Chapter-I

The Black American Feminism

1.1 A Journey from Imposed Innocence to the Awareness of Self with the Awakening of Black Feminism

Without willing it, I had gone from being ignorant of being ignorant to being aware of being aware. And the worst part of my awareness was that I did not know that I was aware of. I knew I knew very little, but I was certain that the things I had yet to learn wouldn’t be taught to me at George Washington High School.

- Maya Angelou (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings)

The present chapter aims at making an in-depth analysis of various themes of experiences of the colonized and their self-awareness. The study demonstrates the traumatic experience of the black women in the various dynamics of slavery, colonialism and by the ramifications of colonialism such as racism, classism and sexism and its devastating effects on the psyche of the colonised. Further, the chapter illustrates how the black women gain self-consciousness and how black feminism took birth out of the traumatic experience.

During the 17th century the blacks were stolen, made and sold as slaves. Being colonized by the elites (whites) in the foreign land, their condition was unimaginable. The black woman being the second sex has been doubly suppressed in the name of sex as well as color. Before discussing the condition of black women, it is necessary to analyze the mind of the colonized that was being unknowingly submitted to the elites and their ideals. The concept of slavery, colonialism and feminism need entirely a new interpretation based on social, cultural, political and psychological perspectives, because the qualities relating to these concepts lose their
moral and ethical implications and become directly related to the human behavior determined largely by the outer realities. The traumatic social and cultural situations heavily affect the inner world of the oppressed that result in the devastating effects on their personality. The dehumanised colonial oppression destroys the colonized both physically and psychologically and finally engenders into the state of physically paralyzed and psychologically impotent.

Under the most traumatic conditions of slavery and colonization, the slave is ruthlessly torn from his home, from his land and people and denuded of his culture and heritage and uprooted from his history and family. It pushes him to such a condition that it is no more possible for him to be in harmony with himself. Unable to strike a balance between the demands of conformity and the demands of instinctual energy, he becomes mad. Frantz Fanon says:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying their brains of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it (Fanon, 169).

Colonialism is a mode of socialization of the mind of the colonized. The process of this socialization would lead the alleged to believe in their inferiority. Under such a condition they will be inflicted with the neurosis of imposed innocence. A slave is not born, he is made. The innocence of being under elites as slaves is not born; rather it is forcibly imposed over him. Under the negative images about his self, the colonised would certainly face the very serious questions: how to define himself? how to separate his self-concept from the concept of himself created by others? Dependency, repression, self-deprecation, internalization of colonizer’s values and self-alienation become the sign-structures signifying the victim’s existence. In such a condition the enslaved person becomes
psychologically dependent. The colonised, being placed in a state of submission defines his identity not in relation to himself but in relation to the colonizer and his value system and gets himself alienated from his true self.

Self-assertion defines as “the capacity to put one’s self truly into act” (May 115). But that remains far beyond the capacity of the oppressed. The character of Nanny in Zora Neale Hurston’s groundbreaking novel *Their Eyes were Watching God*, for instance, is one such victim who develops a very basic consciousness of the white value system and she defines herself within the framework of that system. Her sense of dependency born out of false security even leads her to force her granddaughter into an undesirable marriage. Nanny becomes the spokesperson of many unfortunate Afro-Americans.

Under the clutches of the imposed innocence over the colonized, the black man struggles to find his real self. He is dehumanized in such a way that at the damaged corner of his ego, he faces the sense of self-rejection. The alienated negro, in America would be accepted only when he accepts and inculcates the imposed innocence on himself. In other words, he is accepted only when he internalizes the alien cultural values within himself.

The colonized who internalizes the alien cultural value system certainly becomes the victim of darkness within his own psyche. It is the darkness wherein the colonized utterly fails in recognizing the brighter side of his self. “Negro in America does not exist except in the darkness of his mind” (Foucault 18). Michael Foucault describes it as “nothingness of existence… experienced from within as the continuous and constant form…” (Foucault 16). It is this state that causes paralysis of consciousness, renders him powerless and sets him on the ‘psychic
crutches’” (Morrison, Recovering 14). The victim often finds it difficult to restore his cultural validity. “It is easier to deal with the external manifestation of racism and sexism than it is to deal with the result of that distortion internalized within our own consciousness of ourselves…” (Lorde 147).

The above analysis, if placed in the context of black women’s experiences generates additional connotations. Since black women find themselves in a double jeopardy of race and gender, their study must be related not only to their racial or colonial experience but also to their experiences arising out of their femininity. The black woman was brought to America during the early 17th century to promote its capitalism; she was divested of her basic rights to existence as a human being. She was forced to prepare herself for the slave market resulting in the loss of her racial identity, erosion of her femininity and finally ending in the repression of herself.

The black woman experiences marginalization, subordination, self-rejection, dependency, internalization, alienations and all such neurosis not only as a racial creature but also as a woman. Morrison states her view on black women as “Black women’s role is the most repressed because they are both black and female, and these two categories invite a kind of repression that is pernicious” (Lester 47).

As a woman, the black woman shares almost the same experiences and undergoes the same subjugation and marginalization which the white woman experiences under patriarchal imperialism. Like white woman, she is silenced and used as a sex object by men. Like any other woman, her life remains shrouded in the seamless web of misconceptions like sober, weak, dependent, secondary and and her responses remain shaped by the patriarchal dictates. A black woman is a woman and therefore, a general study of woman will help to define what it is to be
a woman in a sexist patriarchal society. That would also clarify woman’s relationship to patriarchy because it is this relationship that ultimately determines her relationship to her own self and her consciousness.

Under the patriarchal imperialism woman’s psyche and her personality is the product of social constructs. “One is not born, but rather becomes woman... It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine” (Beauvoir 295). Likewise concerning racism, it is the slave who is not born rather becomes/forcefully made only on the basis of the color of the skin. Woman’s definition and differentiation is always made with deference to man. A woman is never an autonomous self. She is just incidental, inessential and appendage to man. Tennyson’s poem *The Princess* summarizes this as:

Man for the field and
Woman for the hearth; Man
for the sword and for the
needle she; Man with the
head, and woman with the
heart; Man to command and woman to obey; All
else is confusion (Tennyson, 13)

In truth, the confusion here is patriarchy’s verdict to keep women in their assigned places. At the root of the tendency to see man and woman as inherently opposite - as respective embodiments of head and heart, conscious and unconscious, aggression and passivity, rationality and intuition - is the assumption
that man is the centre and woman is periphery and man is signifier and woman is signified. To quote Simon de Beauvoir again:

Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. . . She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her, she is the incidental . . . he is the absolute - she is the Other (Beauvoir 16).

A facet of black woman’s life that provides insight into her interior reality is largely emphasized by her sexual life. Their rape by white men to subjugate them and that alienates them from their culture and native land. And further the rape of the black woman by black male is an avid testimony that he merely imitated his master and it can be argued as the black man’s internalization of the patriarchal domination of the female imbibed from the mainstream white culture. “Patriarchal force relies on a form of violence particularly sexual in character and realized the most completely in the act of rape” (Millet 44).

The racial prejudices and sexual oppression have put the life of black woman into a complex wherein unlike other woman, the black woman meets the double patriarchal oppression because she has to face the white oppressor and also the black oppressed male. Black Feminist Thought by Patricia Hill Collins illustrates Katie Cannon’s view for the above as;

Throughout the history of the United State, the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the women’s reality as a situation of struggle - a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged and oppressive, the other black, exploited and oppressed (Cannon 22).
However, the black woman stands as different from other woman. She develops the neurosis of self-hatred and self-censorship both at the individual and the collective levels. She shows vulnerability to the prescriptive conditions imposed by both the groups. Seeking willy-nilly assimilation into the white value structures, she stands divorced from her own cultural traits subscribing naively to black male ideology and its phallocentric programs; she remains oblivious to her own femininity. bell hooks describes the vivid position of black woman as;

Levels of oppression are different for every individual woman: being oppressed means the absence of choices. Because many women do have choices, better words to describe women in the United States are exploitation and discrimination” (Feminist 5).

The most inhuman system that is American chattel slavery treated the slaves like the legal property of their masters. Under such a sheer force of divesting circumstances, black woman became oblivious of her past and future. Survival in the present moment became her sole obsession.

The white beauty ideals for black woman became one of the significant ramifications of colonization and racism. The black woman manifested her desires for the assimilation of the process of internalization of white beauty ideals. Confronted with a society attuned to white standards of beauty as the positive mark of humanity, the black woman felt ashamed of her black color as if it was deadweight or an albatross hanging their necks. Blindly accepting untruths created by the dominants, the black woman meets a tragic confusion out of which she feels she is lesser important than the whites and the man.
The confusion makes black woman’s life tragic because her sense of pride could be vested not in attributes she possesses but in attributes she aspires to have, that is to say, borrowed ideals. Such conditions cause a loss of self-esteem and produce self-hatred and self-deprecation. The self-deprecation and loss of self-worth increases self-doubt and self-alienation causing willing suspension of one’s own beliefs (S.T. Coleridge) and dissociation of one’s own sensibilities (T.S. Eliot).

The black psychiatrists Kardiner, Ovesey, Grier, Cobbs and Calvin Hernton hold by common consensus that the black women’s internalization of white beauty ideals ultimately lead them to self-deprecation. Commenting on such a phenomenon Grier and Cobbs argue:

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. . . in this country she is ugly. . . when to her physical unattractiveness is added a discouraging deprecation mother-family-environment into which she is born, there can be no doubt that she will develop a damaged self-concept and an impairment for her feminine narcissim. . .

Calvin Hernton makes nearly the same observation when he writes:

The attempts to become “white” intensify rather than mitigate the Negro woman’s frustration in white world. No amount of paint, powder and hair straightener can erase all the things in the black woman’s background that make her femininity and esthetic men. The Negro woman becomes ashamed of what she is… (qt Kulakarni 68)
Many black women novelists have portrayed such female protagonists who crave for white beauty ideals. Pecola Breedlove in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye,* Maud Martha in Gwendolyn Brook’s *Maud Martha,* Selina Boyce in Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl,* Brownstones and Margaret in Maya Angelou’s *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings* are a few of them. It is said,

Wouldn’t they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn’t let me straighten? My Light blue eyes were going to hypnotize them (Angelou 3).

Morrison’s Pecola looks fully capable of accepting the white beauty ideals that is socially respected. Her inner drive compels her to become a blue-eyed Shirley Temple to secure that beauty and counterbalance her blackness. Gwendolyn Brooks’ Maud Martha quite often defines her existence only in terms of white acceptability. White prettiness becomes the only norm acceptable to her “Pretty would be a little cream-coloured thing with curly hair or at the very lowest pretty would be a little curly-haired thing the color of cocoa with a lot of milk in it” (BE 53).

The black women have shown an irresistible impulse not only for white beauty but also for white cultural traits. Black people’s quest for the melting pot speaks eloquently about this. Assimilation into the white cultural pot indicates a desire on the part of the blacks to find entry into the mainstream pattern of living. This is called upward mobility.

The irony of black women’s life is that they did really make choices on default assumption. Confronted with the double whammy of race and gender, that
is the cruelty of facing both of them at once and the same time, they prefer race to their gender. “Our priority is not women’s liberation. Black women will be liberated when all black people are liberated” (Reid 39). The malady for such a presumption is that sex has color-line and that elimination of racism would promote the elimination of sexism.

The black women failed to recognize themselves as a group separate and distinct from black men. By choosing to be sex-oblivious persons, they allowed themselves to be trapped in the prescriptive orbit of patriarchy. Suspending their own programms, they subscribed to those of the black man and became willing scapegoats of his psychopathic mandates which, somehow or the other, came around to maintain that racial liberation. bell hooks, a radical black feminist, comments in her *Ain’t I a Woman* on the unawareness of the black woman:

> Racist, sexist socialization had conditioned us to devalue our femaleness and regard race as the only relevant label of identification…We clung to the hopes that liberation from racial oppression would be all that was necessary for us to be free. We were new generation of Black woman who had been thought to submit, to accept sexual inferiority and to be silent (hooks 1-2).

In sexist and racist society, to be ‘black’ is to be a black man and to be a woman is always to be the white woman. Simon de Beauvoir opines that, “The humanity is male’ but for the black women ‘humanity is white and male’ (qt by Ranveer 17). It appeared that to be ‘black’ and ‘woman’ are mutually exclusive. Hence, it is perfectly logical that ‘black liberation’ came to be synonymous with the liberation of only black men. The place the woman received during and after the liberation movements is the same place that is traditionally assigned to them.
There are a number of misconceptions, myths, stereotypes and images for black women that have not only deprived her of basic humanity but even contributed to the masking of her existential realities. Stereotypes, images and myths are neither static nor inherent. The colonizers use them as the psychological tools and ideological weapons in order to control the minds of the colonized. By unconsciously accepting these ‘controlling images’, the colonized conforms to his own thought system. Collins calls them as “powerful ideological justification for their existence” and opines “without which the race, class and sex oppression could not continue” (Collins 67).

Being doubly oppressed, the black woman is labeled with different images both by the whites and the black men. The whites socialized black woman labeling her as mammy, matriarch and beast. The black men call her an evil bitch, male castrator worthy to be kept in her proper place or destroyed. The first image of black woman that emerged during slavery and plantation system was subhuman. A subhuman could be utilized in every convincible way by her master. She could be sold, or killed and she could be taken away from her children and also her body can freely be used. She accepted such inhuman acts. Another image as mammy serves as an obedient domestic servant who cares and nurtures the children of white families. Though she may be well loved by the white children as caretaker and considered as an important part of the child growth still she has to know her place as an obedient servant. Even most of the mammies are used as surrogate mothers for the white children. Another fact of this image is economic exploitation. From centuries black woman is low waged labour hence White families appoint her to maintain their class position. She is unconsciously made to accept subordination.
A matriarch typifies the mother figure in black families. Mammy symbolizes the ‘good’ black mother whereas the matriarch symbolizes the ‘bad’ black mother. The modern matriarchy thesis contends that black women fail to fulfill their traditional womanly duties. Spending too much time away from the home, these working mothers cannot properly supervise their children and are a major contributing factor to their children’s school failure. Labeling this negative image ‘matriarch,’ a ‘bad’ mother figure curtails her self-confidence.

The image of welfare mother or ‘breed’ mother provides an ideological justification for interlocking the system of race, gender and class. Collins asserts:

During slavery the breeder woman image portrayed black women as more suitable for having children than white women. By claiming that Black women were able to produce children as easily as animals, this objectification of Black women as the other provided justification for interference in the reproductive rights of enslaved Africans. Slave owners wanted enslaved Africans to ‘breed’ because every slave child born represented a valuable unit of property, another unit of labor, and if female, the prospects of more slaves (Collins 76).

One of the most amoral controlling images of black women is - The whore/jezebel-sexually aggressive woman. Except the image of mammy, the rest stereotypes/controlling images of the black women are restricted to the black women’s sexuality and fertility. Further, those who have assisted in creating and disseminating much of these negative images of black womanhood have unfortunately been black men. The black men help to make the terminology and images of black woman globally popular as sassy, lazy, over-sexed, ratchet, black
vixen, slut and bitch. To resist the intersectional oppression that are channelized through these controlling images, it is necessary to discourage the habit of defining women as an essence whose nature is determined biologically, racially and whose sole identity is to produce more slaves and as an aid to the political economy.

The act of discouraging controlling images has to begin by the black woman herself. It sometimes may seem as taking risk of resisting against the elites. But such risk is needed to feel the brightness of real self-identity. It is like the risk taken by Eve, the mother of the earth, by plucking the fruit from the forbidden tree. Richardson illustrates Maria Stewart’s interpretation of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* from the feministic perspectives. She interprets, like the first mother of the universe Eve, every woman seeking liberation must cease to be the victim of such neurosis. She must step out of “her place”. She must pluck the fruit of knowledge, for “knowledge is power” (Stewart 41).

The woman must seek a fall from the patriarchal bondage. Not to fall is not to know, not to be psychologically free, and not to be independent. Therefore, not to fall becomes more destructive than to fall. It indicates cowardice. Fall from innocence, therefore, becomes a necessary gesture of freedom and a profound act of self awareness. The fall therefore becomes a fortunate fall which engenders a journey of a woman from imposed innocence to painful knowledge. Mary Daly provides a feministic perspective on the concept of fall:

This movement beyond patriarchy’s good and evil can be seen mythically as the “Fall”. . . This will be a fall from false innocence into a world of adulthood. Unlike the old adulthood that requires the arresting growth, this demands a growing that is ever continuing, never completed. . . In that
dreaded event, women reach for knowledge and finding it. . . We can leave the delusory paradise of false consciousness and alienation. In ripping the image of the fall from its old context we are also transvaluating it. That is, its meaning is divested of its negativity and becomes positive and healing. Rather than a Fall from the Sacred, the Fall now initiated by women becomes a Fall into the sacred and therefore into Freedom (Daly 67).

Departure from paradisiacal existence offers woman the life of full authenticity. She continues to live after fall in full relation to herself. A fall from innocence becomes essential for one’s authentic being, no matter how frightening the risk and how ironic the end. If plucking of the fruit is a sin operating as a tool for self-liberation, then, that sin must be committed. In that sense, the fall can be the fortunate fall for women’s redemptive passage from the state of ‘imposed innocence’ to the self-earned knowledge. It leads her to an understanding that the world of patriarchy is not the whole world and that masculine ideologies are the creation of masculine subjectivity designed for man’s selfish and psychopathic ends and such objectives are neither objective nor value free, nor inclusively human.

When such a consciousness takes birth in the mind of black woman, she will be able to differentiate between the good and the evil, true self and imposed identity and that will be the key for her survival. Armed with new knowledge, she learns to posit values not in such marginalising ideology but in philosophy that upholds feminocentricity. Celebrating the feminine principle, they recognize that central responsibility of a woman is to capture the ambiguities of her soul. Breaking the snare of silence, she now begins to name self, begins to uncover the hidden, to make herself present and to make sure that she does exist. She even begins to speak the unspeakable. She becomes capable of thinking the unthought.
In brief Mary Daly states that Black woman announces “the Arrival of New Being” (Daly 68).

Literacy, which was wrested by the black woman through subtle means, played a very significant role for the unspeakable woman. The same made her speech to be heard and read. Through writing woman expressed her inner self and through which she could question or undermine the injustice, exploitation and subordination. Moreover through the political movement, woman began openly protesting against her subordination, marginalization, exploitation and denial of right to voice, literacy and economy.

The earned self-consciousness has brought her out of the imposed innocence. More importantly the oppressors (whites and black male) must change their attitude towards black woman. When this seems as dream for them, the black feminist movement emerged as the most powerful force in achieving the equal socio-economic, political and literary rights.

The black woman’s earned self-consciousness transformed her from being submissive into a strong woman. The woman whom Alice Walker illustrates in her In Search of Our Mother Gardens: Womanist Prose as “serious, responsible, and outrageous, committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female, Loves love, Loves struggle, Loves the folk. Loves herself, Regardless” (Walker 63)

The black feminist movement through its several organizations established from the late 1970s to 1980s was able to fight against several issues such as reproductive rights, sterilization abuse, equal access to abortion, health care, child care, the rights of the disabled, rape, welfare rights, lesbian and gay rights. Having
passed many hurdles the black feminist movement finally achieves its goal of gaining equal rights in America.

1.2 The Black American Feminism and the Other Feminisms

*It is not our difference which separate women, but our reluctance to recognize those differences and to deal effectively with the distortions which have resulted from the ignoring and misnaming of those differences.*

- Audre Lorde (*Our Dead behind Us: Poems*)

The black woman is more different and unique as the oppressors than white woman. The black woman faces not only sexism which white woman faces, she faces the consequences of racism. Intersectionality makes black woman stand different from white woman. The concept of intersectionality describes the ways in which oppressive institutions such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, xenophobia, classicism, etc. are interconnected and cannot be examined separately from one another. The black woman’s life is closely associated with intersectionality. Since the times of slavery, the black women have eloquently described the multiple oppressions of race, class, and gender-referring to this concept as ‘interlocking oppressions,’ ‘simultaneous oppressions,’ ‘double jeopardy,’ ‘triple jeopardy’ or any number of descriptive terms. In almost every other instance, the black woman is in contrast to the white woman. She may be described as strong as opposed to weak; server as opposed to served; unfeminine as opposed to feminine, ugly as opposed to beautiful, promiscuous as opposed to moral, displaced as opposed to well placed and poor as opposed to rich.

The white woman, out of sexual exploitation over them, outraged through political movement during the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. It was the movement for only those women who were oppressed as women. Though for namesake white women included black women in the movement, there was neither a movement nor a voice
to claim for those women who were facing racism. The very racism placed black women disproportionately in the rank of working and poor class. The framework of feminist movement frequently renders black women’s legal invisibility and their absence in legal recourse.

Finding the discrimination between white and black woman in the movement, the black women struggled with white women on many political fronts. For example, in 1921, at the National Women’s Party Convention, Alice Paul received black delegates’ complaints over disenfranchisement with indifference. On another occasion, in 1970, the white feminists’ reluctance to aggressively organize against the political persecution of Angela Davis continued this legacy of white women rejection and alienating black women. Though the white women included the black women in the movement, they continued to be the greatest beneficiaries of the feminist movement. As a result, the movement called Third Wave Feminism arose partially as a response to the perceived failure of and backlash against initiatives and movements created by the second-wave feminism during 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. The weakness of white feminism of neglecting or lack of attention towards black women’s issues resulted in the establishment of black feminism. The black feminism is by black women and exclusively for black women’s issues.

In spite of lots of efforts for the success of black feminism, the black feminism continues to remain relevant for a plethora of factors, including the fact that black women are often asked to choose a side or are ashamed into putting race and ethnicity over their gender and when they realize that the term feminism cannot encompass all the issues of black woman, the black feminists shy away from the title feminist, instead accepting the more appropriate title womanist. Walker’s In Search of Our mothers’ Gardens defines “Womanist is to feminist as
purple is to lavender”. Womanism is a feminism that is stronger in color than white feminism.

As Thesaruse’s Dictionary defines womanist as;
1. Believing in and respecting the abilities and talents of women; acknowledging women's contributions to society, and
2. Pertaining to a type of feminism that acknowledges the abilities and contributions of black women.

As a womanist, the black woman believes and respects in her inherent talent and courage to raise voice against injustice. Through womanism, black woman portrays herself as more special, creative and more worthy to be freed and live a liberal and respectful life like white woman.

The black women’s self-empowerment is achieved through four major standpoints. “First, Black women empower themselves by creating self-definition and self-valuations that enable them to establish positive, multiple images and to repel negative, controlling representations of black womanhood. Second, black women confront and dismantle the ‘overarching’ and ‘interlocking’ structure of domination in terms of race, class and gender oppression. Third, black women intertwine intellectual thought and political activism. Finally, black women recognize a distinct cultural heritage that gives them the energy and skills to resist and transform daily discrimination” (Collins 39).

bell hook’s analysis of feminism adds another critical dimension that must be considered – that is the self-conscious struggle against a more generalized ideology of domination:

To me feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women will have equal right with men. It is a
commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western Culture on various levels - Sex, race and class to name a few and a commitment to recognising U. S. society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion and material desire (qt Collins 38).

Through black feminism, the black woman is demanding a new set of female definitions and recognition of herself as a citizen, companion and confidant, not a matriarchal villain or a step stool baby-maker. Their role integration advocates the complementary recognition of man and woman. The black feminism is the result of the negligence of black women by white feminism. Black feminism set out a different set of rules and principles of its own and that are not just addressing to feminism rather than womanhood. Since black feminists are made shy to accept the term feminist they choose to name it as ‘womanist’ coined by Alice Walker. Because Womanism is a feminism of colour which is stronger than feminism and covers the problems and exploitations of black woman and the other woman of minorities.

1.3 An Overview of Prominent Black American Women Writers

The black women’s writing is an effort to achieve the lost self-identity. They take pen as a weapon to outlet their dehumanized experience as a slave, as a woman, as a racial being and as a colonized. Their literature is for themselves and for their own people. Their writings are the response against their degradation. They write to challenge the capabilities of the elites who certify them as illiterate and whose literature as unfit to read. Through writing, they prove elites that they are capable to feel, to think and to express themselves. The purpose behind their writing is to share the common experience. “They write to come out of the
complex layers of institutional racism and sexism. Their vision allows to see what white people and men seldom see” (Tate X, VII). Mary Helen Washington writes:

Black woman herself - her aspirations, conflicts, her relationship to her men and children, her creativity. The Black women writers have looked at the Black woman from an insider’s point of view and tried to discover what happened to the Black woman as she raised a family under ghetto conditions, or as a day worker in some white woman’s kitchen, or as she lived with a man struggling with his own sense of powerlessness, or as she looked into the mirror and tried to see beauty in full features and dark skin (Washington X).

Afro-American women writers express their feelings through words in their unique style and language. Kate Millet, an American feminist writer, in her Sexual Politics says, “Her writing originated out of her need to articulate herself or express herself or give voice, a voice that needs to be heard, for being acknowledged as a human being” (Millet 25). The writing skill is inherent with the black women. Writing gives them confidence and mental freedom. Their self-conscious mind easily allows them to explore themselves to demonstrate the fact that they too are human beings.

The literature by black women is not easily accepted and recognized by the establishment. Barbara Smith in her Towards Black Feminist Criticism (1977), Deborah McDowells in New Directions of Black Feminist Criticism, Mary Helen Washington in her Introduction to Black Eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and about Black Women and Barbara Christian in her Black Women Novelists: The Development of Tradition, 1872-1976 and many more highlight writers’ on the issue of how the black women writings are neglected. During the 18th century,
there was not just the discrimination between the white and black women writers but also between the black male and black women writers. “Most of the black women writers were never known as black male writers and women’s writings were never taught in college level American literary courses and rarely mentioned in women’s studies courses” (Washington IX)

Though the Afro-American literature has been neglected throughout the decades, deservingly very recently it is recognised as one of the branches of world literature and the world appreciates the sensibility of black literature. Now it is no lesser than the literature by the elites. The literature by Afro-American women Writers’ has greater share in the credit of such appreciation. Afro-American women writers’ contribution for the field of literature is immemorial.

There is no single genre which Afro-American women writers have not written in. They are excellent in writing poetry, drama, prose, fiction, children’s plays, non-fiction, short-story, anthologies, essays, etc. In their writings they document the evolution of black feminism and their vision of family, society, community, male, female, children etc. The progenitors of Afro-American women’s writings have been found to be poets. Black women’s poems reveal their self-expression which is argued as their unconscious means to inscribe a female space and hence becomes an unconscious forerunner of black woman’s literary history. The next genre of black women’s writing was slave narratives. Slave narratives embody their experiences in the horrors of slavery. Slave narratives by Sojourner Truth, Lucy A. Delaney, Kate Drumgold and others symbolize their ability to recover the past oppression and to hope for a better future.
Among all the genres of literature fiction/novel provides more space for the exploration of the self. Afro-American women writers do feel more comfortable with novels/fiction. Most often they project themselves through the lenses of black women characters. The development of black women’s fiction correlates to the black woman writer’s attempt to explore the most crucial relationship between racism and sexism in the predominant white world. Most of the black writings portray the image of ‘mulatto’. The tragic mulatto explores the conflicting values of black slaves. Mulatto embodies the illicit and anomalous sexual union between a black female slave and her white slave master that question the very basis of slavery as an institution. Morton writes, “The mulatto was a moral degenerate and carrier of sexual disease, which confirmed the necessity of segregating blacks from whites” (qt Rani 2008).

Harriet Wilson being the first black woman writer in novel form, depicts the story of an abandoned mulatto girl, Frado, who works from the age of six until she is eighteen as an indentured servant for a white, middle-class family in Boston. Abandoned by her mother after she marries a white, Frado, is further exploited physically and psychologically by her white mistress. She escapes and marries a freed slave only to be left with a child following his death. In spite of its tragic ending the novel denies the 19th century white tradition, wherein it defines black womanhood from the slave parameters.

Francis Ellen Watkins Harper, a contemporary of Harriet Wilson, an active abolitionist, a social reformer, a fighter for women’s emancipation, a public speaker and a political activist portrays the tragic life of mulatto girl as beautiful. Iola, the protagonist’s fall is implicit in her discovery of her talent in black blood. Iola’s self-discovery comes when she learns of the white’s complicity and
hence rejects the white imperialism by rejecting the love of a white doctor and there onwards works for the betterment of black slaves. Though sentimental in its form, the very fact that Iola’s life becomes fulfilled through love of her mulatto husband and her own right that she enjoys, suggests her triumph in subverting the stereotype.

Approximately spanning the years from 1917 to 1930, the black’s literary history, for the first time, Harlem land exploded as a cultural capital or Negro metropolis drawing crowds of intellectuals, artists, creative writers and political activists to its fold. In the world literature, it provided avenues for new self-expression, racial pride among black men and women. Harlem Renaissance provided scope for women writers, to refute stereotypes both from the white imperialism and the black male perspective.

Harlem Renaissance witnessed the emergence of black woman writers who continued exploring the lives of their mulatto protagonists. Right from the slavery, tragic mulatto has been a predominant stereotype in black writing that probes the conflict of ‘offsprings’ borne out of miscegenation. The mulattoes either enjoyed the privileges of white imperialism, as they could be ‘passed on’ as white apparently carrying the dominant white blood. But certain mulattoes, who were disowned by their slave mothers and rejected by their own fathers, invariably suffered the trauma of their conflicting identities. Writers have consistently attempted to probe the interior lives of the mulattoes, hence the image of tragic mulatto is depicted in the black writings.

Nella Larsen is the first black woman to delve into the psychology of the middle class mulatto. Her novel entitled *Quickstand* explores the conflict of the female protagonists, Helga Crane, concerning her identity she could easily be
passed on as a white. “As has been discerned the tragic mulatto theme reveals the conflict of values that the blacks faced as a conquered people” (Christian 4).

Zora Neale Hurston was a literary model to many of her successors by making her writing distinctive through the use of black folklore. Her effort was to establish a connection between the social ethos and the natural world. Her outstanding novel, *Their Eyes were Watching God* is an attempt to refute the stereotype of the tragic mulatto. The novel explores the love story of a mulatto girl by name Janie Crawford and her self-discovery. Throughout the novel, Janie searches for the love that she has always desired, the kind of love that is represented by the marriage between a bee and a blossom on the pear tree that stood in Nanny’s backyard. Only after feeling other kinds of love Janie plans to gain the love like that between the bee and the blossom.

Ann Petry delineates the urban reality of a black woman in America during the depression. Her *The Street’s* Lutie Johnon as a wife and mother is beset with financial problems and the novel depicts the black woman’s attempt to come to terms with poverty and sexuality, as she is vulnerable to the male attack. Ann Petry has painted a poignant reality of the economic deprivation of the blacks in Harlem. Petry rejects both the myth of Harlem and the myth of a loose woman by making Lutie fight sexual assault. The novel ends with Lutie’s inability to realize her dream of Harlem, to find Lutie in a detention home for the murder she has committed. It suggests that the black woman’s attempts at self-definition can never be realised as they are traumatised by racism.

Gwendolyn Brook’s work springs from her occupation with the present. Her *Maud Martha* is a celebration of black womanhood. At the same time, the novel
examines the difficulties and trials of growing up Afro-American and female. Such trial includes both the universal problems of life and those specific to Maud Martha’s race and sex, race and color prejudice. Maud finally realises that her self-definition as a woman and as an individual is both important. This female awareness corresponds to and anticipates feminist movement of the 1960s.

Paule Marshall delves into the psyche of her characters. Barbara Christian writes, “Paule Marshall is supremely devoted to the creation of characters. She consistently delves into the psychology of her characters, why they act as they do, as well as into the psychology of the place and time within which they exist” (Mashall 17). Selina Boyce, the novel’s memorable heroine, is conflicted by the opposing aspiration of her parents: her hardworking, ambitious mother longs to buy a brownstone row house while her easygoing father prefers to dream of effortless success and his native island’s lushness. At the end, Selina is defeated. She is left without the love and appreciation she desires. The novel explores the black’s problem of assimilation and materialism. Selina Boyce’s failure at self-definition is realised in her daughter who epitomises black culture and history. Selina makes a journey back to the Caribbean to reclaim her culture and history. And this self-awareness is a means towards understanding the trauma of her mother and father.

The 60s witnessed a growing racial pride paving the way for black American. Every black American was turning away from the white cultural influence and turning towards each other, what was otherwise called a Black Nationalist Movement, which emphasised their return to their roots in Africa, pride in blackness, black colloquial language, negro speech and idioms. This development reflected their unique black culture, their race and Blackness. The writing became
protest or polemical in nature. The move was towards reclaiming, renaming and reowning black culture and history. As has been argued, the novels by black women of the 60s and onwards echo the protagonist’s search for self in the present through their search of their roots in their past and coming to terms with it. As such the black women writers have focused on the protagonist’s quest for self as central, which has contributed significantly to the women’s studies. The “feminist literature does not reveal an already given female identity, but is itself involved in the construction of this self as a cultural reality” (qt Rani 32).

The 1970s were a rich time for the black women’s writing, with the beginning of the careers of a generation of writers like Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde and June Jordan who provided an alternative to mainstream feminism and the recovery of early writers. This renaissance of black women’s literature inspired the Black Women’s Liberation Movement. Its members agreed that women of color experience oppressions different from those of white women and black men, because of their race, sex, sexuality, and economic status. They were committed to the liberation of black women from racism, sexism, heterosexism and classism in culture as well as politics.

Female protagonists and female narrators dominate the writings. Toni Cade Bambara’s famous novel *The Salt Eaters* is the best example for it. This feature was informed by radical feminism and firmly placed inside Afro-American culture, with its dialect, oral traditions and jazz techniques. Toni Cade Bambara was always influenced by the people of Harlem and by her strong-will mother, Helen Bent Henderson Cade Brehon. Barbara’s racial and cultural identity is seen throughout her work and has made her the influential author that she became.
Alice Walker in her novels *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Meridian*, *The Color Purple*, *In Search of Our mothers’ Gardens* deals with the terms molestation, lesbianism, racism and self-esteem and identity.

Toni Morrison, the most prolific and unique black woman novelist had made an indelible mark in the annals of black woman’s writings through the changed focus in her perspectives. The witness for her fabulous writing is none other than the Noble Prize for literature, awarded to her in the year of 1993. Morrison is one among those writers, whose novels captivate not only the hearts of common readers but also of scholars as well as critics. Her novels are the mirrors of Afro-American realities, black life and their victimization throughout the history. Her citation reads. Toni Morrison, “who in novels characterised by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality” (wiki 6).

Morrison’s commitment to her people is witnessed in her writings. Her novels such as *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, *Beloved*, *Jazz*, *Paradise*, *Love*, *A Mercy*, *Home* and *God Help the Child* focus on various themes like racism, racial tension, sexism, lustful desires, beauty, mother-daughter relationship, sisterhood, man-woman relationship, identity crisis, quest for the self, African culture, womanhood, slavery, freedom, female friendship, myth, American reality, the black aesthetics etc. The black woman is unique in the American life and literature. Morrison portrays this uniqueness. She states:

There is something inside (them) that makes (them) different from other people. It is not like men, and it is not like white women. We talked earlier about the relationship between my women and the men in their lives. When they sing the blues it is one of those somebody is gone kind of thing but there is never any bitterness (qt Parker 255).
Because of their differences from the other categories of American society Morrison observes that:

I do think Black women write differently from white women. This is the most marked difference of all those combinations of black and white, male and female. It’s not so much that women write differently from men, but that Black women write differently from white women. Black men don’t write very differently from white men (qt Tate 122).

In the case of white women they have some support to fall back upon. However, this is not the case with black women. Morrison writes in her *What the Black Woman Thinks about Women’s Lib*, “. . . she had nothing to fall back on, not maleness, not whiteness, not lady hood, not anything. And out of the profound dissolution of her reality, she may very well have invented herself” (Morrison 14).

Morrison’s writing has been her attempt at discovering her own self as a black woman writer, as an individual and as a human being in white America. As an Afro-American woman writer she thinks freely and visualizes freely. All her novels are contextualized in the history of Afro-American past, present and take a tentative leap towards future. They operate from within the framework of slavery, reconstruction, world war, depression, feminist movements, civil rights movements and capitalist America. For Morrison, black American history is not only a means of reclaiming their black cultural past, for forging an identity, but also re-examines it for providing a corrective as against the distortion of it by the whites.

Morrison’s novels revolve around the life and the self of black woman. Her female protagonists are evolved out of a black culture. Her women characters are strong, confident, positive and independent out of their exploitation and marginalisation. She paints her characters with bright colours. Her women characters survive despite immeasurable physical and emotional trauma they
undergo. Amidst unspeakable torment and isolation their survival strategy rests on an indomitable courage to fight all the odds. Morrison’s works and characters are analysed from the feminist point of view in the following chapters.
References:


