

CHAPTER – 1

ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD* AND RICHARD WRIGHT'S *BLACK BOY*: THE BLACK FAMILY IN THE 1930s AND 1940s

I am inclined to believe....there is little in the Black community to reinforce a young Black woman who does not have a man or a child ... She is still considered against nature. It is extremely difficult to assert oneself when there remains some questions of one's basic identity.¹

Michelle Wallace

Blacks were supposed to operate in a moral world where freedom of action was denied. Moreover some of them [African American authors] deliberately refrained from delineating them [Black men] as free agents.²

Richard Yarborough

The first decade of the twentieth century is significant in African American social history as the decade of the Great Migration. For the southern Blacks, the North was supposed to be a land which promised fulfillment of their dream of civic emancipation. Andrew Billingsley notes in his study of the Black family, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*³, that this American Dream had several problems. He writes:

The problem of freedom for African Americans was four-fold : how to stabilize their families and provide for their integrity, how to establish an independent economic existence on the land, then how to establish permanent institutions to carry on their social development, and finally how to secure their political liberty, through creative participation in the political process.⁴

Since the post-emancipation era, this movement to the North forced the African Americans to reorder their definition of family and community as also their cultural, economic and political options. Most importantly, those who migrated to the North

believed that they were giving their children a better chance, something the oppressive Jim Crow South had denied them.

Harlem, the area near the Hudson river and the East 125th Street⁵, became home to most of the Blacks who moved to New York. Harlem also became the centre of the first concerted Black Arts Movement which was referred to as Harlem Renaissance by Alain Locke. Literature of the Harlem Renaissance marks a paradigmatic shift from the literature of the nineteenth century and the slave narratives of the earlier years. Nineteenth century literature moralized on issues of Blackness and racism, whereas the slave narratives were formula driven and often made use of stereotypes in their characterization of Blacks. According to Charles T. Davis, Blackness as a trope had always figured prominently in Black literature:

Awareness of being Black is the most powerful and the most fertile single inspiration for Black writers in America. It is ironic that Blackness, for so long regarded as a handicap socially and culturally, should also be an artistic strength.⁶

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, however, W.E.B. Dubois had vehemently opposed the laws of southern segregation and asked for a greater amount of cultural pluralism. It is the flavour of cultural diversity, without overemphasizing Blackness, that we note in the output of the artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Alain Locke, the most prominent theorist and chronicler of the Renaissance, described this movement as a quest for the new Negro. In his essay 'The New Negro'⁷ he remarked:

For generations the Negro has been the peasant matrix of that section of America which has most undervalued him, and here he has contributed not only materially in labor and social patience, but spiritually as well... He now becomes a conscious contributor and lays aside the status of a beneficiary and ward for that of a collaborator and participant in American Civilization. The great social gain in this is the releasing of our talented group from arid fields of controversy and debate to the productive fields of creative expression.⁸

However, the stereotype of the Negro as described in the literature of white American writers, persisted even in some of the writings of the Harlem era. Claude McKay's poem 'The White House'⁹ reiterates the image of the Negro as a resentful Black man, the kind which was popularized in white literature as the stereotype of the Southern Negro. The poem envisages the Black man as a 'chafing savage' who walks down the street with 'passion rending his vitals'. Locke and the others who were trying to define the New Negro were opposed to just this kind of dramatization of Blackness. In fact, McKay seems to suggest that white systems of oppression and racial exclusion serve to intensify the anger in the Black malcontent:

Oh, I must search for wisdom every hour
Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw,
And find in it the superhuman power
To hold me to the letter of your law!
Oh, I must keep my heart inviolate
Against the potent poison of your hate,¹⁰

McKay's poem hints at the racism that tarnished the American Dream. Writers like Richard Wright would go on to analyze this issue more thoroughly but McKay's poem adds a new dimension to the concept of the Black man as hero. As the poet suggests, the 'new Negro' must acquire tremendous 'wisdom' and 'superhuman power' not to rebel against the injustice of his condition. Thus he subtly criticizes the prevalent practice of equating the Black man with a brute by suggesting that the incompleteness and hypocrisy of the American Dream, at that point in history, almost inevitably provoked the Black man to violence. In spite of being an enlightened person McKay himself had had occasions when he was compelled to suppress his wrath and force himself to transcend his rage to believe in the American Dream.

Jerry H. Bryant, in his book *Victims and Heroes*¹¹, speaks about the documentation of violence in American novels particularly in their treatment of the nature of Black masculinity. Bryant observes that a Black man is a 'victim' when he

is subject to white violence and he is transformed into a hero when he retaliates.¹² Bryant analyzes the formulaic structure of some of the early works of Black authors where the victim kills a white man to assert the 'validity of counter violence'.¹³ According to Bryant, 'the victim is transmuted into a martyr at the moment of violence'.¹⁴ Thus violence and the ambivalent reactions to it are always present in Black fiction. Alain Locke and the Harlem Renaissance artists believed that the American Negro no longer needed to regard himself as a problem; he was now free to develop as a person and an artist without the restrictions of political controversy. But in spite of their beliefs the Negro identity began to be imprisoned in another fresh set of stereotypes. Migration to the North initiated a debilitating stereotype of associating the Negro identity with the dissipation of the urban ghetto lifestyle.

Since my thesis tries to trace the evolution of the African American family and its delineation in Black literature, the symbolic significance of the Harlem ghetto is of special consideration, as it forever altered the definition of the Black community. After the Blacks were supplanted from a Southern/Agricultural to a Northern/Industrial economy the very idea of a community and the collective Southern Black traditions underwent a change. Moreover, the socio-economic conditions in the North also redefined man-woman relationships within the matrix of the Black family. Thus, although the Harlem Renaissance liberated the Black imagination, it did not try to address or reconcile the gender related issues which would go on plaguing the Black family and the Black community in the years to come.

Zora Neale Hurston, (one of the leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance), had moved from the South to the North in 1925¹⁵ and was one of the few authors who tried to address the flaws inherent in Black community life as well as within the

prevalent discourse of Black sexuality and its ideals of masculinity and femininity. Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)¹⁶ takes a look at different aspects of heterosexual love and tries to critique the position of the Black woman in the Black family and community. Richard Wright, on the other hand, was never actively associated with the Harlem-based artistic movements. Yet he was one of the very first among the Black novelists and social activists who saw writing as a forum to express the trials and tribulations of the Black race, especially its sense of alienation at having been deprived of the fruits of American Civilization. Wright's heroes conform to the formula of the 'Black-Southern' male in the Age of Jim Crow, migrating to the North as a promised land. Wright's novel *Black Boy*¹⁷ (1945) analyzes notions of Black heroism and male virtue and observes the problems of conforming to White standards or even Black standards of masculinity in such difficult times. It is interesting to see how Wright manages to link the 'coming of age' trope with issues relating to the Black community and the Black family.

These two novels chosen for discussion in this chapter can be read as 'coming-of-age' narratives, but from a more historicist perspective they can be classified as 'ascent'¹⁸ and 'immersion'¹⁹ narratives respectively. 'Ascent' and 'immersion' narratives have been identified as the two basic kinds of narrative structure in the African American literary tradition by Robert Stepto in his study, *From Behind the Veil*. The classic 'ascent' narrative launches an enslaved and semi-literate figure on a ritualized journey to a symbolic North:

that journey is charted through spatial expressions of social structure, invariable systems of signs, that the questing figure must read in order to be both increasingly literate and increasingly free. The ascent narrative conventionally ends with the questing figure situated in the least oppressive social structure afforded by the world of the narrative, and free in the sense that he or she has gained sufficient literacy to assume the mantle of an articulate survivor.²⁰

The second type is the 'immersion' narrative where:

the protagonist ends up in or near the narrative's most oppressive social structure but free in the sense that he or she has gained sufficient tribal literacy to assume the mantle of an articulate kinsman.²¹

The quest motif operates in both the novels, and the protagonists in their 'journeys' are also perhaps trying to search for an ideal community where the individual's freedom of self would be significant. Both these novels are concerned with the relationships between individual and community as predicated upon the family. In discussing these novels I will try to explore how Hurston and Wright have dealt with individual man-woman relationships within the family and other aspects of Black community life, to create a dynamic discourse as well as a critique of Black society. Discussions on the Black community will naturally embrace a wide circle of kinship networks that have always characterized the African American family. My first chapter will also investigate whether Hurston and Wright have tried to question stereotypical Black definitions of the function of the Black family by taking into account its positive and negative influences on the development of the individual, since both are coming-of-age novels. While comparing the two novels in their treatment of family and community, the authors' views on racism and minority identity will also be studied. Moreover, the differences in their gender perspectives will also be considered, to see whether such differences in male and female-authored novels contribute significantly to the diversification of the African American discourse on family.

Their Eyes Were Watching God: Southern Community Life And The Individual.

Although a part of the Harlem Renaissance movement, Hurston wasn't consciously trying to address Black issues and themes through her literature. Her writings, and this novel in particular, try to examine Black heritage and folklore to uncover the flaws inherent within the Black community rather than address or articulate questions of racism. In her celebrated essay, 'How It Feels To Be Colored Me'²², she writes about her inability to see herself as being 'tragically colored'.²³ She observes:

There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it.²⁴

Thus Hurston's fiction set a tone for the following generations of women writers to emulate. Hurston's Janie never feels racially challenged but her identity evolves through her encounters with the different Black men in her life. Therefore, Hurston's treatment of Black man-woman relationships in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is separated from her views on racial subjugation of the Black people in America. Hurston's viewpoint may appear to be distinctly apolitical, but Alexis De Veau²⁵ has commented that Black women writers dealing with gender-specific issues were actually addressing larger concerns. Barbara Christian quotes De Veau in the epigraph of her essay 'Trajectories of the Self-Definition'. De Veau writes:

I see a greater and greater commitment among Black women writers to understand self multiplied in terms of the community, the community multiplied in terms of the nation and the nation multiplied in terms of the world. You have to understand what your place as an individual is and the place of the person who is close to you. You have to understand the space between you before you can understand more complex or large groups.²⁶

Barbara Christian, in the same essay, defines such literary activity as ‘Trajectories of Self-Definition.’²⁷ Christian says that the commitment to exploration of self, ‘as central rather than marginal is a tribute to the insights they [Black women writers] have culled in a century or so of literary activity’.²⁸ Hurston’s novel, especially in its treatment of the development of Janie’s character vis-a-vis the community and the men in her life is perhaps one of the first of such attempts to ground Black woman’s fiction in the exploration of self.

Zora Neale Hurston was able to adjust to Harlem, New York, despite hailing from the South, because Harlem transcended the connotation of a ghetto (although she frequently visited the South to work on a number of anthropological projects). It became a space where she could undertake the activity of self-expression. Valerie Boyd, the author of Hurston’s biography *Wrapped in Rainbows*²⁹, remarks:

In Harlem, the sense of me-ness that Zora had felt so profoundly as a child in Eatonville - the freedom to thrive as an individual within the embrace of community - was fully restored.³⁰

Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), however, was not written during the years of the Harlem Renaissance. Zora Neale Hurston’s protagonist Janie is a girl abandoned by her parents and brought up by her grandmother Nanny, who is her moral guardian. Nanny tries to bring up Janie to be a respectable girl. As she grows up, the need to feel loved and the awareness of her sexuality draws her to her first encounter with a man named Johnny Taylor. Maya Angelou, in the introduction to *Mending the World*,³¹ has a word of praise for the figure of the Black grandmother within the Black community. Her own grandmother, according to her, never kissed her or claimed to love her in overt ways. She says:

I don't remember her even kissing me. Many white sociologists would make a big thing of that. "There's no tactile love in the Black community," they'd say, but that's not true. It's just that old Black people don't often kiss children. But they do put their hands on you and let you know that you are loved.³²

In Janie's case, her grandmother also uses violence to ensure her granddaughter's wellbeing. bell hooks in her recent book *Communion: The Female Search For Love*³³ affirms in the preface that:

Rejection and abandonment by fathers and mothers is the space of lack that usually sets the stage for female desperation to find and know love.³⁴

Perhaps this is what happens in Janie's case as she has never had parental love. She loves her grandmother; and although Nanny loves Janie too, she is unable to provide the kind of guidance and affection an adolescent might require. Nanny's character is drawn along the lines of the stereotypical, strong Black mother and she does everything to act according to the stereotype. She is unable to understand Janie's desire to be loved. When she sees Janie kissing Johnny Taylor she gets very upset with her granddaughter's conduct. Nanny considers Johnny Taylor totally unworthy of Janie's attention. In fact, according to Nanny, Johnny exhibits the worst features of the Black male stereotype. In other words, Johnny is the kind of traditional 'brute'³⁵ Negro who does not have the ability to be a provider for Janie. Nanny effectively curbs Janie's desires by divesting Johnny of any commendable manly attributes, because she believes that a Black man who is unable to provide is not fit to be called a man.

According to Nanny, Logan Killicks would be a much better prospect for Janie. In Hurston's novel, Nanny's choice of Logan Killicks is due to her desire to see Janie acquire a bourgeois station in life. John Scanzoni³⁶ has discussed this aspect of a desirable family structure which stipulates that in a conjugal family in the Black

community, the husband is the ‘provider’³⁷ and the wife is the ‘socio-emotional agent’.³⁸ Although this essentialist definition of the Black family reduces it to a very simple institution, in most of early Black fiction this is the norm of depiction. Nanny is one of those women who falls a victim to the idealised image of a white woman being the ‘queen of the porch’³⁹, as it were. Although latter day feminists would question such gender stereotypes, as far as early Black women writers were concerned, Hurston showed remarkable perception in creating the character of Janie who is able to transcend the conflict seen in the writings of Black women before the 1950s. This conflict, according to Barbara Christian, was:

.... the tension between the writer’s apparent acceptance of an ideal of woman derived from white upper-class society and the reality with which their protagonists had to contend. And most seemed to be written for an audience that excluded even the writers themselves.

.... But the attempt to present positive images of the Black woman, to restrict her characterization to a prescribed ideal, did not result in any improvement in her image or her condition. Rather, the refutation of negative images created *a series of contradictions* [italics mine] between the image that Black women could not attain.⁴⁰

Christian also remarks that sometimes characters created by Black women writers manifested this illusion of believing in the image of the white woman as the reality.

Hurston’s depiction of Nanny is an example of such confusion. She is a strong, Black matriarch, but in her character we find internalized the image of some kind of ideal ‘Black woman’, mirroring the image of the ideal white woman. Janie’s inability to conform to Nanny’s standards is indicative of the way in which she will arrive at self-knowledge by the end of the novel. Nanny’s confused self-knowledge makes her see the Black man-woman relationships in a hierarchical manner, without any scope of equality of status as far as the Black woman was concerned. As she tells Janie :

“Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able to find out. Maybe its some place way off in de ocean where de Black man is in power but we don’t know nothin but what we see, so de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to but he don’t tote it. He hand it to this womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so far as Ah can see. Ah been prayin fuh it to be different wid you.”⁴¹

Nanny’s remark is based on her observation of Black and white relationships. She has been reconciled to seeing the Black man in a position of subjugation vis-a-vis the white man. The Black man in his turn enacts this same master-slave scenario within his own family by subjugating his woman. Nanny likens the lot of the Black woman to the mules of the world. The mule is an animal which is valued because of its weight bearing capacity. The analogy thus implies that the Black woman has to be as tenacious and resilient as the mule. Nanny feels that Janie might be able to have a different life story if she marries someone who can be a provider. This simplistic belief is may be based on her presumption that racial inequity translates into gender inequity within a marriage when the Black man belongs to a particular class like that of Johnny Taylor. If the Black man is able to rise in the class hierarchy, he will not have to tow the burden of the white man, and therefore, not transfer it on to the Black woman. In her opinion Logan Killicks would be such a man.

Bonnie J. Barthold ⁴² describes Janie’s fate in the novel as an attempt to escape being the mule. She marries Logan Killicks because her grandmother convinces her that the burden to be avoided was a

material one of poverty and deprivation. She sees Killicks’ farm as a kind of insurance and as a means to gain what her grandmother terms a ‘respectability’.⁴³

But as Barthold further observes, ironically in her attempt to rebel against being the Black ‘mule’ of a woman, she

.... find[s] herself trapped in the very fate she had sought to elude seemingly caught in a recurrent and destructive cycle.⁴⁴

Janie realizes that although Killicks does not abuse her, he takes her as one of his material possessions like the mules with which he farms his land. Janie's sexual expectations out of the marriage are also not fulfilled. bell hooks, in her book, *Communion : The Female Search for Love*, has described the female quest for love as an attempt at self actualization which patriarchal culture denies. She opines that true freedom comes only when we see love as a transformational force:

We begin to see clearly how much love matters; not the old patriarchal versions of "love" but a deeper understanding of love as a transformational force demanding of each individual accountability and responsibility for nurturing our spiritual growth. To seek love as a quest for the true self liberates. All females who dare to follow our hearts to find such love are entering a cultural revolution that restores our souls and allows us to see clearly the value and meaning of love in our lives. While romantic love is a crucial part of this journey, it is no longer deemed all that matters; rather, it is an aspect of our overall work to create loving bonds, circles of love that nurture and sustain collective female well-being.⁴⁵

Perhaps Janie's narrative (of immersion) is also her quest to find love. hooks affirms that self-love is necessary for women to self-actualize their identities. Janie's spiritual growth takes her through relationships with men who enact the kind of patriarchal masculinity which, according to hooks, undermines 'feminine self-actualization'.⁴⁶

Logan Killicks had married Janie for her efficiency in farm work. In fact, he admits as much when Janie brings up the subject of the absence of love in their marriage. Killicks' inability to provide love to Janie makes her seek it elsewhere. She walks out on Killicks when he insults her and her family. The moment when she takes this decision and leaves the Killicks farm is described symbolically:

The morning air was like a new dress. That made her feel the apron tied around her waist. She untied it and flung it on a low bush beside the road and walked on, picking flowers and making a bouquet.⁴⁷

Janie's throwing away her apron suggests her eagerness to start afresh and to escape the role of a domestic drudge to which she had been reduced. But she soon finds out that her second marriage is a renewed imprisonment in a new role. She is set to act out the 'mule' stereotype all over again, but with another man.

The man in question is Jody Starks. Janie was attracted to him because he promised to make her a 'wife'. Compared to Logan Killicks, Jody embodies the traits of economic stability and bourgeois respectability—traits which are highly valued within the Black community. Bonnie J. Barthold describes Janie's flight as an attempt to seek a marriage which would be more satisfying because it promised to combine material well-being with love.⁴⁸ Jody is a much more successful person than Logan and is characterized along the lines of a Black leader who feels passionately about community-building. In her capacity as Mrs. Mayor, wife of Joe Starks the mayor, Janie casts in her lot with the community-building endeavours of Eatonville. On the occasion of the inauguration of the store of provisions, Joe makes a speech before the community. When the townsfolk ask Janie to address them, Mayor Starks remarks:

“Thank you fuh yo’ compliments but mah wife don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no speech-makin’, Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She’s uh woman and her place is in de home.”⁴⁹

Janie, in spite of making the transition from being the wife of an affluent farmer to that of a bourgeois citizen, is still reminded of her place and deliberately excluded from the sphere of community building. According to Bonnie Barthold, Janie's second marriage is further proof that material prosperity and respectability do not entail equality or love within a marriage. She points out:

The estrangement between Janie and Starks is mirrored in Janie's estrangement from the community. Instead of the redemptive *union with heritage and community* [italics mine]... Janie lives a life of isolation in the role of white mistress of the "big house"... The attempt to escape the past is rewarded with its reenactment; and in Hurston's vision the twist is that the assumption of a different role, one of power rather than powerlessness, represents only a different manner of fragmentation of community and heritage.⁵⁰

The sense of 'redemptive union with heritage and community' is something that the Black family has always fostered. But in Janie's case—since there is no love in the husband-wife relationship—there is no sense of their sharing a unique heritage. Estrangement from her husband and her community denies Janie any scope for self-expression.

The episode of Matt Bonner's yellow mule in the novel proves that the stereotypical division of man and woman's roles within the family was in most cases fostered and propagated by the Black community. The mensfolk led by Joe assume the task of 'taming' Matt Bonner's yellow mule which had run wild. The men see this task as a vindication of their masculine strength. At this point in her marriage, Janie has become aware of the chauvinistic nature of Joe. The mule may be a symbol of the oppressed Black women who were victims of violence within their marriage. By extension, the mule's fate is also symbolic of Janie's situation in the novel. She tries to assert her individualism within marriage and fails. The mule is captured, but dies with its legs in the air, in a gesture of defiance against violence. Yet Janie's subsequent behaviour proves that the violence she succumbs to doesn't break her spirit. Janie's protest is registered through the sarcastic speech that she makes at this point in the novel:

“Freein’ dat mule makes uh mighty big man outa’ you. Something like George Washington an ‘Linclon. Abraham Lincoln, he had de whole United States tuh rule so he freed de Negroes. You got uh town so uh freed uh mule. You have tuh have power tuh free things and that makes you lak uh king uh something.”⁵¹

Janie’s words critique patriarchal definitions of masculinity. Patriarchal power in America, irrespective of colour, was preoccupied with sanctioning behaviour which divided society along the lines of the oppressor and the oppressed. bell hooks has pointed out that in patriarchal society, marriage often becomes a relationship played out in the context of domination and therefore there is absence of true love. Jody is unable to love Janie without dominating her as she performs the role of the mayor’s wife; Janie gets imprisoned in the stereotype of the kind of woman Jody wanted her to be.

At the time of its publication, critics like Alain Locke had dismissed Hurston’s novel as being ‘folklorist’⁵² and lacking ‘motive’⁵³ which was so essential in ‘social document’⁵⁴ fiction. However, with her protagonist Janie, Hurston created a new ‘trajectory of self expression’ (to use Barbara Christian’s words) whereby the sexual politics within the Black family came to the fore. DuBois, another influential Black critic and theorist had also observed this inequality in man-woman relationships and blamed the sexist attitude of the Black community for its lack of progress. He remarked in his essay, ‘The Damnation of Women’⁵⁵ that:

The family group, however, which is the ideal of the culture with which these folks have been born, is not based on the idea of an economically independent working mother. Rather its ideal harks back to the sheltered harem with the mother emerging as nurse and homemaker while the man remains the sole breadwinner.⁵⁶

As Janie does not conform to the ‘nurse’ and ‘home maker’ stereotypes, Jody feels threatened. Any attempt on Janie’s part to assert her individuality is met with

violence. More importantly, Hurston's treatment of marriage and gender relationships adds an element of social protest to the novel. Sharon West observes:

On the surface the story may appear to be apolitical particularly with its focus on the domestic life of its characters, yet this very aspect becomes a site of political commentary for Hurston. Hurston's short fiction and novels use the home as a microcosm for larger society. Marriage and relationships between men and women become a metaphor for the politics of race, class and gender. Because much of her fiction focuses on small, rural, southern all-Black communities and the dynamics of hetero-sexual relationships, Hurston has been misread as a writer who failed to address the social, political and economic issues of her time....[but] Hurston criticizes injustice in a subtler way through her handling of the domestic arena and the women's sphere in her work.⁵⁷

This concept of a domestic arena and a women's sphere, with regard to the Black community, needs to be studied at this juncture. The Black family structure always venerated the matriarch, but this tendency also led to the women being limited to the roles of mother, wife, housekeeper and helpmate. bell hooks, in *Communion*, sees the tendency to limit women to their roles as part of the politics of patriarchy. She suggests that European 'imperialist colonization'⁵⁸ made it possible to idealize female submission. According to her:

Women's economic dependence on men was to have been mediated by male emotional dependency on woman.... women, idealized as mothers, were seen as uniquely situated for the task of nurturance. The working man of the twentieth century had no time for realizing a love rooted in romantic traditions, which required of the love devotion and communication.⁵⁹

Michelle Wallace also comments on this demarcation between Black male and Black female spheres within Afro-American families and communities. Wallace contends that in the post-emancipation era, Blacks emerged out of slavery in twos, ready to form their own definition of family. But it was a few years later that the crisis in their family life started, when they tried to redefine gender relations based on the

predominant American white discourse on family. Speaking of the post-emancipation period, Wallace remarks:

For the most part it [the Black family] ...continued the tradition of its two by two stride that had marked the evolution of the Afro- American family from slavery. There was the pressure of the American white standard but there was also the standard that Black Americans had set for themselves; they understood very well that they were not white ... Only as American Blacks began to accept the standards for family life as well as for manhood and womanhood embraced by American whites, did Black men and women begin to resist one another. And as time went on their culture, under constant attack from the enemy became more impoverished and dependent and left with fewer self-generating mechanisms.⁶⁰

Hurston further problematizes her depiction of the Black family because she seems to imply that Black men within the family were responsible for perpetuating such a gender divide. In the novel, every time Janie tries to overcome the stereotypical roles inscribed within the Black community, she is faced with resistance from her husband. Instances of such resistance come to the fore when her husband forbids her to participate in the conversation of the storefront porch.⁶¹ He also hits her when she is unable to prepare dinner according to his specification.⁶²

In her critique of the African American family, Hurston also includes the study of flawed Black masculinity, through the three men in Janie's life— Logan Killicks, Joe Starks and Tea Cake. In her treatment of Janie's second marriage, Hurston depicts episodes which expose the myth of the self-made Black man which Jody is supposed to be. Jody is so taken up with the fact that he is the mayor of a Black town that he creates elaborate rituals to assert his mayorship. In town meetings, Janie is asked to dress in expensive clothes and spurn the calico and cotton which the other women wear. The screen adaptation of the novel⁶³ translates this episode as an attempt by Jody to contain Janie's femininity. When Janie (played by Halle Berry) undresses, she finds ugly welts made by the tight corset of the dress.

Jody tries to imprison Janie in the role of ‘Mrs Mayor’, forgetting how this was alienating both of them as well as estranging Janie from a healthy community. Ironically, however, Janie’s reluctance to play the role of Mrs. Mayor makes Jody insecure about his own manhood. Janie’s self assurance, as Hurston interprets it, is described as something which emasculates Jody’s image of being a representative of patriarchal masculinity. In the episode where Jody disparages Janie’s lack of physical beauty, Janie is equally scathing about his so-called physical prowess, thus inviting his rage. After Jody hits her before others, Hurston comments:

Janie had robbed him of his illusions of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible... she had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed, would keep on laughing so he struck Janie with all his might and drove her from the store.⁶⁴

Such instances of marital violence happen to Janie more than once. In the post-war eras Dubois had asked the Black community to give greater equality to women as they were now creating and fulfilling new roles for themselves. He had written:

We cannot imprison women again in a home or require them all on pain of death to be nurses and housekeepers.⁶⁵

But this was exactly what Jody was trying to do. When Hurston makes Janie analyze the reasons for the failure of her marriage, she feels that it was Jody’s unwillingness to perpetuate the marriage on terms of equality that proved fatal to their union. Janie tells Jody in his death bed:

“Listen, Jody, you ain’t de Jody ah run off down de road wid, Yoise what’s left after he died. Ah run off tuh keep house wid you... But you was’nt satisfied wid me de as was Naw! Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me.”⁶⁶

She adds with a note of pathos:

“Dis sittin in de rulin chair is been hard on Jody.”⁶⁷

In her book *Communion* bell hooks observes that it is difficult for men and women to create equality in their relationships, which means going against the narratives of power that the patriarchal notion of a marriage or a family thrives upon.

To continue to speak of love, we would have had to break through the wall of denial that seduces us all to accept subordination and domination as natural facts of everyday life. We would be telling everyone, especially the men in our lives, again and again that domination and love do not go together, that if one is present, the other is not.... But we have not created a culture of gender equality that encourages women and men to search for love with the same zeal and passion that inspires our quest for success and power.⁶⁸

Thus Jody, a victim of patriarchal notions of manhood, lived his marriage by perpetuating a relationship of power and subordination. Perhaps this question of power and subordination also shadows their sex lives because we do not find any documentation of a meaningful physical relationship between them. After Jody's death Janie releases her hair from the kerchief with which she used to tie it up in an act of self-celebration. Her husband had forbidden her to wear it loose after he had seen a man trying to touch it on the porch. This action is symbolic, indicating Janie's return to her sensuous self, as she had become as impassive as the earth:

She got so she received all things with the stolidness of the earth which soaks up urine and perfume with the same indifference.⁶⁹

Marriage to Jody had made Janie suppress her sensuous, loving self and after his death, through this ritual of untying her kerchief, she embarks again on her previously adjourned journey for greater self-actualization.

Janie's third relationship with a man is very different from the earlier ones. Tea Cake is a social outcaste in the town of Eatonville because he is not affluent and does't have any pedigree. Bonnie Barthold sees Janie's marriage to Tea Cake as a return to the community:

As the mayor's wife in the "big house", Janie was above the community; with Tea Cake she becomes a part of its strength and its celebration.... Tea Cake fosters Janie's *redemption in to time* [italics mine] mythically, in fostering her union with him and with the community, Tea Cake becomes a spiritual guide through whom Janie becomes a celebrant rather than a victim of time.⁷⁰

Jody had limited Janie to the role of Mrs Mayor; Tea Cake once again unites her with the community. While working in the muck with Tea Cake, Janie gets the sense of being in a community where she could be herself. When her friend Phoebe tries to caution her about Tea Cake, Janie tells her that she has finally decided to lead her life differently from that prescribed by her grandmother. Janie examines her grandmother's limited vision and concludes:

She was borned in slavery time, when folks dat is Black folks did'nt sit down anytime dey felt like. So sittin in porches lak de white madam looked lak a mighty fine thing tuh her. Dat's what she wanted for me—don't keer what it cost—git up on the high chair and sit dere. She didn't have time think whut tuh do after you got up on de stool uh do nothin. De object was tuh git dere. So Ah got up on de high stood lak she told me, but... Ah done nearly languished to death up dere.⁷¹

Janie, after her two failed marriages, realises that such a position insulated her from the world around her. For people like Phoebe Jane's decision is an act of social regression, but for Janie herself, it is coming back to the embrace of a community. Bonnie Barthold rates Tea Cake as a 'free man'⁷² like Morrison's Ajax in *Sula*. However, she clarifies:

Tea Cake is equally free, different only because he finds a mode of love in which neither he nor Janie possesses the other, but in which both belong to a larger community and in their love celebrate their larger, essentially mythic union.⁷³

bell hooks, while examining Black man-woman relationships, has pointed out that women who are victims of patriarchal thought and believe that they have to change themselves in order to bring happiness in their relationships are 'in denial'. She adds:

Their denial strengthens patriarchy but it does not create a universe where women and men can love one another. Anti patriarchal thinking, which assumes that both women and men are equally capable of learning how to love, of giving and receiving love, is the only foundation on which to construct sustained, meaningful, mutual life ... Learning to love our female selves is where our search for love must begin.⁷⁴

Janie's relationship with Tea Cake creates this interest in herself. As Tea Cake pampers her, Janie becomes aware of her own self like never before. In loving Tea Cake and the community he represents, Janie starts loving herself, and therefore is able to transcend the philosophy of Nanny's life. Nanny's view of a comfortable marriage was a union of patriarchal notions of marriage combined with gender based white ideals of marriage where the men would earn and the women would be in charge of the home. Barbara Christian affirms Barthold's view that the successive marriages of Janie are only different 'vehicles of rebellion'⁷⁵ which she stages in order to escape the fate of being the mule of the world. Since Christian reads the novel as Hurston's attempt to make the self central, she interprets the Janie-Tea Cake relationship as:

... a vision of possibility in terms of some parity in a relationship between a woman and a man, based not on material gain or ownership of property but on their desire to know one another.⁷⁶

Thus we see Tea Cake and Janie take part together in activities such as fishing and gardening. The 'fishing trips' are generally regarded as male domain whereas 'gardening', is regarded as an extension of the domestic sphere of work. Thus Tea Cake and Janie's marriage is not only symbolic of a mythic union between community and family, but also an attempt to create a new discourse on marriage and family, separate from the stereotypical Black expectations out of these institutions.

Paulette Richards⁷⁷ has proposed an interesting use of psychoanalytic theory to understand the delineation of the older woman-younger lover motif in Black women's

writing. She cites the work of the Jungian psychoanalyst Linda Schierse Leonard⁷⁸ in this respect. In Leonard's book, *The Wounded Woman*⁷⁹, she makes use of Jung's theory of the collective unconscious to describe certain women in films, literature and mythology who have been wounded to some degree by the collective authority of patriarchal society as well as by the individual dynamics of the father-daughter relationship. Leonard calls them the 'armored amazons'⁸⁰, and Richards finds in them a direct correspondence with the world-weary older women in Black women's fiction. These amazons, according to Leonard, have been wounded not only by the weaknesses of their individual fathers but by patriarchal society as a whole, which devalues the feminine principle. The woman, therefore, tries to follow a masculine model of strength and power. Then she meets a younger man, who is a sort of 'dumpling'⁸¹ character from fairy tales i.e. a bumbling youth who is ridiculed for his weakness but in the end stumbles upon the right path and gets lucky. According to Richards, these men are referred to as 'trifling men'⁸² in the Black cultural context. Trifling men feature in the blues as men who are rootless drifters, yet physically attractive and know how to awaken the women's creative energies. They do not believe in hard work and education; are sometimes shown to resort to violence as if in answer to patriarchy which devalues their role. Janie and Tea Cake's courtship, and the initial happiness of their marriage work along the lines of Leonard's theory. On the other hand, if the novel is read as an immersion narrative, Tea Cake represents a necessary phase in Janie's coming of age.

The community of Jacksonville, where Janie migrates after her marriage with Tea Cake, is remarkably free from any patriarchal or gender bias. In a moment of objective appraisal Janie tries to review the way her life has changed from her earlier days at Eatonville:

What if Eatonville could see her now in her blue denim overalls and heavy shoes? The crowd of people around her and a dice game on the floor. She was sorry for her friends back there and scornful of the others. The men held big arguments here like they used to do on the store porch. Only here she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to.⁸³

While trying to define and analyze the discourse surrounding the African American family, we realize that there is no essential concept of a definitive Black family. Like all other cultures, the Black family as an institution has evolved in the community. Thus even in Janie and Tea Cake's idyllic family there is an instance of marital violence. Tea Cake hits Janie in a bid to remind her that he is her husband, when she talks to Mrs. Turner's nephew, a man of a higher social status. Christy Rishoi⁸⁴ sees this episode as an obstacle to Janie's attainment of subjectivity. Although Tea Cake does not represent patriarchal masculinity, he is yet to evolve as a man willing to base his marriage on a principle of equality.

Tea Cake's death in the novel is perhaps Hurston's way of suggesting that he was not yet mature enough to be a husband or a father. In the funeral, Janie turns up wearing her working overalls, but her grief over Tea Cake's death and her acceptance of it makes her a more mature human being. She returns to Eatonville and in her narration to Phoebe, she ends with the following piece of wisdom:

Everyone has to go tuh God alone and ... find out about living alone.⁸⁵

Janie's act of telling her life story is Hurston's way of marking her as the survivor. But Hurston does not minimize the need for a community in an individual's life. Janie embodies the ability to find love outside relational situations. bell hooks, in *Communion*, has remarked that such an ability is a sure sign of the transformative ability of self-love.⁸⁶ Since Janie's quest ends in the attainment of selfhood, she is

able to resurrect her kinship ties with the community without feeling marginalized as a single woman.

Hurston's novel, however, raised a few questions. In her delineation of Janie's character, Hurston totally overlooked the Black maternal discourse. Janie's maternal subjectivity is never sought to be explored. The novel, in spite of conforming to the broad pattern of an immersion narrative, is unable to resolve the conflict arising from the conclusion where celebration of selfhood appears to be at the expense of the community.

Wright's *Black Boy* : Protest Literature Or Individual Angst ?

Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was trivialized by critics such as Richard Wright who alleged that Hurston was trying to evade social responsibility by writing a folklorist novel and not venturing into the realm of protest literature. Wright wrote:

Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears... the sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought.⁸⁷

Wright's interpretation of the novel misses Hurston's rich, emotional treatment of the Black community and, more importantly, the subtle handling of the troubled gender relations within it. *Black Boy* (1945), Wright's autobiographical novel, purports to be the kind of protest fiction which he believed the Blacks should create. Although the story follows the pattern of a journey from innocence to experience, it was an attempt to question the position of the Blacks in a climate of racism and segregation. In fact, as Jerry H. Ward, Jr.⁸⁸ has observed in his Introduction to the novel, *Black Boy*

remains a remarkable text in the Afro-American canon because of its ability to combine the narrative of journey with the element of protest. He observes:

For slightly more than three decades this version of Richard Wright's story of the journey from innocence to experience in the Jim Crow south stood as tragic witness to the collective as well as the individualized realities of movement from childhood to manhood in a particular time and place.⁸⁹

This historical aspect of *Black Boy* is undeniable. Because of its rural, Southern setting Hurston's novel hardly touched upon the issues regarding the Great Migration, which were of immediate importance to the Black community. Wright moulded his response to the American social reality into his autobiography to create the kind of protest literature he believed to be the need of the hour. He spoke of this kind of literature in his essay, 'Blue Print for Negro Writing':⁹⁰

For the Negro writer to depict this new reality requires a greater discipline and consciousness than was necessary for the so called Harlem school of expression. Not only is the subject matter dealt with far more meaningful and complex but the new role of the writer is qualitatively different. The Negro writers new position demands a sharper definition of the status of his craft, and a sharper emphasis upon its functional autonomy.⁹¹

In one of the early reviews of the book, Lionel Trilling⁹² remarks on the anger which pervades the authorial voice of Wright. Trilling lauds the way in which Wright indicted the white oppressor's culture as being responsible for fostering in the Black community 'flaws of feeling and action.'⁹³ He points out that Wright's treatment of his family is at times ambiguous:

He himself suffered from the fierce, puritanical religiosity of his own family. He can speak tenderly of the love his mother gave him, but he can speak with sorrow and bitterness of the emotional bleakness in which he was reared.⁹⁴

In a much later review⁹⁵ David Bradley attempts a much more critical analysis of Wright's novel. Bradley's review is more incisive because he writes it in response to

the publication of the previously unpublished portion of his book, published as *American Hunger* in 1977. Bradley criticizes Wright's tendency to look at Black 'memories', 'tradition' and 'sentiments' as shallow. According to Bradley:

This is protest literature written by a master, perhaps *the* master. But it is not autobiography. It is not personal... *American Hunger*...does reveal Wright as something of a cold blooded intellectual, friendless, alone, prone to perceiving people, even himself as perfect prototypes rather than human beings.⁹⁶

The first relationship that Wright mentions in the novel is that with his father. Wright's relationship with his father is observed in the context of flawed Black masculinity. Herb Boyd and Robert L. Allen, editors of the anthology *Brotherman*⁹⁷ have remarked that the father-son relationship is the most complex one in African American families. The first mention that Wright makes of his father is in consonance with the problems of living in a tenement. Richard characterizes his father as a coarse kind of man. His eating and drinking habits are described as bordering on the gross. The episode of killing a stray kitten is significant in the understanding of father-son relationships in the family. Richard's father asks him to kill a kitten which was disturbing his sleep. Although his father does not mean it literally, Richard takes it as so. After killing the kitten he takes it to his mother who is frightened about the repercussions of this act of violence and takes Richard to his father. When asked for an explanation, Richard quite truthfully states that he acted according to his father's order. His father can only utter an expletive and ask him to get out of sight. But Richard explains his action and his father's reaction in the following manner:

I had my first triumph over my father. I had made him believe that I had taken his words literally. He could not punish me now without risking his authority. I was happy because I had at last found a way to throw my criticism of him into his face. I had made him feel that if he whipped me for killing the kitten, I would never give weight to his word again. I had made him know that. I felt he was cruel and I had done it without his punishing me.⁹⁸

In this instance, Richard resorts to an act of violence in an attempt to outwit his father. This episode also highlights the fact that in Black families, even if the male guardian was unable to be a stable provider, he exercised domination by 'fear'. Richard exposes his father's bravado and by his action undermines his authority comprehensively. What his father could not do, however, his mother's moralizing could. She spoke to Richard at length, and finally embarrassed him by pointing out the moral repercussions of killing a harmless kitten. In true Christian tradition, she made Richard repent for his sin by carrying the kitten out and burying it in the garden, finally offering a prayer for mercy. At the end of it all, Richard goes to bed severely chastised and quite prepared never to see a kitten again.

Wright's uncomfortable relationship with his father coupled with his father's early desertion of Richard and his mother contribute to the feeling of alienation that he experiences as a Black in America. According to Abdul R Janmohamed in 'Negating The Negation':⁹⁹

The absence of father and food, of protection and nurture, together form a physical and psychic lack that comes to symbolize for Wright an essential feature of the condition of social death.¹⁰⁰

In fact, Wright never feels any sympathy for his father; neither is there any attempt to understand his flawed masculinity. In his adolescent years, the constant hunger and the vacuum of a male parent somehow coalesces together in his mind:

As the days slid past, the image of my father became associated with my pangs of hunger; and whenever I felt hunger I thought of him with a deep, biological bitterness.¹⁰¹

Richard's resentment towards his father grows as their poverty becomes all the more pronounced. His mother forces him to go begging for monetary aid to his father, and Richard's sense of shame is compounded further when his father insults him by flaunting his girlfriend. After this incident, Richard severs all ties with him and meets him again after twenty-five years. At this point, his father has become a mere shadow

of himself, reduced by the oppression of the South to a sharecropper. Richard realises, with considerable pride that:

We were forever strangers, speaking a different language, living on vastly different planes of reality.. From far beyond the horizon that bound this bleak plantation there had come to me through my living the knowledge that my father was a Black peasant who had gone to the city seeking life, but who had at last fled the city, the same city which had lifted me in its burning arms and borne me toward alien and undreamed of shores of knowing.¹⁰²

David Bradley's criticism of Wright's tendency to perceive characters as types is evident in this treatment of his father's plight. According to Herbert Leibowitz,¹⁰³ Wright's characterization of his father is limited to his usefulness in supporting Richard's argument of how rural poverty grinds down and stunts Black sharecroppers¹⁰⁴, although Wright is aware that the same fate might have befallen him if he had not been lucky enough to achieve a smooth South to North migration success-story. Wright's adolescent bitterness or anger towards his father can be explained because he is unable to provide for his family but his later indifference to his father's plight makes him the 'cold-blooded intellectual'¹⁰⁵ that Bradley calls him. In any case, Wright's adult self should have been able to acknowledge how difficult it was to provide for a family in the turn-of-the-century South. But he conveniently forgets it as the North has been kind to him. As Leibowitz asserts:

The father, an animal without awareness is so unskilled he cannot even describe his own plight; the son is sophisticated and self conscious, stiff and formal from his tension, but commanding the art to render and encompass their different lives...like a judge applying impersonal principles of law to the prisoners standing before him in the dock, Wright weighs his father's transgressions and finds him culpable. Wrights icy words of charity *deny kinship as a mitigating factor*..They are still strangers. Though he speaks of his father in the manner of a minister at the gravesite of a man he doesn't know well, by lapsing into passive constructions Wright hints that he, too, was 'swept' by historical forces... Like his father, he had fled the red-clay country to better himself in the city, he had *nearly failed* [italics mine] there, but the city had become his *foster father*, lifting him in its sheltering arms above the feckless and earthbound destiny of his peasant father.¹⁰⁶

Throughout the novel, Wright employs this systematic method of seeing himself as separate from and perhaps superior to his family and community, thereby justifying his need to migrate to the North. Wright is also careful to document the tenacious grip racism had had over the entire South and how it disempowered Blacks from pursuing their American Dream. The autobiography, according to Henry Louis Gates Jr,¹⁰⁷ is concerned with fashioning a 'myth of self'¹⁰⁸ not very different from the American myth of the self-made man.

The next relationship that Wright explores is that with his mother. After his father's desertion of the family Richard and his brother are brought up by his mother. Their family, like most of the families living off welfare, is subject to the same hand to mouth existence. According to Herbert Leibowitz, Wright portrays his mother with 'taciturn affection'.¹⁰⁹ Richard seems to hold his mother responsible for the lack of guidance in his formative years. On the occasion when he is very hungry his mother tries to amuse him with a nonsensical rhyme, but this only irritates him further. Richard's characterization of his mother is done in such a manner that she appears to be a passive parent. Wright seems to hold her responsible for sending her sons to an orphanage and later on subjecting them to living with their maternal grandmother. Towards the end of the first half of the novel, Wright's mother is no longer an active parent, having been bedridden after a serious stroke. Wright's tendency to reduce the characters to types is also operative in this instance. His mother's suffering becomes transmuted to the general suffering of Blacks in the Jim Crow South, and finally becomes a symbol of everything that Richard wanted to escape from. Leibowitz comments,

His mother's prolonged ordeal became for Wright...a personal loss and a grievance that was gradually enlarged into a humiliating symbol of the Negro's degraded status in America.¹¹⁰

Wright's study of African American folk history in *12 Million Black Voices*¹¹¹ dealt with male and female gender roles within the Black community. In spite of acknowledging the role of Black women in keeping families together, he seems to show a patronizing attitude forwards their function within the family. About the activities of Black women in their families, he remarks that they have a limited range of interests:

the orbit of life is narrow, from their kitchenette to the white folk's kitchen and back home again — they love the church more than do our men who find a larger measure of the expression of their lives in the mills and factories.¹¹²

According to Robert T. Winch, the 'functionality' of parents in a family is important for the child. 'Functionality' can be understood as the sum total of:

What the family actually does for the child in terms of behaviours and values that will help him in later life.¹¹³

Winch also affirms that:

the identification of the offspring is usually the greatest with the more functional parent.¹¹⁴

The incidents involving his parents, which Wright chooses to highlight in *Black Boy*, seem to suggest two facts. First, that his parents have failed to provide Richard with a functional family and secondly, that the systematic segregation of Blacks from the mainstream culture and its benefits does not allow the family to evolve into a more meaningful entity.

Family violence is also something which Richard believes to be a product of the white society's victimization of the Blacks. The episodes of violence within his family as described by Wright, Jerry H. Bryant suggests, are there to remind the reader that:

Violence is the pervasive impediment to the achievement of the spontaneous autonomous self-identity... The impediment was not limited to whites. The pattern of violence in the larger white world is repeated in the Black world of his family, his school, and his neighbourhood.¹¹⁵

After the incidents of violence in his family, he becomes feverish and dreams of:

huge wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows, suspended from the ceiling.¹¹⁶

Bryant comments :

The family violence is mixed in his fevered unconscious with the all-pervasive white danger.¹¹⁷

From the first rebellious act of burning down the curtains, Wright seems to cast Richard into a rebel-hero; but unlike Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*,¹¹⁸ Richard does not employ violence to discover his identity or find himself. Although Richard goes through a period of initiation into the hood, he is enlightened enough to reject its trappings. It is significant that Richard's initiation into the hood is brought about by his mother's action. After his father's desertion, Richard's mother starts working and Richard has to buy groceries. He is robbed by the local youth. When he reports the incident to his mother, she arms him with a stick and more money and orders him to complete the errand. His mother, who had earlier chastised him for using violence, now licenses him to do so if only for the sake of survival. Although Richard rejects the violence as part of his Southern existence, at this precise moment he feels a sort of masculine pride for having bested his peers. He remarks:

That night I won the right to the streets of Memphis.¹¹⁹

This moment of triumph is only short lived. Richard does not feel any sense of redemptive bonding that the Black brotherhood is supposed to foster amongst Black men. In the episode where Richard is forced to drink in a bar by older men just to

entertain them, Wright is scornful about the role of the Black community that acts as a surrogate family in the matters of guidance of children. Thus the family and the community become intertwined symbols in *Black Boy* and function as a web trying to trap Richard inexorably in his Southern existence. Richard's alienation becomes all the more unbearable because he seems to be the lone crusader against these odds.

Black Boy's historical relevance on however, transcends its autobiographical genesis, according to Jerry H. Ward, Jr. Contrary to Bradley, he lauds *Black Boy* as an example of the best kind of protest literature. Ward remarks:

Recreating and inscribing himself in a particularized moment of American history from *angles available to an African American male*, [italics mine] Wright did not intend, as those who would censor his autobiography contend, to corrupt, scandalize or blaspheme. On the contrary his autobiography is designed to illuminate how obscene was denial of access to full participation in the democratic process by law, custom and the practice of race. *Black Boy* embodies its own defense as a classic response to the call of the most sacred American principles regarding human rights... *Black Boy* does explain the universal potential of the person who is socialized to be *Black and male* [italics mine] in an oppressive society. The text establishes the probability that as an autobiographical act, it spoke specifically for Wright. And Wright spoke specifically... for a *very distinct community*.¹²⁰ [italics mine]

Ward may be right in affirming the book's relevance for 'Black males' at that moment of American history. The post emancipation history of Black oppression by whites is also faithfully documented by Wright. But it is arguable whether Wright as Richard was able to voice or articulate the feelings of the entire community. Richard's journey is also an attempt (like Janie's) to understand the 'self multiplied by community',¹²¹ in order to gain knowledge about the wider group. But Hurston's approach to the handling of the ills of American small-town Black existence is done with her understanding of the subtle dynamics of man-woman relationships, as well as the inseparable courses of class and race struggle. Wright, on the other hand, seems to be

operating on some fallacious presumption that American mainstream white community is the ideal as it has 'access to full participation in the democratic process by law, custom and the practice of race'.¹²² According to Wright, since the Black race was denied the same participation it felt alienated. Moreover, Wright sees Black community life and kinship networks as heightening this sense of alienation. Unlike Hurston, Wright does not find anything redeeming in the community and neither does he seek 'relational love'¹²³ to construct a 'meaningful mutual love'¹²⁴ according to bell hooks' prescription. Herbert Leibowitz has suggested that the central motif in *Black Boy* is hunger. He remarks:

The word and the sensation stalk him like an assassin, but besides hungering for food, affection, justice, and knowledge Wright yearned for words.¹²⁵

Although Wright does yearn for affection, nowhere is his 'hunger' associated with a hunger for family or community. He associates images of 'endless suffering'¹²⁶ with his family, and, as Abdul R. Janmohamed has pointed out:

At first Wright's energies were occupied with enduring his maternal family, which sought to break his independent spirit and make him conform to a Southern way of life... however as Wright later realized, his family, without being conscious of it, had been "conforming to the dictates of the whites above them in its attempt to mold him."¹²⁷

Apparently Wright seems to resist these attempts and hold his family responsible for fostering an inferior self-image of the kind which white America wanted for its Black citizens. But Wright, unlike other biographers like Frederick Douglass or Maya Angelou, does not portray the resilience of the Southern Black woman or the quiet fortitude of the Southern Black man. He is so critical of the institution of the Black family that he chooses to see only its flaws. The characterisation of his grandmother as a matriarch undermines her strength by showing her to be a religious fanatic and a child-beater. His grandfather's portraiture

is similarly skewed with Wright's emphasis on his pathetic faith in the American sense of justice. Once again, these characters and their struggle are transformed into a signifier which forbids Richard to seek his dream in the South. Thus the acknowledgement of any positive traits of Black culture in the South is absent in *Black Boy*.

Every episode related to Richard's interaction with his family strengthens his decision to leave the South where the presence of white culture was adversely affecting him. In his essay 'How Bigger Was Born'¹²⁸, Wright had attempted to demarcate the entire spectrum of behaviour which Blacks exhibited in reaction to white oppression. He commends on contemporary African American behaviour that:

.... oppression spawned among them a myriad variety of reactions, reaching from outright blind rebellion to a sweet otherworldly submissiveness.¹²⁹

This 'otherworldly submissiveness' is to be found in Wright's characterization of his grandfather. Although he is described as a tall sturdy man, and a figure of authority in the household, he is forever writing letters to the U. S. War Department asking for his disability pension that never comes. The way in which Richard narrates this episode indicates that the White system of denial had successfully emasculated an otherwise strong Black man. Richard's description of incidents where his grandmother and later, his Aunt Addie, use physical violence, are not so much critical about the role of women in the Black community as they are part of Richards's critique of a civilization (America) which ensured civilized behaviour by resorting to violence.

In a separate incident Richard records how the otherworldly submissiveness, like that which was taught in his family, actually contributed to damaging Black self esteem. In one of his odd-jobs he saw firsthand how an educated Black man, working

as an elevator operator, debased himself to earn twenty-five cents for lunch. The Black man deliberately started talking like a nigger and teased a White man by telling him that he would not take him to his floor unless he gave him a quarter. The White man seemed to derive a sadistic amusement from this ‘nigger-act’ and responded by abusing him. This act is repeated before Richard, and the incident functions in the novel as Wright’s implicit method of recognizing that neither rebellion nor submissiveness was going to help. As he remarks in retrospect, supporting his decision to migrate North:

Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of Black life in America, I know that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it, but not for it. And when I brooded on the cultural barrenness of Black life; I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty and the capacity to remember were native to man.¹³⁰

Black Boy, published in 1945, preceded the years leading up to the active Civil Rights movement of the sixties and the seventies, headed by the likes of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. At the time of Wright’s novel, there were no mass movements for civic emancipation. Wright’s advocacy of the genre of the protest novel anticipates the latter day Black Arts movement and its manifesto which asserted that political activism was a primary responsibility of Black artists. According to Larry Neal¹³¹, Black aesthetic standards needed to be set up and White aesthetic standards required to be stripped off. This replacement could only be done with creative values from the Black community supplanting White artistic standards. Wright, hinting at the creation of a new aesthetics of Black writing, always harps upon the ‘barrenness’ of Black ‘cultural life’ and tries to find in his contemporary community such essentialist ideals as ‘tenderness’, ‘love’ and ‘honor’, by which he perhaps means the image of such values as are cherished in the White community, but

seems to be unaware of his ambivalent demand. Therefore, when Wright talks about the 'full spirit of Western civilization', he seems to be fascinated by the ideals of western civilization as upheld by the white society of his time.

Richard's intelligence had shown him the travesty of the ideals of democracy and equality (which western civilization glorified) when applied to the lives of Black Americans. In the case of the Black community the system of denial had become a part of their lives, so much so that they could not bring themselves to opt out of it. Thus when Richard himself chose to move out of such an existence, he was aware of the significance of such a decision:

I was building up in me a dream which the entire educational system of the South had been rigged to stifle. I was feeling the very thing the state of Mississippi had spent millions of dollars to make sure I would never feel; I was becoming aware of the thing that the Jim Crow laws had been drafted and passed to keep out of my consciousness... I was beginning to dream the dreams that the state had said were wrong, that the schools had said were taboo... In me was shaping a yearning for a kind of consciousness, a mode of being, that the way of life about me had said could not be, must not be and upon which the penalty of death had been placed.¹³²

Through this passage once again we perceive Richard's attempt to see himself as someone special who had the ambition and aspiration to desire something different for himself. He categorizes himself as a dreamer who dares to dream differently. The education system of the South, according to Wright, was rigged to suppress the dreams of Black boys. Jerry H.Ward's comment that *Black Boy* articulates the significance of being a boy and Black in a particular moment of American history¹³³ is also evident from such remarks made by Richard in the course of the first half of the novel.

Richard successfully migrates to the North, to an environment which he believed would foster his ambitions. It is evident that Richard has already given up his

dream of finding a nurturing community which would help him to attain his goals, but it is also ironic that at the time of his migration to the North he is not at all sure of what he wants to find there, except perhaps to be able to catch the ‘spirit of western civilization’ which had been denied to the Blacks of the South. But Wright’s migration to the North further debases his sense of self. While working in the laboratory of a clinic, he is disillusioned as to the real purport of the American Dream. As he and others were tending to the rats, there was an altercation that led to the cages being accidentally opened. The rats had to be retrieved meticulously, but as he and the other workers were unaware of their scientific status, they put them into cages at random, hoping that their error would not be detected. Surprisingly enough, the researchers never found out about this breach of security. Wright interprets this incident as symbolic of the White apathy towards Blacks, and realizes that the Negro remained in his ‘dehumanized’¹³⁴ form even in the North:

The hospital kept us four Negroes as though we were close kin to the animals we tended, huddled together down in the underworld corridors of the hospital, separated by a vast psychological distance from the significant processes of the rest of the hospital just as America had kept us locked in the underworld of American life for these hundred years — and we had made our own code of ethics, values, loyalty.¹³⁵

Wright sees this apathy in the same way as Ellison later saw the phenomenon of Black ‘invisibility’.¹³⁶ The Blacks in the North were contained in their ghettos, and while living there, they could define it as their space with its code of ‘ethics, values, loyalty’.¹³⁷ In an earlier instance [quoted above] Wright had wondered whether it was possible that the ‘cultural barrenness’ of Negro life could be transcended so that they could feel and exhibit a universal set of ethics. Here in the North, Richard seems to conclude that the Negro code of ‘ethics, values, loyalty’, however inimical it was to the civilized individual’s dreams, had evolved because of the white mentality of

segregation. Once again we see that he does not feel upbeat about artistic movements for self-definition, such as the Harlem Renaissance, which arose spontaneously in spite of and perhaps even because of such policies of segregation.

Richard had travelled towards the North with the hope that it would offer him a better life. However, his experiences in the North make him aware of the more subtle structures of segregation operating in the American life of the North as well. He realises that he had 'fled from one insecurity and had embraced another'.¹³⁸ Perhaps, having been carried away by his dream of an ideal human community which can be realized from within the Black community, Wright is inspired for a while by the Communist Movement. But here also Wright is disillusioned. In the May Day demonstration he gets to see an indisciplined and aggressive side to the Communist dream, which was not very different from the adolescent violence he had witnessed within the Black community. Finally Wright chooses the vocation of a writer to affirm his human-ness and:

to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human.¹³⁹

Thus Wright's conclusion fulfils his prescription for a protest novel in *Black Boy*, with its concluding decision by Richard, that to be human and thrive as human beings in the American civilization he would have to be a writer, and protest the inequalities of civilization. Though written in the form of an ascent narrative within the American context, *Black Boy* marks also the failure of such a trope, because, in spite of the protagonist's migration to the North the oppression persists. Also, there is no protest against the gender inequalities present within the very fabric of the Black family.

Whereas Zora Neale Hurston's Janie returns to the community, Wright's Richard proclaims his separation from it. Ralph Ellison, in his essay 'Richard Wright's Blues'¹⁴⁰, attempts to analyze this as Wright's individualism. He remarks:

Wright's attitude ... represented a groping for individual values in a Black community whose values were what the young Negro critic, Edward Bland has defined as 'pre-individual'. And herein lay the setting for the extreme conflict set off, both within his family and the community, by Wright's assertion of individuality... And the significance of the crisis is increased by virtue of the historical fact that the lower class Negro family is matriarchal; the child turns not to the father to compensate mother-rejection, but to the grandmother or to an aunt—and Wright rejected both of these. Such rejection leaves the child open to psychological insecurity, distrust and all of those hostile environmental forces from which the family functions to protect it ... One of the southern Negro family's methods of protecting the child is the severe beating *,a homeopathic dose of the violence generated by Black and white relationships.* [italics mine] such beatings as Wright's were administered for the child's own good a good which the child resisted, thus giving his family relationships an undercurrent of fear and hostility.¹⁴¹

Although the ambivalent power of the matriarch has been acknowledged in African American fiction and also in biographies like Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Birds Sing*,¹⁴² Ellison seems to condone the use of violence within families. Richard resents this violence and rightfully so, because if it is perpetrated as a 'homeopathic dose' to fortify the younger members against a racially charged society it is emulating its oppression and therefore damaging the Black child's own self-image. As Janie indicates in her observations on Logan and Jodie, it is the same community-sanctioned use of violence in the family that drives love out of marriage. In *The Will To Change* bell hooks is also of the opinion that only patriarchal masculinity can feel comfortable with such shows of violence; mature males do not conform to such behaviour.¹⁴³ It is significant that Wright does not see anything redeeming in his immediate family, which transcends his memories of violence and gives him the feeling of being loved.

Conclusion:

When we arrive at a comparative analysis of Wright's and Hurston's treatment of family and community, we find a number of differences. Hurston's novel, chronicling a young woman's coming of age in a Southern town, is faithful to her own Black childhood in a nostalgia which was remarkably free from any kind of racism insofar as it was the memory of an all-Black community. Therefore, unlike Wright's passionate outburst against racism, Hurston never discusses Black-White relationships at length; neither does she dwell on the repercussions of racial repression on the Black family. It was this lack of social commentary (or 'protest' to use Wright's term) that critics concentrated upon, since, at the time of the publication of Hurston's novel, there was no concerted feminist or gender-specific criticism of women's writing. Critics failed to appreciate Hurston's critique of the status of the Black woman in her community and in her home. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu in her study *Black Women Writers and the American Neo Slave Narratives: Femininity Unfettered*¹⁴⁴ has contended that neo-slave narratives authored by women writers tried to create 'women of resistance'¹⁴⁵, to rectify the genderless identity of women characters in the nineteenth century slave narratives. Although Hurston does not create characters living in an enslaved condition, she does create a 'woman of resistance' through her characterization of Janie. But critics like Alain Locke misinterpreted this and labelled Hurston's work as lacking in, 'sharp analysis of the social background'.¹⁴⁶

Wright's novel *Black Boy*, on the other hand, deals with issues of gender only in a limited manner. Barbara Johnson in her essay, 'The Re(a)d and The Black'¹⁴⁷, remarks that in most of Wright's novel the Black woman's story remains invisible. While defining the roles of his mother, grandmother and father Wright never tries to

deal with the problems of Black femininity and Black masculinity. In a comparative study of Wright's *Black Boy* and Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* George E. Kent¹⁴⁸ observes:

The rhythms of the American Dream ideas run in a parallel pattern with a more serious questioning of the Dream itself. However, Wright's *Black Boy* was the autobiography which began a questioning of the ... fabric of the American dream... In the process of Wright's questioning, however, the cultural fabric of the Black community is torn to shreds and tends to reflect a people teetering upon the brink of nothingness.¹⁴⁹

He also notes that this is the opposite technique to be differentiated from that of Angelou. Angelou is alive to the 'beauty and absurdity'¹⁵⁰ of her community. Her characters, like those of Wright, can be regarded as stereotypes but are characterized by their personalities. Talking about Wright's technique he notes:

Wright attacks Black folk tradition oriented towards survival, base submission and escapism, whereas, he states in "Blueprint for Negro Writing" she wished to mould tradition into a martial stance The hero emerges as a Black rebel-outsider embattled, both with the pretensions of the American Dream and his own folk tradition.¹⁵¹

This 'existential' quality of the work prevents Wright from being compassionate about the individual flaws of his family members. The family, as a space where the needs of the self and that of the community converge, is not properly documented in Wright. Hurston, on the other hand, tries to interrogate and analyze the problems of the African American males as well as females within the context of the family. Michelle Wallace in her essay 'Neither Fish nor Fowl: The Crisis of African American Gender Relation'¹⁵² has pointed out (while reviewing Orlando Patterson's essay 'Blacklash') that for the Blacks, whether male or female, it is difficult to have *any* identity. As Wallace puts it :

Not only doesn't the white dominant culture allow it, your family, your community, your political, intellectual, and cultural leaders don't usually allow it either.¹⁵³

Thus Wright seems to make up a special case for himself. Although he does speak about the Southern community and its inability to access the privileges of the democratic civilization, after coming to the North it is his own transformation that he is essentially worried about. In the conclusion of the novel he chooses the vocation of writing as his future, because it will be able to keep alive 'a sense of the inexpressibly human'.¹⁵⁴ He hopes to use writing as a platform to address the problems of his community, but his agenda of writing a 'protest novel' is not realised through this conclusion. Only in the episode in Memphis, when a mother tries to force Richard to be her daughter's husband, does Wright allow a certain amount of compassion in his treatment of the racial plight, considering how the quest to better one's lot led people to act the way they did. In this one instance Wright is compassionate about the Black mother but for the rest of his biography Richard continues in his stance of the enraged Black man.

While trying to evaluate the Black woman's literary tradition, Mary Helen Washington¹⁵⁵ has commented about Black women writers that:

Their literature is about Black women; it takes the trouble to record the thoughts, words, feelings, and deeds of Black women, experiences that make the realities of being Black in America look very different from what men have written. There are no women in this tradition hibernating in dark holes contemplating their invisibility; there are no women dismembering the bodies or crushing the skulls of either women or men, and few, if any, women in the literature of Black women succeed in heroic quests without the support of other women or men in their communities. Women talk to other women in this tradition.¹⁵⁶

Washington seems to suggest that Black women's literature as a tradition is more concerned about kinship ties and is committed to exploring themes which affect the

community as a whole. Thus, the 'womanist' perspective that Walker was to formulate a few decades later, has always been alive within Black women's literature. Washington's reference to self-centric Black male heroes in such canonical texts as Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Wright's *Native Son* is significant because in these texts the existence of the hero as outsider (or an alienated being) is emphasized to the exclusion of their ties to their family or kin. Women talking to women is another significant aspect of Hurston's novel. Although Janie affirms at the end of the novel that:

Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. they got to go tuh God, and they got they got tuh find out about livin fuh theselves.¹⁵⁷

she tries to impart the actual import of her experience to Phoebe, as an articulate survivor. She does try to tell her friend the need to be loved by someone like Tea Cake. Although Phoebe does not understand the depth of Janie's experience and tells her that she would ask her husband to take her fishing, as Tea Cake did, Janie's openness and willingness to talk (in the blues tradition) makes her one of the first Afro-American female heroines with her own articulate voice.

Michelle Wallace critiques the conclusion of Hurston's novel as projecting an impossible state of 'Zen-Like isolation.'¹⁵⁸ Through her experiences Janie is able to find the oneness between herself and her community. At the end of the novel, she has no biological family, but through her immersion narrative she has united herself with the spirit family. As Barbara Smith notes in 'Toward a Black Feminist Criticism':

The use of Black women's language and cultural experience in books by Black women about Black women results in a miraculously rich coalescing of form and content and also takes their writing far beyond the confines of white/ male literary structures. The Black feminist critic would find innumerable commonalities in works by Black women.¹⁵⁹

In the later chapters of this thesis we will find authors like Morrison, Walker and Naylor trying to emulate Hurston's method.

Bonnie J. Barthold,¹⁶⁰ describes Hurston's creation of Janie as that of a woman character who exceeds a type. According to her, such a creation implies a willingness to confront the ambiguities within herself, which in turn is symbolic of the confrontation between the White world and the Black world and the contingencies which result from the opposition of the two. Janie's gradual understanding of herself and her honest appraisal of the men in her life, as well as how they help her to evolve, affirm that Hurston does hold out hope for the possibility of the existence of a better community, where the gender divide and the racial divide will not matter. Such an existence, once discovered, would also strengthen the Black family. In Wright's case there is no such hope or faith, as he gradually moves towards his goal to attain freedom in the North. Houston A. Baker in her essay on Richard Wright, 'On Knowing Our Place',¹⁶¹ has found that most of Wright's works are written with a specific gender coding. While writing about Wright's study on the African American folk culture, *12 Million Black Voices*, she opines about Wright's male vision of the world that:

That vision projects a merger of Afro-American males and the progressive forces of Western industrial technology, a merger that, by its very nature excluded Black women and their domestic consciences and calling.¹⁶²

Thus in *Black Boy*, when Wright speaks at length about Blacks being denied the scope of trying to imbibe the expectations of western Civilization, he is speaking about the community, but perhaps his vision is only limited to the possibility of male participation in White America's political and social institutions. Baker has described Wright's portrayal of Black women as ruthless in *12 Million Black Voices*. In *Black*

Boy, too, the Black woman and her desires are never addressed, and when Wright is describing them he never admits the possibility of them wanting to share in the American Dream as well.

Wright's biography offers a critique of the socio-political reality of the Blacks as well as their flawed discourse on family and community, but always with the aim to justify Wright's dream to be an artist or a public figure. As he remarks in the conclusion to the novel:

I wanted to build a bridge of words between me and the world outside, that world which was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal.¹⁶³

Once again he chooses to connect with the world outside rather than his own community. Attitudes to middleclass Black family and community, as evident in Wright's descriptions, almost inevitably have a note of haughty disdain. He sees every experience as contributing positively or negatively to his growth as an artist from the point of view of an angry young man.

Wright's role as a pioneer of the protest novel is undeniable, but the theme of protest does not include any strategies for survival, neither does it raise the issue of the necessity of healing within the Black community. D. Angelyn Mitchell in her book *Freedom to Remember*¹⁶⁴ describes Black women's writing as an attempt to create 'narratives of healing'.¹⁶⁵ Although it can be said about Hurston's novel that most of her representation of the Black community is self-referential, and there is no sustained critique of the racial scenario (except perhaps in the case where the muck workers have to bury the bodies of the white people rather than their own kin), she admits to the possibility of healing, thereby advocating a hope that reconciliation between family and community is possible. bell hooks, in her study *The Will To Change: Men, Masculinity and Love*, has noted :

To truly protect and honor the emotional lives of boys we must challenge patriarchal culture. And until that culture changes, we must create the subcultures, the sanctuaries where boys can learn to be who they are uniquely without being forced to conform to patriarchal, masculine visions. To love boys rightly we must value their inner lives enough to construct worlds, both private and public, where their right to wholeness can be consistently celebrated and affirmed, where their need to love and be loved can be fulfilled.¹⁶⁶

Janie in her relationships, especially with Tea Cake, recognizes this 'need' and their marriage is one such subculture where she tries to value the 'inner life' of Tea Cake. However, it seems that Janie and Tea Cake's idyllic relationship doesn't last because Tea Cake tries to be a possessive husband instead of appreciating love. In Wright, we find no such relationship.

In his essay 'Everybody's Protest Novel' James Baldwin writes:

The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of its beauty, dread power in its insistence that it is this categorization alone which is real and cannot be transcended.¹⁶⁷

Baldwin may be harsh in his judgment about Wright's *Black Boy*, but it is true that the conclusion of the novel, with its absolute finality, doesn't leave room for new possibilities for the evolution of the family, while it is present in the ending of Hurston's novel, with Janie coming back to Eatonville. Thus Wright's solipsism and his preoccupation with racial issues shifted the focus away from the emotional issues between men and women, which needed to be addressed as far as the Black community was concerned. bell hooks, in her book *Rock My Soul : Black People and Self-Esteem*¹⁶⁸, has pointed out :

Though race is a vital aspect of our identity as African Americans, we cannot know ourselves fully if we look only at race. Looking at ourselves holistically seeing our emotional well-being as rooted both in the politics of race and racism as well as in our capacity to be self-defining, we can create the self-esteem that is needed for us to care for our souls.¹⁶⁹

In the early decades of the twentieth century Hurston was able to do this 'caring for souls' better than Wright. My later chapters will explore strategies adopted by writers to address the emotional as well as racial issues which contributed to the emergent discourse on family through the rest of the century.

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