

CHAPTER - 4

THE 1990S AND THE MILLENNIUM : THE NEW BLACK AESTHETIC AS OBSERVED IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S *BAILEY'S CAFÉ*, E.LYNN HARRIS' *JUST AS I AM* AND TERRY MCMILLAN'S *A DAY LATE AND A DOLLAR SHORT*'

Lift up your eyes upon
This day breaking before you
give birth again
To the dream.¹

—Maya Angelou.

We are in the midst of a second Middle Passage. To understand the scale of dislocation, violence, loss of life afflicting Black communities in America today, one needs a parallel as stark and comprehensive as the Middle Passage. Separated from traditional cultures, deprived of the love, nurturing, sense of value and identity these cultures provided, enslaved Africans in the New World found it necessary to reinvent themselves, if they were to survive as whole human beings in an alien, hostile, chaotically violent and threatening environment. Those are the precise conditions, the awesome tasks confronting young African Americans again.²

—John Edgar Wideman

The two quotations cited in the epigraph reflect the two contrary moods of the 90s. Angelou's poem speaks in an assuring voice of renewing the dream, since it was the decade in which the Democrats came to power and President Clinton got nearly 82% of the Black vote.³ Delivered on the occasion of Clinton's inaugural day celebrations, it reflects the hope of the African Americans who had voted for him as he had addressed the racial issue traditionally ignored by the conservative Republicans. On the other hand Wideman, addresses the especially difficult position of Blacks of the current generation who have to negotiate their identity and mixed racial heritage, as well as their marginalized position in America.

In the 90s, owing to the predominantly post-modern climate, it was no wonder that questions about Black identity would be hybridized. When Wideman speaks about the younger generation of Black Americans reinventing themselves, he is calling for a new and more contemporary understanding of the African American identity. The urban educated Blacks now have their own set of problems, which is no less daunting than the experience of the first Middle Passage. Bernard Bell, who has discussed the traditional ethnic tropes of identity formation in his work, *The Contemporary African American Novel*⁴, observed that the 90s evolved a 'New Black Aesthetic' (henceforth to referred to as NBA) which is very much in keeping with the shifting, postmodern parameters of current literary theory. He defines this aesthetic as capable of accommodating the:

Shifting cyclical pattern of residual, emerging and dominant aesthetic movements of literature... [it] stresses, racial, class, gender and sexually transgressive hybridity and multiculturalism ...The most recent movement for an NBA began in the late 1980s with a new generation that novelist Trey Ellis calls "cultural mulattoes" "Blacks who grew up in white neighbourhoods" but "now live in Black neighbourhoods" and "alienated (junior) intellectuals...educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures."⁵

This chapter deals with two novels of the 90s, Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*⁶ (1992) and E. Lynn Harris' *Just As I Am*⁷ (1994) which illustrate these aspects of the emergent NBA. Naylor's *Bailey's Café*, heavily reliant on magic realism, tries to create a quasi community out of a surreal café in New York. The clientele includes diverse people from different social backgrounds who find their own voice by articulating their stories in the café. Harris' *Just As I Am* is based on the lives of the upwardly mobile, educated, Black urban youth. In their search for jobs and partners they try to establish this individual identity but once again there is the feeling that establishing a community of fraternity is equally important in such a class-conscious

society. Thus definitions of family and community change automatically while going into the new millennium, as this chapter will try to establish. At the same time popular fiction by Black writers now tries to demarcate its ideal community and ideal family in a way in which race and gender stereotypes are abandoned to a great extent. The only constant is the necessity to retain love, compassion and tolerance, even as the socio-economic conditions make such a communal existence rather difficult. Teri McMillan's *A Day Late and a Dollar Short*⁸ (2001) has also chosen as an example of the popular novel to highlight some changes in the African American discourse on family and community in the new millennium. McMillan's novel has been included in this chapter to establish the fact that changes evident in the African American community, as depicted in the literary novels at the turn of the century, also came to be documented in contemporary popular fiction.

Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Cafe*: The Community As Charmed Space

In *Black Feminist Thought* Patricia Hills Collins has discussed the idea of family and community as safe spaces emerging to aid the process of self-definition for Black women. The concept of safe spaces has been alluded to in the previous chapters but it must be elaborated upon at this point in the thesis, since the quest for a safe space becomes all pervasive in the millennium. Collins defines this idea as follows:

While domination may be inevitable as a social fact, it is unlikely to be hegemonic as an ideology within social spaces where Black women speak freely. This realm of relatively safe discourse, however narrow, is a necessary condition for Black women's resistance. Extended families, churches and African American community organizations are important locations where safe discourse potentially can occur. Sondra O'Neale describes the workings of these Black women's spaces : "Beyond the mask, in the ghetto of the Black women's community, in her family, and more important, in her psyche, is and has always been another world, a world in

which she functions—sometimes in sorrow but more often in genuine joy...—by doing the thing that 'normal' Black women do" (1986, 139) These spaces are not only safe—they form prime locations for resisting objectification as the other. In these spaces Black women “observe the feminine images of the 'larger' another, realize that these models are at best unsuitable and at worst destructive to them, and go about the business of fashioning themselves after the prevalent, historical Black female role models in their own community" (O'Neale 1986, 139). By advancing Black women's empowerment through self definition these safe spaces help Black women resist the dominant ideology promulgated not only outside Black civil society but within African American institutions.⁹

Bailey's Café is such a ‘safe space’ situated in some obscure geographical blind spot in New York. The proprietor, who is one of the narrators, does not disclose his name. But very early in the novel he gives the reader a hint as to the precise nature of the café. He says:

...folks shouldn't get the wrong idea about this place—if we start serving 'em too readily, they'll begin thinking we're actually in the business of running a cafe....I guess whoever Bailey was—if there was a Bailey—he knew this place had to be real real mobile. Even though this planet is round, there are just too many spots where you can find yourself hanging on to the edge...and unless there's some space, some place, to take a breather for a while, the edge of the world frightening as it is—could be the end of the world, which would be quite a pity.¹⁰

Like Willow Springs in *Mama Day*, the café's origin and existence are rooted in magic but it is placed in New York to sustain a sense of community in the lives of its regular clients. The proprietor assures the reader that the people who come here are the ones who find the place because they need to find it. The narration is a multivocal orchestration of the stories of Black men and women who have survived. Critics like Maxine Lavon Montgomery have noted that *Bailey's Café* is an attempt to 'construct a new world order'. In her article 'Authority, Multivocality and New World Order: Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*'¹¹, Montgomery notes that the climactic birth of George

as a sort of second coming and the presence of a multicultural group at the moment of his birth signifies this possibility of a New World Order. Others like Rebecca S. Woods see *Bailey's Café* as an attempt to synthesize the warring ideas of nationalism and universalism.¹²

Although Naylor writes her novel long before terms like NBA have gained currency, she successfully unites the Black ethnic tropes of self-definition (especially for Black Women) with a new sensibility, which makes *Bailey's Café* an attempt to transcend the race question by addressing other issues that are more humane and relevant in the current climate of America. Rebecca Woods deals with the nationalism versus universalism issue in her essay as she sees Naylor's efforts in *Bailey's Café* focused on reconciling these two opposites. By demarcating Bailey's Café and Eve's boarding house as 'safe spaces' for those who can find them, Naylor imagines a shelter for the socially deviant of diverse marginal groups and makes it possible for them to create a community out of this hybridity. These women united in their pain, however, have not lost all hope and the proprietor reminds us at the beginning that all their stories have a hidden meaning—a counterpoint:

Anything really worth hearing in this greasy spoon happens
under the surface.¹³

The point-counterpoint analogy frames the story within a jazz metaphor, with the solo-pieces orchestrated by the maestro. Most importantly, like an open-ended novel which discourages closure, the text does not give any sense of a 'happy ending'.

The women who feature in the individual stories are social deviants—a rape victim, a junkie, a nymphomaniac—but in their will to survive they bring a new dimension to the definition of Black sisterhood and community. Eve, the proprietor of the boardinghouse (another establishment which dwells on the edge of world) that houses all these women, is created in the mould of the strong Black maternal

stereotype. Maxine L. Montgomery describes Eve's regeneration as self-generation.¹⁴ She graduates from the puritanical confines of her godfather's house and her journey towards her destiny begins the day she is thrown out by her godfather without a single thread on her body. As she treks northwards, she becomes her own person and realizes that she would survive no matter what. But after ten years in New Orleans she is ready to leave. Her material assets are substantial, but she ponders about her next move as she realizes:

If I could get through all I'd gotten through, then I was overqualified to be the mayor of New Orleans...And when I kept thinking on up the line, the comparisons were beneath contempt...It seemed there was nowhere on earth for a woman like me. That's how I ended up here, taking over this brownstone and starting my garden.¹⁵

Eve's boarding house with its boarders is intrinsic to the magical landscape of *Bailey's Café*. Eve's persona, though very reminiscent of the stolid Black matriarchal women, is carefully characterized without any biological relations. She is non-judgmental about the lives of her boarders but she knows that they are the ones who have given themselves a second chance and she feels responsible towards them. Maxine Montgomery makes a very interesting observation about Eve's character. She remarks:

Naylor's Eve is thus a character that can be placed within the aesthetic poles [used] to define the mother-figure in African American writing. Neither an Eve, in the biblical sense, nor strictly a Madonna, she resides somewhere between the two extremes. Her ability to manipulate reality and her close affinity with the supernatural are qualities that invite a comparison with folk figures such as the shape shifting trickster or the revered conjure woman...her role in the narrative action is to be considered in terms of her effect on her female wards.¹⁶

To illustrate this point Montgomery emphasizes the passage in the novel where Eve is engaged in a verbal duel with a local puritanical Christian, Sister Carrie, who denounces the inmates of Eve's boarding house. She remarks:

In her citation of [the] Old Testament passage from Ezekiel, Naylor thematizes the importance of global harmony among all women regardless of race, religion, ethnicity or even sexual preference. Eve turns Sister Carrie's narrow, legalistic and homophobic perspective on its ear by stressing the essential oneness between Jews and gentiles and encouraging a non-judgmental stance towards issues of morality set forth in divine law. In her revisionist use of scripture, Naylor thus ushers in a new era for women whose lives were once circumscribed by a discourse that is male authored, and therefore paves the way for a more sensitive reading of the text of African American women.¹⁷

Naylor uses the same technique in her characterization of Stanley, a University educated Negro who resisted the draft and was imprisoned. Stanley is believed to be a 'faggot' by most of the people who frequent Baileys Café, since he is seen wearing cotton dresses throughout the summer and responds to the name 'Miss Maple'. But here again, Naylor forces us to look beneath the surface. Stanley's masculinity evolves as a response to the racially charged American culture, where his story bears out the fact that a Black man with all the necessary degrees did not inherit the legacy of the American Dream. Stanley's mixed heritage and his agrarian, peasant stock background, rounded off with years of liberal education, make him a misfit as he finds himself looking in vain for a job in post-war America. When Stanley begins his story he makes it abundantly clear that people who conveniently label him as a 'homosexual' have been trained to do so by American history.

Stanley recounts his adolescent pangs when his father, trying to make him a man, forbade him to play the American cowboy or go to American Westerns. Instead

he was asked to concentrate on books and literature. He clearly felt that his father was less of a man as he never resorted to violence or retaliated against any sort of racist behavior. The incident which changes Stanley's opinion about his father's manhood is an encounter with three local Ku Klux Klan members. Stanley's father gifts him with a custom-made complete works of Shakespeare, which these men vandalize. But their real anger stems from the fact that Stanley's father, who was actually a Black peasant, dared to appear so sophisticated in his attire. At first, Stanley's father does not retaliate and tries to reason with them about his belief in social justice. When he does decide to retaliate, however, he does so with sadness, but what he tells the Gatlins serves as Stanley's first lesson in American history and initiates his own self-definition as a man. Stanley's father tells the Gatlins:

My friends, I'll try to be brief. I am a man. And the founding fathers of this democracy passed on to you who call yourselves real Americans a monumental lie. All of us are not created equal. Some of us are more intelligent and physically fit than others...I am a man of peace. I am a sensitive man. Those are the qualities I wanted to pass on to my son. I believe he has the capacity to be a great leader. And I've tried to teach him that a man rules best when he rules with compassion. There is no greater strength than what is found within. There is no greater love than reaching beyond boundaries to other men. There is no greater wealth than possessing true peace of mind. When my son left me to go out on his own, I wanted to give him the vision of such a brave new world.¹⁸

Stanley understands the importance of liberal education and in retrospect he feels that his father would have lauded his survival skills instead of dismissing him as Sugar man does—as a cross-dresser or a drag-queen. He recollects this event as a transition point before he went to the university, although, having faith in liberal education, he retired after a few years when he realized that seeking to be an integrationist was not a rewarding prospect in America. His universalist perspective depresses him enough to make him contemplate suicide. However, Stanley does retain

the part of his father's education which taught him about the need to connect with others. As bell hooks has observed in *The Will to Change*, masculinity needs re-definition especially with regard to the silence over male emotional connection.¹⁹ Stanley, as he finally gets to Bailey Café, completes his journey and becomes a man, but not the kind who is a representative of the American patriarchal culture. He resists the compulsory draft as a protest against the hypocritical standards of the American establishment, which does not accept a Black man's blood but forces him to join the Army. In jail, he is made the victim of sexual abuse but he does not resist and therefore knows in his mind that he is not a victim at all. Although his universalist education tides him over in these two instances, it is challenged as he tries to look for a job in a newly emerging corporate America. As he looks for a job and trudges between the offices he gets heat rashes from wearing his suit and starched shirts. As an expedient he takes to wearing women's clothes and although it does not give him a job he feels a sense of purpose:

On the up side, I'd never felt more like a man. With each new town I was growing stronger in purpose, having no excuses for not working from dawn until well after dark.²⁰

Thus Stanley's reinvention of himself makes him a better and more self-defined 'American negro', as the way he puts it. Finally, when he lands a job by means of a sound marketing proposition, he walks out of it because he senses in the middle of a corporate lunch that the CEO may be mentally challenged, as he kept shredding his paper napkin into tiny pieces. Stanley walks out of the job, depressed with the future of corporate America and knowing that he would not be comfortable in this job, since he could not wear his dresses according to the protocol. When he unbuttoned his shirt at the lunch he came to understand that in corporate America this violation of protocol translated into his being the mad person in the scenario, rather

than his employer. He decides to commit suicide when he realizes that the brave new world dream of his would never be answered in America.

This brings him to Bailey's Café, and Eve hires him as a housekeeper-cum-bouncer in her boardinghouse. Stanley in turn gets a respectable job, where he can keep wearing his dresses and his sound marketing skills help him to write many an award winning ad-slogan or jingle, by which he makes a tidy sum every month. Like Eve, who is neither a wife nor a biological mother, Stanley is not depicted as anybody's father or husband. But his masculine presence helps to foster the impression that the future Black man will break out of the stereotypes of the absentee-father or the callous husband. Stanley, as Maple, invents himself as a new American man and also anticipates the NBA, in which hybrid identities would form the matrix of the American multicultural reality.

Between the extremes of Eve and Stanley are a host of other women who have come to Bailey's Café and then passed to Eve's boarding house. These women are victims of violence, sexual oppression or drug abuse and therefore represent the various ills inflicting Black women within the community. Bailey's Café and Eve's House become safe places for them. In her discussion on 'safe spaces' aiding the power of self-definition, Hill Collins asserts the significance of such places because:

....safe spaces are free of surveillance by more powerful groups, such spaces simultaneously remove Black women from surveillance and foster the conditions for Black women's independent self-definitions.²¹

By extension, the safe-space of Bailey's Café aids the self-definition of two men also—the proprietor as well as Stanley who feels free, and more of a man, being Miss Maple. Bailey's Café successfully operates as a 'safe space' since it does not try to apply any sort of surveillance mechanism on its inmates; nor does it undertake to pass judgments. Jesse Bell's story could easily have been narrated as that of a

psychologically battered woman who takes to drugs and destroys her settled life. Jesse's characterization goes quite against the model of the strong Black woman. But Naylor's emphasis here is on the healing spirit of Eve who cures Jesse's addiction. And more importantly, as Jesse reconstructs her life and her decisions, we see Naylor subtly critiquing the Black community and its very own class hierarchy which is very similar to the white class hierarchy, and comes with its own protocols as well as moral dogmas.

Jesse Bell's story is that of a woman who marries into a culture which undermines her native working-class roots and dismisses every folk element of it as 'slave' culture. Jesse's mother was an incarnation of the revered Black matriarch and her brothers never raised their voices before her. Jesse's childhood in the docks where her brothers worked made her respect her Black heritage. However, her marriage into the King family puts her in a different hierarchy, as the Kings of Sugar Hill, Harlem, have very little appreciation of ethnic Black culture. Jesse evaluates their integrationist lifestyle as a mindless aping of white culture. From a culture which respected women, she moves into an environment where family-dinners were elaborate occasions. In most of the cases the husband subtly criticized his wife and sometimes even brought in his mistress as a dinner guest to insult her. But Jesse reserves the most scathing comments for the family patriarch Uncle Eli, who had charged her with mixing some 'Juju' potion in her husband's drink on their first meeting, in order to marry into his family and wealth. Uncle Eli found fault with her cooking southern soul-food and hosting loud barbeque-Jazz parties since it undermined their image as Kings of Harlem Hill. Jesse speaks more favourably about her husband who married her even though he knew about her woman-friend. Jesse's lesbianism was not judged by her husband but his family used it as an instrument against her.

Jesse's anguish over Uncle Eli's efforts to demean her as well as her folks increases as she sees her son being gradually indoctrinated into the 'King' way of life. Her son starts hating her folks. Sensing his hatred Jesse resorts to alcohol and begins a serious relationship with her woman-friend, if only to get some compensatory comfort from her. But matters come to a head when the Bells are intentionally invited to a party celebrating her son's admission to Harvard. Uncle Eli deliberately makes them appear to be far beneath his class as they arrive late and try to set up their own barbecue grills in the pouring rain. Only Jesse knows that it was Uncle Eli who had asked them to come two hours after the scheduled time and bring their own food. After the fiasco at the party, Jesse realizes that she has already become a shadow presence in her own home like those endless streams of 'King' wives. She understands that Uncle Eli has used her working class roots to destroy her family life and done it so subtly that she herself is made to appear the culprit. Jesse also realizes that she has lost her husband and her son, for they only listen to her protests but do not comprehend anything. This crisis in her life leads her to take recourse to alcohol, to have numerous affairs with women and finally, when all this does not give her peace, she starts taking heroin. Very soon, her divorce becomes a public spectacle with the newspapers using her family, her school, her choice of friends and her way of life to nail her down as the villain in the marriage.

Jesse's drug addiction becomes a serious problem, but it is through Eve's mediation, and later through her active intervention, that Jesse withdraws and becomes sober. Thus Bailey's Café and Eve provide for her the safe space where she can re-create herself after having failed as a mother and a wife. It is important that Eve manages to protect her and give her the sense of sisterhood which she was looking for in all those lesbian relationships. For Eve, however, Jesse is not a charity

case but an investment, and as Eve is a shrewd businesswoman she does not make an unprofitable deal. But once again, if we delve beneath the surface, we see Eve as providing just the sense of community and acceptance that Jesse craved for; she even stands up to support Jesse's lesbianism when she condemns Sister Carrie's puritanical attitude towards it. To apply Hill Collins' argument, Eve uses love as a source of empowerment and, as she helps others to define themselves, she does not pass judgments on their moral choices as long as they justify her faith in them by rewarding her investment of time. Jesse does so when she gets rid of her addiction with Eve's help.

Eve, the proprietor of Bailey's Café, his wife Nadine, the Jewish Pawn shop owner Gabe, and the residents of Eve's boarding house all come together to help the Black Jewish virgin mother Miriam in her childbirth at the end of the novel. Rebecca Wood describes the birth of Miriam's son George as the beginning of a New World Order. Miriam's story is an attempt to recast the Christian myth of the Immaculate Conception and the birth of Jesus into a Black context. Miriam becomes the Black mother who, with the birth of her son, can bring about a New World Order, because of her mixed Black/Jewish identity. Like all the other characters, Miriam also travels along a particular road, facing ostracism and different kinds of exploitation before arriving finally at Eve's boarding house. Miriam is a girl who makes everyone assume guardianship. Gabe, Bailey, Nadine and Eve try to protect her as parents do their children. The scene at the Café after her delivery is particularly significant, because Naylor describes this child as 'the child of god', using the words of a Negro spiritual which Esther sings. The birth of this child is celebrated by each and everyone at the café. The proprietor of the Café describes the scene in the following manner:

Nadine hug me so tight she almost lifted me into my toes. Then Gabe grabbed me, whirled me around, and we started to dance...Miss Maple took his other hand and the three of us were out in the middle of the floor, hands raised and feet stamping. People were up on tables and cheering. Someone was banging on the counter with my spatula. Someone tore open the sack of rice and was throwing it into the air...Jesse had her skirt raised in the throes of a mean flamenco. And, wonder of wonders, Esther smiled. But I think it was Peaches who started to sing...you could hear it even above the mayhem. As everyone could hear the lone cry of new life.²²

The passage is reminiscent of the closing lines of Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*²³ (discussed in Chapter - 2), where the sounds of Tish's new born baby herald a new beginning. Naylor goes one step further to create a complete new mythology of the 'new order'. She does what Deborah E. McDowell had attributed to Black women writers, namely, employing literary devices in a distinct way in order to create their 'own mythic structures.'²⁴ The birth of George outside Bailey's Café, in a subliminal zone, shows Naylor's readiness to create new mythical structures to accommodate her vision of the new Black community.

Naylor's other works, like *The Women Of Brewster Place*²⁵ and *Linden Hills*²⁶, exhibit her ability to create 'safe spaces' for women. In *Bailey's Café*, it becomes an effort to create safe spaces for the community. Maxine Lavon Montgomery sees the emergent family at the end of the novel as Naylor's attempt to anticipate the kind of non-traditional families which have become a part of the contemporary American reality. Montgomery remarks:

In what is an original revision of the classic Christmas story, the text culminates with a portrait of a radically transformed society where all externally imposed limitations and labels are blurred. Prefigured in *The Women of Brewster Place* by Mattie Michael's dream/nightmare of the women's communal efforts to dismantle the restrictive brick wall at the novel's ambiguous end, the utopian postwar new world order that emerges in *Bailey's Café* is one constructed around Miriam, a type of Madonna who gives birth to the future figured by young George...consistent with the women-centered cosmology that Naylor

is bent on recreating, a new social order appears with a family of choice replacing the traditional nuclear family. Moreover, there is harmony between opposing rituals and traditions drawn from a multicultural community. Gabriel, a Russian Jew, presides at the naming ceremony, like the messenger angel who visits the biblical Mary and announces the birth of Christ, his role in the text is that of a guide or foreteller, for it is he who offers Miriam directions to Bailey's Café. Naylor elevates the dispossessed women in the text to a position of honor with what is a womanist reconceptualization of the once-burdensome domestic sphere.²⁷

Naylor's perspective can no doubt be compared to that of a womanist since she seems to be hinting at a new world order which would be in keeping with the multicultural fabric of America in the 90s. Although it is the dispossessed women who raise the most articulate voice that is audible from the café, Naylor also introduces men in the café who go against the standard stereotypes of Black male characters. Apart from Stanley we also see Gabe, and even more conspicuously, the proprietor of the café. Although he is not a biological father he has a distinctly paternal attitude towards the people who come to the café. His compassion and his readiness to listen to their stories and uncover their meaning makes him stand out as a mature, understanding person. Finally, as George's godfather he takes the crucial decision of putting him in a boy's shelter run by an efficient woman, since the magical Bailey's Café is not a place to bring up young children. He remarks:

...I had a special responsibility to have him grow up a decent and good man...of course, we won't be raising the baby on this street.²⁸

Although he justifies his decision to give up George to the care of a boy's shelter run by Irene Jackson, he is aware that Irene Jackson would not take him in if she knew about George being the son of an unwed mother who was also a virgin. He concludes:

.....But what else can I do ? The whole nature of this place runs against a customer ever walking in here who'd be in a position to adopt him.²⁹

His earlier comments on the plight of children being born in the streets show that he is aware of the need for a disciplined family-like atmosphere for children to grow up in. He predicts the darkness of the future when children would perhaps frequent the café:

The times they are a changing. If the world outside is becoming such that life itself can be brought forth in limbo, then one day, much too soon, I'm gonna start seeing young children walk through the door. Children who have lost their futures....I don't know about you, but I shudder at the stories they'll have to tell.³⁰

This realization strengthens his resolve to give up George to the boy's shelter as he knows that the café could never give him the stability which a child needs, being in a limbo itself.

Naylor's novel is also an attempt to reinvent Black Nationalism by creating characters which resist stereotyping. There are no strong Black mothers and the men are neither 'victims' nor 'heroes'. Instead, there are people like Jones (appearing briefly in the novel) who are willing to assume the mantle of the responsible Black man even for women like Sadie, an inveterate alcoholic and a prostitute. The 90s was a period when some Black men, especially under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan, tried to arouse men to a sense of responsibility for their community. Farrakhan's 'Million Man March', however, lost impetus as the movement was described as 'racially essentialist'³¹. Naylor's multicultural and multiracial novel is nevertheless successful in voicing Black issues of the 90s, especially in its emphasis on the need of strong, responsible Black brothers aiding their Black sisters and working together for a better community. Racial inequity ceases to become the driving force of Black literature in the 90s and a hint of such a trend was visible even earlier in the 1980s. As E. Lynn Harris' novel *Just As I Am* indicates, the Black men and women of urban America now try to define their own sisterhood or brotherhood without agonizing over their

status as 'Blacks'. Bernard W. Bell, while trying to identify the mood of the 80s and 90s, has observed certain salient features of African American culture during this period, which he believes to have been, instrumental in determining the literature of its time. He writes:

Between 1983 and 2001 African Americans continued their dynamic, dialectic role as agents for change in the identity formation of ethnic Americans and other people around the globe. ...Fundamental issues of traditional American family values and civil rights, especially religious and sexual freedoms, were heatedly debated by politicians, preachers, pundits, and popular artists...With the mushrooming of such popular national sitcoms and talk shows as those of Cosby, Winfrey, and Roseanne Barr between 1983 and 2001, the media frequently highlighted the issues of power disparities based primarily on racial, ethnic, gender and class differences that impacted the call for new configurations and representations in life and literature...³²

Bell expands this point by stressing a renewed understanding for the emerging multiple identities of African Americans.

...the fundamental truth it [i.e. the social scenario] calls us to acknowledge is the continuing sociohistorical, sociopsychological and sociocultural struggle to reconcile the tensions and conflicts of the double or now more popularly proclaimed multiple identities of Americans of sub-Saharan Black African descent.³³

Bell sees the popularity of the New Black Aesthetic as a part of this response and also holds it responsible for the proliferation of different types of novels which he classifies as 'paraliterature'. He uses the term 'paraliterature' to include a wide variety of novels such as science fictions, detective novels, gay/lesbian novels and other kinds of popular fiction.

E. Lynn Harris' *Just As I Am* : Homosexuality In The Black Community

E. Lynn Harris' gay/lesbian novels are a part of this new movement, voicing all these issues of the 90s and doing so in the real world of late twentieth century urban corporate America rather than in some surreal café, or, for that matter, in a small Southern community, or even a northern ghetto. The novel centres around the experiences of Raymond Tyler Jr, a self confessed Black bisexual man and Nicole, a Black beauty queen who has Hollywood dreams but also wants to find the man who will be the love of her life. Raymond and Nicole are both successful professionals and yet they have issues concerning their sexuality and past relationships, which prevent them from realizing their goals.

At the beginning of the novel Raymond introduces himself as a bisexual man, a sexual mulatto. Thus Raymond as a hero does not conform to any of the Black male stereotypes prevalent in fiction. Although Raymond's professional status and his upper-class roots make it impossible for us to think of him as a victim, he himself explains how it was possible to be alienated in one's own community because of his/her sexual choices. At the very beginning of the novel he remarks:

Now even though I hate labels, I still consider myself bisexual. A sexual mulatto...I didn't feel comfortable in a totally gay environment or in a totally straight environment. I often wondered where the term gay came from. Lonely would better describe the life for me. There was absolutely nothing gay about being a Black man and living life attracted to members of your own sex in this imperfect world I called home. For now a place called perfect remained a dream.³⁴

Raymond searches for a perfect place where he hopes his alternative sexuality will be accepted. As in *Baileys Café*, the characters in *Just As I Am* also try to search for a safe space. According to Bernard Bell, paraliterature written during the period of the NBA prioritized the narratives of hybrids and marginals. Raymond is one such Black

man who feels that he is marginalized because the world in which he lives is imperfect, and his attempt at self-definition is actually more of a quest to find a place or get acceptance within his community. But true to the spirit of 'hybrid' narratives, he does get around to acknowledging his sexual difference and moves beyond questions of conservative morality.

Although Raymond admits that his parents know about his homosexuality, he also clarifies that they would not like to see him flaunt it. Bernard Bell while discussing, 'homophobia' in the Black community, remarks:

Rooted in the tradition of moral conservatism of most Black Baptist and Methodist churches, especially fundamentalist and Pentecostal denominations, strict sexual proscriptions are among the many controversial and contradictory aspects of Black American belief and value systems. For some the issue is a transgression against nature, the family, and the community, rather than involving a sin or prejudice against homosexuals.³⁵

Raymond's decision to keep his homosexual/bisexual identity in the closet is due to his failed relationship with Nicole, a woman who rejected him when she came to know about his sexual preferences.

Nicole's part of the narrative involves her questioning of her own sexuality, since she could not reconcile to the truth about Raymond. Nicole's narrative resembles the voice of the modern African American woman who wants a loving, caring as well as a successful man by her side. Nicole defines her quest for self-definition in a manner entirely different from that of Raymond. She does not want to live in a 'Perfect' place, and knows through her professional and personal experiences that life is not perfect. She has devised her own strategy for survival:

So in this life that offered more rainstorms than rainbows, I relied on my faith, my trio of friends, and a great therapist. I was learning to count and enjoy my blessings. I realized that luck ran out, but blessings never did.³⁶

The novel traces Raymond and Nicole's parallel, but sometimes intersecting, quests for self-definition. More importantly, the quest is for love, Bell suggests with regard to 'Urban romance' that such a quest has almost evolved into a kind of trope or motif. Patricia Hill Collins, while writing about Black woman's love relationships, has described the 'love and trouble'³⁷ tradition in Black literature and art. Black women look for love from Black men but they also know it is a whole lot of trouble. However, Hill Collins insists that such a distrust of Black males results from the willingness to believe in controlling images of Black men fostered by the white society. At the beginning of *Just As I Am* Nicole is in love with the white man Pierce, but feels unable to commit to engagement or marriage.

Although the search for a Black man as a worthy enough brother is a recurring motif, Collins also points out that Black women's writing in the 1990s has tried to counteract controlling stereotypes like that of the Mammy and Jezebel by creating independent women characters. She terms this trend as the 'emergent woman thesis'. Nicole is one such emergent woman, and although Lynn Harris is a Black male writer he seems to appreciate the emergent woman thesis. Not only Nicole, but women like Gillian (Raymond's boss) and Delaney also negotiate their personal and professional lives as emergent women. Hill remarks:

Independent Black Women heroines populate U.S. Black women's fiction of the 1990s, Many of these Black female fictional characters express varying dimensions of the emergent woman thesis just as social class differences have become more prominent in Black women's controlling images overall, images of emergent women in Black women's literature also reflect class diversity. Working-class

women become emergent women by overcoming an array of hardships, many of them financial, that aim to keep them down.³⁸

Nicole, a former beauty pageant winner, has to come to terms with her colour. Her childhood memories of racial discrimination contribute to her low self-esteem. Her attempt at self definition includes visits to her therapist where she finally learns to accept her Black identity and also to trust men.

But more than Raymond or Nicole's individual attempts at self definition, the novel is about men and women in the Black family and community dealing with homosexuality and AIDS. Bernard Bell describes it as Harris' continuing engagement with the issue of 'sexual hybridity'. Bell lauds Harris' work because he believes that Harris' strategy lies in:

...challenging the conventional negative stereotypes of homosexuality as a choice of lifestyles rather than as a natural, God-given sexual identity...and by judiciously rejecting the anti homosexual attitudes and behavior of the traditional Black church and community while passionately affirming the healing power of spirituality, love and friendship, the implied author and his major characters challenge the normative moral authority of his texts in a non polemical manner.³⁹

It is also interesting to note that Harris displaces the trope of the tragic mulatto to focus on the figure of the tragic sexual mulatto. The mulatto, with his mixed racial heritage, is sometimes unable to define his identity. In the same manner, Raymond's bisexuality and his inability to come to terms with it make him call himself a sexual mulatto. Bell also points out the ways in which Harris undertakes to challenge anti-homosexual attitudes. He remarks:

Although Harris is ambivalent about whether unconditional love and spirituality are more likely found in the hearts of women than men, he is unequivocal that both have the capacity to respect and understand that....we're all precious in God's sight.⁴⁰

A number of episodes in the novel prove this point. The episode where Raymond talks to his younger brother Kirby as he is leaving for college is one such instance. Raymond warns him about the repercussions of unprotected sex and comes across as a warm and caring brother in this episode. Also mentionable is the fact that Raymond's presence in the family is solicited by his parents in spite of their being aware of his homosexuality. Raymond, as Harris takes a lot of pains to establish, is also a good son. Raymond, himself feels good after visiting his parents and brother:

I was happy I'd stopped off to see my little brother before he left home for his first extended stay.⁴¹

As a community brother in his old college fraternity reunion, Raymond brings the same outlook of mature tolerance when he tries to defend one of the new recruits who was being teased for his homosexuality. The odious atmosphere of homophobia causes Raymond to criticize his fraternity:

I thought about the checks I sent in support of the fraternity and the house and how my money was helping to perpetuate this hate. For the first time since I knew about KAΩ I felt embarrassed about being a member of one of the most prestigious organizations of Black men.⁴²

Raymond's experience at this reunion shows the difficulty of trying to come to terms with one's sexuality even if one was a closet bisexual. Perhaps it also strengthens his resolve to come out of his closet and the 'silent frat', as he manages to do at the end of the novel.

Nicole is also a persona who, in spite of having a professionally demanding career, tries to be there for her family—especially her mother and her brother. She

tries to rescue her brother from his numerous financial difficulties and helps him when he goes into rehab. Nicole is also a good 'sister' to her friend Delaney and stands by her when she is sexually harassed by one of her employers. Although Nicole is wary of closet homosexuals after her break up with Raymond, she does not become judgmental when one of her prayer group friends, Sheila, criticizes gays as being condemned by God. Nicole refuses to be a part of Sheila's prayer service but Nicole and Raymond are able to self-actualize themselves when they learn about Kyle's (their common friend) AIDS and rally around him in his last days. Both of them learn to forgive and forget while accepting the inevitability of Kyle's death.

Harris' treatment of homosexuality and AIDS is particularly sensitive. Bernard Bell has analysed homophobia as a debilitating reality in the Black community because people saw homosexuality as threatening heterosexism and therefore, indirectly, the family and community structure in the African American society. Harris is mindful of the fact that 23% of the HIV+ population in America consists of African American males. However, he chooses to highlight not the trauma and alienation of the epidemic but the healing power of faith, love and wisdom. Raymond puts his career on hold and shifts base to New York to be with Kyle when he learns of his condition. Raymond stays back with him till the time of his death, and there are episodes in the novel where Harris portrays him nursing Kyle with compassion. In such instances, Harris is perhaps trying to break out of the image of the Black men as emotionally callous and uninvolved. Also, Kyle's confrontation with AIDS becomes an example to Nicole and Raymond, as they try to take on and succeed in facing the problems regarding their identities. Nicole finally breaks her engagement with Pierce, as she realizes that she had been dating him just because she had a certain amount of animosity towards Black men. She acknowledges that:

Through Kyle I was able to ask questions and get honest answers that increased my understanding of gay Black men and some of the struggles they had to deal with day to day.⁴³

Raymond understands Nicole's doubts but voices the position of the Black gay man:

Did these women not understand the pressure Black men, gay or straight, were under constantly on a day-to day basis? Maybe white men didn't bring extra baggage into relationships. I mean, why should they? White men had been given all the power in this society and ...they took it. A Black man trying to do the same thing was considered a major threat and was dealt with accordingly. Black gay men also encountered the fear of rejection from their own community, if not from their immediate family then certainly from the African American family as a whole.⁴⁴

To prove his point Raymond describes the kind of alienation Kyle faces from his Black ex-lovers when they learn of his disease. Even when he joins an HIV support group it is the white gay men who befriend him. Although Raymond observes the supportiveness of his boss and his friend Jared, he complains:

I don't know what I expected when I told people about Kyle's condition,... I still felt the African American community had a long way to go in the areas of education and support of minority AIDS patients.⁴⁵

Kyle also tries to address Nicole's distrust of Blacks and gay men. To rectify her stance when she talks about wanting to find a man who was 'all man',⁴⁶ he tells her:

But women ought to think about the men who really hurt them. It's not gay men who lie, cheat, beat them, and leave them alone with kids to fend for themselves. Well, sometimes these confused gay men do. But when you think about it, heterosexual men beat women down daily.⁴⁷

Thus Kyle, a gay Black man with AIDS, is able to aid Raymond and Nicole to be responsible members of the community. Raymond and Nicole are able to forget their past and try to give Kyle the sense of a Black family which homosexual Black men

rarely have. Nicole befriends his mother Peaches, who is a strong Black woman but needs help to face the death of her son. Raymond, on the other hand, fulfils his friend's last wish and finds his father, who had earlier abandoned them. Although the father-son reunion is not described at length, it comes just before Kyle's death and is perhaps Harris' way of showing that Black father-son relationships can be mended. The section dealing with Kyle's death is entitled 'Loss' and comes after 'Lust' and before 'Love'. The Kyle episode thus documents the 'ethics of care' and the 'ethics of love' which, according to Patricia Hill Collins⁴⁸, constitute one of the key aspects of Black Feminist Epistemology that Black males should learn to value over the white ideals of dispassionate masculinity. In fact, Raymond's caring for Kyle helps him to forget his own anxiety about being a 'sexual mulatto'. After Kyle's death, Raymond goes through a mental breakdown, but his psychiatrist aids him to better understand and accept his sexuality.

In the last part of the novel, both Raymond and Nicole find love and are able to sort out the crises of their individual identities. Raymond tells his parents about his decision to refrain from being a closet homosexual. His parents accept his decision and also join a support group called 'PFLAG' (Parents For Lesbians and Gays). Nicole starts trusting Black men, enters into a relationship with Raymond's friend Jared, and finally decides to marry him. *Just As I Am*, with its explicit homosexual theme, projects the changing reality of American as well as African American society. It is written at a time when non-traditional families are becoming the order of the day. The American 'nuclear family', as mentioned in 'The Reappearing Nuclear Family' by David Blankehorn⁴⁹, has become almost a curiosity because less than 25% of American households respond to the definition of such a family, 'as a household consisting of two biological parents, their main children and no one else'.⁵⁰

The African American family never conformed to such a straight definition because of its emphasis on community living, especially when it came to women. The system of 'other mothers', 'community mothers' etc was, according Collins, a system necessitated by the absence of male guardians. From the time of slavery absence of fathers necessitated woman-centric kinship groups based around these 'other mothers.'⁵¹ The 1990s sees the Black men also embracing this kind of network of community living.

Wideman, in his memoirs on his father entitled *Fatheralong*⁵², has emphasized the need of the Black community to revive the 'father stories.'⁵³ He feels that the particular time in history has arrived to relegate discussions on the paradigm of race to the background and foreground the personal, if the Blacks want to rectify the 'emotional dislocation'⁵⁴ in their community. Although Harris does not concentrate on the figure of the father he does well to document Black masculinity in a positive lights. It is worth mentioning that all the male characters in the novel are compassionate and have very meaningful relationships with their families. Raymond, in one of his therapy sessions, talks about his father and tells his therapist that his father was always supportive of his alternative sexuality. It was Raymond himself who felt that, being a gay, he was somehow destroying his own juvenile fantasy of the world as a perfect place. A reviewer in *Southern Voice* has reviewed the novel rather aptly:

Just As I Am answers the essential question all Black gay men must eventually ask themselves: How can I be Black and homosexual and remain a part of my family and community? Harris has given us a book on survival and a glimpse at the wonderful possibilities that await us when we decide to love ourselves without compromise.⁵⁵

Harris' novel is a relevant response to movements such as the 'Million Man March', which called Black males to assume responsibility within their families and communities. However, it has none of the movement's conservative moral trappings. Harris also sufficiently ignores the paradigm of race, except while documenting the Pierce-Nicole relationship, and focuses on gender-relationships within the family and community instead.

Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café* and E. Lynn Harris' *Just As I Am* present the characters as social/sexual deviants who try to create their own kind of community and succeed in doing so. Incidentally, biological relationships are not treated with the same prominence as relationships between fellow-Blacks in the community. As has already been observed, these novels serve to popularize a norm of the non-traditional family. Bailey, in Naylor's *Bailey's Café*, is not depicted as a father, yet he becomes a father figure because of the affection with which he speaks about the clients who frequent his café. Neither is Eve the typical Black matriarch and yet she comes closest to being some sort of a surrogate mother. In Harris' *Just As I Am*, there are strong parent-child relationships throughout the novel but the conclusion seems to stress upon the non-traditional aspects of family and community-building. Ray, Nicole, Jared, Delaney and Jody form their own fraternity in which their supportive biological parents are included. What serves as a common denominator in both these novels is that the characters are willing to embrace and include each other into a community. This concept, according to hooks, dates back to the time of the arrival of the Blacks to the New World, and since they had no concept of a nuclear family at that time but that of a kinship network, they gave the latter priority.⁵⁶ Although the Moynihan Report and sporadic movements like the Million Man March tried to address the issue of gender inequity, the maturity of the novelists of the 90s is evident

from the fact that they choose to tackle this issue of gender along with other issues plaguing the Black family and not dealing with each one in isolation from another. *Bailey's Café* and *Just As I Am* embody the healing quality of love, which is perhaps the most redeeming aspect of Black brotherhood and Black sisterhood. Thus the trope of hybridity seems to have permeated the discourse of African American family, so much so that stereotypical gender roles are no longer of any interest to the novelist.

Terry McMillan's *A Day Late And A Dollar Short* : The Millennial Black Family In Popular Urban Romance

Bernard Bell's study of Black paraliterature has also reinforced this model of hybridity. Like the gay/lesbian novels of Harris, popular urban romance also deviates from traditional stereotypical tropes. A good example may be Terry McMillan's representation of a Black dysfunctional family in *A Day Late and a Dollar Short*. McMillan systematically employs the stereotypes of Black gender roles in her novel only to redefine them. There are the Black matriarch, the drifter of a Black husband, the worthless son and the single Black successful woman who is the daughter in the family. But McMillan conceives her cast of characters with humour, so that every stereotypical behavior is analyzed and rationalized by each character's individual narration. Ultimately the dysfunctional family is projected as a functional one. In spite of its eccentricities, its members have the ability to connect with and love each other despite their defects. The importance of 'soul' in Black culture is evident in such Black cultural products as 'soul music', 'soul food' etc. hooks relates the emphasis on love as the Black community's search for soul.⁵⁷ Viola Price, the protagonist of McMillan's novel, is the typical matriarch; yet the novel hinges on her ability to love

all her children no matter what their faults are. It is to McMillan's credit that she infuses a good deal of Oprah Winfrey style wisdom⁵⁸ and plain commonsense to make Viola a very believable woman and not the larger-than-life Black matriarch. Viola Price is a lot like Mildred Peacock, the mother in McMillan's 1987 novel, *Mama*,⁵⁹ which documents a troubled Black mother-daughter relationship in the context of the 80s. Here also, the mother-figure has an indomitable spirit as much as a good sense of humour.

Viola Price is the divorced mother of four grown children. At the beginning of the novel, Viola describes her children as having traits which would liken them to animals. Her eldest daughter Paris she describes as a female lion 'who does not roar loud enough'⁶⁰; Lewis is a horse 'who don't pull his own weight'.⁶¹ Charlotte is described as a 'bull'⁶² and Janelle is the 'lamb'.⁶³ When Viola gets down to talking about her children, we realize that her calling them by different names is actually an attempt to deal with her own failure as a mother. She compares them to animals because their flaws remind her of the inborn characteristics of those creatures.

Paris is the first-born, and she is the stereotype of the successful Black single mother. She has a thriving catering business and a son who adores her, but Viola recognizes the emotional vacuum in her life after her divorce and asks Paris to fill it by dating eligible young men. Comparing her with a lion is perhaps a testimony to her power, but that she doesn't roar 'loudly' enough is a sign of the fact that she is yet to explore her power to its fullest potential. Paris, an affectionate woman, is one of those Black female characters who form the emergent woman thesis of the 1990s, which (according to Collins) was a strategic method of counteracting controlling images of Black female power. Paris is a very responsible mother and a successful career

woman, but McMillan exposes her character as a woman who is in denial, denying her need of a male presence. Viola remarks:

Paris spend so much energy trying to be perfect, trying too hard to be Superwoman, that I don't think she know how lonely she really is.⁶⁴

McMillan's portrayal of Paris, seen in the context of the 90s 'Million Woman March'⁶⁵ milieu, reintroduces the classic 'love-and trouble' tradition related to the Black woman's quest for a worthy Black man as popularized through blues music. Viola feels that Paris' obstinacy in trying to raise her son Nathan single-handedly has wrecked havoc on her emotional well-being.

Viola's only son Lewis is a stubborn 'horse'. He is the type of the Black male who embodies the worst possible faults of being an absentee father and a perpetually out-of-work husband. Viola does not waste her sympathies on Lewis' dissipated, laid back lifestyle. The fact that he had recorded genius IQ while in high school doesn't impress her. She blames her son for his divorce. Viola is critical of his perpetual complaints about the white man oppressing the Black man and his posing as the 'victim'⁶⁶. In his self-defensive manner, Lewis is like all those Black men who try to exacerbate the problem of racial inequality which contributes to their unemployment, rather than being self-critical. Viola Price's, summation of her son's diatribe against the American social system once again sparkles with characteristic humour:

And then he goes off and explains the history of the human race, and then Black people, and then finally we get to the twentieth century and the castration of the Black man that's still going on in society today because just look at how successful the Black woman is compared to us...Tragedy is his middle name.⁶⁷

Lewis' allegations are very much a part of the protest of Black men who participated in such movements as the 'Million Man March'. Viola Price's comment can also be

read as a critique of such movements which failed to inspire Black men in creating a better ideal for the succeeding generations to emulate.

Janelle, Viola's second daughter, is the type of the Black matriarch who wants to control everybody around her, including her children. But she ends up being too much of a disciplinarian and incapable of understanding the sexuality of her son who is gay. Her willfulness, according to Viola, is the reason why she was unable to manage herself, got pregnant before her marriage and then married the wrong man.

Charlotte, the youngest, is the stereotype of the 'lamb'—someone who is too weak to protest even when she realizes that her second-husband is exploiting her daughter from the first marriage. Her juvenile attitude really turns off Viola, who protests for her granddaughter. Charlotte is at the opposite end of the spectrum, where a Black woman is not ready to take the responsibility of her children, and behaves like a child herself.

Finally, Viola turns to herself after reviewing her 'dysfunctional' family and blames herself for choosing the wrong man. She feels that her husband Cecil has worn her down. After thirty-eight years of marriage he has left her for a younger woman. At the end of the first chapter, Viola resolves on a desperate course to reclaim her life and to live for herself by buying a new house. McMillan's attempt to treat the family in the appropriate context of the 90s is evident when Viola is shown to be best friends with her neighbor Loretta who happens to be white. The parameters of Black sisterhood are thus extended to include women of other ethnic origins.

Viola dies in the middle of the novel, trying to fight an asthma attack, but the rest of the novel is taken up by her children realizing their potential as their mother had wanted them to do. The novel ends with a family reunion on the occasion of

Thanksgiving, where Viola's letters to her children are publicly read by each of them. The letters contain Viola's instruction to her children to lead full lives and never to deprive themselves emotionally. She confesses her flaws in mothering and pleads exhaustion, but assures that she loves each of them equally. However, the most significant letter in this last chapter is perhaps the one addressed to her husband. After all these years Viola admits to her fear of living alone. She puts in encouraging words about for her husband Cecil starting a new business and a new life (with Brenda) but only wishes that he is around with his children more often.

The last chapter, with the family gathered at Cecil's house, is proof enough that Viola's wish has been carried out. The ending of the novel, where Lewis pledges to host the next Thanksgiving dinner at his own house, is further proof that the two 'men' in Viola's life—Lewis and Cecil, have assumed responsibility and been able to connect as father and son.

This novel, referred to as a tour-de-force, does bring together the father stories and mother stories while shedding light on issues of gender disparity, domestic violence and redeemable masculinity in Black culture. McMillan incorporates every possible Black stereotype and controlling image to document the present day Black reality which transcends them. Finally, questions of reconciling family discords, troubled mother-daughter or mother-son relationships are addressed to the therapeutic power of a Black ethic of love.

Trudier Harris, in her study entitled *Saint, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature*,⁶⁸ has pointed out that African American writers both male and female, are loath to do away with the stereotype of the strong Black woman. In a different way, she reconfirms Collins' view of fictional Black

women characters being created to counteract controlling images. Harris sees this trope of the strong Black woman as a testimony to the possibility of resistance.

According to her:

They suggest that the worlds—fictional and historical—in which Black women live and operate do not ultimately subdue them. The bodies that were contained by slavery, segregation, popular media, and public opinion cannot finally be contained by Black squiggles on white pages.⁶⁹

Viola Price is one of those survivors who has all the qualities of a strong Black matriarch and yet repeats again and again how tired she is of shouldering the responsibility for thirty-eight years. McMillan's creation of Viola Price and Cecil Price as 'Black mother' and 'Black father' and their dysfunctional family is an attempt to project the contemporary Black reality with its extended family set up as a possibility of improvement. Viola Price does not once refer to herself as a deprived Black woman and, like the deviants of *Bailey's Café* or the upwardly mobile characters in *Just As I Am*, the Price family discovers and creates its own kinship networks beyond the nuclear model. Gerald Early in his essay 'A Racial Education, Part Two'⁷⁰ has pointed out how deliberate Afrocentrism has become a 'middle brow' impulse and how his children have grown past the phase of possessing and exhibiting 'Afro-centric values'⁷¹ now that they are comfortable with their racial identity. Viola Price's letters to her children are letters of a mother and a wife, and not simply reflective of a Black woman's anguish. Viola's friendship with Loretta and her ability to tell her husband to get rid of his Jheri-Curl Afro are responses which do not show any racial anxiety. She realizes that her family is dysfunctional in the normative American pattern (as she has learned from Oprah), and tries to sort it out on her own way. She *is* the Black matriarch par excellence, but contemporary enough to negotiate the multicultural influences to which her grandchildren have been subjected.

Conclusion:

In her book *Rock My Soul*, bell hooks has advocated the need to assume individual responsibility so that Blacks can realize that they have the ability to heal themselves. In order for the Black race to acquire self-esteem, she asserts that:

We have to drop our addiction to suffering, to our complaint, whether its about what white folks have done, or what your mama and daddy did or what your man has done or these children have done. We have to let the suffering go.⁷²

The three novels discussed in this chapter are precisely about the successful ability of Black people to create love and to let go of suffering. The New Black Aesthetic of the 90s, with its emphasis on hybrid identities, also foregrounds the ethic of care-giving rather than the preoccupation with racial identity in its predominant tropes. Critically acclaimed literature, paraliterature and popular literature, all voice this ethic over and over again.

What we see in the 90s is actually a return to the Black kinship networks of the past. 'Family' as it figured in the American national myth was stringent in its nuclear proportions. The Black family, as hooks had observed, was never monolithic and therefore remained most suited to embrace the variety of roles and functions which a new hybrid, multicultural reality necessitated. The decade of the 80s, with its emphasis on the individual freedom of the Black woman, might have intensified the confusion regarding gender roles and the isolation of the individual. Collins, however, in her suggestions for Black feminist empowerment, has advocated a strategic change in the interpersonal domain of power, which would also be an effective tool to overcome negative representations of the Black family and community.⁷³ According to Collins:

...the interpersonal domain [of power] functions through routinized, day-to-day practices of how people treat one another. ...the interpersonal domain stresses that the everyday resistance strategies within this domain can take as many forms as there are individuals.⁷³

Along with revolutionizing the hegemonic domain of power, which would enable African American men and women to develop this consciousness regarding community and family based on individual history, the awareness of an interpersonal domain of power would be able to offer successful strategies of resistance.

The three novels discussed in this chapter all attest to the validity of these observations. The women in *Bailey's Café*, the characters in *Just As I Am* and Viola Price and Cecil Price in *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* all try to redefine their family and community relationships so as to finally arrive at a solution or a conclusion which does not see the white model of family and community as a normative one. But they move on from there to devise their individual strategies of resistance to various kinds of oppression. The oppression which Hill Collins talks about is a combination of racial, social and economic factors. In literature, the strategies of resistance formed by the fictional characters help to counteract this 'matrix of white oppression'.⁷⁴ Black authors have often gone against controlling images or stereotypes to resist such oppression. But in the novels of the 90s and the new millennium, it is evident that Black authors have chosen to employ the tropes of the New Black Aesthetic to establish the validity of a hybrid Black community which would more effectively counteract the dominant white discourse on family and community. For example, the women in *Bailey's Café* go on to form an almost surreal community which aids in the birth of a new order when the little boy George is born outside the Café. All of the deviants in the café, act in their own peculiar manner but are finally able to collectively resist together the oppression which has ruined their life.

As Collins has suggested, the characters have a dynamic consciousness by which they are able to recreate individual stories as oppressive or liberating, their biological roles as demanding or fulfilling. In *Just As I Am*, the characters also resist oppression by defining their sexual preferences within the Black community and chart out the different possibilities of same-sex relationships. Viola Price, in *A Day Late and A Dollar Short*, resists initially by trying to break away from the mould of a strong Black mother and claiming a different method of self actualization like buying her own house, as a right to independent living that is propagated by the white society. But the novel is about Viola Price's realization that motherhood and efforts at self-actualization may not be mutually exclusive. In fact, her legacy to her survivors is to appreciate their family as well as their selves, and not deprive the one for the other. That the Blacks were able to assert their ability to transcend negative representations of their family and community was largely due to the fact that the Democratic Party, when it came to power, enlivened the hopes for a new nation in which Black Americans would no longer have a marginalized identity. In their bid to reinvent themselves, Black writers like Naylor, Lynn Harris and McMillan supplied new models and new methods of resistance. At this moment of post-colonial consciousness, Black novelists are perhaps trying to create their version of an imagined community of human family. According to Benedict Anderson, in order to be inhabitants of imagined communities, people have to feel a 'deep, horizontal, comradeship'⁷⁵ which will ensure their simultaneity with others. By dynamically changing their consciousness and rethinking methods of resistance, the Blacks in the 90s, have forged such a collective identity without anxiety. As one of the characters in *Just As I Am* notes (perhaps alluding to Walker's *The Color Purple*):

God only gets mad at us when we come down here and pretend to be something we're not.⁷⁶

Now that they have overcome anxieties about their identity Black Americans have dedicated themselves to healing their community through love and tolerance.

In the conclusion, I will try to point out how Black activism evident in Black literature insists on foregrounding the emotional legacy of the Blacks as their special contribution to the American nation. In the new millennium the emphasis has been on love and trust in the family as well as towards the community; and I would like to show how this insistence is itself evolving into a trope of identity formation that is being emulated by other groups within the American nation, especially those with racially troubled histories. But none of have so far tried to conform to the model of the American nuclear family.

NOTES

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3. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *The Hard Road to Freedom*, p. 346.
4. Bell, *The Contemporary African-American Novel*, p. 302.
5. Ibid., p. 303.
6. Gloria Naylor, *Bailey's Café* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).
7. E. Lynn Harris, *Just As I Am* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995).
8. Terry McMillan, *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* (New York: Viking, 2001).
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11. Maxine Lavon Montgomery, 'Authority multivocality, and the New World Order in Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*' in *African American American Review* Terre Haute: Spring 1995: V. 29:1, pp. 27-34 available from: <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index>; Internet. Accessed on 19 December, 2006
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13. Naylor, *Bailey's Café*, p. 35.

14. Montgomery, 'Authority, Multivocality and the New World Order, p.28.
15. Naylor, *Bailey's Café*, p.91.
16. See 'Authority, Multivocality and the New World Order, p.3
17. Ibid., p.3.
18. Naylor, *Bailey's Café*, p.185.
19. hooks, *The Will to Change*, p.5, p.15.
20. Naylor, *Bailey's Café*, p.204.
21. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 111.
22. Naylor, *Bailey's Café*, p.225.
23. Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, p.213.
24. See Deborah E. McDowell, "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism, in *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, p.34.
25. Gloria Naylor, *Women of Brewster Place* (New York: Viking, 1982).
26. Gloria Naylor, *Linden Hills* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1985).
27. Montgomery, 'Authority, multivocality and the New World Order', p.4.
28. Naylor, *Bailey's Café*, pp.227-228.
29. Ibid., pp. 228-229.
30. Ibid., pp. 227.
31. Darlene Clark Hine, William C. Hine and Stanley Harold, *The African American Odyssey* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002), p. 598.
32. Bell, *The Contemporary African American Novel*, pp.250-252.
33. Ibid., p.253.

34. E.Lynn Harris, *Just As I Am*, pp.7-8.
35. Bell,*The Contemporary African American Novel*,pp.349-350.
36. Lynn Harris, *Just As I Am*,pp.7-8.
37. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, pp.151-160.
38. Ibid., pp.95-96.
39. Bell,*The Contemporary African American Novel*,p.360.
40. Ibid., pp. 361.
41. Lynn Harris,*Just As I Am*, p.164.
42. Ibid., p.169.
43. Ibid.,p.195.
44. Ibid., pp.220-221.
45. Ibid., p.205.
46. Ibid., p.244.
47. Ibid., p.245.
48. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, pp. 262-265.
49. David Blankehorn, 'The Reappearing Nuclear Family' in *The American Family*,ed. Karen Duda (The Reference Shelf, Vol.75, Number2, 2003)pt. *First Thing*, January 2002, pp.12-15.
50. Ibid., p.13.
51. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*. pp.178-183.
52. Wideman, *Fatheralong*, pp.177-197.

53. Ibid., Introduction, pp. xv – xxv.
54. Lynn Harris, *Just As I Am*, Title page.
55. bell hooks, *Rock My Soul : Black People and Self-Esteem* (New York :Atria Books, 2003), p.120.
56. Ibid., pp. 215-226.
57. Celebrated day-time talk show host Oprah Winfrey has become an icon in the black community. She frequently addresses problems pertaining to the Black family and offers solutions. Bell has also remarked in his *The Contemporary African American Novel* that Winfrey's talk show foregrounds the black family (in the late 80s and 90s) as a trope of identity formation. Bell, *The Contemporary African American Novel*, pp. 251-252.
58. Terry McMillan, *Mama* (New York: Pocket Books, 1987).
59. McMillan, *A Day Late and a Dollar short*, p.1.
60. Ibid., p.1.
61. Ibid., p.1.
62. Ibid., p.1.
63. Bell, *The Contemporary African American Novel*, p.383.
64. McMillan, *A Day Late and a Dollar Short*, p.14.
65. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *The Hard Road to Freedom*, p.349.
66. McMillan, *A Day Late and a Dollar Short*, p.4.
67. Ibid., p.4.

68. Trudier Harris, *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).
69. Ibid., p.179.
70. Gerald Early, 'A Racial Education, Part Two' in *These Hands I Know*, ed. Afaa Michael Weaver (Louisville: Sarabande Books, 2002), pp. 207-231.
71. Ibid, p.212.
72. hooks, *Rock My Soul*, p.211.
73. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p.287-288.
74. Patricia Hill Collins uses this phase repetitively in her book in order to emphasize the intersecting oppression of race, class and gender which black women are subjected to.
75. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London : Verso, 1983), p.7.
76. Lynn Harris, *Just As I Am*, p. 368. The same point has been made by Bell in *The Contemporary African American Novel*, p.365.