CHAPTER – I

INTRODUCTION

A woman is the full circle, within her is the power to create, nurture and transform.

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The thesis entitled “Identity and Autonomy in the Select Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston” focuses on identity, autonomy, gender bias, racism, sexism, colour discrimination, slavery, marginalization, alienation and so on…in the African American literature. The author chosen for the study is Zora Neale Hurston, a prominent writer in the African American genre. A special attention is given to female identity and autonomy and the women’s emergence among the troubles and trouble shooters in their society. The gradual rise of women’s literature is of two significant events in the American history. In the search for the roots of their experience, African American women and men have started to unearth the long ignored “missing” black authors and their literary works. Zora Neale Hurston is one of the most eminent African American women writers, an unflinching crusader of African American people, stoically suffered for long.

The writer fights against social atrocities championing the cause of the black race. This is the era in which black feminist literary criticism has really developed enough to provide African American women of their own experience with regard to African American (women’s) literature. Of course, African American male writers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright are already well known in the African American community, but they are men. There is not much awareness of African American women writers’ talents and their literary works. Attainment of women’s suffrage is one of the many historic changes in the last few centuries. Women’s rights including women’s suffrage, liberation, freedom for self and individuality, independence are the outcome of the female writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Alice walker, Tony Morrison and etc. struggle through their pens.
The term “Identity” refers to one’s rights, equality and dignity, equal opportunity in work and education and equal pay. Here the focused “Female identity” denotes a movement advocating the cause of women’s rights and legitimate demands, particularly equal rights with men by challenging blatant and rampant inequalities between the sexes in the society. And the term “Autonomy” refers to self-decision or individual thought or self-assertion which constitutes uniqueness in the society, where “Female-autonomy” denotes that female’s assertion and constitution of their individuality. The value and necessity of female autonomy is strongly felt in the African American community and emerged as one of the significant political and cultural currents of the last decade. Identity and Autonomy as a concept can be defined as the search for self-assertion and its relationship to social contexts and realities. The problems such as biological, psychological, cultural and social issues have been treated thematically in various contexts, and brought in the writings of African-Americans.

African-Americans have widely accepted that they are socio-historic products, not only bound to one another by racial and biological commonalities, but also molded by the consequences of slavery and betrayal. Many women writers like Zora Neale Hurston have naturally emerged to focus their identity and autonomy on the literary horizon. The writers of all races have recognized the inexhaustible literary potential of African-American self-examination and self-exploration. Identity is often regarded as a function of place. There is a strong relationship between the environments into which the inexorable fate placed them and their own definition of the sense of female identity and self-assertion. The African American women have longed for their identity and dignity in the society, and they have suffered a lot in different ways such as alienation, colour-discrimination, marginalization, slavery Identity, autonomy, and gender-bias and so on.

Foster, a critic has observed, “as far as the major white literary critics are concerned, black literature never existed” (1973, 444). Foster, however, also notes that as early as in 1895, an African American woman, Victoria Earle Matthews, have written an address titled, “The value of Race Literature” in which she said that:
“a part of a long tradition of extra-curricular literary study” (1973, 444), is mainly by African American women who are obscured by the white world. The tradition of the African American community, backing and writing about African American literature, is born out of racism, marginalization and sexism. In addition, it should be noted that black women have already set up literary clubs in the early 19th and 20th centuries and published a black journal called Crisis that is featured published poems and stories by African American writers. The 1920s is a rich time for African American literature that has acquired a strong black culture trend and novelty. The feminist movement has provided a wider horizon for women to turn their thoughts into words. Women have begun to translate the experiences of being suppressed into such literary forms as drama, fiction, and expository prose. From the end of the nineteenth century to the early years of the twentieth century, most women writers have felt that they are in a period of significant transition. Many of them have been empowered to write about what they have vigorously opposed and to emphasize their request for equality and equal justice for both men and women in the society.

The era extending roughly from 1914 to 1939 is called the modern period in which many literary men have felt more anxious than their female counterparts. They are anxious about the rapid changes of the world they are living in. For this reason, the period of change is called “The Age of Anxiety” by W.H. Auden. Eagleton, Hazel Carby and other critics believe that women’s movement has brought the female literary tradition into being and resurrected the classical writings, which recorded female attitudes and imaginations. The feminist movements have given voice to women and presented a new understanding of the essence of femaleness. Eagleton explains the importance of feminist movements in creating a female literary tradition that:

It is the women’s movement, part of the other movements of our time for a fully human life that has brought this forum into being; kindling a renewed, in most instances a first-time, interest in the writings and writers of our sex. Linked with the old, resurrected classics on women, this movement in three years has accumulated
In the 1970s, feminist critics from Britain and the United States focus on the idea of silencing women writers and excluding them from literary history. In this period feminist critics are interested in reviving the forgotten works of women writers while creating a context that would substantiate contemporary women writers and demonstrate what it takes to be a female. The fact that literary criticism concentrated only on male writers, which has urged the critics of this period to demand legitimate attention and recognition for women authors as well. However, the aim of these critics is not merely to find a female entity in the male-dominated literary world, but also to create a literary tradition among women themselves.

Women writers have always felt an affinity among themselves; they competed with one another and encouraged those who are reluctant to share their experiences. This “affinity” is also seen in the way in which one literary work might pave the ground for another group of feminist writers, as we will see in the example of Hurston and Alice Walker. Literary critics like Showalter have offered two views. First, she has criticized the use of the term “movement” which implied an ongoing continuous tradition, unlike the female literary works in reality which are easily fractured and erased. She speak about the vulnerability and ruptures in the female literary body. It has constantly left new comers struggling to revive the broken tradition. Secondly, Showalter believes that the concept of “female imagination” coined by Patricia Meyer Speck stresses the basic and natural differences between male and female perceptions of the world. This essentialist or “biologist” way of thinking confirms that women have intrinsic common bonds. Nevertheless, the concept of “female imagination” could endanger the female tradition because it represents a risk of rendering female writings a historical and a political by neglecting the indispensable aspects of class, race and history. Showalter, along with other literary critics, was among the first to stress that establishing a female tradition which is challenging because it introduced the determinant of “gender” into literary criticism and rearranged literature as a whole to focus on the identity and autonomy of the African American writers.
Among the early African American representations, in the nineteenth century, The Seneca Falls Declaration is the first important document of an American women’s movement. The Declaration is adopted in a meeting in which the social, civil, and religious conditions and rights of women are considered. After this meeting, a number of resolutions are made, Stein most notably the one that confirmed that: “All laws which prevent women from occupying such a station in society as her conscience shall dictate, or which place her in a position inferior to that of men, are contrary to the great precepts of nature, and therefore of no force or authority” (81). Frederick Douglass (1817 -1895), an American slave who has been freed ten years prior to the Seneca Falls Declaration and editor of the weekly abolitionist newspaper The North Star, has written in his autobiography, “when the true history of the anti-slavery cause shall be written, women will occupy a large space in its pages, for the cause of the slave has been peculiarly woman’s cause”(83). Douglass is moved by women’s devotion and efficiency at addressing the cause of slavery and became interested in women’s rights. He is seen as a women’s rights activist and said: “I am glad to say that I have never been ashamed to be thus designated” (83).

Patricia Meyer is present at the Seneca Falls meeting and has been an effective advocate for full political rights for women. For many decades, Douglass has participated actively in women’s rights conventions and meetings, despite the hostile and abusive responses from the American organs of opinion. In his editorial in The North Star of July 28th, 1884, Douglass has written: “A discussion of the rights of animals would be regarded with far more complacency by many who are called the wise and good of our land, than would be a discussion of the rights of women” (84). He adds “Many, who have at last made the discovery that Negroes have some rights as well as other members of the human family, have yet to be convinced that women are entitled to any”(84). African American women’s lives during this period are distinctively different from the lives of Victorian women. They no longer strictly adhered to feminine ideology; rather they searched for progress by entering universities, and joining cultural institutions from which they are once stringently excluded. There are popular women novelists and memoirists like Wharton and Will
Cather who has explored the dynamics and the triumphs of female lives. There are also prominent feminist writers like Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield and Zora Neale Hurston whose works put forth similar ideas about the power of women. These authors also illustrated the strength of their heroines to find their identity and autonomy in their literary works.

While studying about feminist authors, one can have a glimpse of the social conditions that contributed to the creation of the Harlem Renaissance and the wretched position of the African American women in the beginning of the twentieth century. The Harlem Renaissance is the name for a movement especially connected with the distribution and recognition of African American literature, music, art and culture. But it also functioned as a starting point for the new African American artists in the United States. The beginning and the end of the movement has not been defined yet; it started in 1919s and ceased in 1930s. The Harlem Renaissance would probably have never arisen if the African Americans have stayed in rural areas. There is a massive migration of the African American from the rural South to the industrial North in order to find better working conditions and more equal rights for them. The movement lasted for about twenty years and the biggest wave of migrants is esteemed to have been in 1915-1916.

The Harlem Renaissance can also be known as Black Renaissance or New Negro Movement that “is connected with the interest and curiosity of the development of social and economic problems” (Franklin and Moses362). Even though it has been many years since the abolishment of slavery by the Proclamation Act in 1863, the situation was not much better. Moses notes that

Blacks were not called slaves, but the conditions they lived in were more than similar to those at the time of slavery, may be even worse. Blacks had no masters who provided housing and food for them, but they had to struggle through their harsh lives and sometimes even hid because of the threat of lynching. There were schools, banks, public transportation and places which were separate for the blacks and the whites.(362)
Garvey’s **Black Nationalism**, which emerged in 1850s, is noted for its “militancy and aggression” (Huggins22). His unrealizable dream is to create a **State** in Africa which the African Americans would develop into a real nation. Some realistic and revolutionary ideas are propagated by the organization named **Universal Negro Improvement Association** (UNIA), founded in 1920s which Garvey moved from his home Jamaica to Harlem, from where he spread his dynamic thoughts, but unfortunately his dreams could not be fulfilled. However, there are many people who are inspired by his imagination and seriously believed and accepted his ideas. As a matter of fact, Garvey is someone who brought some hope to find the identity and autonomy for the African Americans.

African American women are, for a long time, is at the bottom of every social hierarchy deliberately created by men, based on the interaction of race, gender, class and systems of identity. Owing to the dawn of awareness, they have decided to revolutionize the horrible scenario and assiduously fought against gender, race and class discrimination and concomitant inhuman oppressions. It is traditionally assumed that the man is the head of the family, who is the leader of the house or nation because his knowledge of the world is mistakenly presumed to be broader than that of women. Further, it is thought that Women could not do things as efficiently as men, and that they are made by nature to function differently. Women are seen as incompetent, dependent and incomplete. There is thus a gross prejudice against women in general and African America women in particular, in the history of mankind. But this picture gradually changed when Zora Neale Hurston emerge on the literary horizon. She contributed a great deal in drastically changing this prejudicial perspective of women. She is an outstanding African-American anthropologist, folklorist, novelist, playwright, autobiographer, and essayist. Her literary works are considered as an important milestone in the history of the African-American literary world and the Harlem Literature. She employed folk language, folkways and folk stories as symbols to measure the intrinsic values of the black oral cultural tradition, race gender, colour discrimination identity and autonomy, and so on.
The New Negro movement is mainly focused on identity, autonomy, color discrimination, racism, marginalization, gender-bias, sexism etc. brought about profound changes in the African American writers’ outlook and attitude. The African-American literary club has talented artists full of energy and racial pride. This movement is even known as Harlem Renaissance and it is the awakening of the African-American conscience through literature, painting and music. Humor, perseverance, pride, courage, sarcasm, musicality and criticism are some of the spices present in the literary creations of the period. The Harlem Renaissance has brought out powerful talents from many African American writers. The movement splendidly blossomed in a short period of time between the end of the First World War and the Great Depression. This is in part, a contribution from the black urban migration – doctors, singers, painters and writers – and the rise of radical African-Americans and W.E.B. Du Bois. Harlem Renaissance is not only a literary movement; it is a social revolt against racism in which they urged for identity and autonomy. The participants wanted to discover and redefine the African-American culture. They are encouraged to celebrate their heritage and become a “new negro”. Leon-Gontran Damas, Leopold Senghor and Césarie, were the African poets who pointed out the concept of Negritude which represented a fundamental development in notions of African dysphoric identity and culture in this century. The African and Antillean controversies around the term Negritude subsequently initiated one of the fundamental debates in postwar ‘global black thought.’ Senghor’s description of the term triggered a radical reversal of dominant racialist discourse in the West. Finally, Cesaie’s historicizing phenomenological use of the term promoted a developmental model of enlightenment that sustained and advanced the transformational project of African American liberation.

The literary works of the Harlem Renaissance writers have dealt with the issues of race, class, religion and gender and are presented as autobiographies, poetry, short stories, novels and folklore. Not only male, female writers also have developed a discipline called African American feminist literary criticism. This newness is due to a lack of consensus among the literary establishments on an acknowledged body of writings by African American women. This tradition is characterized by distinctive
qualities that conformed to the more mature ideology defined by male and female critics. Barbara Smith, in 1977, in her essay, **Toward a Black feminist criticism**, has voiced her sense of danger. She felt convinced that she is writing something unprecedented because writing about black women writers from a feminist perspective has not been done by male writers, although they have paid most attention to African American women writers as a group. She calls black feminist movement to “open up the space needed for the exploration of black women’s lives and the creation of consciously black women-identified art” (Mitchell 411).

Though African American feminist literary criticisms have come into existence before 1960s and 1970s, it chiefly gained national and wider attention through the re-emergence of an interest in (classic) African American literature. It also coincides with the emergence of the “new” authors, poets and writers, such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Gayl Jones, to mention a few. Further, African American feminists took the African American literature to new heights in the public eyes as well as in the academia. It could be further noted that the black feminist literary criticism is spurred by the ignorance and neglect about African American women writers and their works in main stream of feminist literary theory. In her introduction to the anthology “Black Women”, Toni Cade Bambara states that it is partly created out of impatience---that in the whole biography of feminist literature, literature immediately and directly relevant to us wouldn’t fill a page. Like Black feminism, Black feminist theory criticism is also shaped and connected to the history of the African Americans, especially that of the women. Harris notes, “The close ties between African-American history and literature are undeniable----”. (93)

African American women writers in particular are prolific in writing about the experience of the African American women during the times of slavery, which of course is not very surprising, for many of the traumas and stereotypes witnessed even today are said to stem from that era. Collins, a critic expresses that the fictional works by African American women writers constitute a distinctively rich site for exploring African American women’s agency and reclaiming the voices of the oppressed. Thus, in a sense, African American women’s literature became a tool for coping with the
traditionally unique but often burdened and painful history of the black womanhood but they fought for their identity and autonomy in the African American society.

The African-American women have shared history and the way in which it is connected them closely with one another despite, for instance, regional and class differences, and most of them have shared with one another the century-old long history as the oppressed slaves and the struggles experienced during segregation up to their contemporary efforts. Hence, it seems to be a principal agenda for African American feminists to keep the history of African American women and their past struggles still alive lest they might be forgotten. A central tenet of modern feminist thought has been the assertion that “all women are oppressed”. This assertion implies that women share common factors like class, race, and religion, and sexual preference, etc., do not create a diversity of experience that determines the extent to which sexism will be an oppressive force in the lives of individual women. Sexism as a system of domination is institutionalized but it has never determined in an absolute way, the fate of all women in this society. Being oppressed is the primary point of contact between the oppressed and the oppressor. They struggle to come out of it to find their identity and autonomy and prove themselves in the male dominated society.

African-American feminist writers have illustrated the direct result of specific political, social, psychological and economic experiences in their works. Their literary products thematically have ensued of their direct experiences. They also illustrate in their works women’s struggle for their identities. They reveal how they sacrificed themselves for the family, community or race and relate how they explored their own abilities, needs and desires. These authors always clarify black women’s “self-definition as one of the important elements in their writings”(Tyson 395). She history of women’s literature reveals indisputably that women’s work has been excluded and marginalized for a long time until the Renaissance period when such writing is limited to church activities, courts or to women in the upper class. Few women in the Western world have written during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But subsequently several different organizations fought for racial equality and Black Feminist
Movement vehemently addressed sexism and other related issues as Bell Hooks observes:

Every Black person concerned about our collective survival must acknowledge that sexism is a destructive force in Black life that cannot be effectively addressed without an organized political movement to change consciousness, behavior and institutions. What we need is a feminist revolution in Black life. But to have such a revolution, we must first have a feminist movement. Many Black folks do not know what the word feminism means. They may think of it only as something having to do with white women’s desire to share equal rights with white men. In reality, feminism is a movement to end all sexism and sexist oppression. The strategies necessary to achieve that end are many. We need to find ways to address the specific forms that sexism takes in our diverse communities.(1992:124)

As this quote suggests, many African American women could not relate completely to the mainstream of Anglo-American feminist movement, although it is self-evident that in some respects white and black feminisms are related. Obviously, both criticized the Western culture generally, and the Western canon more particularly, for being patriarchal (Russ, 1973: 4 and Gilbert & Gubar, 1979: 45-46). Yet, many African American women are considered the mainstream feminist movement narrow and elitist, as it is “markedly white, middle-class, Western, and heterosexual, and (...) [consequently] ha[s] been participating in the marginalization of women of color, working-class women, Third World women and lesbians”(Ward & Herndl, 1997: 259). African American women explicitly refuted the suggestion that there is something as “the female consciousness” or “the female experience”. As Christian says:

For we now confronted the revelations we always knew, that there is both a She and there are many she’s. And that sometimes, in our work we seemed to reduce the both-and to either-or. That revelation
made itself felt strongly in the exclusion that women of color protested when Woman was defined …. The awareness that we too seek to homogenize the world of our Sisters, to fix ourselves in boxes and categories through jargon, theory, abstraction, is upon us. (1997: 54)

Although the white and the black women certainly have in common as women, it is something totally different to be black and female. So, even among women, universality does not exist. The double marginalization that is implied by being a black woman has called for a feminist theory that “seeks to explore representations of black women’s lives through techniques of analysis which suspend the variables of race, class, and gender in mutually interrogative relation” (Smith, 1997: 318). As Hooks a famous critic argues:

We are in need of more feminist scholarship which addresses a wide variety of issues in black life (mothering, black masculinity, the relationship between gender and homicide, poverty, the crisis of black womanhood, connections between health and our conceptions of the body, sexuality, media, etc.) that could have transformative impact on our future. (1989: 56)

According to Hooks, such a specific black feminist movement will not cause a division among blacks – as many black men fear – but will instead bring liberation of the race at large closer. “A feminist movement that addresses the needs of Black women, men and children can strengthen our bonds with one another, deepen our sense of community and further Black liberation (Hooks, 1992: 124)”’. It has been illustrated that white and black feminisms certainly have important features in common. In spite of the attempts of some white feminists to include the black feminism in their feminism, black women have however regarded themselves as incompatibly different and have called a black feminist movement into life. “The women suffer a great deal from being considered as anomalies, to challenge and question their inferior condition” (Gilbert and Gubar 153). Only men assumed an active role in producing literary works. As Virginia Woolf states through her fictional
character Judith, Shakespeare’s sister, in A Room of One’s Own, Women’s opportunities to write in the old days were unconscionably restricted by the rule of patriarchy. “To be ambitious like men in the world of literature was meaningless and it was almost impossible for women to realize their dreams” (Gilbert and Gubar 1376-1383). Simone de Beauvoir mentioned in The Second Sex that women were less influential because all concrete powers were in the hands of men. The space of women in putting their creativity into words was narrowed. Gilbert asserts that: “patriarchal rules had kept women voiceless and put them in a state of dependence since the earliest days” (149). She in addition to also express that: “Women do not set themselves up as subject, they have no religion or poetry of their own: they still dream, through the dreams of men” (150). Simone’s de Beauvoir’s view on the necessary process of women’s liberation reflects the ideas she presents for both men and women more generally in her essay “Personal Freedom and Others” (150). In this essay she presents freedom as a state that can be achieved through enlightenment. As children find themselves “cast into a universe which [they] ha[ve] not helped to establish, they realize their negative being and begin to question their perspective of the world” (Ethics of Ambiguity, 39). By questioning their world, they realize their potential to become enlightened. And though they take time reach a state of enlightenment, they continuously engage with their own subjectivity in a lifelong struggle for identity and self assertion.

According to Simon de Beauvoir’s analysis, women are currently still similar to children by being subject to a universe they did not create. Women only participate in a societal structure that men have forced upon them: “[Women] can exercise their freedom, but only within this universe which has been set up before them, without them… they can only submit to the law, the gods, the customs, and the truths created by males” (Ethics of Ambiguity, 37). Women therefore must find their own existence in the world by occupying a negative space in order for them to find their own individual human capacity: “To exist is to make oneself a lack of being; it is to cast oneself into the world” (42). However, Simone de Beauvoir differentiates women from children because women act complacent in relation to the world man has given them: “The child’s situation is imposed upon him, whereas the woman (I mean
the western woman of today) chooses it or at least consents to it” (38). Finding solidarity in their oppression, women should come together to help and liberate each other. In liberating each other, women can gain their deserved freedom.

Simone de Beauvoir understands freedom for women as willing themselves free by finding solidarity in others and resisting the temptation to remain ignorant of the possibility of their own liberation. She also grasps the complexity that arises in attempting to answer why women are continually held in a state of oppression by men: “the constraints that surround her and the whole tradition that weighs her down prevent her from feeling responsible for the universe” (The Second Sex, 713). Women are torn between embracing the role of the other and becoming independent, free thinking women. Simone de Beauvoir firmly believes the solution for women to fulfill their true potential is to find liberty: “what woman needs first of all is to undertake, in anguish and pride, her apprenticeship in abandonment and transcendence: that is, in liberty” (The Second Sex, 711). In The Second Sex Maggie achieves this liberation by utilizing knowledge to free herself from the restraint society placed upon her. By finding their subjectivity, women can then participate in the public sphere with men, and not as the other. Simone de Beauvoir calls on every individual in our society, male and female, to make freedom to find their identity and autonomy, for all human beings.

Black feminists portray African American women as complex selves, showing their journeys from the condition of victims to the realization of personal autonomy or even creativity, Yet need to aspire for their identity besides family and community personal relationships. For the American people, radical Protestantism, Constitutional democracy, and industrial capitalism are the white American trinity of values. These values, themes, forms and character are present in the African American novel, especially because their writers have the consciousness of being black and female in a white male society, sharing and escaping from their own interiority. Toni Morrison (1931- ) as a black woman writer, shows how the standards of the mainstream culture cause suffering and fracture in the lives of her black female characters, especially in The bluest eye (1970), where those standards cannot be
reached, once they are alien to black people. The racism inherent in both ideals destroys those who struggle to reach them, causing the inner destruction; sometimes this suffering leads to madness. African American women are portrayed in relation to the influence they suffer from the white ones and from society in their search for their own identity and autonomy. The African American women are excluded from a universe of love and tenderness where the figure of man is a key element for their imprisonment in madness, silence, sexual oppression and lack of hope. Silent, desperate, and isolated, these women cannot escape a life of unfulfilled desires. Malcom states that:

As the black population increased, with blackness becoming synonymous with slavery, the blacks were increasingly described in negative terms by non-blacks. Eventually, the negative description of blackness created the social necessity for a positive antonym: whiteness. Whiteness, then, was born from a negative reaction to others and not a positive sense of self-identification: “whites were not so much white as they were non-black (281-82).

Bell Hooks has observed that: “Throughout the history of the black women, sexism stood as equally oppressive and threatening as racism, patriarchy or institutionalized sexism” (214). All these elements formed the infrastructure of the American social order and racial imperialism. Sexism is brought from Europe with the early white American fathers. It lingered in the New World and is to bring about a great deal of misfortune to the female black slaves. When an African American woman bore children, they were legally enslaved, regardless of the race of the father. The value of the female slave increased and the slave traders shifted their focus to the black women, who would do all the work and produce slave children in any case. Amanda Berry Smith, a 19th century black missionary and African culture observer, has written prior to a visit to the American communities that:

The poor women of Africa like those of India have a hard time. As a rule, they have all the hard work to do. They have to cut and carry the wood, carry all the water on their heads and plant all then rice.
The men and boys cut and burn the bush with the help of the women; but sowing the rice, and planting the cassava, the women have to do. You will so often see a great, big man walking ahead with nothing in his hand but a cutlass (as they always carry that or a spear), and a woman, his wife, coming on behind with a great big child on her back, and a load on her head. (120).

Further she states that, The African woman is a reference in “The art of obedience to a higher authority by the tradition of her society” (122). Thus the African American woman is the perfect subject for enslavement. The white owners on the black plantations have seen that the African women are as useful as slaves; they are already accustomed to working in fields and at home as well. The passage of the slaves from Africa to America aboard slave ships is a hell for the African men and women who are transported to live in slavery in the New World. The torment and brutalization that men and women endured on the ships is only the beginning of a canon that would turn the free African human being into a helpless slave. This stream line made the feminist writers to embark on for their identity and autonomy through their literary works which would speak for the African American women.

Elizabeth Fox, a critic reveals her opinion on African American female writers that: “who had never had much opportunity to write in their own names or the names of their kind, and much less in the name of the culture as a whole” (162-3), not only desired to write, speak and thus claim their experiences as black female subjects; in addition, they also craved for presenting the essential spirit of the African American culture and community that has shaped their identities and formed their experiences. African American female writers, in this respect, did not place ‘self-ism’ above ‘our-ism’ nor sacrifice “self-ism” in favor of “our-ism”. Instead, what they wanted to speak through personal voices was the independence between the self and the others, the individual and the community. African American women’s writing, fictional or (auto) biographical, is therefore one of the ways for black women to quench their thirst for their identity and autonomy not only about what a black woman was but also, about what they could be in the male dominated world.
As a result, sexism and racism together intensified their identity and autonomy and the intolerable way of living for the African American female slaves. The work area revealed the callous ways in which men and women slaves are differentiated and in which women slaves particularly are ruthlessly discriminated. Unlike male slaves who worked in the fields, women labored on plantations and households, bred children, and on top of all, endured the sexual assaults of the white masters. Black males are not forced to do women’s work, but women did men’s work in addition to their feminine tasks. Thus, the female slave who worked in fields in the African society as an extension of her womanhood was nothing more than a substitute of men in the American society. The African American women began to lift their journey towards self identity and autonomy which is a positive attitude in the African American society.

The rise of the feminist movement paved way for a large number of works written by contemporary African-American writers, evoking a great interest for many critics since 1970s. The outstanding evidence is the essay of Alice Walker In search of our Mother’s Garden which focuses on many significant points that provides and provokes African-American feminist criticism such as the issue of a female aesthetics and the issue of black literature creation. Many critics have turned to an exploration of the works of African-American female writers for the reason that African-American feminist criticism embodied many interesting aspects. There is an opposition to white and black attitudes towards women’s oppression. Black feminists chose to follow womanist theology. Delores S. Williams states in Womanize Theology: Black women’s Choices, that the concept of the woman provides an opportunity for women to claim their roots in black history, religion and culture. Women’s theology emerges among black christian women. Alice Walker has coined the term womanism in her collection of essays entitled In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens, published in 1983. At the beginning of the collection she gives a definition of this “feminist, Afro-centric, healing, embodied, and spiritual” (Razak, 2006: 100). Walker suggests that womanism denotes very different things, which makes it fully grasp the concept as:
**Womanist 1.** From womanish. (Opp. of “girlish”, i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in great depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious.*

**2. Also:** A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.


**4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (Walker, 1984: xi-xii)**

In the first phase, Walker defines “womanist” in reference to the origin and the original use and meaning of the term. The only phrase that does not go into these more etymological issues is the one in which she indicates that “womanist” is a synonym for a black feminist or by extension, a feminist of color. By adding the generalization “of color”, Walker makes sure that she is not guilty of the discrimination that white feminists are. But, as I already indicated, the major part of
this first entry deals with the origin of the term “womanist”. As Collins argues, by “[t]aking the term from the Southern black folk expression of mothers to female children (...), Walker suggests that black women’s concrete history fosters a womanist worldview accessible primarily and perhaps exclusively to black women” (1996: 10).

The expressions of identity, autonomy, and assertion indicate “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior” (Walker, 1984: xi). These four adjectives all refer to doing/saying something that is not self-evident or easy, yet doing/saying it with strong determination and a lot of motivation. As Saunders argues, “[t]he emphasis is on ‘willful’ because for so long, so many black women have not been considered to be in possession of their own free wills, and no small part of the problem has resided in the psyche of black men” (1988). Secondly, both expressions refer to an attitude that is characterized by “[w]anting to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for one”(Walker, 1984: xi). This again implies the non-self-evident side of Womanism. Thirdly, the expressions indicate a mature, grown attitude. As Walker says in the beginning of the entry, “womanish” is the opposite of “girlish”, which means “frivolous, irresponsible, and not serious” (Walker, 1984: xi). In opposition, “womanish” (as do the expressions) means not only acting, but also being grown up. It is associated with being responsible, in charge and serious. This emphasis on the mature side of womanists may indicate that the zeal for the black woman’s case does not derive from a childish passion or a naïve whim. Instead, it is rooted in a feeling of responsibility, of being in charge of the fate of black women.

Further in the second phase, Walker defines “womanist” by referring to the different types of relationships that can occur between women. Most importantly, womanists love other women, especially for those things that make them female, like their specific female culture, their emotional life and their strength. Besides just loving these female characteristics, Walker adds that womanists should even prefer them (implying: to those of a man). It seems that Walker not only means that women should love other women, but that, more importantly, they should also adore what is specifically female about themselves. “She tells the black women to address gender
oppression without attacking black men” (Collins, 1996: 11). Walker explicitly expresses this non-separatist attitude three times in the entry. First of all, according to her, a womanist is “[c]ommitted to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female (1984: xi)”. With this statement, Walker makes clear that black feminism is not opposing race liberation, but will, instead, bring it closer. Secondly, she states literally that womanists are not separatists. Thirdly, she gives vent to her non-separatist attitude by saying that womanists are “[t]raditionally universalist” (1984: xi). She illustrates this by means of the metaphor of the garden in which “the women and men of different colors coexist like flowers in a garden yet retain their cultural distinctiveness and integrity” (Collins, 1996: 11). In other words, Walker indicates that a tolerant attitude is not only needed among sexes, but also among races. In that way, she offers a philosophy here that is useful not only for African American women, but for the whole of mankind. Her definition thus clearly has both a concrete dimension (cf. the rooting of the term in black (female) folk expressions) and a more universal one (cf. the mythical, worldwide image of the garden).

As Davis expresses that, Walker’s definition illustrates that “individuals are not separate from the survival of the earth, but instead act as extensions of the universe itself” (2003: 33). Walker further refers to one specific relationship between women: the relationship between a mother and her child. The fact that her two examples in this entry involve a mother-child (presumably a daughter) situation suggests that she considers motherhood essential in the experience of being a woman. As Razak claims, Walker focuses on the “sharing and mentorship that are a traditional part of idealized Black mother-daughter relationships” (2006: 99). Lastly, Walker uses a mild form of humor in this entry when she says that womanists are sometimes separatist “for health” (1984: xi), or in the last dialogue between mother and child. Probably this is to create a positive atmosphere.

Further more in the third phase, Walker defines “womanist” associatively. In an enumeration which lists things that a womanist loves, she mainly considers the irrational side that women is traditionally said to have (cf. the moon as a symbol of femininity). In her list, Walker includes music and dance, love, food and roundness as
symbols for the worldly, bodily pleasures in life as well as the moon and the Spirit as symbols for the spiritual dimension of our being. Furthermore, she says womanists love struggles, which probably means that they do not give up easily in their striving. And besides loving their people (“folk”) in general, womanists also love themselves. She seems to believe there are at least some aspects that all (black) women share. The fourth phase consists solely of the phrase “Womanist which is to feminist as purple to lavender” (1984: xii), which has become famous by now. With this statement, Walker indicates that they both have things in common, but that in the end they are undeniably different. In her definition of Womanism, Walker indicates several different things that are not easily summed up. Most importantly, she sketches (black) women as beautiful and strong beings without denouncing men or white people in the process. As Davis puts it:

Through her four-part definition, [Walker] draws her reader’s attention to the importance of women’s intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual wholeness, and she stresses the need to create a global community where all members of society are encouraged to survive and survive whole. Madhu Dubey argues that Walker’s womanist project seeks to “integrate the past and the present, the individual and the community, the personal and the political changes, into a unified whole. (2004: 33)

Walker clearly recognizes the identity of African American women. She says, “it is the black woman’s words that have the meaning for us, her daughters, because she, like us, has experienced life not only as a black person, but as a woman” (1984: 275). Walker makes clear that because of their double identity, this leads her to say that the African American woman is “oppressed almost beyond recognition – oppressed by everyone” (1984: 149). Walker employs a folkloristic image that aptly identifies one’s status in society and says that black women are called the mule of the world, because “we have been handed the burdens that everyone else – everyone else refused to carry” (1984: 237). Walker discerns the double discrimination that black women suffer even within black society itself that:
It was not until I became a student of women’s liberation ideology that I could understand and forgive my father. I needed an ideology that would define his behavior in context. The black movement had given me an ideology that helped explain his colorism (he did fall in love with my mother because she was so light; he never denied it). Feminism helped explain his sexism. I was relieved to know his exist behavior was not something uniquely his own, but, rather, an imitation of the behavior of the society around us. (1984: 330)

Walker also refers to motherhood in a more symbolical and spiritual way, when she talks about her models. Her own relationship to the Harlem Renaissance author Zora Neale Hurston is a nice illustration of this. Talking about Hurston’s novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Walker says “[t]here is no book more important to [her] than this one” (1984: 86). As Bell argues, “Hurston is the literary precursor, foremother, and spirit-guide that inspire the audacious autonomy that [Walker] expresses in her womanist vision” (1987: 260). Walker discovered Hurston and her literary works when she is looking for information on voodoo for a story she was writing. Just when she is irritated by the racist tinge of the works on black folklore by white scholars, she found Hurston’s *Mules and Men*. As she says, she immediately appreciated in Hurston her “racial health; a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings” (1984: 85). Yet, when she starts looking at what critics have said about Hurston, she found mostly negative things. This is when she decided to do something about it and started “looking for Zora” (1984: 93). Walker did all she could to recover Hurston and her literary productions. It is because of these motivated and successful attempts that Hurston is now considered an important Afro-American author and one of the first black feminists. Walker’s personal involvement in Hurston’s case goes quite far. Pretending to be Hurston’s niece, she has travelled to Eatonville, Hurston’s hometown, to visit her grave. After having found the grave (or thinking she had) in a field full of weeds, Walker even bought a headstone for it, saying:

Zora Neale Hurston

A Genius of the South
Novelist, Folklore
Anthropologist

This is probably the feature that constitutes the most striking difference between Womanism and white feminism. Although Walker overtly pleads with her audience to love themselves solely because of the fact that they are female, she is not at all hostile towards men. In fact, “lov[ing] individual men, sexually and/or non sexually” (Walker, 1984: xi) is even considered a characteristic of a womanist in her list.

The slave narrative has taken a prominent role to find the identity and autonomy in the African American feminist writers and is considered a unique American literary genre, which has first appeared at the beginning of the eighteenth century and became well-known during three decades before the civil war. It has originated from various literary forms and genres such as African and African-American folklore, the Bible, travel writings, the puritan spiritual autobiographies, novels, the abolitionist press and the American success narratives. In recent years, the novel Beloved by Toni Morrison, the first African-American to win Nobel Prize for literature seems to be the most creative reworking of the slave narrative form. Alice Walker’s writings has anticipated many of Smith’s concerns, and tried to find a literary tradition from which she descended and redefined art, particularly as it is practiced by women. Her collection of essays, entitled In search of Our Mother’s Gardens, makes many attempts among other objectives to define a tradition of Black feminist creativity. Walker contends that even without money or a room of her own; the African American woman has achieved the height of creativity. Walker says, “Therefore we must fearlessly pull out of ourselves and look at the identity with our lives, the living creativity some of our great grandmothers were not allowed to know” (237). She cites an example of her own mother, whose literary work is expressed in her gardens. Her mother has handed on to her the seed of creativity that she could not herself acknowledge or express in words. Her mother has told her stories, which Walker discovers her own hidden writings, and, like the flowers of her mother’s
garden, these stories constituted a vital tradition of creativity passing on from generation to generation.

Hurston is the literary foremother whom Walker has discovered in the course of her search for a literary tradition to call her own. Walker is chiefly responsible for bringing Hurston back to the center of critical attention in 1960s. Hurston deserves consideration as the first feminist black literary critic for several reasons. She is a serious writer from an early age, at a time when recognition is hard to come to black writers in America. She has a strong sense of destiny as a writer and worked assiduously to establish a reputation as an author of many works. Precocious and powerful in personality, she creates and avails herself of many opportunities. Her self-fashioning persistence and self-definition reveal an ability to take her own subjectivity so seriously that she could not abstract herself from it and review it with a conscious determination. Hurston spent much of her life in the town of Eatonville, Florida, the first all-black community to be incorporated in the United States. She made the town of Eatonville the setting for much of her novels, rich in its culture and tradition. Alice Walker identifies and connected herself with her ancestors, both literary and genealogical. She is firmly entrenched within the female African-American literary tradition. She is so deep-rooted in its culture and tradition that she is able to find female African-American models in her mother, who is a great story-teller and like Zora Neale Hurston, an eminent writer of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston's life and works are models of rebelliousness against the patriarchal order of her time and she modeled the lives of her characters on her own life experiences as an African-American woman, subjected to the appalling abuses of racism and sexism. Although Hurston is not able to overcome these obstacles in her own life, she, with profound creative and imaginative power, created black female characters in her writings and through them achieved what she has aspired to. She depicts, in her novels, how they triumph over unimaginable obstacles to find identity and autonomy similar to her own, which is reflected in her autobiography.

Hurston depicts her female characters withering and static in their repressive. It is therefore posited here that her literary works are tales of searching for not only self-identification but also for complex personal development. The struggle for
liberation is accompanied with a search for identity, expressing one’s wishes, desires, and emotions, as well as for equal treatment in relationships and marriage. Hurston’s works, however, does not provide a universal tale of such liberation. By contrast, analyzing her works from the early short story Sweat through her first play Color Struck to the acclaimed TE and the castaway SS, one can find an evolutionary process which traces developmental stages of the African American woman’s quest for freedom and equal treatment as well as Hurston’s developing views on African American women’s identity and assertion.

Hurston asserts and could read “possibly all started . . . ,” (DT 7) and already we are engaged with legend as much as history. When Hurston moves toward her more direct personal history, she maintains the tone of legend: "Into this burly, boiling, hard-hitting, rugged-individualistic setting walked one day a tall, heavy-muscled mulatto who resolved to put down roots” (D T 7). This mulatto is John Hurston, Zora's father, and his past is subsequently revealed; but when he enters the text, he seems bigger than life and without known antecedent. John Hurston courts Lucy Ann Potts; against her parents’ wishes, they marry and begin the generation which will include Zora. Hurston's own birth is also narrated within the generic conditions of legend: She was born in dire circumstances, saved through outside intervention, prophesied over, named somewhat mysteriously, threatened with natural disaster in the form of a hungry sow, and perhaps subjected to hoodoo. Of course, for Hurston, her birth was legend; despite her claim that she had "memories within that came out of the material that went to make me," she knew the details of her birth because they were repeated to her. Through her syntax, she stresses the oral tradition into which she was born: "This is all hear-say." The sentences describing her birth are constructed not as facts but as bits of speculation: "The saying goes like this . . . . It seems . . . . I have never been told . . . . I did hear . . . . It seems . . . .” (DT19). As an ethnographer gazing at herself, she is careful to distinguish between the episodes she observes and those she hears about. Syntactically, however, she doesn't become a potential object of investigation, until she is named: "So I became Zora Neale Hurston” (DT 21). Autobiography is to follow conventional generic practices; the
remainder of the text should reveal precisely how she becomes the individual classified public name.

To have a glimpse of Hurston’s works, The Great day is an original folk music published in 1932. Then it is renamed From Sun to Sun. The music, introduced in John Golden theatre in New York, is performed in many American towns and cities and gained great popularity. Hurston’s publications include The Gilded Six Bits in the Story magazine in 1933. Hurston’s writings seem attractive to the Lippincott Company, which offer to publish a novel of Hurston. Hurston has certainly agreed and have provided them Jonah’s Gourd Vine, an autobiographical story about her parents’ marriage. A year later, in 1935, Jonah’s Gourd Vine was followed by Mules and Men, where voodoo tradition is depicted. In 1937 Hurston’s masterpiece, Their Eyes Were Watching God, is created. Another book which also arose on the base of information from the visit to Haiti and Jamaica is Tell My Horse.

Hurston’s folklore collection has a blend in the aroma of black tradition. As a student of Franz Boas, she gained a grant and went to Florida to collect folklore. This journey has been a great experience for Hurston—both positive and negative. She not only discovered her interest and skills in doing research but also met with mistrustfulness from the people due to laconic narratives, which is caused by Hurston’s adjusted education. In 1927, she has met Charlotte Osgood Manson, called Godmother, who is not only Hurston’s benefactor but also a source of inspiration and a propelling force. Under her patronage, Hurston collected oral histories and personal stories in Alabama, Florida and Louisiana and later in the Bahamas.

At the beginning of 1940s, publishers are interested in Hurston’s writings. But later, they have wanted her to write an autobiography. This is a tricky task for Hurston as her personal life is always a taboo for readers. Finally, she has written Dust Tracks on a Road, an autobiography. But even in that, Hurston has not revealed many things about her private life. She rather provides the background information about the towns she visitor lived in and the strangers she has met on her travels. The book has both its supporters and objectors and won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for the
best book that contributed to the understanding of racism and appreciation of cultural diversity in 1943. She has also won Howard University’s Distinguished Alumni Award in the same year. Hurston has published an article What White Publishers Won’t Publish in which she expresses her opinion about the kind of subject matter writers should pen. She claims that “publishers should not give preference to authors describing racism and discrimination but they should be interested in a common Negro and her or his inner qualities” (Hurston, Folklore, Memoirs 950-955). Hurston has eventually found the Scribner publishing house which have promised to publish Seraph on the Sewanee, a ‘White Novel’ describing the life of a poor white family, in which she wants to prove that black authors has the same qualities like their white colleagues.

Hurston’s works deal with two formidable challenges to the writings of African American women. There are forces of sexism in black men’s responses to her writings. In white women’s responses, there are forces of racism. Hurston deals with racism, self-identity, marginalization, color-discrimination by creating characters of great depth and passion. Sander L. Gilman claims that:

> The association of the black with concupiscence reaches back into the Middle Ages [yet] by the eighteenth century, the sexuality of the black, both male and female, becomes an icon for deviant sexuality in general. […] The black figure appears almost always paired with a white figure of the opposite sex. (209)

Gilman further states sexuality of African American women with scientific studies: “The relationship between the sexuality of the black woman and that of the sexualized white woman enters a new dimension when contemporary scientific discourse concerning the nature of black female sexuality is examined” (Gilman 212). She decides the apparent invisibility of the emotional lives of the African American people to white Americans. In What white publishers won’t print, an essay that first appeared in Negro Digest, she says, “I have been amazed by the Anglo-Saxon’s lack of curiosity about the internal lives and emotions of the Negroes, and for that matter, any non-Anglo-Saxon people within our borders, above the class of skilled labor” (Mitchell 117). To explain this phenomenon, she says: “The answer lies in what we
may call the American Museum of Unnatural History. This is an intangible built on folk belief. It is assumed that all non-Anglo-Saxons are uncomplicated stereotypes” (Mitchell, 117).

Hurston is aware of the sexism of black male writers, which she has experienced in a very painful way. Richard Wright and Langston Hughes struggled to prove their masculinity as well as their writing prowess in a predominantly white literary establishment and reacted more negatively to her than to her writings. They have doomed her to relative obscurity for the first half of the twentieth century. Hurston and Hughes collaborated on the play Mule Bone, but in the process, they unfortunately fell out and their relationship came to an abrupt end. Bloom states that:

Few male critics have been able to resist sly ambiguities and outright attacks on Hurston’s personal life, even when the work in question was not affected by her disposition or her private affairs. But these controversies have loomed so large in the reviews of her work that once again the task of confronting them must precede any re-evaluation of her highly neglected work. (124)

According Georges Cuvier, an anatomist states that: “the black female looks different. Her physiognomy, her skin color, the form of her genitalia label her as inherently different” (23). As Gilman adds, “the black female was widely perceived as possessing not only a “primitive” sexual appetite but also the external signs of this temperament – ‘primitive’ genitalia” (Gilman 213). Hurston also addresses black male sexuality in some of her works, for example in Jonah’s Gourd Vine, which is an autobiographical tale of Hurston’s father and his philandering. In terms of the nineteenth century discourse on black sexuality, the men were addresses as well. Contrary to black female sexuality, however, African American manhood and sexuality were often portrayed as passive, but this image changed drastically right after the end of the Civil War. Robyn Wiegman posits in “The Anatomy of Lynching” that with the advent of Emancipation and its attendant loss of the slave system’s marking of the African American body as property, “lynching emerge[d] to reclaim and reassert the centrality of black [male] corporeality” (356). Lynching became a
tool of power and of owning the black male’s body again, projecting onto it social, sexual, and economic frustrations of the white mob. Wiegman says that:

As the most extreme deterritorialization of the body […] lynching guarantee[d] the white mob’s privilege of physical and psychic penetration, grant[ed] it a definitional authority over social space, and embodie[d] the vigilant and violent system of surveillance that under[wrote] late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century negotiations over race and cultural power. (Wiegman 356).

Hurston strongly puts forth folklore in all her works. “In the beginning,” writes Ann Allen Shockley in her introduction to African American Women Writers, "the black and women's movements acted as strong catalysts for the reexamination and incorporation of neglected groups into the traditional white male scheme of history" (xxvi). The newly discovered texts of a significant number of white and black women writers helped this process of integration in terms of race, class, gender, and region. In Their Eyes Were Watching God Hurston provides a fictional narrative of the rural black South at the turn of the twentieth century, as she explores the traditional patterns of life language, and folklore of the black Southern community. "Immersed in the all-black world into which she had been born in Eatonville, Florida," writes Trudier Harris, "Hurston was well prepared for the circumstances that enabled her to introduce black Florida folk and their oral traditions to the larger world" (3).

Tony Morrison, a contemporary African-American writer, narrates the dehumanizing conditions of the slave system and the horrible impact of slavery on the African-American families which intend to find their identity and autonomy where women are given secondary importance, a more balanced view of the slave narrative genre, one that includes those written by women should be taken into account. She also suggests that in order to balance one's understanding of the slave narratives, we need to closely read those narratives written by women and expand the range of terms used in writings. To study how African American women can escape from their voiceless world and develop their strength and empower themselves, the origin of
their oppression needs to be fore-grounded. The African American women are oppressed by many factors. However, an influence of slavery in the olden days reflects the present lives of black women. Racism and patriarchal ideologies are considered as significant factors. The quality of a true woman needs piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. On the contrary, a woman who possesses them is promised happiness and power. It is the core of a woman’s virtue and the source of her strength which holds that women must be religious by behaving right before God and joining church activities. Purity, the second virtue is a quality of being virgin before getting married. Women are regarded as the passive and submissive responders in the male dominated society.

African American women are oppressed by the inhuman system of slavery. When African American people are victimized throughout America by the system of slavery, it is the African American women who have suffered the heaviest trauma. Slavery is an act of deconstruction. According to the history of slavery, countless people are devastated in the process. Many slave holders exploited the slave system in many ways, such as for sexual pleasure, for laboring and reproducing. Violence is necessary with enslaved women in order to make them docile and implicitly obedient. Slave women could not enter legal marriages. They have no right to marry the men they loved so that they have no legal claim to their child if they have one. The law states that the child of a slave would be the property of the slave’s master. Slave women who dare to fight against injustice and struggle for freedom by individual acts or by escaping, would still face difficulties caused by racism, colour and gender discrimination. Running a considerable risk by making a forbidden journey, the enslaved “nigger” woman tried to escape from the limited life that white women suffered. They also managed to escape from the great harms-both physical and psychological ones inflicted by their white masters. Free African American women, moreover, embarked on their quests not merely for “escaping” from the established boundaries and limitations of domestic life in search of identity and autonomy; more crucially, they pursued their relentless quests both inwardly and outwardly, physically and psychologically so that they might touch people and might be touched. It is a
quest for love and respect, a quest which brought them into a direct confrontation with the world that oppressed them.

Hurston’s works show how the blacks started living within a positive environment. She has put many of her female characters in the novel like herself, very strong and determined. Her strength is “inherited from her mother and her self-confidence was gained from her home town” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1637). Many feminist critics are interested in Hurston’s work for various reasons. She is considered the mother of the twentieth century black women’s writings. Her works reflect the conspicuous tensions of audience and self-involvement in the discrimination of race, sex and class, gender, colour, identity and autonomy, marginalization and so on... Schuster, a critic has asserted that: “Hurston is a model author who has influenced many well-known black writers” (44). In Gates’ view Hurston: “has become a model for many famous writers like Alice Walker, Gayle Jones, Gloria Nayler and Toni Cade Bambara” (196-197). Hurston’s works show how the blacks have started living within a positive environment. She puts many of her female characters in the novel like herself, very strong and determined seeking for their self identity and independence.

Kathy Lyn Hilbert examines the works of Zora Neale Hurston by looking at how her female characters search for their own voice which is something unusual when considering the normal social order. It is found that the struggle and pain of each character can go beyond the boundaries of accepted behaviors in the society. Many scholars and researchers have examined the works of black females on several issues. However, the analysis of how black women empowered themselves remains largely unexplored. In the review of New York post it is said that: Hurston “has authentic talent of a high quality and ought to go far with the start she has made. . . . Many people do not read dialect, and this is the only reason I can think of that will stop Jonah's Gourd Vine from being popular” (New York Post, May 5, 1934, Herschel Brickell, p. 13), and in The New York Times Book Review it is noted that:

Real Negro People," "Jonah's Gourd can be called without fear of exaggeration the most vital and original novel about the American
Negro that has yet been written by a member of the Negro race. . . .
Unlike the dialect in most novels about the American Negro, this
does not seem to be merely the speech of white men with the
spelling distorted. Its essence lies rather in the rhythm and balance of
the sentences, in the warm artlessness of the phrasing . . . Not the
least charm of the book, however, is its language: rich, expressive,
and lacking in self–conscious artifice. From the rolling and dignified
rhythms of John's last sermon to the humorous aptness of such a
word as "shickalacked," to express the noise and motion of a
locomotive, there will be much in it to delight the reader. It is hoped
that Miss Hurston will give us other novels in the same, colorful
idiom . (Margaret Wallace, 6–7).

In the view of Opportunity, the magazine points out that, “Miss Hurston approached
her task with a knowledge of Negro dialect and customs that is rare in contemporary
writers . . .” (Estelle Felton 252–53). Lewis Gannett in the The New York Herald
Tribune Weekly Book Review, states that, “The result is Mules and Men, and I can't
remember anything better since Uncle Remus . . . Some of these 'lies' are sheer tall
tales; some are Bible legends” (Lewis Gannett). Henry Lee Moon suggests in the
magazine New Republic that, “As a result Mules and Men is more than a collection of
folklore. It is a valuable picture of the Miss Hurston presents her material with little
attempt to evaluate it or to trace its origin”(142). Sheila Hibben states in the magazine
The New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review that,”Vibrant Book Full of
Nature and Salt," that: "Here is an author who writes with her head as well as with her
heart, and at a time when there seems to be some principle of physics set dead against
the appearance of novelists who give out a cheerful warmth at the same time write
with intelligence”. ( 2) Alain Locke expresses in Opportunity, that:

And now Zora Neale Hurston and her magical title: Their Eyes Were
Watching God. Janie's story should not be re–told; it must be read.
But as always thus far with this talented writer, setting and surprising
flashes of contemporary folk lore are the main point. Her gift for
poetic phrase, for rare dialect, and folk humor keep her flashing on
the surface of her community and her characters and from diving
down deep either to the inner psychology of characterization or to
sharp analysis of the social background (1938).

Elmer Davis observes in Saturday Review that, “Zora Neale Hurston has gone afield
from the scenes of her previous work . . . and turned in the inexhaustible mines of
Voodoo and witchcraft in Haiti and Jamaica. Tell My Horse is a curious mixture of
remembrances, travelogue, sensationalism, and anthropology” (6–7). Carl Carmer in
New York Herald Tribune Books, "Biblical Story in Negro Rhythm," states that:

Moses, Man of a Mountain "has become a fine Negro novel."
Hurston "has made a prose tapestry that sparkles with characteristic
Negro humor though it never loses dignity" and she "teaches us to
realize the contribution her race is making to American expression."

(5)

Phil Strong observes in Saturday Review that, “This book is more of a summary than
the autobiography it advertises itself as being. It is a delightful one and a wise one,
full of humor, color, and good sense” (6). Beatrice Sherman expresses his view in The
New York Times Book Review, that:

Here is a thumping story, though it has none of the horrid earmarks
of the Alger–type climb . . . . her story is forthright and without frills.
Its emphasis lies on her fighting spirit in the struggle to achieve the
education she felt she had to have . . . . Hard work and natural talent
were her mainstays. Bad luck and good came in mixed portions. But
always Zora Neale Hurston felt that she was a special, a different
sort of person—not in any unpleasantly cocky way, but as almost any
one does who has energy and ability and wants to use them . . . . Her
whole story is live and vivid . . . (44).

Edward Hamilton states in the magazine America that, “The first two thirds of
this novel is an incredibly good job. The author has caught the idiom of backwoods–
Florida whites beautifully, and she presents the relationship between an insecure woman and her adequate and resourceful husband with fidelity and delicacy that I think excels anything that other writers have achieved." (354–55). Claire Crabtree writes in her article "The Confluence of Folklore, Feminism and Black Self-Determinantibn in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eves Were Watching God" that "Tea Cake expands Janie's horizons both literally and figuratively" (57). Later in the article she writes, "The sense of sexuality and shared roles found in Janie's relationship with Tea Cake is another aspect of Janie's development as a person. ...It is in her life 'on the muck' of the Everglades with Tea Cake that Janie achieves equality with men" (60). Although her conclusions are somewhat different, Maria Tai Wolff echoes Crabtree when she states, "Tea Cake gives Janie the world, from which they will make a 'dream' together. He offers her experience" (31). Crabtree's and Wolff's arguments are problematic- Crabtree states that Tea Cake expands Janie's horizons while Wolff claims Tea Cake gives Janie the world and offers her experience, in both instances we may note that Janie is a passive character, viewed by these critics as an object acted upon by Tea Cake. In my reading, Janie is the main actor in this text, one who is on a quest for herself. Her relationship with Tea Cake is just one of three marital relationships. The fact that Tea Cake does not even appear until halfway through the novel reinforces this view that he is not the central figure in Janie's life.

Plant suggests that to Hurston, the ideal relationship between a man and a woman is one in which the male dominates and the female submits; "woman is ... man's helpmate"(162). Plant writes: "More often than not Hurston 20 endowed women with a weak will and cast them in the stereotypical mode of emotional or financial dependents" (163). According to Plant,

Janie is a woman in constant need of men: Janie seems to be a woman who depends on the kindness of strange men. She has experienced love as she dreamed it should be, but that kind of love casts Janie in a subordinate, dependent position. (199)

Plant writes "When Hurston has the opportunity to develop a female character of heroic stature to question conventional gender roles, she does not" (166). Plant
does not recognize the critique of Janie and Tea Cake's relationship made by Hurston. She reads the text only on the surface level when she states that she believes that Hurston's ideals of relationships in literature and life are ones of sub ordinance and domination. Gloria Naylor (1993) in a conversation with Virginia Fowler, she explained the way in which she has looked to other African American women writers as sources of strength and models for her own writing. Not coincidentally, Naylor cites (as quoted above) the influence of Zora Neale Hurston's politics and celebration of "the folk" as informers of her work Deborah E. McDowell speaks of the deep connections over time between African American women writers in her insightful article titled "The Changing Same: Generational Connections and Black Women Novelists. McDowell notes: “I see literary influence, to borrow from Julia Kristeva, in the intersexual sense, each text in dialogue with all previous texts, transforming and retaining narrative patterns and strategies in endless possibility” (107). McDowell's observations about literary influence shed light on the reason why so many contemporary African American woman authors speak of their connections with and the influence of other African American woman writers. Helen Levy writes specifically about Gloria Naylor's connection to Zora Neale Hurston in her article "Lead on With Light." Robert Saunders suggests that "The literary process of borrowing ideas has been going on for quite some time, but Naylor is one who has perfected the technique” (249). The communal voice of Hurston, her courageous defiance of both black male and white definitions, has empowered Naylor, as well as other African American women authors, to write out of their experience of doubled marginality as woman and black, and like Hurston, ‘Naylor reaches back to the local language, which exists at the margins of the competitive bureaucratic social order” (280).

The prominent writer of African American literature, Alice Walker has found Hurston's works to be such an inspiration that she once has declared that she would definitely take two of Hurston's novels namely, Mules and Men, a book of folklore, and Their Eyes Were Watching God as Hurston's best known novels and "one of the sexiest, most 'healthily' rendered heterosexual love stories in our literature” (Walker, In Search 88). Walker gives the latter book the highest praise
possible.’ There is no book more important to me than this one; this is because the novel reveals African-American people as "complete, complex, undiminished human beings” (Walker, In Search 85-86). As an African-American woman, she chooses the model, the example, of Janie Crawford from Their Eyes Were Watching God, a book which Walker asserts is "as necessary to [her], and to other women as air and water” (Walker, In Search 7).

Robert E. Hemmingway, a chancellor of the University of Kansas and professor of English, is the author of Hurston’s first biography a literary biography. The book emerged in 1977 and the following year, it is announced The New York Times’ best book (Robert E. Hemmingway, 16th chancellor of the University of Kansas). In Hemmingway’s opinion, Hurston is not a fully appreciated author in her time. There are various hardships in her literary career. He praised Hurston for her “folk wisdom” inherited from her mother—“Courage and humor, art and intellect, life and society’ (35-36) of rural southern black inhabitants. According to Hemmingway, the strength of Hurston’s writings consisted in the emphasis of ordinary people’s lives: “She demonstrates both the complexity of their lives and richness of their folks” (35-36) and refers to her lifestyle, especially to her smoking in the public, which is unacceptable for a woman at that time.

Valerie Boyd, an Arts director at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, a founding officer of the Alice Walker literary society, a member of the national books critics circle and a founder of Eight Rock, a cutting-edge journal of African American Arts and Culture, is the one who fulfilled Hemmingway’s request after hearing the demand from him personally, at the Zora Neale Hurston’s festival in 1994. Boyd introduced Wrapped in Rainbows: The life of Zora Neale Hurston, a book which is awarded a fellowship from the George A. and Eliza Gardner Howard Foundation of Brown University. Lucy Hurston, Hurston’s only relative who followed her aunt’s literary career expresses that:

Once a reader hears a story, he or she would like to read the other stories as well. He has admired Zora’s extensive variety of working experiences and felt proud that Zora had managed to assert herself
not only nationally but all over the world. From the niece’s point of view, Zora was “anything but conventional. (L.Hurston 6)

The economically crucial role of the black women did not have the same effect as in the white society. Lewis states that:

Black women have held a relatively high position within a dominated society. This contrasts with the deference accorded white women in the dominant society. For, unlike white women, black women have lacked deference in the dominant society principally because of the stigma of race. Within the dominated society, (345)

In other words, Washington believes that Hurston, as a black woman writer faces “a problem that she could not solve the questing hero as women (Hero 106)”. As a consequence of this need for Hurston to reconcile the desire of a female heroine to quest for self-realization and the repression of such romantic impulses by patriarchy, Hurston remains, Washington argues, ambivalent about whose “dream” in Hurston’s novel “Their Eyes Were Watching God” Janie’s verbal attack causes Joe a fatal injury. It is not an ordinary hurt and Joe painfully feels it. As Hurston writes, his illusion of appealing maleness that all men cherish is robbed. He does not eat the food she prepares and he sleeps in a different room. Being too angry and dissatisfied by Janie’s words, Joe has no energy to recover, and he finally dies. There are many distressful events which Janie has to encounter. However, Janie intelligently manages to cope with what is going on, though there are so many irritations around her. Hurston attempts to authorize and extol Janie’s ability of coping with all tyranny. Instead of being submissive, Janie stoically builds up her inner strength. She silently explores her inner self and gains adequate moral power for herself and waits for the day when she would able to do things according as her aspirations dictate. Hurston describes: “no matter what Jody did, she said nothing; she has to learn some to talk and to leave some” (TE 76). Joe can only physically control Janie. He can’t control her mind. Janie’s mind is always against him. She has her own thoughts and reasons to judge things by herself. She is intelligent enough not to let it explode because she realizes quite well that Joe will not rest in peace when she speaks to him.
Hubbard observes that Hurston puts Janie on the track of “autonomy,” “self-realization,” and “independence” (37). She allows her to “wear the outfit of men which suggest power. Janie dresses in overalls, goes on the muck, and learns to shoot—even better than Tea Cake and her rebellion changes her and potentially her friend Pheoby” (37). Dolan Hubbard believes that by “placing her narrative in the context of the Christian journey, itself a romance, Hurston violates readers’ expectation that the protagonist should marry her charming black prince and live happily ever after” (37). Having returned from the horizon, Janie Crawford represents the “mature voice of experience and wisdom” (37). In Janie’s search for her identity one can see how she struggles to overpower the ways white people considered her blackness and oppressed her. As Wilfred D. Samuels observes that:

Hurston’s early stories reveal the ideas of an author with clear convictions about the issues and ideas that will become the centerpieces of her longer works. […] Hurston’s stories provide the genesis of her exploration of a theme that seems of singular importance to her throughout her career as writer: the quest for female empowerment in a patriarchal world (240).

Robert Hemmingway appreciates the short story as “A remarkable work, her best fiction of the period. [As] a perfect fusing of the Eatonville environment and the high seriousness of self-conscious literature, it illustrates the unlimited potential in Hurston’s folk material when an organic form grew from the subject matter” (47).

Zora Neale Hurston voices her concern for the black women and has fought for their legitimate racial identity, autonomy and dignity in the American society through her writings. These heroic struggles of hers chiefly constitute the themes of her novels. Her heroines’ gradual evolution into women of independence and individuality and their ultimate awareness of their immense potential vividly bear out this fact. In her time, awaken consciousness of the unconditional plight of the African American people are thrown light by female African American writers. The black women suffered oppression and humiliation at the hands of both the whites and the black males. They have felt a sort of “two ness”, living as Americans and black
Africans, and experiencing a conflict of ideals and cultures, as W.E.B. Du Bois has said that attainment of basic rights as free human beings is the passionate dream of the African American women. Zora Neale Hurston’s controversial personality and lifestyle has inhibited an objective critical analysis of her works. Hurston’s vision is firmly grounded in the African-American folk culture in which she participated as a child, growing up in the black town of Eatonville, Florida; assuming the role of an anthropologist-observer, Hurston discusses the difficulties of collecting folklore from her own hometown. Somewhat ingenuously referring to the Eatonville story tellers in the third person, Hurston has encountered sexual stereotypes as well, repeatedly patronized by her male peers, both white and blacks. Hurston has an intensive desire to move in the direction of serious fiction which tries to find their identity and autonomy.

In Hurston's essay, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," the Zora persona seems to paint a subdued portrait of black-white race relations and categorically maintains that she is not "tragically colored." The icon of the tragic African-American, victimized by a racist society is, however, one that found favor with literary presses during the first half of the twentieth century. In yet another essay, "What White Publishers Won't Print," Zora further claims that white publishers take no interest in the emotional, intellectual, and romantic life of bourgeois African-Americans. Such publishers, Zora asserts, foster and reproduce notions of the simple, working-class African-Americans beset by problems that a racist society has caused. These tragic caricatures pose no real threat to the status because African-Americans are still presented as being childlike and less intellectually adept than members of the white society. Both of Hurston's essays have been faulted for being dismissive of the continuing significance of slavery during modern times, and both essays seem to castigate other African-Americans for bemoaning their plight without taking the initiative to better their positions themselves. Strangely, Hurston accuses publishers of fostering notions of the complacent African-Americans, and she derides the "pet Negro" system although she herself has been accused of being a "pet" whose portraits of black life were conciliatory to white paternalism. Admittedly, the narrative personas that Hurston creates are controversial. Yet both essays expose the
discrimination that exists in Hurston's time. In addition, Hurston's essays express her belief that her literary freedom is limited, if not altogether curtailed, according to the taste of those empowered to publish her work. This may not have been far from the truth, as Hurston has left behind hints that indicate her work is edited according to the whims of her benefactors, sometimes against Hurston's will.

African American women are the ones most competent to write about the social issues of equality and other privileges because they alone labour, work in fields, and do all the work that required physical strength. It is due to courageous and wise women such as Sojourner Truth that black women’s aspirations and hopes are boldly voiced. However, the majority of the women who are active in the contemporary revolutionary movement of women have believed that black women in the early years of their feminist awareness are preoccupied with the cause of slavery in general, not the emancipation of women from patriarchy. Jones observes that her

“Keen analysis of racial, sexual, and gender politics […] foreshadows her treatment of these themes in her novels and shows the possibility of female emancipation [, which] can be achieved only through the death of the male heterosexual partner – whether figurative or literal. (86)

She proposes that in order to liberate themselves, women get rid of their oppressors; she promotes rebellion on the part of women. As a result of racial imperialism, white women have organized clubs and organizations like Women’s Christian Temperance Union, Young Women’s Christian Association, and General Federation of Women’s Clubs. However, black women have tended to label their gatherings racially such as The Colored Women’s League, National Federation of Afro-American Women, and the National Association for Colored Women. By locating blacks at the margins of Seraph, Hurston mirrors the position she has seen African Americans occupying in the dominant white society, while her focus on whites represents a bold assertion of self-worth. As slaves, blacks “could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving” (Bell Hooks’ “Black Looks”(168).
The book, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of us Are Brave* written by Gloria T. Hull suggests that black female writers have almost been viewed as “insufficient women” and “insufficient Black” so that their works fail to represent their gender and race sufficiently. Marginalized both by the race and gender, the “nigger “ woman is not allowed to express her sexuality, to dream her dreams and to do and act according to what she desires, for, as the old Nanny in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has said onto her mulatto granddaughter: “De nigger woman is de mule uh de mule” (TE 14). Deborah E. McDowell further “actually thwarts black female writers” attempts to articulate their sufferings and pleasures, being a “nigger” and a woman” (75).

The images of black women have persisted throughout history both in and out of literature. Black women novelists have assumed a revisionist mission, aims at substituting reality for stereotypes. In so doing, they natively believed that they could eliminate caste injustice. They would manifest in literature, the movement of racial uplift lead by a widespread network of black club women of the nineteenth century whose motto is “lifting as we climb” (94-95). Ironically, whereas some eagerly joined this “movement of racial uplift” (95), other African American female writers have retreated into silence. African American female writers, therefore, always find it difficult to express themselves fully. While the white women tend to ignore the racial issues with respect to gender troubles, African American men sometimes even hold hostile attitudes towards black women’s different voices. After all, most African American men are considered the expression of voices of dissidence a violation of their hope to articulate a single and united (undoubtedly the male one) voice to speak for their nationalism. Hurston undoubtedly is brave enough to redraw the boundary imposed on African American women. Her literary works does help African American women to embark on a self-discovery journey, to redefine who they are, to find their identity and autonomy aside from male definitions and furthermore to reinvent who they could be in the white-male dominant world.
Hurston’s novels is clearly influenced by the blues, jazz and gospel impulses, imagery, symbolism as evident in her works and in the prose of her formal autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road, Jonah’s Gourd Vine (1934), Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), Moses: Man of the Mountain (1939), Seraph on the Suwanee (1948) and her other works, She possesses an exuberance about and for life that is reflected in her correspondence, her autobiography and her other published prose. She brought to the writing task a multi-facet approach, employing various branches of her intellectual studies, spiritual pursuits and emotional entanglements. Writing exclusively in and committing reroute for one genre would have been impossible for her, and whichever genre she happens to be in at the moment seems to fill her with creative energies for the time being. To discover her identity and autonomy she employs techniques in her writings such as Florida geography, weather and people; family stories: religious/biblical reference: folklore collecting activities in the form of tales: sermons, games and rituals: the use of two voices, moving from an articulate and often lyrical narrator to the language of authentic black dialect: and figures of speech rich in metaphor, simile and personification. Her account of books accepted by Lippincott recounts one of the greatest joys of her life. And this begin a relationship with J.R.Lippincott, one of the Publishers of Philadelphia that is to last from 1932 to 1942 through three novels, two folklore collections and her autobiography.

Identity and Autonomy as a concept can be defined as the search for self-assertion and its relationship to social contexts and realities. The problems of biological, psychological, cultural and social self-definition have been treated thematically in various forms in her novels. African-Americans widely accepted that they were socio-historic products, not bound to each other exclusively by racial and biological commonalities, but molded instead, by the consequences of slavery, emancipation and betrayal; it is not surprising that writers of all races have long recognized the inexhaustible literary potential of African American self-examination and self-exploration. Identity is often regarded as a function of place. There is a clear and inextricable relationship between the environments into which fate placed them and their own definition of sense and self-assertion. She asserts her identity and
autonomy through her female characters in her fiction with reality. They are all set in Florida, and, as her biographer, not only does she use the well-known larger cities – Jacksonville, Miami, Orlando, West Palm beach and Tallahassee – but small towns as well, occupying the smallest font size on any map, if, indeed, on a map at all – Eatonville, Belle Glade, Sanford, and Lake city, for example. Sawley and Citrabelle of her last novel appear to be the only fictional names she chooses for places, but she still remains true to authentic Florida description. Hurston illustrates the identity of African American women’s life experiences in various impressive ways. Moreover, they also give a broader vision of African American women in American society. As a result, it is interesting to investigate how African American women could survive, despite oppression, injustices and many limitations in life and still could endure sufferings with incredible fortitude and how the African American women finally gained power to attain their identity and autonomy to stand high in the society.

The main objective of the study is to explore the female identity and autonomy shown through the female characters of Zora Neale Hurston’s works, and how they empower themselves, despite various kinds of oppressions and restrictions in life. The study also examines how these characters with determined spirit, challenge, and reject patriarchal rules and other kinds of social injustice. These works reflect the hopes and dreams of liberal African American women who aspire for emancipation from abject slavery and untold sufferings. The study maps out the following.

1. The oppression of the African American women and its vivid presentation in Zora Neale’s works.
2. The developing of robust inner strength and stout resistance of whatever the female characters find as unjust and the way they achieve identity and emancipation through such protests, and
3. The impact of this newly achieved identity and autonomy upon the lives of these female figures in the works of Zora Neale Hurston.

Hurston signifies that a black woman has to struggle very hard in order to escape from an oppressive materialistic world. Though there are many severe
problems, the black women assert themselves at one stage when things become intolerable and show how they could bravely surmount all crippling difficulties that confronted them. This study will also focus on women’s empowering strategies that eventually lead them to real happiness and freedom. The path which these African American women take to get freedom can be analyzed through the select works. It is hoped that an exploration of the Female Identity and Autonomy of female protagonists in Hurston’s works would illustrate how they empower themselves despite racism, color discrimination, marginalization, male domination, oppression and slavery. First, one can analyze how the African American women are oppressed. Second, one can understand how these women protagonists react to all oppressions and how they empower themselves eventually. Third, one can find how they become aware of the uniqueness of self-identity and self-assertion, which lead them in different life-fulfilling directions.

The protagonists of Hurston’s works aspire to achieve individual freedom, personal independence and equality to do and get whatever they want, based on the belief that women should have individual rights to self-determination. To achieve their goal, these protagonists empower themselves by indignantly resisting conventional, social constructions and doing things according to their own needs and dreams. Identity and autonomy refer to a concept of constructing inner strength and stability to confront obstacles, life conflicts and oppressions in order to survive happily in the practical world. The empowerment of the protagonists in the works of Hurston would be analyzed, based on radical feminist theory. This theory focuses on personal things such as rampant sexual exploitation of women, domestic violence, slavery, oppression, race, color discrimination and gender bias. According to radical feminists, women’s oppression is the most fundamental form of oppression. They firmly believe that women are historically the first oppressed group. This oppression on African American women is the deepest and the most severe kind of oppression. This oppression on them is difficult to eliminate and can cause its victims a great suffering. Additionally, radical feminists affirm that women are ruthlessly oppressed by a patriarchal system that is characterized by power, dominance, hierarchy, and competition. This system should be ripped out by roots and branches. “Radical
feminists have tried to propose several ways in order to help women to free themselves from the sexual domination of men” (Tong 71-950). There are many radical feminist theorists who have dedicated themselves to the task of eliminating women oppressions, such as Alison Jaggar, Paula Rothenberg, Kate Millett and Marilyn French. They have various attitudes about women’s oppression. Jaggar and Rothenberg firmly believe that the struggles, women encounter are the most widespread and the deepest ones. Millet argues that since men always have dominant roles and women always have been subordinate, it is important to combine both feminine and masculine qualities that are likely to help a person grow and live in the community. Marilyn French also believes that “oppression of women by men leads to a further system of domination” (98).

In Black Feminist Criticism, Barbara Christian notes that while “many radical feminists blamed motherhood for the waste in women’s lives and saw it as a dead end for a woman,” Walker does not. Lynn Pifer adds that Meridian “does not object to children, or mothers bearing children, but to the role a woman is expected to play once she becomes a mother” (86). Also, to the additional expectation that Black womanhood will inevitably lead to Black motherhood, as if this were a “given” in a geometric proof. Hurston and Walker present marriage and motherhood as perfectly valid, fulfilling options for Black women, just as long as they remain options, not (as white society and Black men have previously suggested) the only path to a Black woman’s self-fulfillment. As an additional or alternate route to fulfillment, Hurston and Walker insist that Black women seek their emotional independence (though not necessarily through physical isolation) and above all their creativity, which is their sole obligation to their African American women ancestors.

The other radical feminist theorist, Cady Stanton, who believes that to exclude African American women from citizenship based on the ascribed status by race and sex, is a formidable obstacle for women to obtain long-sought-after equality and liberation. Stanton considers the exclusion of blacks and women from citizen’s rights as similar to blatant denial of the right of an individual. She argues that women should be given the right to achieve something for themselves. Individual freedom, personal
independence, and equality of opportunities should be open not only to men, but also to women. She also believes in a doctrine of natural rights which claims that women should have the individual right to determine things on their own. According to Stanton, “natural rights are a component part of individuals and cannot be taken from them. Women bring their rights into the world with them” (77-80). Radical feminist theory is consistent with womanish theology which is female-centered. Womanish theologians are urged to claim for their voices, opinions, experience and faith. According to womanish theology, women must love themselves. Womanish also focuses on the value of mothering and nurturing. The struggles of Hurston’s female protagonists for individual freedom, personal independence, equality and the individual right to self-determination within the above theory are vividly portrayed.

This dissertation is done for a deep investigation of some backgrounds of Hurston’s works namely Their Eyes Were Watching God, Seraph on the Suwanee, Dust Tracks on the Road and other works Jonah’s Gourd Vine,Mules and menand Short stories. Jonah’s Gourd Vine, as black critic Darwin Turner has observed, Hurston’s strength and weakness. The novel Jonah’s Gourd Vine begins with rise of John Buddy Pearson from poverty as an illiterate field-hand living on the wrong side of the creek to success as a lecherous preacher. His wife Lucy makes him a tradesman-politician. But unfortunately she undeservedly suffers humiliating tortures and oppressions at his hands. Subsequently Pearson marries another woman who practices hoodoo and is vengeful. At a later stage, he marries another wealthy woman. But gradually he repents his lecherous behavior though he remains an incorrigible adulterer. Soon he dies in a car accident. But his wife Lucy Potts, the heroic first wife, asserts her identity in the final phase of his life. Lucy overcomes John in spite of all his malice and proves to be a holy wife ever in John’s life.

Hurston’s second novel “Their Eyes Were Watching God” written in 1937 focuses on the pure society of black people in the south. The setting is in a town with mostly black residents so that we understand the people’s mindset during that time and its impact on the female identity of the novel. Henry Louis Gates Jr. states that it is a bold feminist novel and is the first one to be obviously so daring in the Afro-
American tradition. Hurston presents Janie, a beautiful black mulatto woman who can conquer the old stereotype which holds that a woman is the mule of the world. Janie strives heroically for the fulfillment of her long-cherished life goals, despite many obstacles caused by the system of patriarchy. She doesn’t allow cruel destiny to devastate her life. Janie finally finds a way to liberation at the end. She eventually discovers true love and asserts even her identity.

Hurston intentionally portrays how Janie seeks self-realization, autonomy and independence. She also illustrates women’s inner life and women’s equality in every aspect. Maggie Hamm states in her article that the novel resists realism and directly concerns women’s empowerment. It illustrates graphically how women regain their identity, through the heroine Janie, who finally discovers her own identity and freedom by defiantly ignoring oppressive masculine power. Looking specifically at female characters in these two novels, it can be seen that the author makes their characters tough, strong, rebellious and independent. Moreover, the author also tries to empower and liberate their characters from life’s frustrations and the cage of injustice. One can feel that though slavery ended a long time ago, its evil effects are hinted at in the leading African American works. Its powerful impact gives rise to racial discrimination against black women already oppressed by racism and deprived of their identity and independence. For example, Lucy in Hurston’s Jonah’s Gourd Vine keeps herself voiceless, as the oppressive circumstances warrant, throughout the novel till her death. But discovers and asserts her identity after her death. John repents for his deeds. Janie also in Their Eyes Were Watching God, keeps herself voiceless for a longtime, decides to escape from the shackles of male power and a patriarchal rule unlike other women in her society, ultimately finding her own identity and autonomy and is legitimately proud of being an African American woman.

Her novels provide a broader vision of the African American women in the American society fusing African tradition and culture. It is interesting to investigate how African-American women could survive, despite bullying, injustice and many other social and racial limitations in their life and how the African American women finally acquire identity and freedom to attain their horizon by themselves. Hurston’s
impressive and unique writing styles of traditional African literature and modern criticism amalgamates to illustrate African American women’s lives and their newly attained sovereignty. Further, critics such as Rich Potter assert that there is a fundamental understanding in Hurston’s book, as he feels that the novel “is indeed socially and racially critical” (15). He says that Their Eyes Were Watching God certainly supports the development of a new and unique African-American personality, “truly distinct from white culture, and founded the traditional black values that had distinguished the race, honorably, in the past” (15). Potter also says that she along with other notable writers is criticized for cherishing a vision. According to Potter, Hurston portrays early 20th century African American culture as one that is proud of itself, with no “silly images, free and reflecting real folk culture” (17). Hurston uses her artistic skills in an ultra-modern mode of writing to tell the story of the trials and tribulations of her black race, slavery, colour and gender bias making use of resourceful figurative language and finally attain identity and autonomy in the male dominated world.

Susan Meisenhelder observes about Janie’s determined search for her legitimate identity. An indication of her fragmented identity is reinforced by the fact that “she does not see herself as black and cannot even recognize herself in a photograph” (106). She highlights significant scenes of the novel where Janie suffers and does not have a definition of certain aspects of life, such as when people call her by the name, Alphabet as a consequence of having used a variety of names for her. It is a fact that Janie’s different first names are representative of her own situation as a child born to a woman who was ruthlessly abused by a white man. As a child, Janie has no sense of self-identity, nor does she have a paradigm by which to define her. She does not know she is colored until she sees herself in a picture. Even her name does not help to define her as a child because people call her by different names. Therefore, at first she seems to have a clear definition of what she is as a human being. Their Eyes Were Watching God is about the life of Janie and her frantic search for identity and autonomy. She suffers at the hands of many men until she meets Tea Cake, who becomes a partner to her, not a master, as her previous husbands
were. According to Meisenhelder, “She has been given so many names by others that she is finally called Alphabet” (9).

Potter states that “the time Janie spent in her youth with Mrs. Washburn and the white family strongly influenced and inspired her quest for her unique identity” (17). Her life with Mrs. Washburn and the white folks does not protect Janie from suffering at the hands of such men as Killicks and Starks. Potter sees Nanny as Janie’s “only resource for questions of identity” (18). This is the problem because she is “thoroughly saturated with white social issue. She therefore steers Janie onto a path of mimicry that consumes nearly forty years of her life” (18). Potter limits Janie’s resources to Nanny, and neglects the fact that Janie has the fascination for the pear tree, which represents her own feelings and insights about her identity and what she wants for herself. When he talks about Janie and Tea Cake, Potter asserts that, “Tea Cake finally introduces her to the genuine black social patterns that define the spirit of her race” (18). In Potter’s view, it is as if Tea Cake is the only person responsible for Janie discovering her own identity. However, Janie already possesses ideas about her identity long before Tea Cake has come into her life. The same is the case when she left Logan, and also, in some instance, in her life with Joe Starks. To Potter, Nanny’s objective of marrying Janie to Logan Killicks is to give her “the wealth that would fulfill the “White “dream bequeathed to her” (18). Nanny is trying to protect Janie from the sexual exploitations she and her daughter, Leafy experienced.

In the same article, Potter affirms that Janie and Joe “settle in Eatonville with the intention of fulfilling Joe’s dreams of being a Big Voice” (14). He also states that she is defined through Joe and that “because of this denial of self-determination, the marriage becomes increasingly tyrannical to Janie” (19). Potter does not recognize that Janie leaves Killicks to go with Joe Starks for her own reasons. It is clear in Hurston’s text that Janie sees in Starks a possibility of achieving a “far horizon” (19), which is a symbol that Hurston uses to imply possibilities for Janie to accomplish finer things in life. Regarding the Pear tree, Meisenhelder relates Janie’s experience under the pear tree to sexuality, creativity, and delight, by saying, “The relationship between active equals, is not only one of delight, but as the metaphor of pollination
implies, one of creativity” (106). The pear tree carries Janie through different times in her life. Meisenhelder analyses the pear tree as a “vision of female possibility” for Janie only. By marrying Janie to Logan, Nanny intends to give Janie a reference point for self-identification because she herself believes that Janie and she is “branches without roots” (TE 16). Meisenhelder views Nanny’s purpose in marrying Janie to Killicks as one formulated under the supposition of economic gain only. He observes that “Nanny’s dreams of marriage and monetary security for Janie” (TE10). But Nanny’s intention is to go beyond economic security. She wishes to prevent a situation that would damage Janie’s self-esteem and cause humiliation. Kanyano in one of his essay feels that Janie searches for help from Nature in only critical moments of her life. He points out that Nature, to Janie is much more than just a source of solace. He also restricts his analysis to say that all Janie’s experience with Nature is religious. Janie’s relation to Nature is deeper; she finds not only God but also a sense of identity and a voice in the society. Hence critics have generally analyzed the novels of Hurston as a romantic portrayal of male/female relationships in which Lucy and Janie are constantly influenced by the men with whom they become involved.

Johnson, a critic focuses on Seraph on Suwanee for the gender differences between men and women. Johnson has observed that: “Black feminists have led the way in expanding feminist theorizing by pointing out the ways in which gender and race together create a more meaningful dialogue about the life experiences of women of color” (315). Women of color in general tend to take a more political stance in their activism because they deal with a society that encompasses inequalities of a diverse nature, inequalities that are often embedded within cultural practices. As Maynard points out, acknowledging differences is a good start, but looking at each term separately ignores the underlying political structures that create and maintain a value system which privileges the dominant culture, a culture that embodies racism and a patriarchal disavowal of female/maternal powers. Maynard focus on difference as:

Its implications of plurality and multiplicity is seen by many as an effective counter measure to a monolithic view of women, Maynard asks us to think about what is meant by difference and how that
motion could be used as a constructive part of empirical research or theoretical analysis in order to bring about social changes,( 9)

Bell Hooks points out, “only women with leisure time and money could actually shape their identities on the model of the Feminine Mystique” (Feminist Theory 2). At a time in history when majority of women were employed, stay-at-home wives and mothers represents a cultural ideal that is not obtainable for large members of working class women, whether black or white, who were forced to work in menial, low-paying jobs. These women were oppressed by sexism. White women tended to ignore the ways that they were privileged by racism. Audre Lorde points out that those early Women’s Studies courses happened to ignore literature written by women of color, positioning those women as outsiders or “others” whose life experiences and traditions were too difficult to understand (117). Betty Friedan in her book, The Feminine Mystique (1963), highlights how an imposed ideology of dependent femininity “became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture” (18).

Hurston’s close observations of white people in action, like those of the domestic workers mentioned by Collins and Hooks, together with her personal experiences of racial discrimination, led her to ponder the nature of what she referred to as the “false foundation ‘(164), of Anglo-culture as she seeks to understand that false foundation. Her novel describes a society where the exploitation of maternal energies in service to patriarchal, economic and social goals results in the corruption not only of the personal agency and meaning of women as mothers, but of nature as well. Her female protagonist, Arvay Henson, is the focal point for her feminist diagnosis of white culture, a culture dominated by a psychological mind-set based on domination and exclusion where the conditions that confer privileges and powers are very narrowly defined. In Seraph on the Suwannee, Hurston continues the tradition of African American women writers who use their writing talents to fight the social issues such as discrimination against African American women but also emerges as a prescient fore-mother in terms of feminist sociopolitical analysis. Her subversive novel invokes a potent statement about racial inequality by focusing on the
psychological dynamics of a white couple, a clear departure from African American male writers in the 1940s.

Mclntosh claims that, “[M]any, perhaps most white students in the United States do not see ‘whiteness’ as a racial identity” (103). It might be more accurate to say that a specific racial identity is not a part of white consciousness because that awareness is not required for day-to-day living since white people do not experience their lives through a racial filter that implies deviation. Amy Kaminsky claims that race as an unquestioned concept “becomes a receptacle for meaning instead of a locus of the production of signification” (9). This means that as long as white culture sees itself as not having “race”, it will be difficult to conduct a meaningful national dialogue on race-identity issues. Embedded systems of oppression create, maintain, and legitimize an unacknowledged source of social capital that is available to white people for use at the expense of those designated as others. However, Jim, as a white male, goes forth with a greater sense of self-confidence than Arvay whose life is circumscribed by her socially mandated position as stay-at-home wife and mother. In Seraph on the Suwanee, Cornel West states that “blackness has no meaning outside of a system of race-conscious people and practices “(27). Thus, the ultimate irony of whiteness is that it would not exist without the presence of blackness. Indeed, Morrison believes that the use of a “constituted Africanism…..provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity” (44). Frankenberg asserts that the idea of whiteness as identity is “almost impossible to separate from racial dominance” (9). In the social system that includes but does not acknowledge oppression, whiteness becomes a defining element. Looking to define their own position in such a society, African American women writers have used their literary talents to expose and question the privileging of whites in American society, often focusing on the role that white women have played in helping to create and maintain the status of African American society.

The scope of the study explores self-empowering strategies of African-American women as reflected in the works of Hurston. This research is divided into five chapters. Chapter I, Introduction, presents the background, the objectives, the
significance illustrating the feminist theories, literature review and the scope of the study. Chapter II, III, IV and V deal with social conditions, values, beliefs and mindsets of the people and a specific focus on female characters’ strengths and assertion in their attitude towards life. These chapters vividly show how the African American women empower themselves to reach their horizon, discovering and asserting their self-identity and autonomy. The analysis starts with Their Eyes were Watching God, Seraph on the Suwanee, Dust Tracks on Road and other works such as Jonah’s Gourd Vine, Mules and Men and short stories of Hurston in order to trace the development of the vibrant personalities of the African American heroines and even the author as reflected in each work in parallel with the development of African-American society.

Chapter II is titled “Inventing herself”: Emergence of Black Female Identity focuses on female identity in Their Eyes were Watching God. It is an elaborate depiction of how the protagonist of the novel visions herself against the ruling society and time-honored beliefs that have been repressing the female identity and autonomy Janie, the protagonist, who is very strong, independent and intelligent does not meekly follow the main stream base of life but learns over time from her failures. Janie’s life is split into various parts. The first part depicts Janie’s childhood experiences from her birth to the time she becomes a young teen; the second part delineates Janie’s experience with her first husband, Logan kellicks. The third part explores Janie’s life with her second husband, Joe Starks. The fourth part examines her life-fulfillment when she marries a man named Tea Cake, who is much younger than herself and her tireless struggles for justice. This chapter shows the consistent development of Janie’s inner strength by which she gains her identity as a human being with legitimate rights to dignity and freedom. Ultimately she touches the horizon of independence and individuality through her hard life experiences.

Chapter III – “I want to make myself”: Search for Self gives an elaborate expression of Arvay’s irrepressible and insatiable from the fetters of racial oppressions and assertion of Self-Hood in the novel Seraph on the Suwanee. Arvay resists the dominant forms of social oppression. At first, she is an economically
dependent wife and mother to Jim and her children respectively, occupying a social space that renders her subservient to her husband. Nevertheless, freedom is needed for her care-taking and emotional mothering activities that confer a degree of social status. She struggles hard to balance between her husband and children. She becomes a victim to Jim who unconscionably exploits her sexually even before their marriage, taking advantage of her fragile social standing. Arvay finds it difficult to survive with Jim’s oppressions. Yet she finds her identity by purifying herself by her noble suffering, stoically withstanding social onslaughts. She is no longer enslaved by her tortured past. She is ultimately free to do what she wants to do for her family. She is to serve and is meant to serve. Jim is the means through which Arvay can understand herself as worthwhile. She quits Jim, fed up with his high-handedness. It is her sojourn at Sawley which transforms her into a confident woman. Her solitude enlightens her mind and metamorphoses her into a mature woman who can shape her life herself. At Sawley, she gradually evolves as an independent woman who can handle her life individually. Her ability to prudently handle the situation at the time of her mother’s death testifies to her potential as a woman. She independently takes decisions which calls for autonomy and appreciation.

Chapter IV - Self Assertion in Autobiographies deals with Hurston’s autobiographies, where she inputs her own life experiences. A woman who is arrogant, strong and powerful, even radical creates a strong impact on the female empowerment. She discusses her folklore expeditions, political conflicts, struggle, the problems of her own psyche and injustice framed by patriarchy and slavery. She struggles assiduously, gained tremendous inner strength and nobly liberated herself from racial oppressions, as beautifully portrayed in her novels and works. Hurston’s autobiography vividly explains why the female characters of her novels develop the urge for self-identity and autonomy, and how they attain them with determination, empowering the whole of female society.

Chapter V Summation shows women writers have broken the silence in the mid-sixties in the Continent and raised their voice against vital issues concerning the African American females. It is also the era of political independence of many of African States. The decade that follows witnessed the rise of feministic writing by
African women and advanced the African American women’s cause of recognition and relevance. It is a personal odyssey to realize the full potential of one’s complex bicultural identity as an African-American. This legendary and mythic journey of identity and autonomy derives its socio-cultural consciousness from the group experience of African Americans, and its force from the interplay of Euro-centric and Afro-centric symbolic systems. In short, as far as there is an African-American canonical story, it is the quest, frequently with apocalyptic undertones, for freedom, literacy, identity and autonomy, personal and communal — grounded in social reality and ritualized in symbolic acts of African-American speech, music, and religion. She traces the effects of these views on her female characters and depicts the characters’ struggles for liberation from such limiting discourse; Hurston portrays their resistance to the policing and control attempted by the communities of working class or middle class ones.

Further the oppressed African-American and white women in the works of Hurston vehemently resist and assert their identity and autonomy in order to survive in the male-dominated society. The findings in the study give a wide explanation about how the female characters achieve their identity and liberated self. These characters are an inspiration to the society. They create awareness among other women and thereby encourage them to stand up for themselves. Hurston mirrors the position of African Americans occupying in a dominant white society in her time. She has revolutionized the world’s view of African-Americans through her literary works and dedicated efforts. She has shown the way for African American woman to assert and liberate being a strong African American female.