

INTRODUCTION

THE BLACK FAMILY AND COMMUNITY: SEARCHING FOR A DREAM.

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run? Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load
Or does it explode?¹

From Langston Hughes's poetry of the 1920s to the sermons of Martin Luther King to the speeches of the new Black American President Barack Obama, the image of a dream has been an abiding one in the African American collective psyche. Although in most of these cases it referred to the desire for a country free from racism and white oppression, the dream also articulated the Black Americans' mission to create a stable community and family life despite the tensions to which the African American race had been subjected.

While the American Dream has largely been equated with images of material success, it also encouraged a certain pattern of living and thinking that was individualistic rather than community-centric. In *Pursuing The American Dream*² Cal Jillson has observed the patterns of exclusion inherent in the American Dream in spite of its promise of equality. For the Black American community, therefore, it has been imperative to restructure the American Dream to include issues of the community's welfare and, more importantly, to speak about the systematic oppression that they have had to endure, that

in turn has jeopardized their aspirations of equality and their identity as Blacks. For the African Americans the American Dream means a dream of racial equality more than that of individual economic prosperity; a dream of resisting and counteracting oppression. Most Blacks agree that these two aspects of their modification of the American Dream necessarily acknowledge the Black community's departure from the normative American nuclear family and their enthusiasm to preserve a community-centric existence which embraced their ancient tribal pattern of kinship. In fact, as critics like bell hooks have pointed out, 'survival' for the Blacks in the 'New World' was possible because they retained their faith in kinship and a circle of kin.³

Thus Black artists and activists interrogated the flaws inherent in the American Dream, especially as it guaranteed life, liberty, and a pursuit of happiness⁴, but failed to deliver it for their community. Even after the Emancipation Proclamation, the systems of segregation were very much alive, and nationalist leaders like Malcolm X called it an American nightmare.⁵ The Black writers have always spoken about the twin factors of a history of slavery and systematic racial oppression in their own identity formation. This makes Black fiction implicitly historical and referential to their past. In their quest to create a distinct African American identity, Black American artists have repeatedly written on themes that deal with the uniqueness of the African American family and its relation to the larger community. Moreover, every noteworthy writer of African American stock, be it James Baldwin or Toni Morrison, has spoken about the social responsibility of writers so that writing does not remain a purely personal expression but becomes a platform for their political beliefs and reflections on the entire community. Sven Birkerts⁶ has concluded that this is the very source from which springs the power of the African American writer:

Black fiction...reaches off the page, via the author himself or herself, to connect with actual circumstance—the circumstance of degradation inflicted by slavers and plantation bosses and the perpetuation of that injury through societal Racism⁷...

Thus every writer in the African American literary tradition has performed the role of a historian, bearing witness to the evolution of the community. In recording the social changes that affect their community, African American writers have also chronicled the changing face of the African American family. The African American discourse on family is enriched not only by the writers' attempts to recapture the problems specific to Black family life (which are mostly due to an uneasy alliance between men and women) but also because, in every generation, they have recorded the growth of masculine and feminine subjectivities within the family in response to the social changes of the time.

The African American racial memory is permanently marked by the occurrence of the Middle Passage. The Africans who were brought to this new continent were displaced from their homeland; those who boarded the ships had to witness the death of their families on board or estrangement from them once they set foot on the land. Separated by violence from their family, their ancestors and their native land, Africans who came to America lost an important part of their identity. The slave narratives of Olaudah Equiano⁸ and Frederick Douglass⁹ attest to the trauma of this cultural and emotional alienation. The institution of slavery forever fractured the model of a typical African American family. De Tocqueville¹⁰ had noted earlier:

Oppression has with one blow taken from the descendants of the Africans almost all the privileges of humanity. The Negro of the United States has lost even the memory of his country...The Negro has no family; he cannot see in woman anything but the passing companion of his pleasures, and his sons, by being born, are his equals.¹¹

In spite of Tocqueville's authentic observations, the African-Americans tried to replicate the former patterns of communal living by forming circles of kin—other mothers, surrogate mothers and brothers – even within their plantations. These were perhaps the earliest examples of brotherhood and sisterhood which would be integral to the sustenance of the African American family in future and function as major symbols of the importance of communal living in Black fiction.

The kinship networks which first came into existence to supplant biological relationships later on were subsumed under the entity of the African American family. In this instance we see its greatest divergence from mainstream American culture. The white Europeans, who were the founding fathers of America, had aspired to build this new continent as a city upon the hill with a distinctive identity of its own. However, in pursuing this quest for distinctiveness, American culture became predominantly individualistic with the Puritan virtues of toil, perseverance and honesty being prioritized as an individual's potential for success. In such a scenario the favoured form of family organization was that of a nuclear family. Andrew Billingsley probably gives the most authentic definition of how different the African American family is, when he describes it as:

An intimate association of persons of African descent who are related to one another by a variety of means, including blood, marriage, formal adoption, informal adoption, or by appropriation, sustained by a history of common residence in America; and deeply embedded in a network of social structures both internal and external to itself.¹²

Thus while discussing novels which deal with the African American Dream we find a deep, intrinsic bond between family and community, so much so that at times it becomes difficult to separate the one from the other.

Black men and women in their families and community: projecting different trajectories of growth

For the purpose of this thesis, I have narrowed down my discussion of the family in African American novels to the twentieth century, beginning with the decade of the 30s and concluding with the 90s. The late 20s and the 30s were perhaps the most significant years in African American history after the First World War and the great Depression of 1929, because there was a collective migration of a lot of Black people from the racist Jim Crow South to the more promising North which was considered to be the repository of the American Dream. This phenomenon gave an impetus to the first cultural movement towards establishing Black identity – the Harlem Renaissance.

The Harlem Renaissance and its associated intellectuals demonstrated the power of Black Nationalism and cultural self-sufficiency while articulating such issues as segregation and problems of living in an urban ghetto – issues that were important to the community. The literature of these times combines the personal and political experience of Blacks in America, to become a faithful testimony to the socio-political changes taking place after slavery has been eliminated. Therefore the decade of the 30s seemed to be the best point to begin my discussion on the evolution of the African American family and community.

This thesis is structured in a way that engages in a comparative and chronological discussion of the African American family and community as represented in the novels of Black male and female writers (in pairs) between the 30s and the 90s. These writers have been selected in particular because of the similarity of certain themes and motifs in their works, which also makes it easier to understand the significant points of departure in their

treatment of those themes and motifs. I have also tried to explore their differences in delineating the African American family and related issues concerning its position with regard to the community and the individual. This thesis attempts to discover to what extent such differences are due to their gender perspectives and how far each male or female writer fails or succeeds in resisting gender stereotypes within the Black family as well as negative stereotypes fostered by white patriarchal culture.

As my discussion of the novels inevitably involves references to contemporary Black literary criticism (written by both men and women), it is also interesting to note that male and female critics have often reacted differently to these novels. They have sometimes alleged that gender roles within the family as documented by individual writers are primarily influenced by their male or female subject status which they see generally as positions indissociable from the writer's biological sex. For this reason the African American discourse on family has been seen as irreparably heterogeneous and there is yet to be a common consensus in African American literature as to a definitive portrayal of the ideal African American family. We have the celebrated poet Nikki Giovanni speaking about her childhood memories, in 'Nikki Rosa'¹³ in the following manner:

Childhood remembrances are always a drag/if you're Black/you always remember things like living in Woodlawn/with no inside toilet...biographers need never understand/your father's pain as he sells his stock/and another dream goes/ and though you're poor it isn't poverty that/concerns you/and though they fought a lot/it isn't your father's drinking that makes any difference/but only everybody is together and... /and I really hope no white person ever has cause/to write about me/because they never understand/Black love is Black wealth and they'll/probably talk about my hard/childhood/and never understand that all the while I was quite happy.¹⁴

On the other hand Tiffany Ruby Patterson¹⁵, in the dedication page of her study on Zora Neale Hurston thanks her father in the following words:

For Turner Patterson (1918 —)

Thank you for your quiet love, your certain loyalty, and your sense of humor. You kept your promise, neither I nor my siblings or mother ever wore patches. I love you for that.¹⁶

Thus while Giovanni speaks about white biographers distorting Black family life and undermining the Black wealth of love, Patterson thanks her father for refraining from violence and this, according to her, makes him exceptional. These quotations reaffirm the fact that there is no monolithic model of a Black family, although negative stereotypes of Black families proliferate in mainstream literature and culture.

In my thesis I will be engaged in demarcating the process of evolution of a discourse of the African American family which is contingent on both the historical moment as well as the gender identity of the writer. But it is never so heterogeneous and inherently inconsistent as not to reveal a pattern of self-reflexive, critical and assimilative insights by which writers of a later decade reveal the influence that writers of an earlier decade have exercised over on them. As to the differences in representations by male and female novelists, again there is a clear indication that African American womanist criticism and the works of Black women writers have exerted substantial influence on the male writers of later decades, thereby causing them to modify their portrayal of the African - American family in recent times.

Black feminism—ever since Alice Walker coined the term *womanism* to differentiate it from Anglo-American white feminism—has greatly influenced the

outsider's perception of Black women's role in the family and community. In her essay 'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens'¹⁷, Walker spoke about the ways in which Black women have managed to preserve their families while exploring their creativity. She calls this creative instinct, 'the notion of a song'¹⁸, which Black women retained in spite of oppression. While underlining the multiple meanings of the word womanist, Walker remarks that a womanist is:

1. From womanish. A Black feminist of color.
2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist Traditionally universalist ... Traditionally capable.
3. Loves music, Loves dance, Loves the moon, Loves the Spirit Loves struggle, Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.
4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.¹⁹

Walker's delineation of womanism includes aspects of self-actualization, relationship with others, connectedness with life and natural cycles as well as its emphatic difference from feminism. Womanism enables Black women to prioritize connectedness and healing while preserving the power of women to resist oppression. Since a womanist according to Walker cares for the wholeness of the community, for men as well as women, Walker also feels the need to write about the difficulties of a Black man who tries to better himself in such essays as 'Father'.²⁰ Womanist aesthetics, therefore, has no separatist agenda and is committed to the survival of Black people as a whole.

Even before womanism was thus defined, Black feminist critics had tried to evaluate fiction by analyzing the ability of writers to focus on Black women's oppression

within the family. They had shown how certain writers have fallen a prey to controlling images of Black women (mostly perpetuated by white ideology) even while they tried to forge a dynamic maternal discourse exclusively African American in its characteristics, But it seems to me that most women novelists have tried to transcend these negative images of Black women as perpetuated in white patriarchal culture. In this context essays by Barbara Christian²¹, Barbara Smith²² and Deborah E. McDowell²³ are very important as they have tried to point out the existence of a separate Afro-American women's writing tradition that existed well before the Civil Rights movement and blended the personal with the political to bring about the healing of the community culture. Toni Morrison in her interview with Anna Koenen²⁴ says about the resilience of Black women that:

It's a question of who the..., Black women respect, ...And it seems to me that the most respectable person is that woman who is a healer and understands plants and stones and yet they live in the world. It's a quality that normally one associates with a mammy; a Black mammy She could nurse, she could heal, she could chop wood, she could do all those things. And that's always been a pejorative word,...but it isn't.²⁵

Although the predominance and endurance of the metaphors of matriarchy and matriliney cannot be underestimated or ignored in analyzing African American fiction, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report (*The Negro Family: A Case For National Defense*)²⁶ was perhaps the first document which openly alleged the root cause of the backwardness of the Black population as arising out of its preference for matrilineal households.

Moynihan is perhaps a bit too harsh in his denunciation of the dominance of women in the African American family, but there is a grain of truth in his statements, and Black male critics feel a vacuum in the maternal discourse of African American culture because the paternal principle is marginalized. Black women writers are also partially to blame for

such allegations from personages like Moynihan, since they have mostly presented male members of the family as absentee fathers or absconding sons. The standard adult male behavior in Black underclass families is a never-ending struggle to free themselves from the domination of women. George Henderson²⁷ has pointed out in his discussion on Black male identity crisis that the real emotional crisis for Black men starts when they realize that they must 'find their manhood or suffer total psychological emasculation'.²⁸ Black male critics have also alleged that celebrated women writers have missed the point when they delineated male characters as inferior to the women characters. Sven Birkets has noted that bestselling Black women novelists have created narratives where one finds 'the story of Black matriarchy as written with a poisoned pen'.²⁹

Certain critics/editors have tried to rectify this vacuum by publishing anthologies which specifically project the Black male experience. *Brotherman*³⁰ is such an example. The editors have stated in the preface that:

...the central purpose of this collection is to create a living mosaic of essays and stories in which Black men can view themselves without distortion. For distortion is only one of the destructive tactics used against us by the powers that be when confronted by our "troubling and threatening presence". When Blacks were not being annihilated, they were often being deceived and burdened with insidious stereotypes. If these measures proved ineffective, Black men then became the target of psychological manipulation, and were made to believe that we alone were responsible for our frustrations and failures.³¹

On the other hand there have been women writers who acknowledged their racial connection to ancestry through their mothers. Notable among them are writers like Paule Marshall. Marshall states in her essay, 'The Poets in the Kitchen'³² that it was through listening to her mother and her friends talking amongst themselves that she was able to appreciate their creative energy and their self expression as a means to establishing their identity. She writes:

There was no way for me to understand it at the time, but the talk that filled the kitchen those afternoons was highly functional. It served as therapy, the cheapest kind available to my mother and her friends...But more than therapy that free-wheeling, wide-ranging exuberant talk functioned as an outlet for the tremendous creative energy they possessed. They were women in whom the need for self expression was strong, and since language was the only vehicle readily available to them they made of it an art form that—in keeping with the African tradition in which art and life are one—was an integral part of their lives.³³

It is no wonder then that mothers or mother-surrogates have played the crucial role of bearing witness to being agents in the transmission of racial history. Thus it is a foregone conclusion that the mother, matriarchy, matrilineal culture and maternal discourse would always remain significant in the life of the African American community.³⁴ Maternal narratives in Black fiction have pointed out time and again how effortlessly Black women, especially the mothers, have realized their domestic responsibilities, become agents of resistance against oppression and have been able to create a cultural context that is based on the ethics of care-giving and sharing while adhering to the systems of kinship. In other words, they have performed the function of ‘bearing witness’—a phrase used repeatedly by Black critics to emphasize the historical relevance of the fictional narratives written by Black women.³⁵ bell hooks’ book *Communion: the Female Search For Love*³⁶ speaks about the ability of African American women to form the ‘circles of love’³⁷ that help to heal their lives. In this regard, she also emphasizes the need to rectify Afro-American masculinity, to reform it in accordance with the feminist desire for love. This model is described as ‘feminist masculinity’³⁸—in that it is radically different from ‘patriarchal predatory masculinity’ (*Rock My Soul*).³⁹ In two other books, *The Will To Change*⁴⁰ and *Rock My Soul*, hooks underlines the ways in which Black men, by reforming themselves, can collaborate with women in various

‘partnership models’⁴¹ to do what she calls the ‘work of love’.⁴² Only then, she believes, the community can develop and overcome its gender bias.

bell hooks’ addresses the problematized gender roles within the fabric of the African American family and also observes the ways in which the ‘imperialist-white-supremacist’⁴³ bias of capitalist patriarchy aggravates the problem by fostering negative images/ stereotypes of Black men and women. The family thus becomes a contested site where the cross-currents of maternal and paternal subjectivities converge. It is interesting to compare how Black male and female novelists have represented this problem since these characteristic tensions inevitably surface on the canvas of the socially conscientious African American writer. African American writers have either tried to re-evaluate the prescribed gender roles within the family or have tried to show the ways in which the Black man and Black woman can work together to form a cohesive community.

On the chapter divisions and selection of novels:

In view of the subtle differences and political disagreements between critics on the African American family and its representation in Black novels, I have chosen, for the purpose of my analysis, a cross-section of those novelists who have documented the entire spectrum of the African American experience from the political to the domestic.

Chapter 1 of my thesis is concerned with comparing two novels—Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes were Watching God*⁴⁴ and Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*⁴⁵—published during the 30s and 40s, i.e. right after the Harlem Renaissance. Both Wright and Hurston employ the coming-of-age trope in their works to trace an individual’s

relation to his/her family. The comparison of the novels is based on their differential approaches to the institution of the Black family. Themes of sexuality and gender also surface in these works, although they are differently handled by the two. I have attempted to explore how Hurston and Wright were (perhaps unconsciously) trying to suggest that Black men and women in their families and communities have had separate trajectories of growth and how these two novels were perhaps the first examples of effective protest literature.

In Chapter 2, I have tried to bring together two pairs of novelists. These four novelists have been incorporated in my discussion primarily because the second chapter encompasses two significant historical developments of the 60s and the 70s. The 60s was the decade of the Pan Africanist and Black Power Movements while the Civil Rights agitation marked the contours of Black history in the 70s. Alex Haley's *Roots*⁴⁶ and Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*⁴⁷ have been chosen for discussion in the first half of the second chapter. Marshall's Bournehills is a Caribbean community, and Haley's search for his roots takes him back to his African tribal roots. These novels not only affirm the existence of the Black diaspora but also prove that the ethics of bearing witness, of struggle and resistance forging a communal lifestyle united Black people everywhere. The circumstances under which Black men and women created brotherhoods and sisterhoods at this time in history are also discussed in this chapter. The second half of the chapter discusses Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*⁴⁸ and James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*⁴⁹. These novels explore the resistance of the community by focusing on the survival strategies adopted by Black men and women during the great political turmoil of the Black Power movements and the Civil Rights era.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison critically examines the community's accountability in failing to inculcate a sense of self-worth in a Black girl. Morrison critiques the Black community because she sees it as rejecting their legacy of a community-centric existence, forgetting how such a move might endanger the young people of the community. Baldwin's perspective is different in that he examines a Black man's plight in America as he is pitted against a racially charged law and order system. Baldwin's 'androgynous'⁵⁰ vision is not as bleak as that of Morrisons' since he tries to suggest that strong families have the ingredients to effectively dismantle structures of oppression, and his compassionate female narrator sees the individual members of her family as men and women trying to collaborate in the creation of a 'circle of love'⁵¹ (hooks' phrase) in spite of all the odds.

In Chapter 3, I have discussed novels from the decade of the 80s. The 80s was a decade of womanist fiction and women authors were creating protagonists who were radically altering gender roles by subverting negative stereotypes prevalent in the characterization of Black men and women. In the first half of the third chapter I have discussed Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*⁵² and Ernest Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men*⁵³. Walker's womanist aesthetics are integral to the understanding of Black feminism in the 80s. In *The Color Purple*, Walker uses a simple female bildungsroman motif while trying to keep her focus on the need to heal and to create circles of love. In Gaines's novel, Gaines portrays a group of old Black men who come together in a moment of crisis and their collective resistance which effectively destroys negative stereotypes of Black male behavior. In reading these novels Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought*⁵⁴ and Jerry Bryant's *Victims and Heroes*⁵⁵ are referred to as important critical texts which help us to understand the negative Black stereotypes (male and female)

fostered by white patriarchal culture and the gradual movement of Black writers towards embracing a Black cultural heritage of community-centric existence out of the need to recreate the community as a 'safe-space'⁵⁶, away from the points of oppression. In the second half of the chapter I have discussed Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*⁵⁷ and John Edgar Wideman's *Sent For You Yesterday*⁵⁸ as these novels are the successful concomitant attempts by Black writers to depict the Black community and neighbourhood (Willow Springs and Homewood) as an integral part of the Black American's coming of age. Moreover, these novels also bear out the fact that the womanist emphasis concerning the health of the community as a whole was shared by the Black people in general. Homewood and Willow Springs may be charmed spaces but they bear the imprint of the Black peoples' desire to recreate their community as a safe space. I have also tried to analyze whether the womanist ethos has in any way undermined the growth or documentation of Black male subjectivity in the novels of this period. For that reason I have chosen these two pairs of authors with a view to establishing the 80s as a prolific decade of African American writing in which womanist authors were going strong but male authors were also trying to imbibe their teachings. The second pair of authors substantiates to what extent womanist aesthetics has been effective in healing the community.

In Chapter 4, I have primarily discussed two novels—Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Cafe*⁵⁹ and E. Lynn Harris' *Just As I Am*⁶⁰. These novels of the 90s have been chosen because, in keeping with Bernard Bell's definition of the New Black Aesthetic in *The Contemporary African American Novel*⁶¹, they foreground hybrid identities as an essential corollary of the multicultural existence. They also document the concept of non-

traditional families as consisting of people united by circumstances rather than biological relation (as in *Bailey's Café*), and sometimes by their sexual orientation (as in the gay and lesbian families in *Just As I Am*). I have tried to observe whether, in the era of multiculturalism, the need for protest/resistance is still a pressing concern and whether the need to have a safe space is still felt among Black men and women. I have concluded the chapter with the discussion of a novel published in the millennium, *A Day Late and a Dollar Short*⁶² by Terry McMillan. I have departed from the model of comparing pairs of authors in this case, as I wanted to end my discussion with the example of a popular Black urban romance that tries to incorporate all the developments in Black male and female subjectivities while documenting an all-American Black matriarchal family. Terry McMillan, I believe, uses all the conventional tropes of the Black mother (strong and resilient), absconding son, lazy unemployed father and Black mother-daughter relationship, but develops them in such a manner that it becomes possible to recognise an apparently dysfunctional Black family as another kind of non-traditional American family.

In the concluding chapter I have tried to evaluate objectively whether the African Americans as a group have been able to transcend their post-colonial crisis of identity that initially formed the legacy of a tortured racial past, as reflected in Pan-Africanism. With their particular sense of dislocation and marginalization in their adoptive land, however, African American writers have been able to harness their unique memory of slavery and segregation to create an independent discourse on family which is different from those of other diasporic communities. In order to understand the specificities of this discourse, and how far the Black writers have been able to create a balance between their

past and present, I have tried to compare the discourse of family in African American novels with contemporary Jewish American and Native American novels. These two communities are also significant marginalized groups in America, sharing with the African Americans the experience of a racially oppressed past and retaining a similar awareness of history, but their recent literature has a greater sense of integrated masculine and feminine subjectivity, which gives their identities a different kind of credibility. To grasp some of the differences between the African American novelists' discourse of family and the representation of family in Jewish and Native American novels, I have discussed Forest Carter's *The Education of Little Tree*⁶³ and Erica Jong's *Of Blessed Memory*⁶⁴ as representative of Native American and Jewish American literatures respectively.

There is now a considerable body of work which tries to define the motifs of family and community in the works of contemporary American authors. Works like Afaa Michael Weaver (ed.) *These Hands I Know*⁶⁵ and Rosemarie Robotham and Maya Angelou (ed.) *Mending the world*⁶⁶ are examples indispensable to the understanding of the African American thrust on the family. Afaa Weaver describes the African American Black family as being complicated by the 'symbiotic weaving of racism with thepersonal failures and losses'.⁶⁷ However, the trauma that Weaver speaks of can be rectified if 'personal failures'⁶⁸ are articulated and the essentialising gender stereotypes are re-evaluated. These stereotypes, perpetuated in white American culture and carried over into Black culture to be internalized by African Americans, and are largely responsible for certain fault lines manifested in the negative images of Black men and women. Patricia Hill Collins and Jerry H Bryant have explored these issues in their books

Black Feminist Thought and *Victims and Heroes* respectively. Even after having withstood the menace of racism, African Americans had to alter or modify the American Dream because initially their social and economic position rendered them incapable of participating in it. The novels I have chosen for discussion in this thesis not only highlight the resilient spirit of the Blacks but also show how they re-created that dream without jeopardizing their own Black identity. As John Hope Franklin and Eleanor Holmes Norton⁶⁹ points out:

Blacks have always embraced the central values of [American] society, augmented those values in response to the unique experiences of slavery and subordination incorporated them into a strong religious tradition, and espoused them fervently and persistently. These values — among them, the primacy of the family, the importance of education, and the necessity of individual enterprise and hard work — have been matched by a strong set of civic values, ironic in the face of racial discrimination—espousal of the rights and responsibilities of freedom, commitment to country and adherence to the democratic creed.⁷⁰

Most inspiring is the way African Americans have defined themselves vis-à-vis white Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture (and its dominant trends in America), as a community that respects strong family ties.

Although Michelle Wallace in *Black Macho*⁷¹ and Veronica Chambers in her essay ‘White Women’s Feminism’⁷² have spoken about the ways in which Black men find all the odds against them, they have not lost their faith in the men. Writing about this problem as late as 1995, Veronica Chambers has commented:

In the United States, in 1995, Black women and Black men are not together—in our families or in our communities. This is something that white women often fail to understand—that for us, unifying the community is of paramount importance. In this society, Black men are increasingly powerless and too often believe themselves to be powerless. Too many of them take their anger out on the only people they feel are within “their” domain—“their” women and children. It is wrong. It is unfair. And it is frightening. But it is also pitiful.⁷³

I have tried to show how, in spite of the prevailing problem, African American fiction has delineated Black families and their community as having the potential to evolve into a 'safe space' that can provide for its members an opportunity to regroup in the face of oppression. Kalamu Ya Salam⁷⁴ writes:

We are more than just twisted responses to slavery...Our insistence on constantly creating family is ideological, not pathological. We believe in the beauty of the community.⁷⁵

Finally, this thesis tries to explore how it has been difficult to honour this commitment to the family in the face of the constant obstacles posed by racial and political problems. In analysing these representative works of fiction I have tried to offer a comprehensive view of the evolution of the African American family, keeping in mind the psychological adjustments that the African man and the African woman have had to make in order to achieve their own version of the American Dream.

NOTES

1. Langston Hughes, 'Harlem' in *Black Voices: An Anthology of African-American Literature*, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York : Penguin Putnam, 1968), pp. 430-431.
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3. bell hooks, *Rock My Soul: Black people and Self-Esteem* (New York: Atria Books, 2003).
4. The Declaration of Independence in *The Declaration of Independence – Origins and Impact*, ed., Scott Douglas Gerber (Washington D.C.: C Q Press, 2002).
5. Malcolm X 'The Ballot or the Bullet' in *Pursuing the American Dream*, p. 214.
6. Sven Birkerts, 'A postscript on Black American Fiction' in *American Energies: Essays on Fiction* (New York: William Morrow, 1992), pp. 300-337.
7. Ibid., p. 332.
8. Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. Mckay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), p. 140.
9. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (New York: Library of America, 1998).
10. Alexis de Tocqeville, *Democracy in America*, Volume I, Part II, Chapter X, trans. and ed., Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 2000).
11. Ibid., p. 304.
12. Andrew Billingsley, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder; The Enduring Legacy of African American Families* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), p. 28.

13. Nikki Giovanni, 'Nikki-Rosa' in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, p. 1984.
14. Ibid., pp.1984-1985.
15. Tiffany Ruby Patterson, *Zora Neale Hurston and a History of Southern Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).
16. Ibid., p. 1.
17. Alice Walker, 'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens' in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* pp. 2380-2387.
18. Ibid., p. 2384.
19. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), pp.1-2.
20. Alice Walker, 'Father' in *Living By the word: Selected Writing by Alice Walker (1973-1987)*, ed. Alice Walker (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1988), p. 17.
21. Barbara Christian, 'Trajectories of Self Definition: Placing Contemporary African-American Women's Fiction' in *Feminism*, ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane P. Herndl (Hamphire: Macmillan Press, 1997), pp. 319-328.
22. Barbara Smith, 'Towards a Black Feminist Criticism', in *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, ed. Jacqueline Bobo (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2001), pp.7-23.
23. Deborah McDowell, 'New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism' in *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, pp. 24-37.
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