CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

There's no vocabulary
For love within a family, love that's lived in
But not looked at, love within the light of
which
All else is seen, the love within which
All other love finds speech.
This love is silent.
T. S. Eliot - The Elder Statesman

The novels of Anne Tyler, Josephine Humphreys and Gail Godwin represent a small part of a virtual outpouring of works of contemporary white women authors. Yet the patterns traced in the works of the three authors under consideration can be found in the novels of majority of their contemporaries, as well. A number of contemporary writers of the American South like Kaye Gibbons, Lee Smith and Bobbie Ann Mason have expressed a similar response in their works. Like Gail Godwin, Kaye Gibbons is a victim of a dysfunctional family and in her fictional texts she recreates the trauma of children who are victims of such families. Born Bertha Kaye Batts in 1960, Kaye Gibbons was raised in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. She lived in this very rural area,
about fifty miles east of Raleigh, with her mother and father in a four-room farmhouse. Gibbons used her experience in rural Rocky Mount to create the setting for Ellen Foster. After graduating from high school, Gibbons studied American and English literature at North Carolina State University, and she continued her studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she wrote Ellen Foster. In 1987, at the remarkably young age of twenty-six, Gibbons published Ellen Foster, which she based on her own nightmarish childhood experiences. When Gibbons was only ten years old, her mother committed suicide by overdosing on medication. Like Gibbons, Ellen too is only ten years old when her mother kills herself by ingesting an entire bottle of pills. Also autobiographical is Gibbons' portrayal of Ellen's father, who eventually drinks himself to death, as Gibbons' own alcoholic father did. In Ellen Foster, Gibbons fictionalizes her true life search for a loving home. Like Ellen, Gibbons found such a home with a foster mother after suffering much abuse by her cruel, self-involved relatives.

Ellen Foster is a memoir of traumatic childhood. The novel explores that a dysfunctional family is for childhood a beleaguered and endangered space. In its excruciating details it presents the life of eleven-year-old Ellen Foster who is an orphan, abused and neglected by her parents and finally abandoned to a series of cold or uncaring relatives. After her mother commits suicide by overdosing on her medication, eleven-year-old Ellen, the title character and narrator of the book, must
find herself a loving home and family to take her in. Immediately after her mother's
death, Ellen endures repeated physical, psychological, and sexual abuse by her
alcoholic father and, because of her father's habit, is forced to pay the bills, shop for
groceries, and cook for her. Ellen retreats to her friend Starletta's house for refuge
from her father and his food-grubbing, flesh-grabbing friends. Starletta and her
parents, who are black, live in a grungy cabin without an indoor bathroom.

When her teacher finds a bruise on Ellen's arm, she intervenes, and Ellen is sent to live
with Julia, the school's art teacher, and Roy, her husband. Both Julia and Roy are
young, liberal hippies who care for Ellen as best they can while she is with them.
Together with Starletta, they celebrate Ellen's eleventh birthday, which she had nearly
forgotten. However, Ellen must leave Julia and Roy when her grandmother battles for
and wins custody of her in court. Ellen does not want to leave Julia and Roy to stay
with her grandmother—a cruel, miserly old woman who has scarcely talked to her
ever before—but she must, per the court's orders. Ellen spends the summer with her
grandmother, whom she calls her "mama's mama,"(p.39) and is miserable with her.
Her grandmother owns farmland and orders Ellen to work the fields with her black
servants beneath the scorching summer sun. While working the fields, Ellen befriends
Mavis, a kind black woman who teaches Ellen how to row and who tells Ellen how
she had known her mother as a child. Mavis notes how much Ellen resembles Ellen's
mother.
Ellen's grandmother, however, is insistent that Ellen is a mirror image of her father, a wretched man whom both Ellen and her grandmother hate. She is constantly reminding Ellen that she is just like her father and somehow wants revenge on him through her torture of Ellen. Ellen's grandmother also tells Ellen that she is to blame for her mother's death, because Ellen had allowed her to die. During the course of her stay with her grandmother, Ellen's father dies, having suffered an aneurysm as a result of his habitual binge drinking. Ellen, who has thought of killing her father many times, had not planned on being sad to hear of his death. However, she feels as she does when a movie star dies—a distant sadness—and sheds a single tear for him. Her grandmother is furious at her show of emotion for her father and tells her never to cry again. Ellen is scarred for a long time afterwards, for at the close of the book, she still cannot bring herself to cry. After her father's death, Ellen determines that her grandmother had been paying her uncles, Rudolph and Ellis, to spy on her and her father while she was still living with him. When Rudolph brings over the flag that had been on Ellen's father's casket, her grandmother turns him away and later burns the flag in a wood fire she's made outside. When her grandmother falls ill, Ellen cares for her with the utmost tenderness, as she does not want to be blamed for yet another death. Inevitably, her grandmother dies, and Ellen frames her body with fake flowers, as if to "trick"(p.147) God into accepting her into heaven.
After her grandmother's death, Ellen is sent to live with her aunt Nadine, and her cousin Dora. Nadine and Dora treat Ellen condescendingly and ignore her for being "cheap,"(p.150) though they have little more money than Ellen and far less integrity. For Christmas, Ellen wants to give Nadine and Dora a wonderful gift. Because she cannot afford to buy them a present, Ellen uses her artistic talent and paints them a picture of two cute-looking cats. Ellen would not have personally chosen to paint cats, as they are empty of any deep emotional quality, though she knows that Nadine and Dora will appreciate them more than her pictures of the brooding ocean. When Nadine asks Ellen what she wants for Christmas, Ellen asks only for a package of art paper, though she secretly hopes that Nadine will give her a few other surprise gifts. Ellen works up her hope for these other few gifts and for Nadine and Dora's appreciation of her cat painting. Both of her hopes, disappointingly, are crushed on Christmas Day when she receives only the pack of white paper and later overhears Nadine and Dora making disparaging remarks about her painting, though Nadine had pretended to like it earlier that morning. Upon hearing this, Ellen is deeply ashamed and, moreover, enraged. She shuts herself in her room, and when Dora and Nadine aggravate her, she retaliates.
Nadine orders Ellen out of her house on Christmas day, and Ellen packs up her box and walks across town to the Foster lady's house in hopes that she will take her in. Ellen wears her best dress so that she will make a good first impression and, after a few moments of hesitation, knocks on the Foster lady's door. The woman, soon to become Ellen's "new mama,"(p.147) welcomes Ellen into her warm home and is concerned for Ellen's well being. Ellen offers her the one hundred and sixty six dollars she has been saving for the past two years in exchange for a home and a bit of attention. Ellen's new mama refuses the money but offers to call the county the first thing the next morning to negotiate her adoption of Ellen. In bed that night, Ellen thinks to herself how lucky she is to have her new mama, who, in the future, will provide her with plenty of love, food, and nurturing.

After Ellen has settled in at her new mama's house, she wants to invite Starletta to sleep over, since they have drifted apart as each has grown older. Ellen thinks how brave it is to be breaking a social rule in having a black person sleep over a white person's house. Ellen is ashamed as she remembers how, two years ago, she would not even eat supper with Starletta and her family and only because of their skin color. Now, Ellen vows to lick Starletta's cup if that is what it takes to prove her love for her.
When Starletta does come over Ellen's new house, Ellen confesses to her the remorse
she feels for past prejudices and, ultimately, realizes that it has been Starletta, not herself, who has had the most hardship to endure.

The psychological impact of the dysfunctional family is also reflected in the works of Lee Smith. In the *Family Linen* Smith presents a host of damaged characters who are victims of a fragmented family. In Roanoke, Virginia, Sybill Hess, a middle-aged spinster, suffers splitting headaches. Under hypnosis, she recalls her mother's axe murder of her father. She leaves immediately for the homestead in Booker Creek, Virginia, to investigate. When Sybill arrives, her mother lies dying from a stroke. As the family gathers around, Sybill makes a hysterical but vain attempt to learn the truth. Her mother monument of Booker Creek respectability—dies without speaking, and a family scene erupts in the hospital hallway. After the funeral, as the legacy is divided, a family investigation quietly proceeds. What is unearthed is shocking for the family, but entertainment for the small town: a corpse, a diary, some interesting revelations concerning parentage, and a whole series of infidelities. The reader may be either shocked or entertained or both. Only to the reader is all the dirty linen aired, since the story is told through an amazing variety of interior monologues and restricted points of view: two sisters', four daughters', one son's, one grandson's, and the deceased's (through the diary). The variety of voices that the author commands is reminiscent of her previous novel, *Oral History*. So too is the insight into family dynamics, the
mystery of individual fates, and social change through the generations. The last is amply and happily in evidence at the end when, in this small Appalachian town, a pregnant granddaughter of the deceased is married, with the wedding ceremony held by the family’s new swimming pool—built on the spot where the corpse was dug up.

Like Tyler, Humphreys and Godwin, Lee Smith explores the idea of the past, of how ones private and public histories shape ones life. She treats the subject in complex ways. The quotation with which Smith begins Family Linen is from L P. Hartley's The Go-Between: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." (p.56) In The Dispossessed Garden, Lewis Simpson quotes Faulkner: "There is no such thing really as was, because the past is" (xx). The statements suggest the ways in which the past is always there with an individual, colouring and shaping the present, and more to the point, the way it informs the lives of all the characters in both of the novels dealt with here. But the passage Smith quotes suggests also that one does change and learn to do things differently; the present is not entirely determined by the past. Finally, it could be argued that at the end of Family Linen, Smith presents a diminished present, that the "shrimp trees: the freestanding arrangements of glads as big as trees: the three floating arrangements of red roses in the pool, mounted on Styrofoam, anchored in place by weights," (p.41) and "Ernest Dodd and the Rhythm Masters: all suggest an ambience of high tacky". (p.41) But the wedding cake is baked, stacked, and frosted by Mary June who has "made every wedding cake for every serious wedding that ever
happened in Booker Creek for fifteen years" (p.48), and the bride insisted on making her wedding dress from her grandmother's ancient lace tablecloth. Myrtle's "big glass coffee table looks wonderful" alongside her mother's "antique wing chair" (p.65). The past and present come together here in a rich celebration of both. Both in this novel and in the act of writing it, Smith argues that confronting the past and even preserving what is of use can be a liberating experience and, most important, that the present still holds the possibility for meaningful lives occasionally lit by transcendent moments.

A few protagonists who have chosen to marry and lead traditional lives have used their conventional roles successfully, finding self-expression, personal fulfillment and self growth in the process. In Bobbie Ann Mason’s Spence and Lila, Lila loses a breast to cancer, faces the approach to death, only to look back with satisfaction on a life in which “she and [her husband] Spence have spent a lifetime growing things together”(p.143) Abandoned by her father and married to Spence before she turned eighteen, Lila has led a limited life in partnership with her husband-helping on their farm, raising three children, working in a clothing factory to provide extras for the family, and travelling to see a little of the world before she falls ill. Nevertheless, she feels valued by her family for her individuality, resiliency, wit and strength, finding continued pleasure in the company of her husband and children, as they do in hers and in the daily world “stirring with aroused possibility” (p.98) they share together.
In Kaye Gibbon’s *A Virtuous Woman*, another protagonist, Ruby Stokes, dies at forty-five of lung cancer and yet she feels her life has been fulfilled through her second marriage to a gentle kind man twenty years her senior. After a violent first marriage to John Woodrow (who ends up being killed at an early age), Ruby regains her love and self respect through Jack Stokes’ love, taking pride in her role as his wife, saying “but you ought to see the way I have kept this house and cooked for Jack. I’m sorry to say that I might not have much in my life to be proud of, but I’m surely pleased with myself every time I see bread rise”(p.73)

The importance of intergenerational family solidarity is also explored in the works of these white women writers. The grandmother in Gibbon’s *A Cure for Dreams* takes responsibility for women and children in her Milk Farm Road community. Satisfied with her own life journey from “the bottom rung”(p.18) in Bell County, Kentucky, to Milk Farm Road in Virginia, determined to restore order and justice wherever she can, the grandmother of *A Cure for Dreams* finds her own self-sufficiency strengthened by the self-sufficiency of others. Her admiring daughter recalls for her own daughter, “Mr. Roosevelt’s programs were very helpful, but I’m sure he never realized how much women like my mother were doing to help him pick up after Mr. Hoover”(p.64)

In *Charms for the Easy Life* Gibbons presents another resilient grandmother. Charlie Kate has passed on to her daughter, Sophie and her grand-daughter, Margaret, all her remedies for life’s problems, including the charm for “the easy-life” (p.65) given her
by a black man she has saved from lynching. Hence the works of these contemporary white women writers reflect their attempts toward reformulations of self and community that recognize the interdependence of the individual and the family.

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**Families** are the quintessential institution of any Nation, providing both biological and social continuity. Families are the locus of consumption, savings, and some production activities that are vital to the overall economic well-being, and they bear special responsibilities for nurturing and educating nation's future work force. The family is not an isolated arena in which one can achieve full independence or be subjected to complete domination. Family issues are particularly interesting because everyone in some way or other can relate to them. Certain aspects of the family may be seen as universal or archetypal, positioned outside time and place. According to the dramatist Sam Shepard, everything can be traced back to the family: "What doesn't have to do with family? There isn't anything, you know what I mean? Even a love story has to do with family. Crime has to do with family. We all come out of each other - everyone is born out of a mother and a father, and you go on to be a father. It's an endless cycle" (qtd. in Bigsby, "Born Injured" 21). Family issues are intensely personal yet powerfully universal. The novels of Tyler, Humphreys and Godwin probe deeply into
the American psyche and explore the cultural heritage of the nation, yet they have a mainstream appeal to people all over the world.

Individuals in some way or other are shaped by the family they belong to; it remains rooted in their experience, their identity, their personality, as Miller argues:

We - all of us - have a role anteceding all others: we are first sons, daughters, sisters, brothers (...) the concepts of Father, Mother, and so on were received by us unawares before the time we were conscious of ourselves as selves (The Family in Modern Drama 81).

The family is indeed a contested site on many levels as it engages social, cultural and economic capital. It is also the most representative site that deals with the issues of gender inequality, domestic violence both physical and emotional and child abuse. The family has inevitably been the site for challenges, changes and compromises. In recent times the monolithic concept of family has been interrogated frequently. Despite disturbing statistics of the gradual disintegration of the urban middle class family and erosion of family values resulting in a paradigm shift, the need for family bonding has simultaneously re-emerged.

The breakup of a marriage often results in a financial setback especially for women. In most cases the children remain with the mother, allowing the father to pursue a new life. Women often have to find work, as well as deal with the emotional trauma of
the new family arrangement. Studies have shown that men's income steadily increases while women's decrease. Often the new family will have to move into more affordable housing, and lower their standard of living, leaving fewer options for the children. Parenting issues with the children is another area of concern. A working relationship may not always exist, which will result in the courts designing a custody arrangement which may not be suitable to both parents. Much pain and grief result when both parents want the children on special days or occasions. Often vindictive words and actions are exchanged between fighting parents.

Custody of the children and visitation rights has long dominated the family court agenda and continues to do so. The effect of the divorce may have lasting consequences on one or both parties. A wide range of emotions will emerge, from anger, resentment, to loneliness and even love. Divorce has a devastating “effect on children” as they are usually caught in the middle. They are carted off to the homes of each parent on a regular basis. Often they may hear disturbing talk about their Mother or Father, and may be influenced to take sides. Divorce continues to cast a dark shadow on the American economy by changing the dynamics of the nation’s resources. The novels of Tyler, Humphreys and Godwin reflect their persistent critique of American society and their desire to wake a social conscience in their readers.
The comprehensive understanding of the family systems theory allows a nuanced and rewarding reading of the novels of Tyler, Humphreys and Godwin. First espoused by Bowen (1976, 1978), family systems theory provides a developmental paradigm that focuses on how an individual's sense of self emerges in the context of emotional attachments in his or her multigenerational family system. Bowen asserts that the "family is a system in that a change in one part of the system is followed by compensatory change in other parts of the system" (p.86). The fictions of these contemporary writers reflect close associations with Bowen's psycho-social theories. Simultaneously their fictional representations of the dynamics of family relationships serve as apt reflections of the cultural climate of America in the last four decades of the twentieth century. These writers attempt to sensitize the readers about the need for an integrated family and engage them in a new understanding of the self and affirm the possibility of shared familial understanding that can contribute towards consolidation of familial interdependence leading to empowerment of self and society.