

CHAPTER - 3

**The 1980s : WOMANIST NARRATIVES OF HEALING : ALICE WALKER'S
THE COLOR PURPLE AND GLORIA NAYLOR'S *MAMA DAY*; REVISED
MASCULINITIES IN ERNEST GAINES' *A GATHERING OF OLD MEN*
AND COMMUNITY OF HOMEWOOD IN WIDEMAN'S *SENT FOR YOU*
*YESTERDAY***

They were women then/ My mama's generation./ Husky of voice—
Stout of /Step with fists as well as Hands/How they battered
down/Doors /And ironed/ Starched white/ Shirts/ Armies/ Headragged
Generals/ Across mined/ Fields./ Booby-trapped/ Kitchens./ To
discover books /Desks./ A place for us /How they knew what we./
Must know/ Without knowing a page/ Of it/ Themselves.¹

—Alice Walker, 'In Search of Our

Mothers' Gardens'

(Alternatively published as 'Women')

I find my own/ small person /a standing self /against the world/ an
equality of wills /I finally understand.²

—Alice Walker, 'On Stripping

Bark from Myself'

In an interview with Christina Davis³ Toni Morrison has aptly summed up the contribution of women to the renaissance and growth of Black culture. She concludes her interview with the following remarks:

I think....because I'm not sure that the other Renaissance, the Harlem one, was really ours. I think in some ways it was, but in some ways it was somebody else's interest in it that made it exist. This one is interesting because it may have started out as a fashionable thing to do because of the Civil Rights Movement and so on, but it ended up as...we snatched it! (laughs) So may be this is really *our* Renaissance for the moment, rather than entertaining or being interesting to the Other.⁴

It is significant that Morrison regards the Harlem Renaissance as a movement which was given that name to demarcate African American culture from the point of

view of white America. When she sums up the last thirty years (roughly from the 60s) as 'our' renaissance, however, she is consciously speaking on behalf of her community, although in the same interview she also speaks about the distinction between the male writer's gaze and the female writer's gaze. In an answer to a question which asked her to point out the difference between African women's writing and Afro-American women's writing she remarked:

There's a gaze that women writers seem to have that is quite fascinating to me because they tend not to be interested in confrontations with white men—the confrontation between Black women and white men is not very important, it doesn't enter the text. There are more important ones for them and their look, their gaze of the text is unblinking and wide and very steady. It's not narrow, it's very probing and it does not flinch. And it doesn't have these funny little axes to grind. There is something really marvellous about that.⁵

The women writers of the 80s had such a gaze, and Alice Walker's womanism attests to the relevance of such a gaze as it is best qualified to deal with the different racial issues where the welfare of both Black men and Black women are at stake. Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls this surge in Black women's writing of the 80s an 'explosion'⁶, occurring as a result of the convergence of the women's movement and the Black nationalist politics of the Civil Rights era. The movements of the 80s were, however, dedicated to the reclamation of history and, if anything, the role of 'bearing witness' became even more significant in Afro-American writing as America was moving towards a multicultural ethos in its celebration of nationhood. The women writers were also speaking about their ancestors, their mothers and grandmothers, and how their creativity—expressed in such ordinary ways as gardening or quilting—went on to contribute to the reclamation of history. More importantly, they were remembered because they had undertaken these projects as labours of love, unaware that they were bequeathing a legacy to their progeny, as part of their inherited history.

Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Paule Marshall have all spoken about this aspect of Black life in their essays and interviews. Morrison, while stressing the need to 'bear witness', delineates a process of reclamation where ancestors had to be necessarily 'summoned.'⁷ in her interview with Christina Davis she remarks:

There's a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure, so that the presence and the heartbeat of Black people has been systematically annihilated and the job of recovery is ours...you have to stake it out and identify those *who have preceded you* [italics mine] resummoning them, acknowledging them is just one step in that process of reclamation so that they are always there as the confirmation and the affirmation of the life that I personally have not lived but is the life of that organism to which I belong which is Black people in this country.⁸

Alice Walker, in her celebrated essay 'In search of our Mother's Gardens'⁹, mentions how African American women writers of the nineteenth century, like Phyllis Wheatley, kept alive the 'notion of a song'¹⁰ amidst the aggravating circumstances of slavery. While paying tribute to her mother's skill as an artist, manifested in the garden she created in the backyard of their home, Walker affirms:

For her, so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist has still been a daily part of her life. This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work Black women have done for a very long time. Guided by heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength—in search of my mother's garden, I found my own.¹¹

African American literature produced by women writers of the 80s thus foregrounded questions of ancestry and the role of the maternal figures in the family in the reclamation of history. Black literature in the 80s also dealt exhaustively with folk methods of reclamation such as songs, poetry, magic etc. Black women writers of the 80s engaged as before in various projects of 'bearing witness', but, according to Patricia Hill Collins, they were also able to create images of 'emergent women'¹² who challenged the various realms of power—hegemonic, ideological and interpersonal—¹³ that constituted white oppression. Collins further argues that by articulating core

themes of work, family and community in their fiction, these women writers were creating a cultural context for Black women's empowerment, which could be emulated by other marginalized groups.

The 80s were also the decade of the third wave feminist movement celebrating the bonds and connections between women as well as their differences. Black literature by women can be seen as following the same agenda, although the celebration of sisterhood was not a first time phenomenon in Black literature. Gender relations within the Black community also underwent certain changes, with ordinary women discovering feminism's potential to grant them greater scope for self actualization. However, one of the important points of deliberation about such a scenario would be how well the roles of men or masculinity were analyzed in the literature of the period. Although Black women writers like Walker tried to establish their womanist concern as related to the concern for men within the community as well, there was a widespread idea that men were not characterized as equals to the strong Black women dominating the novels of this period. As Barbara Christian notes in her essay, 'Trajectories of Self-Definition: Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction',¹⁴ the trend of the rebellious female protagonist in the 70s was replaced in the 80s by the penchant for a protagonist who was committed to the healing of the community. She reads Walker's and others, attempts at such healing as a pervasive movement which signifies:

...the sense that women of color can no longer be perceived as marginal to the empowerment of all American women and that an understanding of their reality and imagination is essential to the process of change that society must undergo in order to transform itself.¹⁵

Sven Birkerts, while reviewing J. California Cooper's *Family*¹⁶, certainly does not agreed. He dismisses the claim that Black women writers have been able to

address issues of racism. According to Birkerts, the so called 'explosion' (to use Henry Louis Gates's turn) in African American women's writing in the 80s is the result of the use of certain strategic tropes which act as a 'fusion formula' and ensure better sales:

...these women have...found a particularly powerful fusion-formula. In their work, the age-old hatred of the oppressed Black for the white oppressor is projected through a second layer of rage, which is that of the Black woman against the Black man. In these works of fiction, he is (and I generalize) : shiftless and cowardly, a shirker of familial responsibility, a sexual predator, a gambler, a rolling stone, a weakling gone seedy with booze and drugs. Against his baleful presence—or non presence—the community of women draws together. I think of *The Color Purple*, *Beloved* and *The Women of Brewster Place*, to name three of the most popular books. Here we find the story of the Black matriarchy as written with a poisoned pen...I have to wonder about the underlying reasons for their success. Was it just because of their excellence as works of fiction? Or was it because of their anger—racial anger deflected and targeted upon men—made them such incendiary emblems for an emergent women's movement?¹⁷

This chapter, focusing on the literature of the 80s, tries to address this change and attest to the veracity of Barbara Christian's claim. The novels chosen for discussion are Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*¹⁸, Ernest Gaines' *A Gathering of Old Men*¹⁹, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*²⁰ and John Edgar Wideman's *Sent For You Yesterday*.²¹ These novels by two women and two men writers have been selected to explore whether there has been any development in the depiction of the Black family and community since the 70s that is in keeping with the proliferation of women's movements in America during this time. The male novelists published in the 80s were not quite as popular as their female counterparts. Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe in their works the ways in which commitment to reclaiming history has coincided with their attempts to document Black manhood and redefine their roles within the family.

Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean²² have discussed (in their book *American Cultural Studies*) the attempts by African Americans as a group to reclaim their history. According to them, the history written by the Blacks at this time could be described as ‘new Black histories’. Citing Lawrence Levine’s history of the Black people, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*²³, Campbell and Kean describe the history of the Black race as one of resistance—even during slavery—where their voice was most prominently heard in Black arts and oral literature.²⁴ These attempts at resistance were undertaken by Black folks, in their enslaved condition, to articulate their own complexity and do away with the oversimplification of white historical narratives. This history of resistance which started during the years of slavery finally led to what Levine defines as the ‘imaginative cultural retrieval’,²⁵ and Black literature of the 80s is an important component of that development. In her preface to the collection entitled *Black Feminist Criticism*, editor Jacqueline Bobo writes how women authors are perhaps better suited to this kind of cultural retrieval, since their creative endeavours have flourished even within the family and community. She remarks:

...what is perceived as ordinary and routine intersects with the symbolic in the realm of culture, underscoring its potency in community-building and group cohesion.... Agency, self-determination, recognition of systemic forces of oppression, and transformation of self and culture, are made real in Black women's cultural endeavours. These concepts are often referenced in theoretical tracts, but rendered tangible throughout the range of Black women's creative expressions, including material culture, popular representations, and other art forms. They are integral components of a cultural movement that has altered a people's awareness of their social circumstances and impelled collective actions for social change.²⁶

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) professes to bring about such a collective action beginning at the level of the Black family, through Celie's ‘bildungsroman’. In the introduction to their seminal work on Black women writers, *Conjuring : Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition*,²⁷ editors Marjorie Pryse

and Hortense Spillers have identified *The Color Purple* as a pioneer text in popularizing the ‘conjure’ metaphor which becomes a motif in much of the literature of the decade. By describing her writing as an act in which she is the medium used by her ancestors, Walker establishes the tradition of connectedness that is so much a part of Black community life in America. She remarks:

[By] focusing on connection rather than separation, transforming silence into speech, and giving back power to the culturally disenfranchised, Black women writers affirm the wholeness and endurance of a vision that once articulated can be shared though ...[it] belongs to Black women alone.²⁸

The characterization of women in *The Color Purple* is intended to present all of them moving around comfortably in their sisterhood, in a community of their own, where the male presence serves as a threat to subvert its identity or the man is marginalized as a non-entity. Walker's stance as a writer of the 80s is quite obvious in this work in that the racial tensions have subsided, and the novel deals more comprehensively with relationships within the family. *The Color Purple* is eminently Celie's story, but Walker chooses to chronicle the lives of four different Black women—Celie herself, the abused wife; her sister Nettie, a dedicated missionary in Africa; Celie's step-daughter-in-law Sofia; and Celie's lover Shug Avery. Each of them tries to attain and establish her identity, which brings them into conflict with the men in the novel while drawing the women closer together. Their process of self-actualization, however, is never jeopardized by their disputes or confrontations with the males. Even in ‘times of duress’, to use Toni Morrison's phrase, these women have other interests in their own spheres to aid them in their quest for empowerment. Walker's womanist perspective and her repeated emphasis on the need to know and love oneself go into the making of these self-assured and self-possessed women. Needless to say, these women are entirely different from Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* and

Merle in *The Chosen Place, Timeless People*. In this chapter I would like to show that with the arrival of Black women's writing to a canonical position, their characters also exhibit a pattern of development in a particular direction. Following Collins' theory, these characters can now be more readily identified as women of resistance, and the confessional strain in the writing of women writers of this period can be understood as an attempt to change the dynamics of the interpersonal domain of power in the family and the community.

***The Color Purple* : Celie's Healing Womanism**

Celie, from her very first letter to God, speaks about the sexual abuse she is subjected to by her father and how her mother remained impervious to the possibility of Celie's exploitation by her husband. bell hooks' book *Communion: The Female Search for Love* has already been cited in previous chapters, and in discussing *The Color Purple* hooks' observations are all the more pertinent. hooks mounts her thesis on the premise that the quest for love is a feminine preoccupation because, within the patriarchal culture:

...the girl who does not feel love in her family of origin is given another chance to prove her worth when she is encouraged to seek love from other males.²⁹

The continued denial of love makes women seek their own 'circles of love',³⁰ to sustain their collective female being. Writing about this change in the quest for love, vis-a-vis the feminist movements of the 70s and 80s, hooks remarks:

The contemporary feminist movement had put in place a new social order... Women had been given a vision of mutuality—of relationships in which we would no longer be forced to be the sole nurturers and caregivers. Those of us who wanted to be fully self actualized, to explore with creativity and develop our inner selves, no longer had to

see ourselves as freaks...However, when it came to the subject of love, the narrative had changed, but we were still wanting to see if women and men would embrace the new narratives and love each other differently...We had to find a way to redefine our notion of woman's liberation so it would include our right to love and be loved.³¹

Alice Walker's 'womanism' seems to hold the key to solving the above dilemma. With her emphasis on the health of the community and its connection with the liberation of women, Walker is able to construct a vision of the mutuality of relationships, as evident in *Meridian*.³² In *The Color Purple*, Celie's transformation also stems from such a vision of mutuality. In her essay 'Writing *The Color Purple*'³³ Walker talks about how the anecdote of a woman asking her husband's lover for a pair of her drawers had planted the germ of the plot in her mind. Celie and Shug's love story in the novel can be read as a new 'narrative of love'³⁴ because it aids Celie's transformation (another function of the loving 'communion' that hooks describes) without disturbing or jeopardizing her family. More importantly, Celie's sexual transformation from a victim to a sensuous woman empowers her to speak out against her husband, Albert.

From an early age Celie encounters rejection from her family. The man she believes to be her father is a rapist. Before she can mature into womanhood he makes her pregnant twice and both the times disposes off the babies. In these traumatic moments of her life, Celie's mother's role is little more than that of a cipher to her father. She takes perverse pleasure in the fact that Celie has been able to please her husband. Celie's only sustaining bond during this period is with her sister Nettie. It is significant that Walker chooses to emphasize Celie's relationship with Nettie as the bond which endures in spite of the circumstance which separates them. Perhaps in conformity with the spirit of the 80s, Walker prioritizes sisterhood over every other relationship. Although Nettie is absent as a character in most of the novel, she is

present in her letters to Celie. Celie also tries to find sister surrogates unconsciously in her relationships with other women, as in the case of Sofia, and during her initial relation with Shug before it is transformed into a lesbian affair. Much of the negative and substantial criticism which Walker faced after the publication of the novel had to do with the way she consciously foregrounded female relationships in her novel. In her study *Becoming and Bonding*³⁵ Katherine Payant marks out *The Color Purple* as a pioneer text in its thematic representation of friendship between women. According to Payant:

The protagonist Celie, whom we follow in her letters to God and her sister from age fourteen to middle age, finds independence, hope, and finally transcendence through her love of women. Though the novel is certainly concerned with the oppression of women by men and of Blacks by whites, Walker's main theme concerns how Black women confront and help each other to grow in a world where they are not valued.³⁶

We could also choose to probe Walker's thematic concerns in the light of her womanist ideology. She has always maintained her commitment to supporting the evolution of her community if it prioritized healing. Barbara Christian has demarcated certain concerns in Walker's novels, which operate as tropes. They are:

- (i) attention to the Black woman as creator, and to how her attempts to be whole relates to the health of her community.
- (ii) her insistence on probing the relation between struggle and changes—a probing that encompasses the pain of Black people's lives against which the writer protests but which she will not ignore—as a result the insistence on *healing* [italics mine]
- (iii) a sense of approaching the 'forbidden in society as a possible route to truth.³⁷

Although the last aspect is also found in the works of Toni Morrison, the other two points will help us to understand *The Color Purple* as a part of Walker's canon, which is committed to her agenda of collective womanist healing rather than a single-life bildungsroman. It cannot be denied however, that though the men in *The*

Color Purple are not as strong as the women, they are not simplistically dismissed as villains. In defending Walker's characterization of Celie's abusive husband Albert, Francis Day³⁸ observes that Walker has actually emphasized Albert's transformation in the novel. Relating his transformation to her womanist agenda of healing Walker herself remarks in her essay, 'Living By the Word':³⁹

They proceed to grow, to change, to become whole, i.e. well, by becoming more like each other, but stopping short of taking each other's illness.⁴⁰

Albert's healing is not documented as meticulously as Celie's. Yet like Celie he transcends his biological roles of husband and father to be merely Celie's friend. Along with Shug, Celie and Albert form a comfortable triad of friendship at the end of the novel.

When we look at Celie and Albert's conjugal life in the first half of the book as reported through Celie's letters to God, Albert appears as a kind of beast who cripples Celie with fear through his regular wife beating. He also does not seem to be caring enough about his children. He is characterized in a humane light only when he is reportedly with Shug, his lover, or has come back after visiting her.

Harpo and Sofia's marriage is a more complex and interesting one, because Sofia's behaviour approximates to that of the strong, Black matriarch. Harpo's attempts to subdue her are rendered futile. By characterizing Sofia as an almost masculine character and Harpo as a more home-centric husband, Walker is using her third trope of achieving truth through a forbidden route,⁴¹ as Barbara Christian notes. Their turbulent marriage, break up and eventual reunion highlight Walker's attempt to establish her womanist rationale which discourages all gender specific behavior. What is even more important in their role reversal is that their love withstands all these trials and, in their 'relational love'⁴² (to use bell hooks's phrase), they find the

rare scope to be self actualized people. Harpo and Sofia project an image of the Black family which succeeds in spite of the woman being the breadwinner. While reviewing the women in the novel, it is relevant to keep in mind the manifold definitions of the term womanist, especially its first two connotations:

Womanist 1. from womanish (opp. of "girlish" i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A Black feminist or feminist of color. From the Black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish" i.e.—like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one...Acting grown up. Being grown up...Responsible. In charge. Serious.⁴³

Sofia fits this definition of a womanist woman because she emerges as the more responsible partner in their marriage. In the second definition of womanist, Walker underlines the sexual openness/ promiscuity celebrated in this concept of womanism:

2. A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Traditionally universalist...Traditionally capable, as in "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply. "It would'nt be the first time"⁴⁴

The first time that Celie meets Sofia, the latter is pregnant but carries herself with dignity and poise. She refuses to be daunted by the prospect of single motherhood. In the first interview with Albert, Harpo's father, she doesn't flinch or overreact at his crude remarks about her sexual promiscuity. Her strength comes from her ability to manage exigencies and to protest against wrongs—be it the case of Harpo abusing her physically or the Mayor's wife talking patronizingly to her. To prove this point, Walker includes Celie's observation of their marital rows where Sofia gives back as good as she gets and refuses to let Harpo control her in the way conservative Black husbands were supposed to do i.e. by using physical violence.

Celie's admiration for Sofia stems from her ability to fight back, something that Celie had never done herself. At this point, Sofia tells Celie that her spirited stance emerges from a lifetime of fighting for rights within her family.

A girl child ain't safe in a family of men...I loves Harpo, God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me.⁴⁵

Perhaps it is Sofia who initiates Celie's journey towards wholeness when she first tells her about the possibility of Black family solidarity, which Celie, unfortunately, did not know in her traumatic adolescence. Sofia's description of her family is that of the ideal Southern one:

Six boys, six girls. All the girls big and strong like me. Boys big and strong too but all the girls stick together. Two brothers stick with us too, sometime.⁴⁶

However, Sofia's talking back to the Mayor's wife and her subsequent imprisonment may be Walker's way of suggesting that aggression was not enough of a survival strategy in a racially charged Southern community. The healing had to come from within, aided by love as in the case of Celie who is transformed by Shug's love and tenderness, and is able to embrace life with renewed faith in God.

Celie and Shug's explicitly lesbian relationship is based on sexual attraction, but also on mutual respect and trust. They share intimate moments—combing each other's hair, stitching together and also talking a great deal. Celie's intimacy with Shug takes her a step further in gaining her self-hood. It is almost like the poem quoted in the epigraph of this chapter, 'On stripping the Bark from Myself', which deals with the ability to acknowledge oneself as a distinct entity. According to bell hooks homosexuality is what makes it possible, because in a homosexual relationship the gender codes of a heterosexual patriarchal ideology fail to operate. She observes:

...the more we let go of heterosexism (that is, the belief that it is 'natural' for women and men to mate with one another rather than a culturally learned practice), the more likely we are to see women as potential partners...⁴⁷

hooks cites Lindsey Van Gelder and Pamela Brandt and adds their insights, which is also helpful to our analysis of the Celie-Shug relationship. They remark:

Lesbians often have a habit of falling in love with each other even when we're old, fat, unfeminine or too smart for our own good. The lesbian social world is shaped by the fact that we're all women, the gender that's stereotyped, not altogether without basis, for nurturing, bonding and wanting to talk endlessly about how we feel.⁴⁸

Celie thus starts talking with Shug, about her abusive father, her strained relationship with Albert, her children and her sister Nettie, and even about something as intimate as the lack of her sexual response when she is making love to Albert. In other words, the element of 'communion' which is so integral to southern Black family life, is established in Celie's case for the first time in her relationship with Shug.

However, in a separate article called 'Writing the Subject: Reading *The Color Purple*',⁴⁹ bell hooks deplores Walker's manner of characterizing Celie's homosexuality. She lauds the novel for being a narrative of 'sexual confession'⁵⁰, but finds fault with Walker making homosexuality merely a catalyst for resistance to patriarchal power structures. hooks remarks:

Sexual desire, initially evoked in the novel as a subversive, transformative force is suppressed and finally absent—a means to an end but not an end in itself... Celie's sexual desire for women and her sexual encounter with Shug is never a controversial issue even though it is the catalyst for her resistance to male domination, for her coming to power.⁵¹

bell hooks criticizes Walker because she tries to establish sexual knowledge as the keystone for attaining self-hood. Thus the novel becomes rather essentialist. hooks goes a step further to denounce *The Color Purple* for representing lesbianism without

its radical potential to empower women. She quotes Mariana Valverde from *Sex, Power and Pleasure*:

Lesbianism is thus robbed of its radical potential because it is portrayed as compatible with heterosexuality, or rather as part of heterosexuality itself. The contradictions that our society creates between hetero-and homosexuality are wished away and social oppression is ignored.⁵²

hooks also describes Walker's treatment of Celie's sexual awakening as a pornographic paradigm. While pornography uses violence to contain female difference, in *The Color Purple* Walker uses same-sex love to contain male abusive behaviour. Walker, according to hooks, does not explore the solidarity of such a lesbian communion and its repercussions on the family.⁵³ Her relationship with Shug empowers Celie but it is only limited to speaking out against her husband Albert. It can be argued that Celie's anger is not a late retaliation but rather her outrage at not having been delivered Nettie's letters. Celie's parting words to Albert, when she decides to leave with Shug, does very little to redeem Walker's womanist credentials. Her tone is unequivocal when she dismisses Albert:

You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need.⁵⁴

Very explicitly, Celie excludes Albert from her concept of Creation. Lines like those quoted above have justifiably prompted the ire of Black male critics. Celie leaves Albert and joins Shug in Memphis, but this transition does not lead her to create kinship patterns to suit her taste. The stay in Memphis is an interlude during which she discovers her own 'mother's garden'⁵⁵ by stitching pants for her friends and relatives. She returns to the south as a prosperous businesswoman, rather like the protagonists of the white bildungsroman, than as an articulate survivor of the

immersion narrative like Janie in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* or the visionary Meridian in Walker's own *Meridian*.

Sofia's rebellious and outspoken nature is not rewarded as she suffers for her defiant nature. She is perhaps the only character who comes close to the model of a domineering Black matriarch in the family, a character which, according to Patricia H. Collins, was so overtly aggressive that she appears to be an 'unfeminine woman'.⁵⁶ bell hooks has pointed out that Sofia's fate attests to the fact that unlike Celie, she has not found a 'love strong enough' to 'engender self recovery'.⁵⁷ Even the characterization of Shug Avery is done along the lines of another Black stereotype—'The Jezebel' or 'The aggressive whore'.⁵⁸ Although she aids Celie's transformation and engenders her spiritual and sexual awakening, her natural promiscuity nature makes her leave Celie for a younger male lover. Thus the only relationship which Walker consistently idealizes is that of Celie and Nettie, although the latter is present only in her letters to Celie for the major part of the novel.

bell hooks describes Celie and Nettie's correspondence in the following manner :

Celie and Nettie's letters testify, we as readers bear witness. They are an explanation of being, which asserts that understanding of the self is the precondition for transformation for radical change navigating aspects of their personal history, they engage in an ongoing process of demythologizing that makes new awareness and change possible. They seek to affirm and sustain the initial bond of care and connection experienced with one another in their oppressive male-dominated family.⁵⁹

Walker's womanist bearings make her prioritize sisterhood over the more powerful Black maternal discourse. Like *Meridian*, this is a text where the mother is absent. Nettie in her letters detailing her African missionary work emerges as an othermother, true to the African American tradition, for Celie's children Adam and

Olivia. While Walker robs lesbian sisterhood of its power to heal, she idealizes Celie and Nettie's sisterhood as an agency which can bring about healing, individual as well as familial. hooks adds:

Mothers prove their allegiance to fathers by betraying daughters; it is only a vision of sisterhood that makes women bonding possible. By eschewing the identity of mother, Black women in the *The Color Purple*, like Shug and Sofia, rebelliously place themselves outside the context of patriarchal family norms, revisioning mothering so that it becomes a task any willing female can perform, irrespective of whether or not she has given birth. Displacing motherhood as central signifier for female being, and emphasizing sisterhood, Walker posits a relational basis for self definition that valorizes and affirms women bonding. It is the recognition of the self in the other of unity, and not self in relationship to the production of children that enables women to connect with one another.⁶⁰

Walker's emphasis on sisterhood anticipates the companionship which Celie finds with Albert at the end of the novel. Their conjugal relationship is relegated to the background and both of them find a calm companionship, which is perhaps Walker's method of reminding the readers of the value of womanist politics. Celie overcomes her disgust for Albert, is cured of her sexist vision of God as a forbidding white man and with the help of Shug enters into Creation.⁶¹ She overcomes her disgust for Albert and, instead of treating his 'dead body' as a doormat⁶² embraces his companionship to effect his healing in turn. Albert's transformation proceeds along the lines of bell hooks' principle of change from 'patriarchal masculinity' to 'feminist masculinity'. Although hooks cites this theory in her book *The Will To Change: Men Masculinity and Love*⁶³, in her essay, 'Writing the Subject' she touches upon the possibility of such a transformation as stemming from the connectedness between the women characters. She comments:

The values expressed in women bonding—mutuality, respect, shared power, and unconditional love—become guiding principles shaping the new community in *The Color Purple*, which includes everyone, women and men, family and kin. *Reconstructed* [italics mine] Black males, Harpo and Albert are active participants expanding the circle of care. Together this extended kin network affirms the primacy of a revitalized spirituality in which everything that exists is informed by godliness, in which love as a force that affirms connection and intersubjective communion makes an erotic metaphoric possible.⁶⁴

Albert's 'reconstruction' is not mapped with the same meticulousness as Celie's transformation. Yet, like Harpo, Albert has to cast aside claims to a hegemonic or a patriarchal manhood to become Celie's partner. The Albert who embraces Celie's estranged sister and children is someone who likes to stitch, to sit in the porch and wonder at the power of human love. He tells Celie in a philosophical moment:

I think us here to wonder. To wonder. To ast, And that in wondering about the big things and asting about the big things, you learn about the little ones, almost by accident...The moe I wonder...the more I love... Harpo seem to love me. Sofia and the children. I think even ole evil Henrietta love me a little bit, but that's cause she know she just as big a mystery as the man in the moon.⁶⁵

According to bell hooks, men fail to communicate or get involved with their family because they resist their yearning for love. In her book *Will to Change*, she comments on her findings about the incompatibility between men and love. She writes:

Again and again a man would tell me about early childhood feelings of emotional exuberance, of unsuppressed joy, of feeling connected to life and to other people and then a rupture happened, a disconnect, and that feeling of being loved, of being embraced, was gone. Somehow the test of manhood, men told me, was the willingness to accept this loss, to not speak it even in private grief. Sadly, tragically, these men in great numbers were remembering a primal moment of heartbreak and heartache the moment they were compelled to give up their right to feel, to love, in order to take their place as patriarchal men.⁶⁶

Albert's yearning for love and his capacity to love and be loved are evident in the treatment of his girlfriend Shug. The way he disintegrates after Shug and Celie's

departure shows us how precious this love had been to him. As Albert changes into Celie's friend, we see the emergence of a 'partnership model' which replaces the 'dominator model',⁶⁷ the requisite desired by bell hooks for a man to achieve feminist masculinity:

To offer men a different way of being, we must first replace the dominator model with a partnership model that sees interbeing and interdependency as the organic relationship of all living beings. In the partnership model selfhood, whether one is female or male, is always at the core of one's identity. Patriarchal masculinity teaches males to be pathologically narcissistic, infantile and psychologically dependent for self-definition on the privileges (however relative) that they receive from having been born male...Feminist masculinity presupposes that it is enough for males to be, to have value, that they do not have to "do" to "perform" to be affirmed and loved. Rather than defining strength as "power over", feminist masculinity defines strength as one's capacity to be responsible for self and others.⁶⁸

Albert achieves this passage and there after is able to embrace Celie's family as if it were his own. Alice Walker, herself a civil rights activist, has ironically retained her spiritual faith in the healing power of love. In an interview as recent as 2003⁶⁹, she affirmed once again that for her the value of *The Color Purple* (i.e. the acknowledgement of the presence of God in creation) lies in the love of the community. As Alexis De Veau had pointed out (quotation cited in previous chapter), the understanding of Black women as to what constitutes self has changed to embrace the wider aspects of communal and national reality. Although Celie gets her emotional and economic rewards at the end of the novel, her gift of making 'pants' for people is an attempt to turn to the community. In spite of Albert's transformation, she remembers men like Odessa's husband Jack, a man whose gentle touch had made her think that his fingers had eyes, or Sofia's brothers, who were always there to help. Walker never lets Celie lose hope in the community. Celie achieves her 'Color Purple' by celebrating her family: an eclectic blend of her children raised by another woman

and taught by her sister, her stepson, his wife, her ex-husband (now her friend), and their mutual lover Shug. They choose July 4th to celebrate each other, as Harpo says at the end of the novel, because the white folks are celebrating their independence. But actually Celie chooses July 4th because, like the independence of America, her family has evolved after a great deal of struggle and a momentous day was required to celebrate it.

After Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* or Walker's own *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*⁷⁰ or *Meridian*, *The Color Purple* is a much more positive novel in terms of the possibilities of creating a new definition of the Black family even within the atmosphere of domestic violence and the racially charged environment of the south. Loyalerie King concludes in her essay 'African American Womanism' that:

The communal relationships Walker depicts, ...transcend time, space, the physical realm and the species we call human.⁷¹

King also questions the feasibility and flexibility of Walker's womanist aesthetic, considering her claim of making creation an 'ever expanding community' through its emphasis on wholeness. Walker is able to achieve her desire of an ever-expanding community through women, but the men or the masculine presence in such a community are not quite thoroughly negotiated. Walker's Harpo and Albert transform themselves only to accommodate the women in their lives. The womanist movement made it possible to authentically depict a life like Celie's, but the question of healing the men within the community has not been sufficiently dealt with by Walker. Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*, and Baldwin in *If Beale Street Could Talk* had at least attempted to understand the Black man's dilemma as contingent upon the fiercely racist atmosphere of the South. Walker's womanism does offer an ideology for changing the world, but her spiritual bias seems to obscure the necessity or

possibility of changing Black masculinity. Albert's change, as already discussed, does not address or allude to the ways in which Black men had evolved in the 80s to survive the South. Ernest Gaines' *A Gathering of Old Men* is a novel which endorses the feasibility of a 'brotherhood' where heroic virtues of a new kind were possible.

Ernest Gaines's *A Gathering Of Old Men* : An Attempt to Create A Brotherhood Of Healing

Jerry H. Bryant, while discussing the Black male stereotypes in Afro-American novelistic discourse, identifies the 70s and 80s as the decades which saw the rise and fall of the Black revolutionary figure as hero. In his *Victims and Heroes*⁷² he describes the 70s as a decade which propagated the 'Black revolutionary' as a hero because of the aggressive ideology of the Black Power movements of the time. Bryant discusses Gaines' novel as a work which demarcates the period between the rise of the Black revolutionary and the fall of the Black revolutionary. According to Bryant, Gaines' depiction of manhood and Southern racism is aimed at restoring order and not designed to propagate retaliatory violence:

It turns out that the Black revolutionaries revolt not against the justice system rigged against them but against rogue whites who have taken law into their own hands one time too many. Blacks join with whites to enforce justice. This obviates any threat to the general order from the *revolutionary collectives* and in this form this violence does not pull down society or engulf it in holocaust. It rids society of the distorting elements that would crack it open.⁷³

Bryant's suggestion is endorsed by Keith Clark in his article 'Re (Wrighting) Black Male Subjectivity: The Communal Black Poetics of Ernest Gaines'⁷⁴ where he remarks that *A Gathering of Old Men* projects a unique 'communal voice' very different from the 'monovoice' of 'protest discourse'. Bryant also credits *A Gathering*

of *Old Men* with anticipating the possibilities of Black brotherhood to be developed as a novelistic trope by Morrison in *The Song of Solomon*.⁷⁵ But significantly, Gaines' agenda is also like Walkers' womanism, directed at healing the community and the race. And like Walker's male characters, the women characters in *A Gathering of Old Men* are not developed to their potential, in that they function as catalysts who inspire men to prove their manhood by the old Southern code of honour. Gaines' men choose to establish their manhood at first through resistance, and then with climactic violence. The violence in this case is not directed at women or children but against a white lynch mob. bell hooks, in her book *The Will to Change*, has discussed the ways in which patriarchy sanctions violence as a desirable 'male' attribute.⁷⁶ Yet Bryant is perhaps more perceptive when he describes the group of men in *A Gathering of Old Men* as using violence as an ultimate resort to finally achieve an equality long denied to Blacks by the conservative southerners.

The focus in *A Gathering of Old Men* is primarily on the community of men who stand by each other to save Mathu, an old retainer in a Cajun plantation, who is supposed to have committed the murder of a landowner. Like sisterhood in *The Color Purple*, brotherhood in this novel is more important than biological paternal relationship. However, unlike Walker's novel, there is no singular hero whose quest is prioritized. The men narrate by turns, and hence emerges the captivating 'communal voice'. The result is refreshingly different from the 'subjective voice' of Baldwin or Wright's novels. Gaines' 'brotherhood' represents a viable alternative to the ghetto brotherhood which often subscribed to violence and other activities that were detrimental to a positive image of Black males. Bryant's *Victims to Heroes* discusses the various manifestations of a Black hero—from the Christ like suffering hero to the angry young-man hero of Richard Wright's novels. But Gaines, through his use of a

communal voice, creates a community of upright Black men who had regular families and were able to resist, even without violence, several attempts at oppression. Gaines' attempt is perhaps a precursor to later movements foregrounding questions of Black masculinity, like the Million Man March. Also, Gaines' 'brotherhood' is remarkable in offering a parallel cultural context alongside Black women's attempts to create a womanist community. Like the sisterhoods which try to resist the controlling images of Black women by creating new images, Gaines' 'old men' try to redefine the paradigm of conservative southern Black masculinity. Gaines also insists upon the healing power of such a brotherhood. The brotherhood as a community, as we see it in *The Gathering of Old Men*, however, does not embrace the vast possibility of kinship networks which Black sisterhood endorses.

The murdered man, Beau Boutane, is the son of a Cajun landowner named Fix who has the reputation of being a cruel and racist master among the Louisiana African American farmers. However, as Maria Hebert-Leiter points out in her article ('A Breed Between : Racial Mediation in the Fiction of Ernest Gaines' ⁷⁷), the Cajuns in Gaines' fiction function as 'racial intermediaries'.⁷⁸ Although they can be manipulated by whites to control Blacks, they

...present some hope of racial mediation between whites and Blacks...Gaines' African American protagonists not only realize their own individual worth in the midst of Louisiana's racial conflict, but also realize the individual humanity of their Cajun neighbours. The mutual understanding remains central to Gaines' ultimate message of racial mediation as the key to achieving human equality and true manhood.⁷⁹

The African American community is predominantly represented by the men of Louisiana's farming families. Their separate histories of racial oppression and their experience of southern segregationist laws are unraveled as each one of them attempts

to shoulder the blame of Boutane's murder in a bid to save Mathu and redeem their sense of manhood. It is interesting to note that in this instance, the attempt to establish oneself as a man is not carried out at the cost of inflicting violence or exercising authority over African American women. These men stand up as brothers against a white system of operations and in front of the womenfolk gathered on the porches of the plantation's cottages.

Chimley and Mat are the first ones to rally to Mathu's rescue. Following Candy's call, they go to the plantation after firing a shot each from their guns. The plan was to confuse the sheriff by showing him their guns so that he would be forced to close the case on grounds of lack of conclusive evidence. Both Chimley and Mat encounter opposition at home. While Chimley ignores his wife's questions and threatens to shoot her if she was lazy in preparing the fish, Mat's wife Ella is not so easily fended off. She insists on knowing the reason for Mat's carrying his gun and Mat's reply sets the tone for the personal, confessional anecdotes the old men recount later when the sheriff Mapes asks them their reason for committing the murder. Mat responds to Ella's prodding by reminding her of the indignities they had suffered at the hands of the Cajuns and, most importantly, the incident of his son's death at the hospital because the doctors would not minister to a Black man. Mat sees the crisis as a working of God's mysterious will. He adds:

He works in mysterious ways.... Give an old nigger like me one more chance to do something with his life.⁸⁰

Standing by Mathu becomes symbolic of a retaliatory gesture against the injustice they have had to suffer for years. He muses:

I felt kinda good, knowing me and Chimley and Cherry and all the rest of us, was doing something different for the first time.⁸¹

After the old men arrive at the plantation with their guns and pledge their support to save Mathu from imprisonment, they do not feel any anxiety but a calm which arises from the fact that all of them are together. Mathu, by common consent, had been the only one amongst them who had once stood up to Fix, Beau's father, a long time back in a pub. In the fight that had ensued, Mathu had bested Fix while the rest of the Black town cheered on silently, not being brave enough to participate. After Beau's murder, all of them conclude that it must have been Mathu who had murdered him in order to protect Charlie. The Sheriff, Mapes, knows he is guilty but Candy's inflexible stance and the presence of the old men willing to take the blame complicate the case.

While interrogating Uncle Billy the Sheriff tries to bring him to a sense of what he is undertaking by posing as a murderer. However, Billy replies in the same way as Chimley. He recounts an incident when Fix and his cronies had violently beat up his son to cause him enough mental damage, to be committed to an asylum. He also recalls the way his son was almost turned into an animal, and ate the food which was brought to him 'like a hog'.⁸² Thus Fix and his kind are remembered as the enemy who had emasculated their sons and ruined their families forever. Supporting Mathu is also staking their claim to manhood, which Fix had badly affected. Even Mapes the sheriff admits that Mathu is a better man than them, and the only one with guts enough to kill. However, he also realizes how Candy is jeopardizing the Black community's security in this racist-white, Southern town. Candy, being white, does not realize the dangers that might arise for the Black community, since the victim was a white man and the manslaughter charge was not a minor one. Mapes blames Candy for acting selfishly, since her heroic gesture to save Mathu by incriminating herself might backfire on the Blacks :

If she had any sense at all, she would have taken him to jail hours ago. Because if Fix doesn't show up, others may. And they won't be coming here to talk.⁸³

The reference in these lines is to the southern reality of violent lynching. But Gaines also makes sure that the Southern setting does not dilute the suspense of the murder mystery, by refusing the obvious interpretation that the act was one of random violence representative of Southern-Black behavior. The men gathered around Mathu, however, do not claim to abjure violence. Clatto tells Mapes that he was always 'militant' and remarks, 'My intrance gone sour, keeping my militance down'.⁸⁴ Johnny Paul tells Mapes about the way the Cajuns had driven them off their land and had removed every trace of the flower gardens nurtured by their families. He claims that his hurt at being deprived of their land had made him kill Boutane.

Gable is another Black man who claims to have killed for the injustice meted out to his son. The white system had found him guilty for raping a Cajun girl whom he describes as poor white trash. Gable tells Mapes about the way his minor son was put on an electric chair and executed crudely after a number of unsuccessful attempts. He tells the sheriff:

And that's why I kilt Beau, Mr Sheriff. He was just like that trashy white gal. He was just like them who throwed my boy in that 'lectric chair and pulled that switch : No, he wasn't born yet but the same blood run in all their vein.⁸⁵

Coot, another man in the gathering, speaks of discrimination in the army. Even when Black soldiers sacrificed their lives to save entire platoons, they were denied war honours. Indignation kindles his rage and clinches his decision to save Mathu.

The only Black woman who speaks out is Beulah, but unlike the men she does not merely emphasize the way her womanhood was compromised. She speaks of the

community's suffering under the Cajuns, although she is frank enough to admit that if the women aired their sorrows it would be much more scary.

You want me to start? You want any women here to start? I can tell you things done happened to women round here make the hairs stand on your head. You want me to start? All you got to say is yes.⁸⁶

She reminds Mapes of the incident when Fix had drowned two children in the river; the same river where the Black community had fished. Mapes dismisses her allegation as an old story dating fifty years ago, and one which had no proof. Here Beulah points out that Mapes' attitude is racist:

Now ain't that just like white folks ?....Black people get lynched, get drowned git shot, guts all hanging out and here he come with ain't no proof who did it. The proof was them two little children laying there in them two coffins..And let's don't be getting off into that thirty five, forty fifty years ago stuff, either...So lets don't be putting it all on no thirty-five, forty, fifty years ago like everything is so nicey-nicey now.⁸⁷

Beulah addresses the Black community's feeling by citing an event which had scarred the memory of Black-white relationships in the South. However, Beulah seems unable to realize the fact that Fix also represents a minority community; the Cajuns and the whites were using him and his kind to propagate racial strife. It is perhaps Candy and Miss Merle's presence as benevolent whites which prejudices her perspective. Gaines tries to suggest that a truce with the Cajuns was strategically necessary in order to combat the repressive Southern laws. Fix's son Gil is the only one who is shrewd enough to understand the importance of kinship between the Cajun and Black communities. He attacks Candy in her assumed role as savior of Mathu he sees her gesture as an attempt to impede Black and Cajun relations. He tells her:

You never liked any of us. Looking at us as if we're a breed below you. But we're not. Candy. We're all made of the same bone, the same blood, the same skin. Your folks had a break mine didn't that's all.⁸⁸

Gil's university education makes him dismiss Candy's championing of Mathu as an attempt to ignore the community's ability to defend themselves. Gil's statement, according to Maria Leiter:

Captures the class stratification in Louisiana that supported the racial divisions that run the Marshall plantation because it proves the placement of Cajuns between the Marshall family and the African American laborers who continue to make a profit for them.⁸⁹

From this point in the novel, Gaines introduces the Gil 'Salt' Boutane and Carl 'Pepper' Harrison subtext. Gil and Carl are a part of the university baseball team and their partnership as fullback and halfback in the baseball team helps them to escape the small town racial prejudices. Moreover, as part of the multicultural American tradition, sports proves to be the common meeting ground for two different ethnic minorities. Herber points out:

They are two individuals who work together instead of two races competing to survive within the wealthy white community.⁹⁰

Gaines, like Walker, expands the frontiers of Black brotherhood to include other races in order to successfully reinvent the community. Gil's decision to abstain from the racial ritual of lynching is inspired by his sense of justice, but also because any bad publicity would ruin his promising sports career. The individual ethos of the 80s is in prominent in his decision as Gil consciously goes against the family code of honour which necessitated the use of violence. Gil's action implicitly supports the Black cause and his decision consolidates his bond with his teammate, Carl, who is a Black man.

As the novel moves towards its denouement, Gaines makes the African American men emerge as strong individuals. Charlie, who was regarded as an ineffectual, mentally challenged man, admits his guilt by confessing to the murder of

Beau. Though he confesses his guilt he also admits that he had wanted to flee from the law but decided against it, since he felt that his confession would assure him that he was brave or man enough to own up. He keeps repeating his conviction that he *was* a man and asks the others for approval:

I'm a man...I want the world to know it. I ain't Big Charlie, nigger boy, no more, I'm a man. Y'all hear me ? A man come back. Not as nigger boy. A nigger boy run and run and run. But a man come back. I'm a man.⁹¹

Charlie's manhood had been challenged by Beau's abusive behaviour. He had endured it for more than forty years, but the moment of retaliation had occurred suddenly when Charlie couldn't take his insults any more. Charlie's act of violence, ironically, redeems his manhood. However he dies in the shootout (following his confession) with the lynch mob led by Fix's son Luke Will. But Charlie is not alone in his fight, as all of the old men rally around this new-born man.

The trial following the shootout is also characteristically different. The typically southern kind of justice is not meted out. The court is much more lenient than before, and this is perhaps another way of indicating the change in Southern sensitivity. The court lets all the Black and white offenders go free on parole. Gaines does not end up showing the Black man as victim.

Thus Gaines hints at the possibility of racial mediation in the emancipated climate of the 80s. Southern white, racist society, was surely on its way out. Like Gil and Carl, who made LSU champions, Gaines himself supports 'salt' and 'pepper' collaborations. Maria Leiter quotes Gaines' own perspective:

the only one, who live in the present are Salt and Pepper. They're the ones living in the present and they're the ones who must make this America work. We've got to block for each other and do all kinds of things to get to the goal. The football players are a symbol of how we must do this together.⁹²

By employing this football analogy, Gaines suggests the validity of multiculturalism in America. Like Celie's family celebrating 4th July as their family day, the community in this novel is unified by the star football player who appreciates the African American bonding.

The spectrum of male characters ranging from Mathu, a Christ like figure, to Charlie who is an adult but actually has a child's mind, gives us a very good perspective on African American manhood. bell hooks in her book, *The Will to Change*, blames patriarchy for inculcating the urgency to be 'a man very early in life'.⁹³ She points out instances where feminists have also endorsed patriarchy by rearing up their sons as traditional males. She finds especially repugnant the ways in which patriarchy endorses violence as admissible for boys, since they have to be men. Thus Charlie, too, comes of age when he uses violence.

Gaines' later novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*,⁹⁴ uses the same trope of a Black man trying to come of age, even after he is sentenced to death for a crime he didn't commit. In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Mathu acts as Charlie's father figure and when Charlie tries to prove his manhood, his appeal is made most fervently to Mathu. Similarly, in *A Lesson Before Dying*, it is the strong Black women who figure as the boy's guardians and bring about his graduation to manhood. Although Gaines' understanding of Southern racism is commendable, there seems to be an odd reluctance to deal with the ties of the characters as family men. The 80s were a decade of persistent problems arising due to families with single mothers and absentee

fathers. None of the male characters in Gaines' novel are explored in their capacity as husband or father. It is their loyalty to Mathu which matters the most. Thus Gaines preserves a lot of the Black Power era sensibility which placed the community over the family. However, his ideal of a community is in keeping with the Afro-American kinship patterns where the racial as well as blood brothers and sisters are committed to the survival of the people as a whole.

Walker is perhaps better able to explore the parameters of a Black community since she observes the roles a Black man and a Black woman play within the family, especially with respect to each other. Walker's treatment of masculinity and femininity is redolent of a womanist perspective. The male characters are shown as being able to acquire traits of feminist masculinity, which makes them better equipped to understand women. Gaines' old men become so involved in recounting their tales of being 'victims' that their role as men of resistance become limited. Moreover, Gaines' community is more of a male-centric brotherhood, which lacks the holistic appeal of a Black sisterhood. Audrey L. Vinson⁹⁵ comments:

Gaines's heroes are those Blacks who perceive their duty to their community and attempt to bring about change...The sense of duty is the force which is constantly evolving while linking the past with the present. They [the heroes] are all purveyors of duty in the community and their actions set in motion changes which benefit the society. This duty, transmitted at great cost, is the life-line to which Gaines's characters cling as necessity for surviving in the world with dignity.⁹⁶

Gaines goes outside the fold of family to redeem or rescue Black manhood. Sherley Anne Williams in 'Some Implications of Womanist Theory'⁹⁷ comments that for most of the twentieth century Black male writers have dug a 'hole' for themselves. It is one of 'narcissism, isolation, inarticulation and obscurity'⁹⁸ and the women writers should not fall into the trap. Although Gaines's novel might be male-centric, it

cannot be described with the above epithets. Naylor's novel *Mama Day*, coming towards the end of 80s, makes a good job of steering clear of any separatist tendencies.

Naylor's *Mama Day* : Healing in a Magical Landscape

Naylor's *Mama Day*, like Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, critically analyzes the Black community while delineating a mother-daughter relationship, or the matrilineal heritage which is intrinsic to the Black community. Surprisingly enough, the male characters in the novel are well-evolved and conform to hooks' prescription of feminist masculinity. The men in the novel are stable companions, considerate lovers and responsible parents, and yet Naylor shows the women as wielding some elemental force which blights their lives, especially that of George. Read in the light of the feminist movement, the novel tries to deal with issues of gender equality within marriage. But above all it is the Black community headed by Mama Day which influences their lives more than any socio-political movement.

From the beginning of the novel, Gloria Naylor constructs two worlds, the magical one and the mundane one. Magic, with all its Afro-American associations, is ever-present in the novel. Willow Springs is the charmed island where much of the action takes place. It is not a typical Southern community but more of a fantasy. Naylor wants the reader to respond to it in a non-rational manner, when she traces the island's history where a conjure woman first figures as the protector of the island and later on, a mythical Sapphire Wade gets the lease on the island. Naylor creates Willow Springs as a place which cannot be found on a map, and as the novel's action progresses to the present, the characters in Willow Springs seem to engage in an

existence which is nothing less than magical. Their rituals and their mores date back to the past and Mama Day is the matriarchal conjure woman who dominates the existence of the town.

In her book *Understanding Gloria Naylor*⁹⁹, Margaret Early Whitt comments on the significance of the cover illustration in understanding the meaning of the novel.

She says:

Both the first edition cloth and the succeeding paperback editions carry an artist's depiction of two Black female hands coming out of the tops of trees, reaching towards heavens, with lightning either emanating from one of the hands into the unknown at the top of the book or coming from the unknown down to the hand. Either reading of the lightning's origin still makes the hands enigmatically larger than life. These are not ordinary hands. Therefore this Mama Day must be no ordinary woman.¹⁰⁰

More importantly, Mama Day's hands bear the magic touch, and her powerful presence sustains the community in its almost pristine existence away from a corrupt, doubting world. As Alice Walker became a 'medium',¹⁰¹ a metaphorical conjure woman in order to be able to write *The Color Purple*, so Naylor's protagonist in *Mama Day* is a real conjure woman who retains her ancestry while continuing her association with the present generation.

The first section of the novel initiates the reader into understanding what Willow Springs actually was. There is a detailed genealogy of Sapphira Wade and Bascombe Wade with a deed of the island bequeathed to her. Reema's boy is introduced as a modern character who has had a college education and comes back with the ambition of placing Willow Springs on the map. Naylor specifies the quest of Reema's boy as being inspired by movements for cultural reclamation, a pervasive feature of the 80s. But the futility of scientific methods of perception and evaluation is evident when the community of Willow Springs fails to understand such sophisticated concepts as 'ethnography', 'unique speech patterns', 'cultural preservations' etc.¹⁰² The

anonymous narrator trivializes Reema's boy's quest because he describes it as 'asserting our cultural identity', 'inverting hostile social and political parameters' .¹⁰³ Naylor is thus parodying the agenda for cultural identity formation in the movements of the 80s. The narrative voice insists that Reema's boy should have learned to listen, and here the emphasis is on one's own observation of the rituals and folklores which have become integral to the community. Immersing himself in their practices and beliefs, like chewing mint leaves to alleviate pain and keeping moss inside one's shoes, would have made Reema's boy more competent as an insider and privy to all the stories that Mama Day and the old folks had to say. Thus, like Walker, Naylor insists on the importance of knowing one's ancestry and heritage. Like the quilt-making aesthetics¹⁰⁴ in Walker's novels, Naylor's *Mama Day* also strives to create an entire community based on tradition, but unlike Walker's, the picture of Naylor's traditional community arises out of a three-fold narration, of which the most omnipotent and omniscient is the voice of the anonymous narrator

Naylor juxtaposes the charmed environs of Willow Springs with the sophisticated, urbane love story of Cocoa and George, narrated by both of them in turns. Naylor pairs off this couple who are 'opposites', especially with regard to their family backgrounds and their belief in the present. Whereas Cocoa, Mama Day's grandniece brought up in Willow Springs, believes in ancestral spirits and the presence of the past in the present, George lives in the 'now' because his upbringing in an orphanage, without parents, divorced him from ties with the past or dreams about the future. Cocoa's employing stereotypical judgments on people to classify them disconcerts George. George's boyhood, spent in a shelter under the care of a strict matron, had been a lesson in understanding the value of the 'now' as the boys were relentlessly urged to 'see the potential in the present'. George, however, responds to the vibrancy of New York and tries to infuse a lot of warmth into Cocoa's estimation of the city.

Discussing Naylor's novel in his article 'Matriarchal Mythopoesis: Naylor's *Mama Day*',¹⁰⁵ David Cowart points out:

This novel's end-of-millennium setting invites readers to reflect on the end of the drama that begins in Eden with Fall and Original Sin, continues through the incarnation and the fated sacrifice, and concludes with the Apocalypse and the second coming...Naylor proposes a radically feminist revision of traditional patriarchal narrative. In *Mama Day* she implies that humanity will achieve its redemption only by restoring the proper mythic religious relations between the sexes.¹⁰⁶

Naylor employs mythical, biblical and Shakespearean motifs to create a distinctive mythology for her novel, all the time being attentive to its end of millennium setting. Thus Naylor achieves what Deborah E. McDowell has described as the ideal agenda for Black feminist literature of the future. In her essay 'New Directions for Black Feminist Critics'¹⁰⁷ McDowell concludes:

Black feminist critics ought to...consider...the way Black women writers employ literary devices in a distinct way, and to compare the way Black women writers create their own mythic structures...¹⁰⁸

Naylor's *Willow Springs* is considered to be modelled along the lines of Prospero's charmed island in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Prospero is transmuted into the modern day conjure woman Miranda (Mama) Day. David Cowart, while discussing the mythical dimension of Naylor's work, comments:

Naylor reimagines Shakespeare's magical setting as Willow Springs, an island with a past that represents a strange eddy in the larger stream of African American history. Naylor's plot, like Shakespeare's concerns a troubled family, with a history of ancient suffering that a benign sorcerer, fastening love in the younger generation, strives to reverse. In Naylor as in Shakespeare the magician demands the labour, a kind of courtly service, of the heroine's suitor. Ferdinand is presently released from servitude; George labours and dies.¹⁰⁹

Unlike Prospero's island, Willow Springs, though a self contained community, has a colourful communal life. There is a barbershop where the men

congregate, there is a beauty salon run by Reema, there is a grocery store, a town gossip and characters like Dr. Buzzard, Bernice and her husband Ambush. The community rituals, especially the 'Standing Forth' and the 'Candle Walk', are reported recurrently to reinforce the rhythm of daily existence to which Willow Springs concurs. The Candle Walk is described as a ritual where the folks stop whatever they were doing to participate in this celebration of their ancestral conjure woman—Sapphira Wade—a parallel of the Jungian stereotype of 'The Great Mother' according to Cowart¹¹⁰. These folk rituals allow the reader to realize the persistence of magic in Willow Springs.

Naylor takes pains to emphasize the timelessness of life in Willow Springs, when Mama Day insists on time standing still in the island, yet the George-Cocoa relationship blossoms in the 1980s—a time when they get married—and continues through five years to their fateful August vacation to Willow Springs sometime around 1985. George and Cocoa's relationship is observed in an urban setting. Unlike most male characters in African American literature, George has an engineering degree, works for a major engineering firm in New York and has no history of criminal records. The perspective is one of the 80s, and therefore Cocoa is also an independent woman who has her own apartment in the city. However, after they get married, the question of equality within a marriage is raised through a number of situations, some of them rather humorous. In this regard, Naylor's delineation of George's character seems to follow bell hook's prescription for 'feminist masculinity'. As elaborated in her books *Communion* and *The Will To Change*, bell hooks had devised this term by way of demanding a radical revision of existing patriarchal masculinity. In *The Will To Change* she writes:

Feminist masculinity offers men a way to reconnect with selfhood, uncovering the essential goodness of maleness and allowing everyone, male and female, to find glory in loving manhood.¹¹¹

In *Communion* she writes about the impact of feminist movements on man-woman relationships

Had feminist movement not created the social conditions for women to rethink the meaning of love, none of us would have been able to forge the new and different bonds with men we were forging.....The politics of heterosexual love and romance were forever changed. Women had been given a vision of mutuality of relationships in which we would no longer be forced to be the sole nurturers and caregivers.....We were searching for a love that could embrace the newly invented free women we had become.¹¹²

George, with his kind and caring ways, seems to be the answer to the 80s woman's desire for a partner who could love and support a woman's quest for self-actualization. Naylor is perceptive enough to map the difficulties involved in achieving such a harmony of wills. George, in his first person posthumous narration, also recounts his own adjustment—how difficult it was to share control and sometimes give up control; George good humoredly alludes the first days of their marriage when he used to feel baffled at Cocoa's sudden change of temper and her nagging habit of mentioning credit card bills. However, his love for Cocoa is as evident as his willingness to be loved. He comments, as if in retrospect :

The trick was to make you laugh, or to get you angry enough to leave me in peace but still avoid any arguments at breakfast. Living with a female : a day-to-day balancing act, and I really enjoyed the challenge. Because the times I got it right, you being different made all the difference in the world.¹¹³

There are moments when he wonders about his hasty decision to marry her but it is soon resolved when he realizes, in the course of an argument, that Cocoa could call him a 'nigger' and would not feel the need to explain. Cocoa in turn acknowledges that George would have made a good father but loves him all the more

because he accepts her decision of not having children till she gets her graduation degree. Naylor emphasizes George's craving for affection as arising due to his lonely foster-home childhood. George, on his visit to Willow Springs, responds to Mama Day and Abigail as if they were surrogate mothers. George recounts:

Their laughter had been waiting for me, and as it circled around us, I could finally tell that they were sisters....Miss Abigail put her hands up on each side of my face—Well, bless your heart, child—and a lump formed in my throat at their gentle pressure. Up until that moment, no woman had even called me her child. Did they see it in my eyes? The intense envy for all that you had and the gratitude for their being willing to let me belong?¹¹⁴

George emerges as a man who also feels the need to form a community and does not feel threatened by the power of Mama Day. George's death, following a heart attack in Willow Springs, can be interpreted in a number of ways.

David Cowart's mythical interpretation sees George's death as the demise of a solar hero of the Greek tradition. Solar heroes like Apollo, Dionysus and Christ enjoy the favours of the goddess for a year or so before having to be ritually sacrificed. Cowart, therefore concludes that George's death is inevitable in order to restore the female principle once again.¹¹⁵ He comments about George's death:

George Andrews strives blindly to connect with a woman who is the heir-designate of all the mysteries represented by this island of matriarchal powers. This woman, Cocoa, is herself tragically blind to the precise dynamic that comes between herself and her husband, who, as engineer and Republican, is a man wholly committed to the Logos, impervious to the matrifocal wisdom of the island and its current matriarch...Mama Day does not despise George. Rather, she recognizes his strength and seeks to convert it to her ends. That is, she asks him in the name of his love for Cocoa, to suspend his skepticism and serve her. Thus the ancient conjure woman sends George on a strange mission to find and bring to her whatever might be behind a certain baleful denizen of her henhouse....But in fact George has perished in the attempt to carry out his instructions, and Naylor seems to imply that his sacrifice is instrumental in Cocoa's recovery, that his act of faith is enough to tip the balance. He has become the half-conscious instrument of Mamma Day's healing. She has managed to

defeat the malevolence brought to bear on Cocoa, not to mention briefly to circumvent a rationalistic hegemony some thousands of years old. She becomes the conduit whereby some power of maternal, cosmic healing comes into play.¹¹⁶

Thus the action of the novel seems designed to consolidate Mama Day's power as a conjure woman. George's death seems unfair, considering the sense of belonging which he finally experiences on the island. Perhaps Naylor's mythical vision takes away some of the womanist credentials of the work. George is projected as a man who can be a capable husband and might have been an affectionate father. Instead he has to sacrifice his life as a test to consolidate the power of Miranda Day's magic. George's masculinity is victimized in the fiercely matriarchal domain of Mama Day. To cleanse Willow Springs from Ruby's malevolence George has to die. George, with his loving nature and his strong will, would have been able to contribute to the community of Willow Springs. However, he remains an outsider, who hails from 'beyond the bridge'¹¹⁷ (the bridge that separates Willow Springs from the rest of the world) and is excluded from the community. But Naylor tries to make amends by giving George a ceremonial headstone in the cemetery at Willow Springs, where, like the ancestors of the place, he remains a presence in their lives forever. The conclusion recounts Cocoa's annual visit to the graveyard and, as the reader realizes in retrospect that George's narration is coming from beyond the grave, we appreciate that Naylor transmutes him into a part of the past which is ever present in Cocoa's life. George's memory remains a life-affirming source for her.

George's death at the end of the novel has also been explained as the fate of a 'castaway' in Daphne Lamothe's article 'Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* : Bridging Roots and Routes'.¹¹⁸ According to Lamothe, George's characterization is achieved in such a manner that he feels rootless in spite of having a successful life as

a Manhattan professional. It may be Naylor's way of showing the inadequacies of the post-modern identity which subsumes ethnic cultures into a monolithic, work-ethnic based identity. Lamothe remarks:

...her depiction of the urbanized George is, if not pathological, then certainly problematic because his thorough inability to claim or own a cultural identity makes him the only character in the novel unable to carry any trace of identifiably African American culture with him as he travels. It is his lack of personal history that makes George's only recourse to collective identity the essentialist discourse of race as biologically determined.¹¹⁹

Lamothe further stresses that the Southern community of Willow Springs gives a sense of home to a 'castaway' like George. She observes the tradition of using 'castaways' as stereotypes to facilitate cultural retrieval. Lamothe comments:

Black women writers have consistently recognized the castaway's power as an image of acculturation; thus the castaway both literally and figuratively appears with persistence in their fiction—from Avery in Paule Marshall's *Praise Song for the Widow* to Son and Jadine in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* to George in *Mama Day*. It is no coincidence that with the exception of Son, these literary castaways are also upwardly mobile, cosmopolitan, and therefore "rootless" individuals. The implication of their sojourns in "folk" places is that they must reclaim their lost cultural identities, but all of these texts imagine the possibility of at once setting down roots and delighting in movement, change and difference.¹²⁰

Lamothe seems to iterate Stepto's formulation of immersion narratives (cited in chapters 1 and 2) and Toni Morrison's conception of 'free men', but the 'castaway' i.e. George in this case, does not return to his Southern roots with sufficient folk wisdom.

The final wisdom of Cocoa's narration where she consoles herself that 'there are just too many sides to the whole story'¹²¹, seems to be aimed at the inability to find the whole truth and the ability to accept destiny. However, Cocoa's resilient spirit survives George's death. She marries a second time and has a family. She calls her second born George, after the late George. The young George, when enquiring about

his namesake, is told that he resembled a man who looked like love. Thus George through his ultimate sacrifice personifies and epitomizes love. If we recall bell hooks' agenda as explained in *Communion: The Female Search for Love*, it seems that Cocoa's search for love brought her to a man like George; and because he was the way he was, after his death, the quest for her self-actualization goes on. She can achieve communion with others even after she has lost him. In other words, his memory does not limit her interaction with Willow Springs or terminate a second chance at happiness with her family.

Mama Day visits George's grave, assuring him that Cocoa will return and we know that she does so every year around August, in spite of having a husband and family. Mama Day says to George:

One day she'll hear you, like you're hearing me. And there'll be another time....when she'll learn about the beginning of the Days. But she's gotta go away to come back to that kind of knowledge. And I came to tell you not to worry; whatever roads take her from here, they'll always lead her back to you.¹²²

Mama Day's observation perhaps suggests that Cocoa is yet to be inducted spiritually into their magical community. Her urban upbringing has partially impeded her understanding of the healing legacy of Mama Day. However, her holding out hope for Cocoa's return to Willow Springs is indicative of the power of this magical sisterhood. The last time we see Cocoa, she does come back to Willow Springs and visits George's grave to talk about her new life, as a wife and mother. But there is a doubt as to whether she returns as an articulate survivor, since she does not establish any 'communion' with the other characters populating Willow Springs. Cowart has noted:

Naylor's real energies here seem focused on an issue that transcends race—a simple question about the complexity and difficulty of love. Thus the author finds her subject and theme in the difficulties that men and women struggle with in attempting to achieve true marriage.¹²³

The 'partnership model' used by bell hooks to describe an ideal marriage (cited in chapter 2 with regard to the McTeers in *The Bluest Eye*) seems to have been realized in *Mama Day*. Ambush and Bernice appear to have a perfect marriage but the untimely death of their son Little Caesar flaws their marriage. Ruby cannot make a successful marriage with Junior Lee because of his voyeuristic ways. Cocoa and George have a stable marriage, but he has to die in order to save her. Naylor seems to suggest that the community is built up of all these people who have had tragic histories, but one must return to the community and its support system to transcend personal grief. This belief is later developed more fully into the central idea of Naylor's 1992 novel *Bailey's Café* (discussed in Chapter 4).

As Daphne Lamothe has stressed, Gloria Naylor's work represents an attempt to project 'the community as a home, resistant to the destruction of memory'.¹²⁴ She concludes her article definitively, by remarking:

Ultimately, the real achievement for all characters whether "rooted" in the southern home space, or routed in the Northern metropole is the *construction of community through story telling* [italics mine]. Naylor expands our understanding of cultural memory by making routing/mobility a way to make memory live,... In an examination of story telling's function in the novel, Paula Gallant Eckard underscores the urban melancholy that makes the need for connection to tradition acute. She writes, "Given the social and familial fragmentation in contemporary American society, there is often no grand sense of family as a place to provide identity, stability or belonging for succeeding generations (p.134)" Routing or mobility, certainly in the post Civil Right era, offers the possibility of an agency that enables women and men to reinscribe and actively to recreate their culture.¹²⁵

Wideman's *Sent for You Yesterday* : Need for Healing in Urban Communities

John Edgar Wideman's *Sent For You Yesterday* (1983) also tries to map this 'urban melancholy' and the related attempt to salvage a sense of community, particularly in the context of the urban renewal programmes of the 80s, which demolished many a Black neighbourhood. Homewood, a Black neighbourhood, is the setting for the novel. Wideman employs a variety of European literary devices as well as Afro-centric ethnic tropes to realize the concept of Homewood as an other space. Just as Naylor uses a variety of oral forms—myth, legend, tale and song in *Mama Day*—Wideman uses a vernacular voice, street smarts, daydreams, reverie and temporal shifts, jazz music as well as African mythology to imagine Homewood. Wideman's characters and settings have been described as 'Prufrockian'¹²⁶ by Bernard Bell, since Wideman seems to imagine the entire community through a multivocal narrative voice. As Lamothe pointed out about the mobility of Naylor's characters Wideman's characters are also chronically restless, perhaps in their quest for 'agency'. This agency to recreate their culture might just be living in Homewood. Keith Beyerman¹²⁷ further clarifies that Wideman's fiction has certain qualities, such as Wasteland and apocalypse imagery, narrative experimentation, the unreliability of memory and the thematics of relationship between artist-intellectual and community. He therefore describes this genre as 'vernacular modernism', since Wideman also makes extensive use of his vernacular-folk roots.

Wideman's method, in fact, added a new dimension to the 'New Black Aesthetic'¹²⁸ (to be discussed in the next chapter) as in spite of his almost post-modernist, open-ended narratives, Wideman's work is firmly grounded in his vernacular tradition, especially with its agenda of facilitating the survival of the community. As Byerman notes:

What the vernacular culture does is create a "blues" environment; that is, it enables the characters to see the world for what it is, but to believe that the resources of family, history, cultural expression can enable survival. It does not guarantee survival...what becomes clear is the shared humanity of the characters. One hope in those works is the Black artist-intellectual, who has a prominent role in "gathering up" stories. He is the one who listens to the narratives and uses them to reassure others that survival is possible.¹²⁹

The multivocal narrative, like that of Ernest Gaines in *A Gathering of Old Men*, functions therefore to grant some sort of immortality to Homewood. Benard Bell describes *Sent For You Yesterday* as 'the long, sad song of Homewood and the contemporary inheritors of its blues legacy.'¹³⁰

In an interview with Jessica Lustig¹³¹ Wideman underlines his method of creating Homewood as a fictional space. Although he admits that Homewood is an actual neighbourhood in Pittsburgh, he has imagined and recreated it through its people. He disagrees with the notion of a neighbourhood as a purely sociological urban construct. 'Gathering stories', as Lamothe had pointed out, progresses in Wideman's fiction through the way he sees the people in the neighbourhoods. He tells Lustig:

...I talk about how the old people *made*, created the town. ...They created it through their sense of values and the way they treated one another, and the way they treated the place that's *crucial* to the strength of Homewood, and its something very basic about African American culture. Africans couldn't bring African buildings, ecology, languages wholesale, in the material sense to the New world. But they brought the invisible dimensions of their society, of our culture to that land. That's what you have to recognize ...So it's not anything that people in Homewood invented. To make something from nothing is almost a tradition.¹³²

Thus stories like Wideman's Homewood trilogy perform a twofold function. They not only sustain African American culture but also help to revolutionize the interpersonal domain of power¹³³ by inventing narratives where the Blacks create 'something out of nothing'.

The landscape of Homewood as depicted in the final part of this trilogy, *Sent For You Yesterday*, consists of the family of the Wilkes's and Tates. Albert Wilkes, Brother Tate, Carl, Lucy Tate, Samantha, Junebug appear in the novel almost like cinematic vignettes as Doot, Carl's nephew, half conjures and half recalls their lives. As Bell points out, Wideman, almost like Sterne in *Tristram, Shandy* makes Doot imagine Homewood even before he was born.¹³⁴ However, as he matures into an artist intellectual with his legacy of music, Doot becomes the rightful heir to the Homewood pioneers who were incidentally his ancestors.

Carl French's nephew Doot first recalls his memory of Brother, an albino Black who was taken in by the Tates but was found dead one morning near the train tracks. The novel begins with the narrator's recollection:

Brother Tate stopped talking five years after I was born. When he died I was twenty-one and thought myself too grown for the name he had given me in my grandmother's kitchen.¹³⁵

Brother becomes the bereaved father as Carl recollects the time of his love child Junebug's death and Brother's descent into silence. As Doot clarifies:

His strange color and silence were part of Homewood, like the names of the streets and the night trains and hills...Brother's silence can be thought of as a kind of mourning for his lost son...Brother treated me special because he could see Junebug in me. In Brother's eyes I grew up living not only my own life but the one snatched from Junebug ...So I'm linked to Brother Tate by stories by his memories of a dead son, by my own memories of a silent scat-singing albino man who was my uncle's best friend.¹³⁶

Already Homewood begins to assume the kind of literary cartography that Wideman wants to confer upon it. Brother's presence, his silence, his music—all define Homewood, as also his friendship with the narrator's uncle. Carl is the typical adolescent kid at the beginning of Doot's narration, unhappy because he can see that

parents are unhappy with their marriage. Albert Wilkes is the man who returns to Homewood to further deteriorate his fragile family.

Freeda French, Carl's mother and Doot's grandmother, is the suffering Black woman who is tired with her life but holds on to 'God' and 'family'. She is a caring mother to Carl and treats Brother like her own son. Her husband John French is described as a dangerous man, not a bad one. The latter trait indicated the likelihood of deserting the family. Wideman's stream of consciousness technique includes all these characters and once again returns to the crucial event of the 'Return of Albert Wilkes',¹³⁷ the title of the first section of the novel. Wilkes, the talented jazz musician, is absconding from law after killing a white man, but he returns to Homewood to die.

Albert Wilkes is characterized along the lines of Morrison's 'free man'.¹³⁸ He is a lot like Cholly Breedlove in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Also, Wideman may have sketched him in the image of a drifter. But Wilkes' character is not depicted vis-à-vis the roles of a father or husband. He is just a homesick man who comes back to Homewood, perhaps looking for love. Doot describes the moment of his entry into Homewood:

...He carried no bags. Passengers helloing and good-byeing, the rumble of baggage carts trundling over the cobblestones, the shouts of trainmen and porters were magnified in the cavernous station and trapped under the metal canopy arching over his head...Nobody had asked any questions as he walked across the city...Now he was no closer to knowing the answer to the questions nobody asked than he was seven years before when he glanced over his shoulder one more time at Homewood.¹³⁹

Albert Wilkes confesses to John French that he had first been there to see the white woman whom he had loved seven years ago. As the two men start talking they share a moment of brotherly bonding. John tells him about his marriage and kids;

Wilkes teases him about his old flames and remembers an episode where he saved French's life. John French gives a few useful tips to Wilkes to evade suspicion and returns home. He tries to console his wife by explaining his absence, but they are unable to communicate. In one of those fleeting pictures of poignant emotion, so typical of Wideman's method, French shows his vulnerability, and yet it is only momentary:

What could he say about the long day he'd been away. She'd needed him and he hadn't been there. What could he tell her that would make up for the hours of worrying, the weariness....He remembered the night both of them never went to bed. Remembered Lizabeth's fever and terrible hacking cough, his helplessness and fear as his daughter sat on the side of her bed...Nothing he could say, nothing he could do would change what was hurting her...He had been with Albert or waiting for Albert all day. And now there wasn't anything he could say to Freeda, no way to give back the day he'd taken.¹⁴⁰

French's helplessness represents the dilemma of the Black man who wants to be a family man and yet inevitably fails his family. His good intentions are not enough, and sometimes his brotherhood and brotherlove come in the way of his family responsibilities. Wideman honestly presents the conflicts of Black manhood, whereby the kinship networks which reinforce a Black man's sense of self ironically estrange him from his family. Wideman has dwelt upon this theme at length in his non-fictional work *Fatheralong*¹⁴¹ (to be discussed in the conclusion).

Albert Wilkes is shot down by unknown assailants while he is playing the piano at the Tates' home. Lucy Tate and Brother Tate, along with Carl French, form their own triad in the second section of the novel 'The Courting of Lucy Tate'.¹⁴² Carl French becomes Lucy Tate's lover but their affair is intermittent, because Carl leaves for the war and Lucy is too wayward to settle down. Their moments together are precious and their love, like everything else in *Homewood*, is promising but does not

attain fruition. Doot in the second section of the novel is a child, but remembers Lucy Tate and Uncle Carl teaching him to dance. Doot recalls the war years and, as in much of the novel, this time is also recollected through music and the community of Homewood. A vignette of the Tate and French families enjoying a musical interlude surface as Uncle Carl, back from war, recalls his nephew's first dance lesson:

Daddy in his big chair with his big feet stretched out to the fireplace. Couldn't get out the room without tripping over his feet...Brother scattin with the music like he always did. Everybody feeling good. Good Music. Good times. Homewood was jumping lots of war work, so people had a little change in they pockets. Homewood different then. Hadn't turned ugly the way it is now. I mean now you take your life in your hands just walking down the street after dark. It was different in those days. No dope. No hoodlums prowling round looking for a throat to cut...we were tight in those days. He and Brother and Lucy. Called us the three musketeers. Homewood was something then.¹⁴³

But reminiscences of such moments of communion are interspersed with tragic memories, especially when the story is about Brother's self-imposed silence. Because of his lack of colour Brother is an outsider in his community. He has a relationship with Samantha, a mentally unstable woman who had vowed to fight racism by mothering as many Black children as possible, without bothering about their paternity. She wishes to have Brother's child because the white in his Black lineage attracts her. When she has Junebug, she feels happy that she has fulfilled her plan, but her own Black children turn back on the boy and make him an outsider just like Brother. She believed she was building a Noah's ark but hadn't foreseen this kind of obstruction. Samantha sees her plan going awry and starts distancing herself from Junebug. Finally, one fateful day, at the family barbecue, Junebug is burnt alive and the other children don't bother to reach out to him. This incident forever silences Brother, and Samantha grows old in an asylum hearing Junebug's humming voice and

waiting for Brother, long after he is dead. Lucy, Brother and Carl's lives are inextricably bound, and Carl cannot recollect his love story without recounting Brother's tragedy. As the second section ends, Carl recounts how Brother helped to cure him and Lucy of their addiction, but, he was no more. As if to complete the triad, now Doot had taken his place.

The third section entitled 'Brother' is made up of a string of episodes in Brother's life, ending with his death. The time span covered in this story is roughly from the 40s to the 60s. Finally the story reverts to the present, where Lucy Tate now an old woman, Brother and Doot congregate at the Tates. Lucy, however, deliberately reminisces about the good times and, like a motif, the good times appear, punctuated with memories of music. Music it is that holds the community and neighbourhood together. Lucy recollects John French's obsession with blues music, Albert Wilkes playing the piano and their happy time dancing around the vitrola. The final moments in the Tate house bring the past together with the present and Doot becomes a part of the Homewood legacy, responding to the music. As Lucy Tate observes about the panorama of characters inhabiting Homewood:

They made Homewood. Walking around, doing the things they had to do. Homewood want tricks and boards. Homewood was them singing and loving and getting where they needed to get. They made these streets. That's why Homewood was real once. Cause they were real. And we gave it all up. Us middle people. You and me, Carl...and now its gone-just sad songs left. And whimpering. Nothing left to give ones we supposed to be saving Homewood for nothing but empty hands and sad stories.¹⁴⁴

But Lucy's wistfulness is transcended as Doot begins to responds to the Smokey Robinson song, thereby responding to the ghosts of his past. Lucy turns on the FM to Black music and Doot describes the moment:

The off speed of Smokey Robinson on “Tracks of my Tears”. Brother Tate appears in the doorway. His grinning his colorless grin and pointing at the piano and Albert Wilkes starts unsnapping the duster and aiming his behind for the piano bench. I know how good it's going to sound so I start loosening up, getting ready. I'm on my feeling and Lucy say, *Goboy* and Carl says, *Get it on, Doot*. Everybody joining in now. All the voices. I'm reaching for them and letting them go. Lucy waves. I'm on my own feet. Learning to stand to walk, learning to dance.¹⁴⁵

Doot comes of age in this final section, responding to and embracing the ghosts of Homewood. According to Bernard Bell, Wideman's agenda is to 'explore the interior landscapes of his characters and the conflict between their ascribed and achieved identities as Black men.'¹⁴⁶ Brother, Albert Wilkes, John French, Carl and Doot are men who are defined by the community they live in.

Wideman's storytelling humanizes Homewood as an urban community where the quest for survival goes on. The male characters live out their lives, come of age and die in Homewood. Homewood, therefore becomes a trope which inspires survival and is also a witness to tragedies like that of Brother. In his interview with Lustig, Wideman makes this point repeatedly:

The neighbourhood is an artistic contrivance for capturing all kinds of experience...The play of environment versus character, versus the individual is pretty meaningless when translated into statistical term that you use for gas molecules...I want to examine the interplay of environment and character at the level at which its meaningful, and that is the individual life. What part does biology play, what part does nature as opposed to nurture play? You can only answer that, and even then in a very tentative way by looking at the individual life.¹⁴⁷

Wideman's emphasis on the survival of the neighbourhoods, of individuals, does reflect that Black men's writing in the 80s had transcended Wright's bitter portrayal of Black lives and was now able to convey something more positive. A part of the 80s world view was its emphasis on the survival of the individual, but Wideman's exploration foregrounds the neighbourhood of Homewood as a community striving to

survive and observes the evolution of relationships, familial and otherwise, within it. The music acts as a trope to reinforce the fact that individual stories merely serve to exemplify the community's spirit of resilience.

Bernard Bell, in his study on the Contemporary African American Novel has this to say about Black literature of the 80s:

The paradigmatic shift in the representation and interpretation of culture in the 1980s and 1990s vigorously promoted the transgression of racial, class, gender and genre boundaries, as well as the antiessentialist social construction of identities...this shift in models of literary theory and critical practice also encouraged the discursive, indeterminate, open-ended reconstruction and representation of identity formations in several African American novels and romance.¹⁴⁸

Bell, while discussing the African American tropes of 'identity formation' during the 80s, stresses on the need to understand the African American as a biracial being (much like the Duboisian theory of the double consciousness of Negroes).¹⁴⁹ Their sub-saharan descent has always figured in their American identities. The Middle Passage and Slavery act as 'liminal sites'¹⁵⁰ of identity formation. Such 'liminal sites' with memories of movements for self-determination combined, in the Civil Rights era, with their response to fundamental American myths such as the purity and supremacy of whites, the cultural assimilationist ideal of the Melting Pot, the egalitarian American Dream, and the petit bourgeois Horatio Alger story to create a complex sense of identity.¹⁵¹ The decade of the 80s was also a period when contemporary Black aesthetic responded to 'Afrocentric' traditions. Afrocentric ideology was designed to challenge the dominance of Eurocentric values and it resisted the assimilationist agenda of America as a 'Melting Pot'. The 80s were also the decade of feminist movements and the dominance of Black women writers in the publishing industry. All these factors need to be taken into account while comparing the novels of this period.

Conclusion:

It is but natural that the concept of the African American family, and by extension community, should have changed dramatically from the 70s, to accommodate all the complex questions regarding the importance of Black cultural history on the one hand and the assimilation of Black culture to the mainstream on the other. Alice Walker's womanism was presented as a concept which would be able to heal as well as address the issues of self-determination, especially with regard to Black women. Celie's 'bildungsroman' in *The Color Purple* is not only a womanist attempt to relate a single woman's physical and mental suffering and subsequent transformation to that of the general lot of Black women; its emphasis on Black man-woman relations as the key to establishing a holistic community was also pioneering in its effect. Alice Walker, as the poems in the epigraph to this chapter indicate, was not only aware of the need for the individual Black woman's emancipation—physical, psychological and sexual—but also the need to relate this struggle to one's maternal heritage.

Celie attains an almost perfect American Dream, but her family and friends aid her transformation. Thus, from fearing God because of her idea of Him as the supreme man, she turns to thanking 'God' who has created 'the Color Purple' and is the reason for the daily miracles. Celie's July 4th ritual of family reunion is an affirmation of this faith. Celie's extended family at the end of the novel includes her children brought up by African missionaries, her sister who has figured as their surrogate mother, her ex-husband Mr. Albert who is now her friend and companion, his mistress Shug, who was Celie's earlier lover, and Mister Albert's son and his family. Although Walker does not say as much, this is her idea of assimilation and moving towards the 90s; the fluid structure of the Afro-American family anticipates

the actual ground reality of the family in America in the new millennium. Walker's willingness to embrace every kind of life form, evident in her later poetry and work of the 90s, is what Celie does earlier in the 80s. Celie's sublimation from a suffering Black woman to an independent one happens because she is able to connect with others. This is also prophetic, since Walker has named her latest fictional offering—*Now is the Time To Open Your Heart*,¹⁵² and remarks in an interview that she would love to give this advice to George Bush in the new millennium.

Ernest Gaines' *A Gathering of Old Men* redefines the concept of brotherhood in the changing times. Mathu is the oldest retainer in the plantation, and the killing of one of the owners makes him a likely suspect, since he happens to be one of the most aggressive and resistant Black men in the community. Although Candy, the white daughter of the deceased owner tries to stand by Mathu, Gaines seems to suggest that her heroism is unnecessary. The Black male characters in this novel have been purposefully designed to interrogate and possibly to answer the disparaging questions about the 'Black male' as a valuable member of the community, which were once again being raised during the 80s. Although the men individually are rather unremarkable, collectively they represent a challenge to the Southern traditions of lynching and Black oppression. The women characters do make an entry in the novel, but only as if to reinforce the idea that even Black men can be solid providers for their families. The 'new masculinity' of this group is proved when all of them stand up for Charlie as he confesses to having killed Beau. And their retaliation is a violent one.

Gaines' perspective on masculinity and his prioritizing brotherhood amongst Black men anticipate such movements for masculinity as the Million Man March¹⁵³ of the 90s. However, true to the fluid definitions which were characterizing the concept

of community in every culture, Gaines talks about salt and pepper camaraderie in sports as the hope for the future. As the Black men respond to the challenge of proving their mettle, Gaines retains enough perspective to suggest that the American melting pot, as evident in the sports field, might be a good enough alternative to violent protest. Charlie's act of violence is committed because Beau challenges his manhood, and after fifty years of being the community imbecile he feels that he has to respond to the taunt by killing Beau. After his initial action of fleeing the scene of crime he comes back to admit his part in the crime. Here again, Gaines seems to be bent on doing away with the stereotype of the Black man as a deserter. The near absence of women characters does give the work a certain separatist bent, but in his later works too, Gaines seems absorbed in the problem of establishing the validity of Black manhood in multicultural America.

When we move on to consider Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and John Edgar Wideman's *Sent for You Yesterday* as representative texts of the decade, we find that many of the characters in these novels have solid middle class backgrounds. Bernard Bell remarks in his discussion on Naylor that her use of the 'racial' and 'ethnic' tropes of the ancestors and elders is a shift away from the masculinist to the feminist. Willow Springs is a magical gullah island and *Mama Day* is the absolute conjure woman, almost in the mould of Shakespeare's Prospero. The *George and Cocoa* text, running parallel to the text narrated by the anonymous narrator, is helpful in rooting the story in an urban, 80s setting. George and Cocoa respond in different ways to the island of Willow Springs. George is overwhelmed by its beauty but he does not have the power to overcome the web of Black magic, and therefore dies. For Cocoa, the island is her legacy and at the end of the novel her return to it every August signifies that she has inherited it.

Unlike *The Color Purple*, *Mama Day* doesn't explore the question of sexual freedom at length, but the question of equal rights within a marriage is considered rather seriously. Birth control, education, career vs. family—all the twentieth century issues which make and unmake a family are highlighted. However, Willow Springs and *Mama Day* are much more significant issues. *Mama Day's* conjuring abilities and her will to survive and see her grandchildren are rewarded in the end. *Mama Day's* resilience is perhaps Naylor's way of acknowledging that the maternal-ancestral presence will always be there, even for African American children born in the twentieth century. At the end of the novel *Cocoa*, who is now a mother herself, returns to Willow Springs for the annual Candlewalk. As she sits by George's grave, *Mama Day* feels at peace since she knows that the Wade legacy has now been inherited by *Cocoa*. She wills her own death in the year 2000, as she is just curious to take a peak at the new millennium. It is also significant that *Mama Day*, who is a surrogate mother to the entire community, always acknowledges George as the best possible man for *Cocoa*. George's character is conceived along the lines of a new type of Black man who isn't a sexual predator or abuser, but a man who loves his woman. George is defined by his love for *Cocoa* and he dies to affirm his love. This type of Black man, or more specifically, a man who doesn't conform to the codes of patriarchal masculinity, is a refreshing departure from others. Perhaps this character is Naylor's implied statement that Black men can evolve to be a part of the community. Also George's character seems to fully realise bell hooks' opinion that the epitome of feminist masculinity i.e. the new post patriarchal man, should be able to express emotions without appearing to be a wimp.¹⁵⁴

Wideman's *Sent for You Yesterday* creates Homewood, an urban ghetto, as an artistic construct and here also the ancestors persist in the collective imagination.

Wideman, like Naylor, creates a new type of mythology where Homewood is the most important character in the novel. Homewood is not the ideal Black community, but it is one of those which preserve the blues tradition, an integral part of the Afro-American existence. Naylor's novel, especially in its conclusion, suggests the possibility of the persistence of folk culture even in the urban civilization of self-seekers, and George's conversion to the ways of Willow Springs is proof of its elemental power. In Wideman's Homewood, because he creates it as it is, the folk or the ancestral trope, whatever we name it, blends with the late 70s and early 80s ghetto existence. In fact Wideman seems to suggest that music, one of the Black folk assets, might be the only way to redeem an emotionally derelict community which has to come to terms with most of the twentieth century evils. Wideman does not dwell at length on any relationship, biological or otherwise, since he is more interested in reproducing the pulse of the community as the lives of its members intersect. However, the closest approximation to a hero which we have in this novel is Brother Tate. Like Naylor's George, he is an unlikely Black man. In fact he is an albino, who is claimed by the Tate family as their own. He tries to successfully play the role of lover and father but fails tragically. But in his capacity as 'Brother' he looks out for Carl and Lucy and helps them to get over their addiction to drugs. He is also a surrogate father to the narrator Doot and helps to define Homewood forever. Thus, here too, there is a positive male character and although he remains a silent presence for most of the novel, he defines once again the Black community's search for love.

As the thesis moves into the discussion of the 90s novels, I find that the transition from the 80s to the 90s is towards trying to achieve a more fluid sense of community and attempting to stretch its boundaries. Willow Springs and Homewood both have a certain magical quality about them. Willow Springs is an imaginary space

which one cannot find in any map. It does aid in healing and survival but it also instrumental in the death of George, a rational character who does not believe in magic. Homewood, as the narrator characterizes it, is like any other urban ghetto, but the stories of the survivors serve to characterize it as a *safe space*.¹⁵⁵ This is Wideman's attempt to construct a cultural context which can be a positive influence on the survival of Black people. Homewood nurtures music, memories of first love, memories of intimate family moments which create meaning out of urban melancholy. The 80s were also the time when the individual started getting equal attention with familial, communal or racial group identity. In the novels of the 80s we do not find any exemplary mother figure or father figure but men and women with maternal and paternal qualities, who are looking for love. Searching for partners, they are nonetheless engaged in self-actualization, corroborating bell hooks' idea that trying to define oneself is the first step towards finding love and desiring communion. The ending of Maya Angelou's 1981 biography *The Heart of a Woman*¹⁵⁶ perhaps best sums up the spirit of the times. The novel ends with the incident of her son leaving home to set up his own establishment. Angelou describes her emotions as a mother and finds that she is evaluating the moment as an individual, which surprises her pleasantly. This is how she describes it:

I closed the door and held my breath. Waiting for the wave of emotion to surge over me, knock me down, take my breath away. Nothing happened. I didn't feel bereft or desolate. I didn't feel lonely or abandoned. I sat still waiting. The first thought that came to me, perfectly formed and promising was "At least, I'll be able to eat the whole breast of a roast chicken by myself".¹⁵⁷

NOTES

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