates Earthseed as a futuristic community. She selects a group of people to start a chapter of this community amongst the stars, to save them from almost certain global destruction. Olamina even gives up her biological daughter to fulfill her dream

of Earthseed. The ambiguities of relational love plague her and she never resolves her problems with her daughter; but I feel that she does all this willingly, knowing that the loneliness of a visionary activist is but a small price to pay for the dream. Here we see a modification of the American Dream, but the community of Earthseed also buries Olamina's daughter's desire for a mother. Olamina too, in her encounter with her daughter at the end of the novel, seems to be repenting the lack of relational love in her life.

Terry McMillan's 1993 novel *Waiting to Exhale*,⁶² which acquired cult status as a Black urban romance, features four successful Black women's attempts to create a sisterhood. The novel, however, says very little about their engagement in community building endeavours as they spend most of their time trying to get to meet eligible Black men. So much for Hill Collins' emergent woman thesis. These women are united in their search for Black men, yet there is no denying their loneliness as single women, which remains something that they cannot heal by themselves. However, as stated above, the Black single woman's experiences form a part of the contemporary reality of Black women. Therefore, even if they are not women of resistance, McMillan performs the task of authentic witnessing on their behalf. The contemporary narratives of McMillan or Butler record Black women's experiences without alluding to the memories of a troubled racial past, and thus fulfill the conditions of authentic witnessing.

Black women writers have also tried to realize Black male characters who are epitomes of feminist masculinity. Yet in some cases it seems that Black male writers have a point when they talk about the 'poisoned pen of patriarchy'.⁶³ In McMillan's novel, for example, women enlist the evils of the contemporary Black man and the

list is sufficiently long to arouse animosity. It includes all such charges as “they’re ugly”, “stupid”, “in prison”, “unemployed”, “crackheads”, “liars” to being arrogant” and “childish”.⁶⁴ bell hooks’s conception of feminist masculinity was forwarded as a tool to build up Black men’s sense of self-esteem, especially when they were devalued as worthless in their relationships with the women in their lives. Feminist masculinity would have the power to negate images which hooks believed to be those of ‘patriarchal, predatory masculinity’.⁶⁵ As I have already pointed out in the first part of the conclusion, from the earliest decades discussed in this thesis, women writers have been engaged in creating male characters which were different from the dominant stereotypes of Black masculinity. A character like Tea Cake, for example, potentially embodies the principles of feminist masculinity. Other women writers like Alice Walker have warned that movements such as the Million Man March would be inconsequential unless the Black men of the community could connect with each other on an emotional level. She seems to be rephrasing bell hooks’s prescription of communion between Black men and women when she remarks:

I think it is absolutely necessary that Black men regroup as Black men; until they can talk to each other, hug and kiss each other, they will never know how to do those things with me. I know whole Black men exist, and I want to see and enjoy them.⁶⁶

Walker’s characterization of Albert in *The Color Purple* is done in such a manner that he journeys from being an abusive husband and as an inconsiderate father to being a whole person. In this case, the notion of being whole goes back to the womanist emphasis on healing from within.

Black male novelistic practice has also graduated from the motif of the invisible man to angry men, and finally to men who are agents of resistance in that

they are both self-actualized and successful in creating circles of love. It seems that they have taken the cue from Black feminist epistemology to create a safe space for themselves in America by foregrounding principles of love, nurturing and emotional connections with the family and the community. Baldwin's Fonny in *If Beale Street Could Talk* is such a new man. Baldwin was deliberately creating a character like Fonny because he was aware of the American ideal of masculinity as a conservative one. In his essay, 'Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood'⁶⁷ he remarks :

The American ideal then, of sexuality, appears to be rooted in the American ideal of masculinity. This ideal has created cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs, tough guys and softies, butch and faggot, Black and white. It is an ideal so paralytically infantile that it is virtually forbidden as an unpatriotic act—that the American boy evolve into the complexity of manhood.⁶⁸

Taking Baldwin's lead, other writers of the succeeding decades have tried to portray Black men as responsible figures. During the 80s, Wideman spoke about the need to articulate father stories⁶⁹ in Black communities. Chris Gardner's memoir *The Pursuit of Happyness*,⁷⁰ recently filmed with Will Smith⁷¹ essaying the role of Gardner, documents the relationship of a Black single father with his son. This autobiographical novel foregrounds an African American man's ability to become the sole care-giver in a family when the woman is absent. This is not an isolated example as Black single fathers performing the function of primary care-givers were being bantered as the 'Mr-Mom' phenomenon.⁷² Gardner also shows the Black man's resourcefulness in his quest to achieve the American Dream of economic prosperity. The Black man in this case becomes another model of feminist masculinity, and Gardner's fatherstory is representative of the lives of numerous such non-traditional males in America. Moreover, this novel and its film version strongly suggest that, after Baldwin, it is possible to create a new idiom for Black masculinity

which would rectify the simplistic ideal of American masculinity. Examples in the genre of paraliterature, especially the Gay novels of Lynn Harris, take up this theme and develop Black male characters in their domestic space. It is a paradigmatic shift from Black men being observed in their social and political roles, and a movement towards emulating the women's literary model of portraying the protagonist in a domestic space.

Michael Awkward⁷³ has pointed out that Black feminist literary discourse, after the leaps that it made in the 70s and 80s, has now regressed as it fails to address the problem of 'Black-men-in-crisis'.⁷⁴ He remarks :

With few exceptions (particularly the work of some creative writers) generally self described, Black feminist discourse remains unlikely to explore Black masculinity except as a social, domestic and intellectual force whose oppression of Black women is energetic, self-conscious, and unremitting. ...⁷⁵

Awkward further suggests that like mainstream feminism, that talks of 'non monolithic masculinity'⁷⁶ as consisting of 'a range of responses by individual or racialized men to patriarchal system of oppression',⁷⁷ *Black* [italics mine] feminist discourse should also be prepared to discuss non-monolithic *Black* [italics mine] masculinity to facilitate gender equality.⁷⁸ Awkward feels that the proliferation of 'hip-hop machismo'⁷⁹ in popular culture (reflected in hip-hop inspired literature) has been to some extent a 'reaction against Black women's social and intellectual progress'.⁸⁰ He believes that Black feminist studies should do well to observe the 'rifts between putatively homogenous Black men'⁸¹ that it has not done so far. Although Awkward exonerates some creative writers from exhibiting such a flaw, there is reason to suppose that, in spite of their womanist agenda and exhortations to

realise feminist masculinity, Black feminist discourse after the 90s has done very little by way of implementing these theoretical concepts.

African American male writers and their female peers seemed to have arrived at a common ground, from where they could proudly proclaim their belief in love, peoplehood and collective living. They could also acknowledge that as creative artists they had tried to establish that 'communion', or the desire for communion, which amounts to a kind of activism capable of leading the community to overcome oppressive ideological domination and create a successful cultural context. But although the male characters have become models of responsible Black manhood in recent African American novels written by men while their documentation of Black masculinity is attentive to the hybrid reality of the millennium, one wonders whether the male characters in these novels also do not suffer from the same sense of isolation which plagues the female characters in Black women's writing. However, as the current trends in Black literature show, the intensity of such womanist activism has somehow waned and hip-hop fiction which endorses patriarchal masculinity is stealing a march over womanist narratives of healing.

Houston A. Baker in his book *African American Poetics*⁸² has predicted the future of the African American literary scene as a space where Black male artists and female artists can engage in addressing different issues without trying to exhibit separatist tendencies. He remarks that both Black men and women share a common past and would therefore be able to evolve into legitimate witnesses to recount 'the sources and the signatures of our wounding.'⁸³ In order to do this, the future generations of writers are advised to take inspiration from African American women and create new paradigms evolving out of 'Afro-American woman's expressivity.'⁸⁴

While Baker's suggestion is laudable one also has to keep in mind that for the contemporary generation of writers 'the sources and signatures of wounding' are different for men and women.

I believe that Black male writers have already been educated by Black women writers and activists as well as by feminists and literary theorists. The proof of this fact lies in the manifold ways in which they (Black male novelists) foreground issues such as the search for love, possibilities of communion and the co-existence of self-actualized men and women in families. Male authored Black literature has travelled a long distance and has suitably adjusted its autobiographical tradition to incorporate the African American ethic of connectedness with the community and family. But even with such dynamic strides it has not been able to interrogate and analyze the model of the all-powerful Black woman/mother as the supreme agent of resistance in the community and as the overwhelming model of care giving in the family. Black men as writers have not been able to humanize her enough to treat her as a flawed human being.

Similarly, the Afro-American women writers who have evolved their own mythic structures and followed Morrison's prescription have succeeded in creating a fiction for the tribe.⁸⁵ The community of women writers has always been astute in documenting the ambiguities of the domestic space, in spite of affirming that a communion was possible with men as well as with other racial communities of America. They have been the pioneers in selecting themes and issues in their novels which represent the need to heal as a universal desire. However, the constant recycling of the myth of the mother in various manifestations has somewhat arrested the development of their radical literary tradition.

The Black woman as ‘the activist’, ‘the woman of resistance’ and ‘the emergent woman’ is distinctly larger than life, which Trudier Harris sees as a ‘stubbornness of tradition’.⁸⁶ But the Black feminist literary critic as well as the creative writers, both male and female, need to revise this trope if they are to effectively counteract the cultural context generated by a ‘misogynist’ Black popular culture. For Black feminist literary discourse to be more dynamic, it needs to respond to the contemporary challenges. Michael Awkward has argued that Black feminist studies, because of its commitment to the womanist ideal of ‘racial wholeness’⁸⁷, should be more prepared to acknowledge ‘the desire’⁸⁸ for such an ideal to be successfully realized. This is the need of the hour, and, more importantly:

...in the face of Black patriarchy’s aggressive reemergence in the Black popular culture that helps to shape the perspective of our students and children, we must do so without reducing it to a single, static self confirming thing.⁸⁹

Recycling the myth of the all-powerful Black woman is definitely not going to send a positive message to Black patriarchy. Writers should imagine and delineate women characters who are vulnerable and have to struggle to attain their own identities within families and communities. On the other hand, Awkward’s earlier suggestion of incorporating non-monolithic Black masculinity should be attended to by Black writers. Edward P. Jones, in his recent collection of short stories called *All Aunt Hagar’s Children*⁹⁰, is able to achieve both ends, i.e. realise womanist ideals of racial wholeness and depict non monolithic Black masculinity. Gerald Early has also written about his experience of editing Black anthologies⁹¹ here he has deliberately roped in the popular writer E. Lynn Harris as guest editor, to ensure that Black readers could approach Black anthologies without any feeling of intimidation. Harris would be able to select articles that qualify as serious Black literature (and may have

been otherwise neglected by the masses) and his editorship would assist readers of popular fiction to familiarize themselves with such literature. In this way the complexity and richness of African American literature would be appreciated by the current generation of readers.⁹²

Barbara Smith,⁹³ a pioneering Black feminist critic, also agrees that Black feminism somewhere along the way has become an elitist movement. People identify its practitioners as middle class, educated women. Smith believes that in order to attain Black feminism's womanist goals the basic bread and butter issues⁹⁴ should not be ignored. She writes:

From my own organizing experience I know that there are working class and poor Black women who not only relate to the basis principles of Black feminism but who live them. I believe our moment will be very much stronger when we develop a variety of ways to bring Black feminism home to the Black communities from which it comes.⁹⁵

Smith seems to be suggesting new ways of reviving the activism with which Black writers and critics have always been associated. She also implies that a closure is required on the earlier insistence that the Black community should bear witness to racial oppression. But Smith is pointing out at the same time that the new activism should encompass the reality of the Black community from which Black feminism took off. In her latest novel *Love*⁹⁶ Toni Morrison has incorporated working class characters and Alice Walker's latest agenda (recorded in alicewalkersblog.com)⁹⁷ is to make Black womanist activism more grass root oriented. Neither of these novelists speak any longer of bearing witness to their troubled racial past.

If Black writers (male and female) are able to document the struggle of the Black family and community (embracing both men and women) while trying to keep up with the changing rhythms of the American Dream, Black literature will achieve

its womanist end. Concepts like ‘feminist masculinity’, ‘safe space’, ‘womanist activism’ are primarily intellectual ones, but creative artists can realise them through their representation of these ideals. Contemporary narratives, set in the present like Tayari Jones’s (*Leaving Atlanta*, 2002),⁹⁸ or set in the past (like Edward P. Jones’s. *All Aunt Hagar’s children*)⁹⁹ or even set in the future (like *Parable of The Talents* by Octavia Butler)¹⁰⁰ might show the means of making away with the flaws in contemporary popular Black culture. If the Black artists can do this, their future generations will see a healthier Black family and community, worth setting an example to the other ethnic Americans. Such communities would learn by precedent, as the Jewish and Native Americans have learned, that one can attain individual happiness and also heal the community by engaging in community-friendly art and activism.

NOTES

1. Toni Morrison, 'An Interview with Toni Morrison', interview by Bessie W Jones and Audrey Vinson in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, p. 187.
2. Ralph Ellison, 'Richard Wright's Blues' in *Living with Music : Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings* ed. Robert G. o' Meally (New York : Random House, 2001), p. 119.
3. Ibid., p. 119.
4. Tiffany Ruby Patterson, *Zora Neale Hurston and a History of Southern Life* (Philadelphia : Temple University Press, 2005).
5. Zora Neale Hurston, 'What White Publishers Won't Print' in *Negro Digest* 8 (April 1950), pp. 85-89, rpt. *Zora Neale Hurston : Folklore, Memories and other Writings* ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New York : Library of America, 1995), p-954. Cited in Patterson, *Zora Neale Hurston*, p. 44.
6. Patterson, *Zora Neale Hurston*, p. 44.
7. Ibid., p. 44.
8. hooks, *The Will To Change*, p.117.
9. Elliot Butler Evans , 'Women Authors of Color' in *Feminism in Literature : A Gale Critical Companion*, Volume 4 (Detroit: Gale, 2005), p. 483.
10. Ibid., p. 483.
11. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 95.

12. Alexis De Veau, 'Paule Marshall- In Celebration of Our Triumph' in *Essence*, X, (May 1980) : 96, rpt as epigraph in Barbara Christian's 'Trajectories of Self Definition : Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction' in *Feminisms*, eds.Robyn R. Warhol and Diane P. Herndl (Hampshire : Macmillan Press, 1997), p. 319.
13. The concept of communion as theorized by bell hooks in her *communion: the female Search For Love* (New York : Harper Collins, 2002).
14. Morrison specifically speaks about the mammy image and refuses to see it in a pejorative manner. See Anna Koenen 'The one out of Sequence' in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, p. 84.
15. Barbara Christian, 'Trajectories of Self Definition' in *Feminisms*, pp. 319-328.
16. This expression was used by Morrison to describe the character of Cholly in her novel *The Bluest Eye*. A detailed discussion has been done in Chapter 2.
17. W.E.B DuBois 'The Souls of Black Folk' in *Black Voices: An Anthology of African-American Literature* , ed.Abraham Chapman (New York : Penguin Putnam, 1968), p. 496.
18. bell hooks has discussed this concept of the 'new man' at length in her book *The Will To Change : Men, Masculinity and Love* (pp. 112- 113). I have discussed this in detail in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 respectively.
19. Emmaneul S. Nelson, 'James Baldwin's Vision of Otherness and Community' in *Critical essays on James Baldwin*,eds. Fred L.Standley and Nancy V. Burt (Boston : G. K. Hall, 1988), p. 124.

20. Barthold, *Black Time*, pp.118-121.
21. Baldwin , *If Beale Street Could talk*, p. 192.
22. The concept of ‘safe space’ as theorized by Patricia H.Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (pp. 100-102) has been defined and discussed in Chapter 4 as well as Chapter 5.
23. Barbara Christian, ‘Trajectories of Self Definitions’ in *Feminisms*, p. 323.
24. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, pp. 273-290.
25. Ibid., pp. 273-74.
26. Ibid.,95-96.
27. Baldwin, ‘Take Me To The Water’ in *James Baldwin : Collected Essays*,p.393.
28. Ernest Gaines, *A Gathering of Old Men*, p. 111.
29. Morrison tells Robert Stepto that she prefers the term ‘neighborhood’ to community in ‘Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison’, in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, (p.11).
30. Wideman affirms Morrison’s view in his interview with Jessica Lustig, ‘Home: An Interview with John Edgar Wideman’ in *African American Review* volume 26, Number 3, p. 456.
31. Deborah E.McDowell, ‘New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism’ in *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism* ed. Jacqueline Bobo (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2001), p. 34.
32. Naylor, *Mama Day*, p. 43.

33. Naylor, *Bailey's Café*, p. 160.
34. The Million Man March was held in Washington, D. C. on October 16th1995 'to demonstrate solidarity, strength and support for black family and community.' Source: James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Hard Road to Freedom*, p.349.
35. Oprah Winfrey is the popular talk show hostess who regularly dispenses advice to her audience to deal with crisis situations. Like Viola Price her advice is always delivered matter-of-factly and with her trademark humour.
36. hooks, *communion*, p. 242.
37. Manning Marable, 'Living Black History: Resurrecting African-American Intellectual Tradition' in *The New Black Renaissance: The Souls Anthology of Critical African American Studies*, ed. Manning Marable (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), pp. 3-14.
38. Ibid., p.3.
39. Ibid., p.3.
40. Ibid., p.3.
41. Bell, 'Conclusion' in *The Contemporary African American Novel*, pp.383-388.
42. Ibid., p.386.
43. Tayari Jones, 'Literature at the crossroads' in *eJournal USA*, Volume14, Number 2 (Washington: U.S. Department of State, 2009), pp.7-9.
44. Ibid., p.8.

45. Ibid.,p.8
46. Ibid.,p.8.
47. Gerald Early, 'What is African-American Literature?' in *eJournal USA*,p.20.
48. Ibid.,p.20.
49. hooks, *Rock My Soul : Black People and Self Esteem*, p. 120.
50. Ibid., p.120.
51. hooks, *communion*, pp. xiii-xxi.
52. Ibid., p.xxi, pp. 243-244.
53. hooks, *The Will To Change*, pp. 107-134.
54. Hill Collins,*Black Feminist Thought* , pp. 151-160.
55. Ibid., pp. 287-290.
56. *Communion*, p. 242.
57. hooks, *Rock My Soul*, p. 206.
58. Black Feminist critics have attacked the findings of the Moynihan Report. Good examples are Hortense Spillers's essay 'Mama Baby Papa's Maybe' in *Feminisms*, pp. 384-405 and Michelle Wallace's study *Black Macho and The Myth of the Superwoman*.
59. Ibid., p. 120. In fact used by bell hooks in *The Will To Change* (pp. 17-33) to describe the intersecting networks of oppression black people are subjected to and also to show how these systems damage efforts to build one's identity.

60. Michelle Wallace 'To Hell and Back: on the Road with Black Feminism in the '60s and 70s' in *Dark Designs and Visual Culture*, ed. Michelle Wallace (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p.96.
61. Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Talents* (New York: Warner Books, 1998).
62. Terry McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale* (Boston: GK Hall & Co, 1991).
63. Sven Birketts, 'A Postscript on Black American Fiction' in *American Energies :_Essays on Non-Fiction* ed. Sven birketts (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc, 1992), p. 334.
64. McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, p. 451.
65. hooks, *Rock My Soul*, p. 131.
66. Alice Walker, 'What That Day Was Like For Me' in *Anything We Love Can be Saved: A Writer's Activism*, ed. Alice Walker (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), p.111.
67. James Baldwin, 'Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood' in *James Baldwin : Collected Essays* (New York : Library of America, 1998), pp. 814-829.
68. Ibid., p. 815.
69. Wideman, *Fatheralong*, pp.177-197.
70. Chris Gardener, *The Pursuit of Happyness* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006).
71. *The Pursuit of Happyness*,dir.Gabriel Muccino,(USA: Columbia Pictures, 2007).

72. Ta-Nehiss Coates, 'Confessions of a Black MrMom' in *The American Family*, ed. Karen Duda (The United States: H.W. Wilson Company, 2003), pp.149-156.
73. Michael Awkward, 'Black Feminism and the Challenge of Black Heterosexual Desire' in *The New Black Renaissance*, pp.137-141.
74. Ibid., p.137.
75. Ibid.,p.137.
76. Ibid., p.137.
77. Ibid., p.137.
78. Ibid., p.138.
79. Ibid., p.138.
80. Ibid., p.138.
81. Ibid., p.138.
82. Houston A. Baker, *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro American Women's Writing* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1991).
83. Ibid., pp. 209-210.
84. Ibid., p. 210.
85. Toni Morrison, 'The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison' interview by Thomas Leclair in *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*,ed.Henry Louis Gates,Jr (New York: Amistad Press,1993), pp.369-377. Morrison uses this phrase in p. 370.

86. Trudier Harris, *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 123.
87. Awkward, 'Black Feminism...' in *e Journal USA*, p.141.
88. Ibid., p.141.
89. Ibid.,p.141.
90. Edward P. Jones, *All Aunt Hagar's Children* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007).
91. Gerald Early 'What is a African American Literature?' in *e Journal USA* , pp.17-21.
92. Ibid.,p.21.
93. Barbara Smith, 'Establishing Black Feminism' in *The New Black Renaissance*, pp. 142-146.
94. Ibid., p144.
95. Ibid., p.144.
96. Toni Morrison, *Love* (New York: Random House, 2003).
97. Alice Walker's personal blog. If one visits this site one would see that Walker's personal activism is now extended to embrace other communities in distress.
98. Tayari Jones, *Leaving Atlanta* (New York: Warner Books, 2002).

99. Edward Jones's collection of stories *All Aunt Hagar's Children* includes stories like 'In the Blink of God's Eye' (pp.1-30) and 'Bad Neighbours' (pp.347-373) that are good examples of 'contemporary narratives' where the trope of 'double consciousness' is not the primary one. In his novel *The Known World* (New York: Amistad, 2003), Jones looks at the institution of slavery but in this case the slave-holder himself is a black man.
100. Butler's novel belongs to the genre of science-fiction and is set in the future. However she includes issues pertaining to minority communities everywhere through her novel.