CHAPTER II

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The search for an independent, integrated identity has been the leitmotif in the works of African-American writers. This quest is longing for a home and wholeness and is indicative of an acute desire of black community for self-identification and self-actualisation. In the community as well as in the field of literature, black women remain unidentified as intelligent, clever, brilliant, reactive, and above all artistic. To add to the worst, due to the heavy impact of racism and sexism, the society even refused to accept them as individuals. As black people, they were not recognized by the white. As women also they had to face hostility from black men. Gerda Lerner maintains:

Belonging as they do to two groups, which have traditionally been treated as inferiors by American society-Blacks and Women-they have been doubly invisible. Their records lie buried, unread, infrequently noticed and even more seldom interpreted (*Black Women in white America* xvii-xviii).

The white male writers have always portrayed black women in their novels as one of these stereotypes. Not only the whites but also the black writers have adopted this stereotype portrayal of black women
though the black male writers show a little more understanding and consideration for the black women. The white male writers pen-picture black women as strong, adjustive and encouraging mammies whereas the black male writers portray the black women as tragic mulattoes. Black novelists like Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ralph Elison delineated the black women as mammmas or sex kittens. However, a different image of black women has been given by writers like Imamu Baraka and Don Lee. They have deified black women like mother.

Moreover, black women writers have given a very different picture of black women. In their writings they depict the struggle in the lives of black women for freedom and self-identity. From the 1960s till now many tales describe the plight of black women. Frances Foster observes:

"While the male slave stereotyped slave woman as a sexually exploited being, the slave women's versions of their own lives, while documenting the trauma and the grief of sexual exploitation and physical abuse, portray themselves as far more than mere victims of rape and seductions". They present "Stronger, more complex portraiture of their sex" (Black American Literature Forum 70).

However, we should not be misled into thinking that male African-American writers of the period knowingly criticized the black women. On the contrary, black woman has to explain her situation in such a way that it will display her ownself and personality, her relationship
with family, community, society, and above all men, whether black or white. Fortunately, such writers would express their own ideas regarding the depth, complexity and variety of the black women's experiences.

The twentieth century black women writers follow certain modes in their presentation of black women, on the basis of physical and psychological. Their writing no more centres on the image of the tragic mulattoes and the stereotyping is no more exclusive to the role of mammies. On the contrary, black women have been presented as living human beings who are capable of feeling, thinking and dreaming about their own lives. They are having their own identity and are no more used or misled by others. They are capable of examining their relationship with men in general and with women in particular. They are not just machines and automatons but living human beings having their own independent thinking and philosophy of life. The stereotype roles of these women is no more dealt with by these black women writers because stereotype is the media through which human beings stoop to the level of non-human beings. With the emergence of the Feminist movement in the early sixties, an open hostility arose between the masculine world and the feminine world. The conflict between male and female world is supported by feminists
like Betty Friedan, Shoshan Felman, Julia Kristeva and Toril Moi.

Julia Kristeva says:

“If women have a role to play... it is only in assuming a negative function: Reject everything finite, definite, structured, loaded with meaning, in the existing state of society. Such an attitude places women on the side of the explosion of social codes: With revolutionary movements” (*Feminist Studies*: 1981).

Ann Rosalind Jones presents a very broad view of woman by saying:

By woman, I mean that which can not be represented, what is not said, what remains above and beyond no men cultures and ideologies. There are certain ‘men’ who are familiar with this phenomenon (*Writing the Body* 363).

Shoshana Felman considers feminism as a protest against the claims of man: “I am the unified, self-controlled center of the universe, the rest of the world which I define as the other, has meaning only in relation to me, as man/father, possessor of the phallus” (*Diacritics* 03).

Luce Irigaray studies femininity in giving a clear-cut idea of women that differentiates them from men. She mentions:

Woman has sex organs just about everywhere. She experiences pleasure almost everywhere... The geography of her pleasure is much more diversified more multiple in its difference, more complex, more subtle, that is imagined—in an imaginary system centered a bit too much on one and the same (*Signs* 103).

Woman is considered as a human being who makes it very difficult to be achieved, not easily understood and gives a sudden start and
changes in an unreasonable way. To define the sexuality of a man, Cixous gives emphasis on the libidinal physical aspects of a woman:

Though masculine sexuality gravitates around the penis, engendering that centralized body (in political anatomy) under the dictatorship of its parts, woman does not bring about the same rationalization which serves the couple head/genitals and which is inscribed only within boundaries. Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide (The Newly Born Woman 365).

Cixou emphasises on the link between sexuality and language of woman by telling: “Oral drive, vocal drive—all these drives are our strengths, among them is the gestation drive—just like the desire to write: a desire to live from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood” (Ibid., 366).

However, the French feminists are concerned with the body parts of women only and don’t take into account their emotional side. In the twentieth century racial situation plays a vital role in establishing the self of an individual in the society. According to the views of modern psychologists, a person acquires his sexuality mostly according to his emotional and sentimental closeness and nearness either to the father or to the mother. This points out the basic difference between the definition of woman’s sexuality adopted by the French feminists and the views adopted by the Afro-American writers. This also explains the reason for black American women writers preferring the word womanism to feminism. Black women writers were greatly impressed
by the feminist movement and their writings provide valuable information relating to the experiences of women. If feminism is loosing its strength or momentum nowadays, the reason is its negligence in taking care of the causes, which have led to divide the role of a woman in society. The feminist movement today not only elevates women from sexist oppression but also encourages individual ambition or goal to be much more important than that of the collective goal or ambition. Bell Hooks considers feminism as:

The freedom to decide her own destiny; freedom from sex-determined role; freedom from society's oppressive restrictions; freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely to actions. Feminism demands the acceptance of woman's right to individual conscience and judgment. It postulates the women's essential worth that stems from her common humanity and does not depend on the other relationship of her life (Ain't I a Woman 194).

Elaine Showalter considers the need for women to construct for them a solid foundation that will disregard the male theory. Male writers and critics in 1970 claimed that the feminist writers lacked a solid ground for their existence, which made them dependent on male critics. The dispute among women has cornered the female experience to a very insignificant realm and has lost the faith of most of the cream feminists who have misunderstood reality and have occupied a scholarly realm. Showalter is of the opinion that women should take part in academia to relegate the male-oriented views and to bring
about a mutual and shared relationship between men and women. While the white feminists are involved in struggling to evolve a niche in the academic territory, which will go against the male-oriented academia, black women require a way to get away from forthcoming subjugation. White women are more concerned about their professional careers whereas black women have to struggle for their existence in the society and have little chances for academic careers.

Not only white feminists but also black feminists have devoted themselves to academic concerns without considering the plight of those women who are pressed with the struggle for day-to-day survival. Feminists, therefore, need a theory, which reflects the interests of black working-class women and to help them to be free from racial, social and sexual oppressions. It is through bonding that women can have a share of their consciousness about the aspiration of women and will learn to resist patriarchy. That is why Michele Wallace proclaims her view that in order to rise against sexism all women have to be associated with one another. However, for the existence of women it is necessary to develop the need for sisterhood, which will forge the way toward a healthy, wholesome future for women. The differences among women should be rooted out for arriving at a solution to the dilemma and problems of women. Each woman should put forth her own ideas. When all women will combine
their ideas meant for common good, they will come to the end of the 
pilgrimage and each will know not only how to live, but also how to 
dream of a more meaningful life. If the white feminists extend their 
understanding by developing their sympathy to working-class women, 
they will contribute a great deal to promote an awareness of female 
objectification. However, Lynet Uttal remembering her experience of 
dealing with white feminists points out that the white feminist’s 
contribution to theorize a comprehensive female discourse does not 
necessarily mean anything encouraging. The act of the white feminists 
in rejecting their responsibility for developing female bonding and 
autonomy undermines the plight of the women who are cornered to 
the periphery. The difference between the various groups of women 
should be sorted out nevertheless, the movement will be a failure and 
weaken the cause of female solidarity which will be a golden 
opportunity for the patriarchal oppressors.

It is essential for black women critics to formulate a comprehensive 
womanist theory that respects both the voice of white feminists 
regarding their academic career and also the voice of the black women 
who need a theory in order to escape from forthcoming oppressions. 
Some critics suggest that African-American women should construct a 
traditional theory, which will serve as an alternative to the western 
notion of theory based on binary opposition. However, the feminist
movement does not create much hope in the minds of black women in America because they are afraid of losing what they have achieved due to this system. The notion of feminist struggle has been adopted by a few black women writers. The black women have to struggle for existence in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive and the other black, exploited, and oppressed. Various reasons have persuaded the black women writers to portray their female characters in such a way that they will make themselves free from alienation arising out of racism, classicism and sexism. Ogunyemi in her definition of womanism mentions:

Black American female writers share with black males the heritage of the blues, whose spiritual dynamics ensure equilibrium in a turbulent world-perhaps because, as Stephen Henderson points out, there is a connection between the blues and the capacity to experience hope. The blues have had a tremendous impact on the Afro-American womanist novel, and in contrast to feminist novels, most Afro-American womanist novels, culture-oriented as they are, abound in hope (Signs 89).

The African-American womanism is more complicated than that of the white mainstream feminism. To Alice Walker, “Womanist means a woman committed to the survival and whiteness of the entire people, male and female” (Perry 14). Amiri Baraka emphasises on the oppression of the Third World women:

Third World women in this country suffer a triple oppression, if they are working women, as worker under capitalism-class oppression, national oppression and oppression because of their sex (Afro-American Literature and Class Struggle 12).
Ogunyemi elucidates the womanist vision by saying that the black women writers are not restricted to the topic of improving the black race only, rather they attempt to tackle questions that touch mankind at large. Hortense J. Spillers has related the awareness of contemporary Afro-American women writers to present-day problems of the black women. She observes:

That writers like Morrison, Toni Cade, and Paule Marshall among them, participate in a tradition of black women writing in their own behalf, close to its moment of inception, lends their work thorough complexity. With the exception of a handful of autobiographical narratives from the nineteenth century, the black woman’s realities are virtually suppressed until the period of the Harlem Renaissance and later. Essentially, the black woman as artist, as intellectual spokesperson for her own cultural apprenticeship, has not existed before, for anyone. As the source of her own symbol-making task, this community of writers confronts, therefore, a tradition of work that is quite recent, its continuities broken and sporadic (Gates 78).

Afro-American women are not only conscious of the present problems of black Americans but they also shoulder the burden of responsibility in fighting against the patriarchal forces to achieve their aim. To fulfil their dreams, they had to rebel against Victorian values. For this they must stand united against Victorian philosophy, which has been till now functioning in black American society. Toni Cade supports the voice of the Afro-American women writers against the Victorian philosophy that plagues their sexual and social life:

The only way to regain happiness is to make preparations for the revolution. To do this we must destroy the Victorian Philosophy that plagues our sexual and social life and makes impossible any meaningful togetherness. We must try to realize that we are
building a whole and complete army. We have yet to know about a revolution that was waged by men only. In fact, we have yet to know about rebellions when only the men threw bricks at the cops. We are talking about a People’s Army, which includes men, women and children who are fanatics about their freedom (The Black Women: An Anthology 147-148).

The black people no doubt were being oppressed for quite a long period but the irony of the situation was that there was difference among them also. Dark brown people enjoyed more rights and opportunities than that of the black skinned people. Racial prejudice had ruined the life of the black Americans and at the same time race consciousness had distorted them. There was also distinction among them due to racial discrimination. In such an environment, African-American women apart from being victims of racism, sexism and classicism, are also victims of familial alienation.

After World War II, occupational conflict developed between black women and black men. Black men wanted women to be vulnerable upon them both socially and economically. Slavery and poverty forced the black women to work. So they were more independent, aggressive and laborious than white women. They had to struggle against black men on the one hand and had to be assertive and independent in their careers on the other hand. In contrast to black women, white women were not economically independent and remained passive confined to hearth and home. Black women had to be economically independent
and had to fix some sort of responsibility on their men. Toni Morrison rightly says:

The man is not free to choose his responsibilities. He is only responsible for what somebody has handed him. It is the women who keep it going, keep the children some place safe (Conversation with American Writers 239).

Sexism more oppressive physically and mentally was the cause of grievance for the black women who were being sexually exploited by both black and white men. So, to be black and female is to suffer from the twin disadvantages of racial discrimination and pronounced gender bias. No other social group has ever been subjected to such an unedifying spectacle of human debasement and depravity. Being black, they suffered from racism, being females they were the victims of sexual atrocities at the hands of the white patriarch as well as the blacks, and being poor, they were forced by the white patriarchs to live on meagre resources. In short, black women in America were made victims of triple jeopardy—racism, sexism and classicism. As sources of oppression of blacks, racism and sexism are allied and have a parallel existence which is beautifully described by Gloria Wadegayles:

There are three major circles of reality in American society, which reflect degrees of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle in which white people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow space, in which black people, regardless of sex, experience uncertainty, exploitation and powerlessness. Hidden in this second
circle is a third, a small, dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation and vulnerability. These are the distinguished marks of black womanhood in white America (No Crystal Stair: Visions of Race and Sex in Black Women's Fiction 3-4).

What we see here is the omnipresent, all-embracing reality of racism as a common factor in the lives of all blacks irrespective of sex. Judged by the white man’s standard of life, behaviour and beauty, a black man’s life became unbearable. Just as blacks as a group were relegated to an underclass by virtue of their race, so were women relegated to a separate caste by virtue of their sex. Confronted on all sides by racial and sexual discrimination, the black woman had no friends but only liabilities and responsibilities. Being responsible for their own and their children’s well-being and future, these women had to face daily the reality of their relationships with white men, with white women and, above all, with black men. Both black men and black women were uncertain about their manhood and womanhood and lost their originality in their efforts to model themselves on white Americans. William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs maintain:

Her blackness is the antithesis of a creamy white skin, her lips are thick, her hair is kinky and short. She is, in fact, antithesis of American beauty. However beautiful she might be in a different setting with different standards, in this country—she is ugly (What Manner of Woman 323).
Being a slave himself, the black man was absolutely powerless and the black woman was deprived of a strong black man on whom she could rely for protection. The main aim of women's liberation movement was to root out sexism. Sarah Grimike says:

Woman instead of being elevated by her union with man, which might be expected from an alliance with a superior being, is in reality, lowered. She generally loses her individuality, her independent character, her moral being, she becomes absorbed into him, and henceforth is looked at, and acts through the medium of her husband (Women: A Feminist Perspective 438).

Lack of racial oppression made white women focus on feminism but they did not approve racial equality and were not prepared to work with black women. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, a black woman had to be a person with a menial job. Racism and sexism mutilated the hearts and minds of slave women and defiled their sexual identity and scarred them psychologically for all time. Suffering at the hands of both black and white men, the African-American woman had to fight for survival both inside and outside her house. In the nineteenth century, women's rights movement too did not give black women any chance or opportunity to express their plight. So they began to realize that racism has to be abolished. Then only they would get a chance of liberating themselves sexually.

Toni Morrison is, perhaps, the most sophisticated novelist, whose work has been described as 'amazingly high'. The uniqueness of Toni
Morrison as a novelist lies in her defiance of the social, political, racial and gender ranking in American system. Combining the aims of the black freedom movement with women's liberation, she seeks to produce a historical approach to overhaul a dual western culture. So also the challenges to dismantle African-American culture. African-Americans were constantly neglected in the American literary tradition. They were victims of economic slavery with various restrictions imposed upon them. Even they were forbidden to marry without the approval of their white masters. The black women were white men's slaves and mothers of their mulatto children. To Wallace, the black woman is:

Sapphire. Mammy. Tragic mulatto wench. Workhorse, can swing an ax, lift a load, pick cotton with any man. A wonderful housekeeper. Excellent with children. Very clean, very religious. A terrific mother. A great little singer and dancer and a devoted teacher and social worker... Not beautiful, rather hard working unless she has white blood. The black ones are very exotic though great in bed, tigers. If she is middle-class, she tends to be upright about sex... Unsupportive of black men, domineering, castrating. Very strong, Sorrow rolls right off her brow like so much rain. Tough, unfeminine. Opposed to women's rights movements, considers herself already liberated ("Black Macho and the Myth of the Supper Woman", MS. 45).

Black women were made to breed children so that the owner's stock of slaves would increase. A slave's status was determined by the mother, either a genuine white or a conquered black. The life of a slave was thoroughly restricted and they were viewed not as human beings but as objects. Presenting a woman at the center of her novels, Morrison
attempts to rebuild a field for African-Americans. For this purpose she attempts to return to the origin of western civilization. Originally, the western civilization was influenced strongly by the Egyptian civilization, which was a non-white culture. But whites still deny to acknowledge the impact of non-white civilization upon them and have always sneered and enslaved non-white races to keep up the pecking order mastery of western civilization. They assigned the African-Americans only subordinate roles like nurturing mammies and faithful slaves and linked the blackness with all the negative aspects of life like death, darkness and invisibility. Still the African-Americans have played an indispensable role in American culture and their contribution to American culture can’t simply be ignored.

Morrison also makes a historical approach to explain the reason why African-Americans are subjugated and depreciated and are driven to the periphery of existence. In her view, those who immigrated to America were politically, religiously, and economically oppressed in their countries and they escaped to the new world for liberation. But in the New World, however much they struggled to forget their old tyrannical world, it constantly preyed on their memory. To get rid of this fear they discharged it into the blackness of African-Americans and made the blacks their surrogate diffident selves. Henceforth, they devised to legalize their subordination of blacks and enjoyed new
power, freedom and rights banned to them previously in their original country.

After the World War II some black women writers raised their voices against black women being considered as objects or animals. But in reality they are almost half of all Americans. In this context Lerner puts forth his view that the experiences of women have encompassed, at least, half of the world’s work and much of its products: Women’s experience encompasses all that is human, they share and always half shared-the world equally with men (Gerda Lerner xxi).

Lerner intends to convey that documenting the experience of women would be like recording the history with a specialization. The history associated with the experience of women is disfigured and alienated because it has been contumacious through the eyes man’s documents and analysis. Our knowledge of women’s experiences has been supplied to us through reflections of men. Even the historians working on women’s history have pointed out that women were a ‘marginal minority’ and that their history was no more than a collection of ‘missing persons and facts’. So any attempt to rebuild the women’s history by considering women’s history as an end matter to US history will only be futile. Time has come to reverse the phrase by which Simone de Beauvoir considers the woman as man’s ‘other’, and woman should now see man as ‘the other’. And it is this thinking,
which will raise her feminist self-consciousness. It is her self-confidence, which challenges patriarchal values and arrogance, and tries to replace for them a feminist system of ideas and values. This feminist consciousness is important as it has a great deal to do with the quest for women's rights, equality and justice. Greda Lerner views that what is important for women is autonomy:

Autonomy means moving out from a world in which one is born to marginality, to a past without a meaning and a future determined by others—into a world in which one acts and chooses, aware of a meaningful past and free to shape one's future (Black Women in White America xxiv).

Autonomy will make the woman independent, educated and her feminist consciousness will make her demand for rights and organizing female pressure groups. Despite gradual progress, black women are still far behind black men and white women. As Gloria Steinier points out: "Just as male was universal but female was limited, white was universal but black was limited" (Outrageous Act, and Everyday Rebellions 07). Thus, race and gender, that is, 'black' and 'female' were juxtaposed against 'white' and 'male', in the process of creating a relegated microcosm within a dominating microcosm. On the whole, it was the black woman who had the greater cause for grievance, being oppressed as both a black and a woman. The black woman was an easy prey, an object of desire, a creature for the satisfaction of the master's lust. She was subjected to sexual assault
without any feeling of guilt because she was considered the white man’s personal property. Because of her ability to do man’s work and her extraordinary reproductive capacity, the black woman was considered by her white master as an indispensable commodity. Her family, her children and her body became the property of the master. Her sexuality and reproductivity were rented out to breed like cattle. Such treatment had a devastating effect upon the black woman. She was prevented from breast-feeding her children so that her work would not suffer. At the same time she had to be a surrogate mother to the white children. She was reduced to the status of an animal: “Their femininity and humanity were denied because they were considered to be neither feminine nor human” (Joyce A. Ladner 274).

The so-called African ‘queen’ was reduced to the level of a nigger. The blacks being illiterate and poor, there was no question of protest, they continued to suffer from ignominy without hope. The other side of the coin tells us of the disgrace the black woman suffered at the hands of her own man. Despite all sympathy for his abused wife, the black male (husband) gradually developed a kind of aversion towards the black female (wife). He also began to see her as a loose woman who preferred extramarital adventures to marital permanence. The stigma attached to the black woman by her white master ironically received the black man’s sanction. Thus, the white racist society
forcibly imposed upon the ignorant, innocent black woman a burden, which she could neither remove nor bear. The white man’s clever manipulation of the social situation thus escaped black man’s attention. The black woman had to accept, “racial polarity in the form of white supremacy and sexual polarity in the form of male dominance” (Hooks 120).

With the image of the ‘loose woman’ being attached to the black woman, a different kind of reverse sexual politics began to work in the life of black woman. As she was the object of prey for the white man, she had to bear with the anger of the white woman for being a symbol of evil, for robbing white women of their men. This image of the black woman made her man feel sexually neglected and he took his woman to be his enemy. The utter helplessness of the situation was that he was absolutely powerless to question the scheme of things. He developed a feeling that his woman was a loose woman and preferred sexual dalliance and marital permanence. So he felt unwanted, alienated, inadequate, and developed the notion that his wife was better satisfied by the white man. His ego was hurt, his manliness was offended and he began to think of black woman as a whore. Either way “the black woman was deprived of a strong black man on whom he could rely for protection” (Gerda Lerner xxiii). The black man had to compete with the white man for his wife’s love and
affection. The African woman had very little time for her family and children. Spending a lot of time in attending upon her white mistress, she was incapable of holding her family into a bond. It affected her relationship with her family. The black man, being economically poor, had a very little role to play in looking after the family. He had no genuine love and affection for his children, as he was uncertain about his paternity. The identity of a child was solely dependent upon his mother. The black woman could not keep a healthy relationship with her children. Being unable to bear the pain of being separated from her child, she went to the extent of killing her child as does Sethe in *Beloved* to make her child free from enslavement and brutalization in the hands of the slave masters. Thus, the black woman was considered as an ugly looking woman, a bonded labourer, a separated mother and a licentious mistress.

Not only the people but also the community played an important role in shaping the life of an individual. Like the customs and traditions of the past, place also was an essential steady pillar in cherishing the traditional values of life from one generation to another. Circumstances forced African-Americans to move from rural south to a more or less urban north. They migrated to big cities as well as small ones. They had to face the white residents of Lorain who looked down upon them as newcomers. And the black people had to struggle
to exist in a new environ. To give vent to their struggle for existence the feminist movement in 1950 began celebrating black beauty. But very soon black women writers could realize the deceitfulness of the male writers in preferring white femininity to black femininity. They were mechanistic in considering black women as fully debased creatures, evil castrates and immoral beings. Annoyed by the partial feelings of the male writers, black women writers expressed through their writings the victimization of black women in America being at once black, female and poor. They portrayed the sufferings of black women by the mountains of racism, sexism, and capitalism. In the early 1960s they had an impulse to delineate the growth of their female characters towards self-assertion. But afterwards they turned their concerted attention on the society they live in. In the last two decades the status of the black women had undergone a drastic change. No longer were they a subordinate sex, a second sex'. Instead of being secondary to the literary dominance of black males, the black women writers are considered today as writers in all fields and varieties. They have tried to expose through their literature the political conspiracies of the racial and sexual beliefs, feeling and actions that black male writers have sustained towards black women in general. To evaluate the present condition of black women and to uphold the theory that black women writers considered it as their
bounden duty to discover the black woman’s self entrapped in the white society, a few of their works written by eminent women writers should be taken to study. Frances Ellen Harper’s *IOIA Le Roy or Shadows Uplifted* is historically significant as it was the first novel written by an African-American woman. After The Civil War the blacks were no doubt liberated but World War I hit them hard as it precipitated a global crisis. It was at this time the novel *IOIA Le Roy or Shadows Uplifted* was published by Harper to demonstrate her involvement in the national struggle for the emancipation of the blacks. The novel depicts the life story of a young, educated Christian octaroon who, being fully ignorant of the Negro blood in her vein, considers herself white and acts exactly like a racist. Mislead by his superficial skin colour, she develops an ego about her parentage and defends slavery as a necessity of plantation life. It is highly ironical that a person of her stock should support white values, which have always oppressed the blacks. However due to her black ancestry, she too is finally hurled into the vicious cauldron of slavery. Her racist presumption radically changes when she herself undergoes racial polarity and experiences the plight of being a black. She considers her own pain as a kind of penalty for her past sins. However, the matter does not end there. She has to go through another facet of black suffering in the form of sexism. Sex-obsessed white men chase Iola,
but she tactfully prevents their clandestine advances. Gradually she gains experience of being a black and with her new awareness of knowledge about the African-American life, she wants to live and struggle as a black woman. She recreates herself in the light of her newly acquired experience. Though racism combined with sexism has a deep impact on her black identity, she suffers from an agonizing sense of estrangement and remains fragmented at the outset but towards the end of the novel she overcomes her suffering and attains integration and wholeness. She sees the clear light of day.

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes were Watching God* depicts the black woman’s predicament in unambiguous terms:

> De white man is de ruler of every thing as far as Ai been able tih find out So...(he) throws down de load and tele de nigger man tih pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it tuh his women folks. Be nigger woman is da rule uh de world so far as Ah can see (29).

Hurston shows here considerable talent in revising the preceding models of black womanhood. Her writings signal that the dawn was not far off and the new black woman would soon knock at the doors of the Afro-American literature. She was one of the foremost black thinkers to attack American capitalism for creating a tier of socio-economic classes that pushes the black woman to a subordinate position in the social hierarchy. Janie, the protagonist of the novel, is a beautiful mulatto who is treated by the men around as an object to be
fought over and won. Marriage jeopardizes her self-identity and abandons her to anonymity. Her first marriage takes place with an old man, Logan Killicks. Logan is jealous of her youth and beauty and desires her to work like a mule for him. Her second husband Judy Stark is the black entrepreneur. He considers Janie as his possession and creates a town to establish Janie as its queen, seated on the porch, aloof and isolated from everyone. Janie’s sense of deprivation is mixed with a feeling of utter isolation as she is eventually cut off from the local black community. However a dramatic change occurs in Janie’s life when Judy dies. She then falls in love with Teacake, a man younger to her. It is Teacake, who considers her as a human being and helps her to realize her self-value. Their love relationship forms the basis of this novel. Christian Barbara aptly maintains:

> Romantic in its abandon, but tingling with a poignancy borne of a dream, dream dreamt so long that it had to come true. That Janie must kill Teacake because he is mad with rabies lead us back to the stereotype of the tragic mulatto, except that to Janie, her life has not been tragic but rich (Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition 234).

Teacake’s death makes her sad. But his sweet memory encourages her to continue to live in this world. Through Janie, Hurston has delineated the condition of all black women. As Christian observes, Hurston in her life and work “move the image of the black woman beyond stereotype, as she sought the ever evolving ways of the folk.”
She grafted onto the nineteenth century mode, a new way of looking at the mulatto and the southern black woman, preparing the way for different spice boxes in the twentieth century" (Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers 147).

In the saga of black women novelists Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946) is a landmark. During the Great Depression in the thirties in America, numerous black people migrated from rural South to urban North. The impact of the hostile urban environment on the blacks where one feels alienated and dislocated is the idea that is presented in *The Street*. Petry’s major concern in the novel is the hostile environment of Harlem and its impact on the people who must bear with it. *The Street* shows how racial discrimination renders blacks jobless and how poverty, in turn, exposes the African-American woman to sexual exploitation. Lutie Johnson, a lower class black woman deserted by her husband comes out on the streets of a big city with her obsessive desire for a comfortable life. Her struggle to survive leads her to commit the murder of her prospective employer. She is a ‘brown, good-looking girl’ plagued by the sexual advances of men, both black and white. However, she is not prepared to buy happiness at the cost of her moral values. The dominant male would use her identically as the black female slave was used. Petry also points out how white society manipulates to break family life in *The Street*. The husbands
abandon their women because they are incapable of finding a job and protecting their women and children. The struggle for survival strangles friendship and family ties. Metaphorically speaking, Lutie Johnson might be any woman of thousands of black women whose ambition for a better life kept them going. Petry heightens the intensity of overwhelming odds that depict sordid reality of life for blacks in general and black women in particular. Lutie’s final action is a definite sign of revolution and speaks of her resilience and her inviolable sense of self-dignity.

Paule Marshall’s first novel, Brown Girl Brownstone’s, “ushered in a new period of female characters in Afro-American literature”. It depicts the theme of black women’s fiction in the 1970s: “The black woman’s potential as a full person and necessarily a major actor on the social, cultural and political uses of our time” (Barbara Christian 103-105). Marshall changed cursed black women into self conscious rebels to meet the challenges of life and seek to define their identity within their own community. Brown Girl revolves around Selina, a girl child of first generation Barbadian immigrants, who passes from a traumatic childhood to womanhood. With a psyche damaged by the moist and sexist ideology, she initially judges her self-worth by the white standards of feminine beauty like Pecola in The Bluest Eye. Like Pecola, she too longs for blond hair, blue eyes and white skin.
Just as Pecola’s craving for white elegance alienates her from her community, Selina fostering a debased self-image, subordinates herself to the beautiful white people around, only to confirm her invisibility and worthlessness. Black writers analyse the crippling effects of such double-consciousness on the black woman:

[Her] blackness is the antithesis of a creamy white skin, her lips are thick, her hair is kinky and short. She is, in fact, the antithesis of American beauty... There can be no doubt that she will develop a damaged self concept and an impairment of her feminine narcissism which will have profound consequences for her character development (William H. Crier and Price M. Cobbs 252).

Marshall considers it suicidal for the black woman to accept white values. Selina, unable to perceive the truth initially, finally becomes conscious of her misconceptions and rebels against the distorted image of the black woman presented by white Americans. She also makes herself free from her false belief in male supremacy, which she has inherited from her black father. She now starts identifying herself with her mother who has suffered a lot and takes her mother, Silla, as the symbol of black womanhood. She says:

Everybody used to call me Deighton’s Selina but they were wrong. Because you see I’m truly ‘your child’. Remember how you used to talk about, how you left home and came here alone as a girl of eighteen...? I love hearing that. And that’s what I want (Brown Girl Brownstones 252).

Consequently, Selina discovers her close affinities with all the oppressed and alienated black women in their struggle for human
rights. As she is aware that she cannot change the present, she finally makes a conscious choice to restore order to her disgruntled self. She decides to go back to Barbados. Selina’s throwing her bangle high into the air before her departure shows her as a black woman determined to search for an authentic identity in spite of all barriers imposed upon her by the social milieu.

Alice Walker is an African-American securing an eminent place among women writers. She likes to call herself a ‘womanist’ because ‘womanism’, according to her expresses women’s concerns better than feminism. She is concerned with the suppressed identity of black women. As an African-American woman writer, she is “committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women” (John O’ Brien 192). Black women were even devoid of any hope for a better life. Due to the abuse of human rights by the white, and the atrocities inflicted on them, black women were forced to play a stereotype role. From generation to generation they could not express their feelings in writing because of the restricted and circumscribed life they were forced to lead:

For most of the years Black people have been in America. It was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write. And the freedom to paint, to sculpt, to expand the mind with action did not exist (Walker 64).
Black women were differentiated not only in terms of male standard and poverty but also most importantly by Euro-American women's standard. In almost every other instance, the black woman was understood in contrast to the Euro-American white woman. As a result, they were discarded, and suffered from self-scorn. They were judged by the standard almost impossible for them to attain. Women in American society were expected to be beautiful having a light skin blond hair, and blue eyes. They were expected to be vulnerable upon their men. When such standards were applied to black women, it was found that they could never fulfil them. Their Negro-like features didn't in any way make them beautiful women of America. Opportunity was not given to them to be feminine. In this context, Taylor observes: "If black women can not fulfill the requirements of being beautiful and feminine, then they become less than women and are not complete" (Black American Literature Forum 367). Walker shows her concern with the suppressed identities of black women. She explores the lacerated psyche of the black women characters struggling for a voice. Her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), demonstrates that the violence which men, women, and children of the Copeland family inflict on one another is the direct outcome of the internalization of racist hatred. The novel focuses on the miserable life of black women, their distress due to racism and
sexism, their preoccupation with the inner life of characters, their wounded psyche and creativity; their exploration of the effects of racism and sexism on individuals from an inside rather than an outside perspective, the legacy of parental values, the use of black history and other cultural traditions. The basic principle Walker highlights is the change in a person linked to the change in the society. The novel examines the concept of kinship, the communal or extended self. In African-American society, the individual self is dependent upon the community, as defined in many ways from the family, neighbourhood, village of Ghetto, to such large units as black history, black culture, and black experiences which are complex and multifarious. The central idea behind the novel is that the blacks have been exposed to assaults on their bodies and minds and suffer from alienation and deprivation. But if they are united and connected to their community, their history, and their culture can survive. Black protagonists of Walker show their inability to be psychologically healthy. As Karen Geston observes, "Walker's celebration of the strength, tenacity, and love of black woman is the main subject of her... novels" (*Women in the Lives of Grange Copeland* 276).
But Betty Parker Smith views the black female protagonist in a different way:

Without a doubt, it is the pain and suffering of the female characters...that dominate the stage even after the curtain is drawn (Alice Walker's Women: In Search of Some peace of mind 479).

Barbara Christian asserts that Walker’s most obvious theme is her “attention to the black women as creature, and how her attempt relates to the health of her community” (Black Feminist Criticism 82). In the Third Life of Grange Copeland, Alice Walker shows that the majority of Copeland women do not win, but remain oppressed and vanquished. They are defeated because they are to some extent estranged from their community. They are incapable of dealing single handledly the oppressions they encounter. They are aware that the black community “serve(s) as a filter to sort out or attenuate the pernicious impingements from the larger (white) society, a process which should have a facilitating or enchanting effect on the development of the self-concept” (Bambara 117).

The novel is a three generational story of the Copeland family beginning in rural Georgia in 1920 and ending during the early stages of the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960s. An important character in the novel is Grange who is a poor black sharecropper. He has an unhappy marriage with two sons. He goes to Harlan to begin a new life. Their he meets face to face racism and attacks it directly than
nearly reacting to it as he had done before. However, when he finds that it is not possible to carry out a war against racism, he returns to Georgia to begin his third and final life, of taking care of his granddaughter Ruth. Three Copeland women are defeated in the course of Grange’s three lives: Margaret in the first, Mem in the second, and Josie in the third. Ruth is the only female character in the novel to dominate Grange’s third life and has a chance to gain psychological growth. The defeated Copeland women are examples of what happens when there is nothing but a lone individual attempting to deal with unconquerable forces.

Margaret Copeland, first wife of Grange is an abused black woman. The poverty and injustice of the sharecropping system has threatened her husband’s manhood, and he in turn violently abuses his wife. Grange wants Margaret to be entirely vulnerable upon him, which she is in reality. Her son reflects “his mother agreed with his father whenever possible... She didn’t have a thing to say that did not in some way show her submission to his father” (5). Grange blames her his own lack of power, a system created and compounded by white men in which he is trapped and even goes to the extent of forcing Margaret to ‘sell herself’ to get them out of the debt. A way in which he debases Margaret is that he flaunts his affairs with Josie, in front of Margaret. Margaret has no community of sisters to help her like Sethe
in *Beloved*. She is trapped in her marriage by 'contrary instincts'. She is a typical example of those women who are torn between doing for their husbands and children and living for themselves. As Karen Gaston observes, “by dramatizing the complex and contradictory forces at work in their lives, Walker shows us women who subvert their remarkable strength through their love” (*CLA Journal* 276).

Ironically, when such women suffer through their devotion to their husbands and children, the black community fails to embrace them and insure their survival. The community of black women had rescued Sethe in *Beloved*, but in Margaret’s case, no community of black women helps her in her struggle with the oppressive society.

When Margaret was first married to Grange, she had wanted to go to the north for greater opportunities but she stayed back for Grange. She worked all day, pulling baits, coming home to clean and cook, trying to maintain a home for a husband and son who gradually ignored her existence. By the time Brownfield was fifteen, Margaret was sincerely trying to steer her life in some other way. Grange had been alienal from her long since and she rebelled against Grange’s abuse on the weekends in her pathetic sexual encounters with “fellow bait-pullers and Church members, but on week days she could only express herself by creating food out of plants that grew wild and games caught solely in traps” (20). If we consider the sufferings and abuse Margaret
had received from Grange, we would justify her attempts at self-assertion. Her attempt at self-affirmation estranges Grange from her into his second life. Grange shows resentment when Margaret’s adultery bears evidence in the person of the odd colored baby, Star. However, Margaret’s sexual liaison with Shipley may be in partial payment of Grange’s debt. If it is true, Margaret again sacrifices herself for the people who never reciprocate.

Though Grange shows complete indifference towards Margaret, she is fully sensitive to his feelings and moods. She is well aware how deeply her unfaithfulness affects Grange. Two years after her affair with Shipley, Grange leaves. When she realizes that he is not going to return, she murders Star and then poisons herself. Trudier Harris comments:

Margaret’s murder and suicide are not defiance; they are a bow of defeat, a resignation to the forces outside. She is destroyed by the forces that have dissolved her family; she does not... Destroy herself” (Violence in The Third Life 246).

However, some critics consider Margaret’s murder and suicide as a revolution, as it seldom happens in black women’s history. Margaret had died with the belief that what she had done was sinful and required death. Her guilty feeling over her relationship with Shipley led to her doom.
Josie, Grange's mistress and later his second wife is also destroyed by her community. She is strong, resourceful, and independent. She knows the art of using men to her advantage. She has an independent lifestyle that most black women during that period could only think of. However, like Margaret she is defeated in the end because of the abuse heaped on her by the men in her life. When she becomes pregnant, her father who is a hypocritical preacher rejects and humiliates her. He refuses to speak to her and asks her to leave his house putting her life on its downward spiral. Isolated from her father, she turns to prostitution to support herself. Her father is so obsessed with the Christian ethics and his own sexual hang ups that he refuses to see his physically and psychologically maimed daughter. Ironically, it is her father's so called Christian brothers who have sex with her. On her father's birthday, she spends her hard earned money to give him a party. With this action she tries to get back her father's love: "She had thought, at last I will go home to stay, to be a child again, be sixteen, and near his heart and hand" (39). Love is absent in her relationship with men. She is in complete control over herself and is able to secure her financial independence. Though in her relationship with Brownfield there is some emotional attachment, she remains cool and composed and does her business. But with Grange, it is different. When he returns from the North, she immediately agrees to marry
him, to sell her business in order to buy him his farm. Here is another instance of black women offering kinship to the community and receiving none.

Mem, the wife of Brownfield, is abused by the community. She feels estranged. Unlike Margaret, she has many rebellious sexual affairs though she is less rebellious than Margaret. She has only one significant rebellious act committed not to save herself but to save her daughter’s lives. Her self-annihilation like Margaret is caused by the racist environment and the effect it has on her husband. Brownfield who often victimizes Mem for her unfaithfulness proceeds to:

Drag Mem away from school teaching. Her knowledge reflected badly on a husband who could scarcely read and write. It was his great ignorance that sent her into white homes as a domestic, has need to bring her down to his level... His rage and his anger and his frustration ruled. His rage could and did blame everything, everything on her. And she accepted all his burdens... from her own greater heart and greater knowledge. He did not begrudge her the greater heart, but he could not forgive her the greater knowledge. It put her closer, in power, to them, than he could ever be (55).

Alienated at school, continually pregnant though three babies die and Brownfield murders one, her once fat body wasting away, Mem survives. She bears with Brownfield’s abuse because she is trying to preserve her family. She rises like a phoenix out of the ethos of the black experience. Klaus Ensslen observes:

Brutalization is more unalleviated than any other character’s deterioration under the pressure of dehumanizing conditions. In a sense this is an over drawn dramatization of his historically
documented though resilience of black women... a concept given up in the novel for the sake of didactically polarized contracts. Mem rises like a phoenix of feminist theory from the ashes of her environment at abasement (Collective Experience and Individual Responsibility 200-201).

Just as mothers have adopted extraordinary steps for the sake of their children, Mem takes Brownfield's abuse to maintain her family. But her love for her family, her goodness and innocence ruined her. She could have left Brownfield years ago but her sense of kinship is stronger than her sense of self. Thus, she sacrifices herself for the community like Margaret though the community never reciprocates with her.

Ruth's relationship with Grange is a typical example for the later works of Alice Walker as articulated in Meridian and The Color Purple, where each protagonist develops into a complete woman by sharing and learning from the tribe. Ensslen points out that Grange's individual strength and improved self-image is largely unconnected to any collective culture or experience, neither deriving from them its sustenance for flowing back into them as a reinvigorating force. Grange is portrayed in terms of an individual consciousness struggling for self-assertion, never as part of a community. Grange and Ruth live in isolation. Their physical alienation is indicative of their psychic alienation from the tribe.
Grange becomes a parent to Ruth, which he never has been to Brownfield. While parenting Ruth, he nurtures, protects and loves her deliberately trying to avoid the mistakes he had made in his first life. Ruth like Brownfield is not a reminder of Grange’s powerlessness but a source of his strength. He actively participates in her joys, her dreams, her aspirations and her frustrations. He shares his past life with Ruth and sincerely tries, “to teach her to hate whites, for he thought this hatred would help to insure her survival” (143). He wants Ruth to be strong, resourceful and self-assertive:

And still in all her living there must be joy, laughter, contentment in being a woman; someday there must be happiness in enjoying a man and children. Each day must be past, present and future, with dancing and winemaking and drinking as few regrets as possible. Her future must be the day she lives in...survival was not everything. He had survived. But to survive whole was what he wanted from Ruth (244).

Because of grange’s love and care, Ruth grows up as a young woman full of self-confidence, intelligence and knowledge of the World. However, she has yet to learn the realities of life. When she sees on television, Martin Luther King and the protesting students, she immediately considers them as her heroes. In a way she identifies herself with Martin Luther King. When a group of civil and human rights workers visit her farm one day, she falls in love with one of the students who is a married one. Grange tells her to wait for one who will come to her and won’t have a wife and before he starts
searching for one, Ruth can grab him. Ruth is self confident enough to take her own decision. She is determined to create her own destiny and tells Grange that she will go out to find out one for herself. She has learnt to take care of herself from Grange. Davis maintains, “Three generations of Copeland converge to create Ruth’s identity” (Southern Quarterly 48).

The female characters in the novel, Margaret, Mem and Josie sacrifice themselves for the community, but the same community has always isolated them. Gaston rightly observes:

Black men often destroy what they love by not accepting responsibility for their action. Black women who acquiesce to an understandable but nevertheless destructive need of men to assert their manliness at the expense of the weak are doomed (286).

In fine, Morrison does not proclaim herself to be a black feminist as vehemently as writers such as Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker, June Jordan, Barbara Smith and Deborah Mc Dowell. In her novels, she unveils the roots of sexism and racism and reveals the ideological basis of these pernicious evils. To bring them out effectively, she digs out the legends, myths, folk stories and folk songs of African-Americans. Being a versatile novelist, she never uses the same theme
and pattern in her novels. She portrays a variety of experiences of black life to create the black world. And it is in this variety, we find the harrowing experiences of African-American feminist consciousness.
Works Cited


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