African American writers have always lamented the double burden of having to prove their worth as human beings while at the same time trying to represent their own truths through art. (Richards 30)

The Harlem Renaissance which began in about 1919 and went on up to 1930s and marked a turning point in the history of African American literature. The Harlem Renaissance was a time of flowering of literature and arts and it was a literary and cultural movement. Hence it was aptly termed as New Negro Movement. It centered in Manhattan, Harlem, near New York City. It influenced artistic, political ideologies laying groundwork for the future Civil Rights Movement. The characteristic features of Harlem Renaissance were racial pride, identity issues, racism, desperation, love of god, hopelessness and so on.

Harlem Renaissance was spearheaded by artists, writers, and musicians who gave voice to African American culture. In the literature produced during this time, an overall sense of pride could be felt in African American experience and it was committed to uplift the African American race. Harlem Renaissance gave opportunity to represent the African American heritage as one equal to the Whites heritage. Until the end of Civil war, the majority of African Americans had been enslaved and lived in the south. After the end of slavery the emancipated African American began to strive for political and economic equality. But the Whites in the south denied African American all civil and political rights. As life became miserable in the south, large number of African
Americans began to migrate to North and settled in cities like Chicago, Philadelphia and New York.

Great migration produced a new sense of independence in the Black community and contributed to the vigorous Black urban culture seen during the Harlem Renaissance. The migration also influenced the growing American Civil Rights movement, which made a powerful impression on Black writers during the 1940s, '50s and '60s. Black activists were trying to create a new sense of Black Nationalism. Simultaneously, Black authors attempted to address these issues in their writings. The Harlem Renaissance grew out of the social and cultural changes which led to a new mass culture. It was expressed through essays, novels, songs, theatrical pieces and poetry. It laid the groundwork for African American Literature and had a significant impact on the black consciousness by awakening a cultural spirit.

The artists of Harlem Renaissance focused on two objectives – to draw the attention of the world to the injustice of racism in African American’s life and to promote a unified and positive culture among African Americans. Its leading literary figures included James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Jean Toomer, and Wallace Thurman and many others.

With the Renaissance, African American literature began to be absorbed into mainstream American literature. Writers of African-American literature have been recognized with the highest awards. The themes varied from highly charged political to private and introspective. Among the themes and issues explored in this literature are the role of African Americans within the larger American society, African-American culture, racism, slavery, and equality. African American literature is one which is rich in
expressive subtlety and social insight. African American literary tradition began to take root in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when former slaves such as Frederick Douglass and Phillis Wheatley came to the attention of the White audience. Since these early beginnings African American writing has taken its own characteristics and unique perspectives. The primary characteristic feature of the African American literature is that it speaks of the African American experience in America about slavery and laws of discrimination. James Baldwin (1924-1987), was one of the first writers, whose work addressed issues of race and sexuality. In his novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), he wrote personal stories and essays on the Black’s experience at a time when Blacks were not accepted by American culture. Though they were not accepted by the American culture they did receive sympathy from some of the Whites. Low says,

The Militant protest depicts Blacks organized efforts to resist white oppression. One of the consoling facts is that there were a few sensitive whites and who sympathized with the suffering blacks. Right from the days of Abraham Lincoln, there had been men in position of power and authority who could look at the problems of Negroes as a human problem more than as an ethical or ethnic problem. Both in the black consciousness and in the pockets of white consciousness there is sympathy for the plight of the blacks. (Low 527)

The Black Aesthetic Movement of the 1960s and 1970s brought acclaim and prominence to many African American writers and fostered the growth of Black studies in many genres. The Black Aesthetic Movement or the Black Arts Movement has been the first major African American Movement since the Harlem Renaissance. Beginning in the 1960s and lasting through the mid 1970s, this movement was brought about not by
White patrons but by the rage of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and other notable African American writers. Leading writers in this movement include Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez. Initially when the bonds of slavery were loosened, black writers clamored to be heard but their range was limited. Since slavery and plantations were practically the only subjects in their repertoire, early African American writings were often confined to these themes. As the African Americans' place in American society has changed over the centuries, so, has the content of African-American literature. Washington writes about the transformation and the evolution undergone by the black community.

Setting in motion the black community’s modernization, the social forces of that period altered every sphere of black American life as black America increasingly was transformed from a rural peasantry in to a diverse and energetic urban community.(4)

Before the American Civil War, the literature primarily consisted of memoirs by people who had escaped from slavery. The genre of slave narratives was born, which included accounts of life under slavery. The Folk tales proved to be a psychological release for the African American writers. Bell observes,

Myths, legends, folktales and other forms of verbal form have four principal functions. They transmit knowledge, value, and attitude from one generation to another, enforce conformity to social norms, validate social institution and religious rituals and provide a psychological release from the restrictions of Society. (16)

The slave narratives became integral to African-American literature in due course of time. Many of them are now recognized as literary works of 19th-century by African
Americans, with two of the best-known being Frederick Douglass's autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, which was published in 1845 and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs (1861). Frederick Douglass (1818–95) eventually became the most prominent African American of his time and one of the most inspiring authors in American history.

African American psyche embodied the feelings of defeatism and despondency which were its hall marks. Patricia Hills Collins explains:

> Race, Class, Gender, Sexuality, nation, age and ethnicity among others, constitute major forms of oppression in the United States. However, the convergence of race, class and gender oppression, characteristics of US slavery shaped all subsequent relationship that woman of African American descent had within Black American families and communities with employers and among one another” (4)

After the end of slavery and the American Civil War, a number of African-American authors wrote about the condition of African Americans in the United States. Richard Wright comments about oppression, exploitation and powerlessness in the black society.

> If only ten or twenty Negroes had been put it into slavery, it could be called injustice. But there were hundreds of thousands of them throughout the country. If this state of affairs had lasted for three years, one could say that it was unjust, but it had lasted for more than 280 years. Injustice, which lasts for three long centuries and which exists among millions of people over thousands of square mile of territory is no longer injustice it is an accomplished fact of life. What
happens to black people in America is not injustice but oppression, an attempt to throttle or stamp out a new form of life. (Richard Wright Reader 360)

Among the most prominent of these writers is W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), who published a collection of essays, titled _The Souls of Black Folk_. (1903) These essays on race were groundbreaking. They were from Du Bois' personal experiences to describe the lives of the African Americans. Du Bois argued that Negro identity was based on a kind of double consciousness which he defined as “the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (38). He always asserted that all American Negroes longed for acceptance as Americans but were reluctant to give up their African culture. Fultz argues,

For enslaved Africans, race was destiny; race determined the places they and their posterity would occupy in this nation. Race was and continues to be a physical and a mental space: places set aside on the nation’s physical terrain and within the black psyche, a constant remainder to African Americans of their differences and otherness. (Fultz 20)

Another prominent author of this period is Booker T. Washington (1856–1915), whose published works are _Up from Slavery_ (1901), _The Future of the American Negro_ (1899), _Tuskegee and Its People_ (1905), and _My Larger Education_ (1911). While Du Bois adopted a more hostile attitude toward ending racial strife in America, Washington felt that Blacks should diligently work and uplift themselves and prove their worth. Blair explicates the strategies used by the Blacks to vent out their rage against the dominant culture:
From the colonial period to this day there are two identifiable models of action which blacks have used to assault the barriers that violate their right as Americans and as human beings. One is to submerge their African heritage and despised traits of character and by political and legal mechanisms and cultural imitation become integrated into the society as a whole. The other is to restructure black groups to resist white imposed social deformations and to adapt to new circumstances with a revived sense of pride in their black heritage. (5)

Many Black writers upheld and re-established their black pride by means of their works. The views regarding the significance, traditions, and theories of African American Literature are very many. To the genre's supporters, African American literature arose out of the experience of Blacks in the United States, especially with regard to historic racism and discrimination, and is an attempt to refute the dominant culture's literature and power.

Some of them within the African American community did not like the way their own literature showcased Black people. Some of the criticism of African-American literature over the years has come from within the community; some argue that Black literature sometimes does not portray Black people in a positive light and that it should. Throughout American history, African Americans have been discriminated against and subjected to racist attitudes. The discrimination between the coloured and the whites was soul killing to the blacks. Richard Wright says,

There were two worlds, a white world and a black world … there were white schools and black schools, white churches and black churches, White business
and black business, white graveyard and black graveyard and a white god and black god. (Richard Wright Reader 5)

This experience inspired some Black writers, at least during the early years of African-American literature, to prove they were the equals of European-American authors. While rejecting the claims of the dominant culture, African-American writers attempted to overthrow the literary traditions of the United States.

According to Professor Joanne Gabbin, African-American literature exists both inside and outside American literature. She bases her theory in the experience of Black people in the United States. Even though African Americans have claimed an American identity, during most of United States history they were not accepted as complete citizens and were actively discriminated against. As a result, they were part of America while also outside it. Similarly, African-American literature is within the framework of a larger American literature, but it also is independent. As a result, new styles of storytelling and unique techniques and voices have been created in relative isolation.

Many African-American writers thought their literature should present the full truth about African American life and people. Langston Hughes articulated this view in his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”(1926). He wrote that Black artists intended to express themselves freely no matter what the Black public or White public thought. The history of African-American literature is old and varied, but there are several recurrent themes: combating racism, searching for a black identity, and maintaining a unique quality of life and so on. Pointing out the significance of black women writers, Michelson observes,
The nature of the response to the black experience by these writers demonstrates that they are not writers who just happened to be black … If there is pain in being black and a woman, there is pride in having survived and become strong. Many of the black women we meet in the works seem to echo what Maya Angelou voices in an interview: ‘you may encounter many defeats, but … must not be defeated’. … The sense these writers leave with us is of the pain behind the laughter of black people, the absolute difficulty of human beings trying to live with one another in an environment which often degrades, imprisons and makes just everyday living an agonizing contest of endurance. As Toni Morrison points out in Sula, ‘white society has often been oblivious to the pain behind the ‘shucking knee-slapping, wet-eyed laughter of black people’. She stresses that laughter which turns on oneself is sometimes the black person’s only answer to the despair which threatens to overwhelm. (Michelson 112-113)

The Civil Rights time period also witnessed the emergence of female Black poets, most notably Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000), who became the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize for her book of poetry, *Annie Allen* (1950). Along with Brooks, other female poets who became well known during the 1950s and 60s are Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez. The poet Phillis Wheatley (1753–84) published her book *Poems on Various Subjects* in 1773, three years before the American independence.

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) who wrote in the rural, black dialect was the first African-American poet to gain national prominence. His first book of poetry, *Oak and Ivy* (1893) was published in 1893. Much of Dunbar's work, such as *When Malindy Sings* (1906) and his novels provide glimpses of the lives of rural African Americans. Many
other African American writers also rose to prominence in the late nineteenth and early
twentieth century. The famous writer of the renaissance, the poet Langston Hughes
(1902-1967) first received attention in the 1922 poetry collection, *The Book of American
Negro Poetry*. In 1926, Hughes published a collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, and
in 1930 a novel, *Not without Laughter*. It can be said that, Hughes’ most famous poem is
“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1920). Langston Hughes’s poem “My People” is a fine
example of black pride felt by the African Americans.

The night is beautiful,

So the faces of my people.

The stars are beautiful,

So the eyes of my people.

Beautiful, also is the Sun.

Beautiful, also are the souls of my people.

Another popular renaissance writer is Countee Cullen, who pictures everyday black life
in his poems. Cullen’s books include the poetry collections *Color* (1925), *Copper Sun*
(1927), and *The Ballad of the Brown Girl* (1927). Countee Cullen’s poem “From the
Dark Tower” presents a mood of complete despondency and utter hopelessness of
African Americans:

… And there are buds that cannot bloom at all

In light, but crumple, piteous, and fall;

So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds,

And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds.

Likewise a number of playwrights also drew the nation’s attention. Lorraine Hansberry’s play “A Raisin in the Sun” (1961) focuses on a poor Black family living in Chicago. Another playwright who gained prominence was Amiri Baraka, who wrote controversial plays. Some works written by the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement gained attention like Martin Luther King, Jr’s (1929-1968) "Letter from Birmingham Jail". (1963) which was about human rights.

On the whole, African American literature constitutes a vital branch of the literature of the African Diaspora. Above all, African American literature is being greatly influenced by the great heritage of African Diaspora. Eventually African American literature began to be defined and analyzed by fiction writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Terry McMillan and many others. James Emanuel took a major step towards defining African American literature when he edited, with Theodore Gross, *Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America* (1968), a collection of black writings. This anthology heavily influenced the birth of the genre. African-American literature refers to the writings produced in the United States by writers of African descent. Writers like Philip Wheatly
and others of late 18th and 19th centuries concentrated on the lives of the African Americans, racism and discrimination in the white dominated society. Commenting on the causes of the relegation of Black writing, Alice Walker explains:

> It seems to me that black writing has suffered, because even black critics have assumed that a book that deals with the relationships between members of a black Family - or between a man and woman is less important than one that has white people as a primary antagonist. The consequence of this is that many of our books by ‘major’ writers (always male) tell us little about the culture, history or future, imagination, fantasies etc. ... (O'Brien 202)

Richard Wright’s novel *Native Son* (1940), tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a Black man struggling for acceptance in Chicago. The other great novelist of this period is Ralph Ellison, who won the National Book Award in 1953 for his *Invisible Man* which is a milestone in American literature.

Another famous writer of the renaissance is novelist Zora Neale Hurston, author of the classic novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Altogether, Hurston wrote 14 books which ranged from anthropology to short stories to fiction. Because of Hurston’s gender and the fact that her work was not seen as socially or politically relevant, her writings were brushed aside for decades. Hurston's work was rediscovered in the 1970s in a famous essay by Alice Walker, who found in Hurston a role model for all female African American writers.

A number of other writers also became well known during the Harlem Renaissance period. They include Jean Toomer (1894-1967), who wrote *Cane* (1923), a famous collection of stories, poems, and sketches about rural and urban Black life, and Dorothy
West, author of the novel *The Living is Easy* (1948) which paints the life of an upper-class Black family. Author Wallace Thurman also made an impact with his novel *The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life* (1929), which focused on racial prejudice between lighter-skinned and darker-skinned African Americans.

Toni Morrison (b. 1931) the renowned writer, helped promote Black literature and she herself has emerged as one of the most important African American writers of the 20th century. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published in 1970. Among her most famous novels is *Beloved*, wherein she paints a gloomy picture of a slave who finds freedom but kills her infant daughter to save her from a life of slavery. Another important novel is *Song of Solomon*, (1977) which is a tale about materialism, unrequited love, and brotherhood. Morrison is the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature.

In 1982, Alice Walker won both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for her novel *The Color Purple* (1982), an epistolary novel. It tells the story of Celie, a young woman who is sexually abused by her stepfather and then is forced to marry a man who physically abuses her. Other important writers in recent years include fiction writers Gayl Jones, Rasheed Clark, Ishmael Reed and Jamaica Kincaid. Eventually the Black novel became the mouthpiece of the Blacks.

The Black People in America voiced their views in the black novel. Black novelists in the United States responded to white oppression by exposing it in their fiction either in overtly propagandistic manner or by subjugating the protest elements to aesthetic principles in methods that nevertheless covertly condemn discriminatory practices (Low 526).
A pioneer in fiction is Chester Himes (1909-1984), who in the 1950s and '60s wrote a series of pulp fiction detective novels. Himes paved the way for the later crime novels of Walter Mosley (b. 1952). African Americans are also represented in the genres of science fiction, fantasy and horror, with Samuel R. Delany (b.1942), Steven Barnes (1952) and Robert Fleming being a few of the well-known authors.

Eventually other black women writers came to the fore. Writers like Mary Austin (1868-1934) published works which chronicled the lives of Native Americans. The works of prose fiction writers such as Jessie Fauset (1882-1961), Nella Larsen (1891-1964), Dorothy West (1907-1998) and poets such as Anne Spencer (1882-1975), Georgia Douglas Johnson (1886-1967), Gwendolyn Bennet (1902-1981) and Helene Johnson (1906-1995) gained the attention of the reading public.

Contemporary authors such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou (b. 1928) continue to expand the canon of African-American literature. Oprah Winfrey, one of the most powerful women in the world, is responsible for bringing African-American literature to a vast audience through her successful Book Club. Many women writers refused to adopt the male dictates and wrote fiction that spoke of their worlds and experiences. Literature came as a blessing where women could give vent to their pent up feelings. Literature paved a path for women to break out of the restrictions of the home. Earlier male writers dominated the literary scene giving peripheral position to women and sparse attention to black women writers. They were initially relegated to the background. Nevertheless the black women novelists emerged as an innovative force, opening areas of experimentation. They set the trend for new developments and claimed a voice and space of their own. They claimed recognition and identity and demanded
appreciation for their expressive talents and wished to make their indomitable presence felt. As Henderson points out, they

... brought into the literature a special knowledge of their lives and experiences that is as different from the descriptions and portrayals of women by men as the vision of black writers in the 60’s and 50’s differed from that of whites’ writing on black subjects. (Evans XXIV)

Thus many writers’ especially Black women writers emerged and they began to analyze and reinterpret female identity apart from exploring gender expectations and female experiences. They focused mainly on black experience. Ray explains,

In the slave narratives, as Frances Foster points out, while the male slaves stereotyped slave women as sexually exploited beings, the slave women’s versions of their lives, such as those of Elizabeth Keckley or Harriet Jacobs, 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 and write to celebrate their hard-won escape from the system and their fitness for freedom’s potential blessings ... the black woman herself had to illuminate her own situation, reflect on her own identity and growth, her relationship to men, children, society, history and philosophy as she had experienced. (Harrell 60)

In many ways, Women’s writing became the instrument of feminism, especially, so works of Alice walker, Toni Morrison, Amy Tan (b.1952), Leslie Marmon SILKO (b.1948) and Maxine Hong Kingston (b. 1940).

Terry McMillan is recognized as a prominent innovative force in contemporary African-American Women’s fiction. She has garnered attention and critical praise for her
first novel *Mama.* She is an American novelist whose works often depict the lives of economically successful African American women. Her novels focus on the problems professional African American women have, in finding fulfilling relationships with professional African American men. Her emphasis on love and sexual relationships, her urban characters and her depictions of true friendship among women have won her a wide audience.

The predictions that she has the potential to be a contemporary novelist came true with the publication of *Waiting to Exhale* (1992), her third novel. The book became a great hit and it crossed racial lines. Her honest, unaffected writings have clearly struck a chord with the readers particularly with her enthusiastic African American audience. “I’m not tamable” declared McMillan in Essence. “And I wouldn’t for a minute give up all that I’ve earned just to have a man.” Her female characters resemble her to a great extent in this regard. Many novelists draw on their real life experiences when writing. Terry McMillan, not being an exception, has drawn on her real life experiences. She felt the creativity of writers should never be inhibited in anyway.

Her first two novels *Mama* (1987) and *Disappearing Acts* (1989) received favourable critical attention and established her reputation as an innovative new voice of middle class black America. Terry McMillan enjoys success among critics and readers for her six successful novels. She is highly regarded for her second novel, *Disappearing Acts.* Her third novel, *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) published two years later was adapted into a popular film. Macmillan’s fourth novel, *How Stella got her Groove Back* (1996) became an instant success and was adapted for film. Her fifth novel *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* (2001) and her sixth novel *The Interruption of Everything* (2005) are no
exceptions. *Its O.K if you’re clueless: and 23 more Tips for the College Bound* (2006) is a work which provides wisdom for high school Graduates. It provides practical tips in a conversational tone for every son and daughter stepping into the stormy phase of adulthood. Paulette Richards comments, “Whereas *Mama* grows out of gritty personnel experience, *Disappearing Acts* provides more of a symbolic “portrait of the artist as a young woman” (6).

Terry McMillan, has established herself as a major novelist and pioneer in a new genre of fiction - the African American urban romance novel. Her main focus is on the issues faced by contemporary Black women community from the urban background. “Whatever status the literary establishment ultimately accords to Terry McMillan’s work, in the annals of popular fiction she will be remembered as the foremother of an entirely new genre”. (Richards, 18) In one of her interviews with Evette Porter, McMillan seems to intuitively understand the “backlash to success, especially if you’re black and female --- black and/or female (Porter 42). In the same interview, she sums up her attitude succinctly: “You know my mama used to say, Always have a thick skin, because people are gonna talk about you if you do, and talk about you if you don’t” (Porter 42).

Terry McMillan has carved a niche for herself by selecting a unique form and content in her fiction. “Double consciousness led African American writers to censor both the form and content of their works. Terry McMillan is the first African American writer to manifest such complete confidence that a large reading audience will identify with her unadulterated African American truth.”(Richards 31). It is obvious that McMillan changes the structural form of her novel time and again and she also experiments with
narrative voice. One thing that remains consistent throughout her work is the presence of autobiographical element.

Her novels highlight her unique perspective which drastically differs from the majority of black writers. Most of the Black writers focused on race-centered themes but McMillan wove her themes with the backdrop of the history of African Americans. Her novels essentially eschew ideological concerns of race which is a dominant thread found throughout African American literature. Nevertheless it is said that “Compared to the social protests against racial injustice lodged by Richard and Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, McMillan’s deft use of the romance plot to protest the intersection of race, class, and gender oppression is a significant formal innovation.” (Richards 93). In one of her interviews with Wendy Smith, McMillan says,

“ I appreciate and value all the protest literature of the ‘60s, but I am tired of carrying this plantation on my shoulders. I know that if it wasn’t for Martin Luther King and Malcolm X we wouldn’t be able to do some of the things we do now, but I don’t need to constantly remind you of that. I’m not trying to prove anything to the white folks, and I’m not trying to make them feel guilty – my editor didn’t enslave my ancestors. So why do I have to keep belaboring the point?

McMillan deserves acclamation by all means because she does not affiliate herself with any specific race and her writings are honest and unaffected. Besides she refused to continue the worn out conventions of black women’s writing. She chose the untrodden path and she has created new categories of novels - the post feminist black urban
romance novel wherein she challenges the stereotypical views of African American women and addresses an audience beyond race. According to Paulette Richards,

Like Polite, Jones, Walker, Morrison, and a host of other twentieth-century black women writers, McMillan emphasizes the quest for personal liberty instead of championing civil liberty for the race as a whole ... She is interested in examining how individuals empower themselves and define their own sense of freedom ... McMillan’s heroines are almost all women of substance who reflect her generation’s unprecedented success as professionals in the mainstream society. McMillan consistently challenges her characters to grow and attain greater levels of personal integration.(46)

McMillan affirmed her own desire to portray the struggles of women in a positive, yet realistic light. In his essay, John Leland quotes McMillan: “I don’t write about victims. They just bore me to death. I prefer to write about somebody who can pick themselves back up and get on with their lives. Because all of us are victims to some extent.”

McMillan has succeeded in enthroning the Black female perspective, giving it central importance. In this connection Paulette Richards explicates,

“In synthesizing elements from the body of popular women’s fiction as well as from the traditions of African American oral and print literature, McMillan has discovered a powerful strategy for creating fictional spaces in which a black female world view can occupy the center, rather than the margins of mainstream American “reality”. (51)

In her novels, Terry McMillan essentially refrained from ideological concerns of race. The theme of race is the dominant feature found in traditional African American
McMillan’s novels explore the intricate nuances of African American relationships. In a review Paula C. Barnes comments, “Career advancement, relocation, divorce, aging parents, illness, single parenthood, and the never ending search for love are the problems these women face and the issues McMillan explores.” Family problems seem to diffuse throughout her texts especially *Mama* and *Waiting to Exhale* where she expresses her concerns through conversational prose and realistic dialogue in full gusto. Readers recognize members of their own families in many of her characters. Terry McMillan devotes herself to relationships in her novels and they form the central unit.

Though Terry McMillan seldom includes racial and feminist issues, she does focus on the essential Black experience. Terry McMillan’s novels explore issues relevant to African Americans in contemporary American society. Though McMillan does not overtly speak for a specific race, her keen interest in African American Women is seen in her female characters. McMillan in reality eulogizes Black womanhood. Tate comments on this view,

To base one’s self esteem on self-sacrifice by caring exclusively for others, whether it be one’s mate, children or one’s extended family, and not to care for one’s spiritual well-being is a self-esteem by learning to love and appreciate themselves- in short to celebrate their womanhood (Introd. XXIII).

Terry McMillan was born and brought up in Port Huron, Michigan, north of Detroit. She was one of five children, cared for primarily by her mother, Madeline Washington Tillman, who worked in an auto factory and as a domestic because her father was an abusive alcoholic. John Leland in one of his essay quotes Terry McMillan wherein she
says, “my mother did not just get beat up. She fought back”. She reveals that her mother never regretted marrying her father and she worked hard and lavished her attention on the kids. They divorced when Terry McMillan was thirteen. McMillan says of her mother’s mind-set, “I have five beautiful kids, that is one thing he did right.” The same feeling is voiced in her novel *Mama*, by the protagonist Mildred Peacock. Terry McMillan’s mother was the sustaining force in McMillan’s life. Though uneducated she was blessed with an innate intelligence. The formidable determination to cope with life, no matter what the odds were made her a strong-willed character.

As a child Terry had little interest in literature and the only book in the house was the Bible. Shelving books in the library at sixteen, she discovered the Brontes, James Baldwin and the biography of Louisa May Alcott, which was an inspiring surprise to her. McMillan became an avid reader of African American writers mainly James Baldwin. She reveals her reaction to James Baldwin’s books in the following words: “I was too afraid. I couldn’t imagine that he’d have anything better or different to say than Thomas Mann, Henry Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson ... Needless to say, I was not just naïve, but had not yet acquired an ounce of black pride” (Trescott D1).

After moving to Los Angeles McMillan attended writing courses at Los Angeles Community college. The writing course introduced her to writers as Richard Wright (1908 – 1960), Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960), Jean Toomer (1892-1967) and Ann Petry (1908 – 1997). McMillan enjoyed reading Bronte sisters and gained an early grounding in the traditions of women’s fiction. Works of James Baldwin (1924 -1987) and Langston Hughes (1902 -1967) were a great revelation to her. They inspired her and bolstered her determination profoundly. A course in African American literature
influenced her greatly and later she majored in Journalism. She earned a Degree from the University of California at Berkeley in 1979 and moved to New York City to join Columbia University where she received a Masters Degree. McMillan’s son Solomon Welch who was born of her lover, in 1984 was raised by her as a single parent. Devoted and dedicated to her writing and her son, McMillan was determined to make it in a man’s world and prove her mettle.

After trying her hand at writing poetry she published her first short story “The End” in 1976 at the age of twenty five. McMillan published her first novel Mama in 1987, which she promoted single handedly. Terry McMillan’s exceptional talent has won her fame and fortune. She has won several fellowships and awards which brought her recognition as a talented writer.

McMillan’s first novel ‘Mama’ received a National Book Award by the Before Columbus Foundation, and is largely autobiographical which resembles her mother’s laborious life. She has been awarded a 1988 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Literature, a 1986 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship and the Double day/Columbia University Literary Fellowship. Besides, McMillan is a member of professional organization for writers and artists including PEN (The International Association of Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists and Novelists), the Author’s League, the Harlem writers Guild and Artists for a Free South Africa. She has been a visiting professor of English at the University of Wyoming and Stanford University and an Associate Professor of English at University of Arizona in Tucson.

Writers like Babe Moore Campbell (b.1976), Connie Briscoe (b.1952), Tina McElroy Ansa (b.1949) and E. Lynn Harris (1955-2009) are her contemporaries. They are
invigorated by McMillan’s success. There exists other writers male and female who chronicled life in black middle class communities with particular emphasis on interpersonal relationships, Such as Eric Jerome Dickey (b. 1961), Franklin white (b. 1949) and so on.

McMillan’s fiction mainly revolves around strong intelligent African-American female characters. Their personal crises and romantic affairs reflect the diverse aspirations of middle class and upwardly mobile black women. In her novels she has created a series of portraits that reveal the resiliency of the Black women. In a review John Skow quotes Molly Friedrich, Terry McMillan’s longtime agent who says, “You don’t meet Terry, you experience Terry. She’s truly a force of nature.” Her novels posit the intricate nuances of African American relationships as its primary focus. In an interview with Wendy Smith, McMillan says, “I want to tell my stories on a much more personal level, more intimate. It’s not just the black man pitted against white society; it’s deeper than that.

Terry McMillan’s novels are enormously successful wherein she profiled the urban experiences of African and American women and men. She deals with a variety of issues confronted by the contemporary black women like never-ending search for love, single parenthood, and career advancement and so on but she treats these weighty topics with love, tolerance and good humour. John Leland in an essay quotes Elizabeth Nunez, a black critic who heads the National Black Writers Conference, sending a cautionary note to black writers, “that if they want to get popular they should stop writing literature that is race-centered. But the truth is that race is central to a black person’s experience.” McMillan “was the first to recognize their hunger for fiction that represented their lives”.
Her real purpose of writing novels becomes clear— to sensitize readers to the real-life problems of the Black women in particular. In her novels women characters express their desire to possess a sensitive and compatible partner. Ignoring the opinions of critics about her language being profane, McMillan focuses on “my story, and telling it, and feeling it. And that’s how I write. And that’s why I write” (Porter 42). Her novels empower the black female readers by allowing them to see their own reality reflected. Her enchanting stories, captivating characters and revealing description on recent African-American experience are considered a vital contribution to contemporary popular literature.

Commenting on McMillan’s women Paulette Richards says, “McMillan extends Hurston’s celebration of black women inventing their own lives and thereby earns the profound appreciation of a community of readers that transcends race, class, and gender. (152) Her first novel, *Mama* is based largely on her own family and relates the story of Mildred Peacock, a woman who divorces her philandering husband to raise their five children on her own. McMillan places Mildred in the middle of social change in society and traces her heroine’s struggles through grim realities of life. Despite the harrowing state of affairs that assault her family, she fights tenaciously against the forces that prevent her from raising her family. The novel ends on an optimistic note with Mildred planning to attend community college which offers her immense hope. All these developments restore her hope in life. It is a novel imbued with social realism and not merely a woman’s struggle in a patriarchal society.

McMillan’s second novel *The Disappearing Acts* addresses the issues of urban love. It explores the two year affair of Zora Banks and Franklin Swift, a high school dropout in
his thirties, who works intermittently at the construction site. Zora Banks is a junior high school music teacher who aspires to become a singer. Their biggest problems are the differences in their backgrounds. The theme of this novel has particular relevance to black Americans wherein the professional black women complain of the diminishing number of eligible men. This novel is a conventional tale of love in which class differences as well as gender play major roles. The precarious existence of the black middle class is powerfully dramatized. It lays bare the challenges within a relationship between a professional woman and a Blue Collar man. Their relationship is doomed by mutual expectations and thus they fall apart.

*Waiting to Exhale* (1992) McMillan’s third novel, traces the lives of Robin, Bernadine, Gloria and Savannah, four educated African American women living in Phoenix, Arizona who have an ongoing discussion on their problems in preserving serious and long-term relationships with men. It is one of McMillan’s most popular novels wherein she exhibits a keen eye for social criticism. All four learn to forget their bitter past and move forward in their lives. It is a vibrant story about these four African-American women struggling to find love and their place in the world. In *Getting to Happy* (2010) McMillan revisits the four heroines fifteen years later.

In *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1996) Terry McMillan chronicles the relationships of women to each other, their families and the men in their lives. McMillan returns to her most preferred theme of a successful woman trying to cope with meaningful relationships with men. It tells the story of a single financially independent woman who has become frustrated with her stagnant life after her marriage has dissolved. She is in a good job, has a loving son and a big family. To find inner peace, she goes on a
vacation to Jamaica and falls in love with a young man, twenty years her junior. Despite all hurdles Stella invites him into her life and the couple decides to embark on a life together. Stella rediscovers her own lost self and sense of joy. *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* was selected by *Book-of-the-Month Club* as one of its main selections. These two novels, *Waiting to Exhale* and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* cemented McMillan’s status as the decade’s pre-eminent writer of contemporary middle class African and American Women’s lives and launched her into celebrity status.

*A Day Late and a Dollar Short* (2001), McMillan’s fifth novel, is in her usual format which is about a family dominated by a matriarch. It is the story of the Prices family which is dysfunctional in nature. It chronicles the relationships that exist in a family, among parents and four grown children and focuses on their problems. It presents a family portrait focusing on the lack of communication and rivalry among adult siblings who eventually rediscover their family ties after the death of their mother. Viola, the matriarch is the strength and prop of the family of four children Paris, Charlotte, Janelle and Lewis, with various conflicts and addictions. After thirty eight years of marriage a detached husband Cecil, leaves her for a younger woman Brenda. Paris, the eldest daughter does not admit that she feels lonely in life and that she needs a partner. Charlotte, the second daughter is a resentful wife and is never ready to accept that her son is a gay. Janelle is married to a cop who molests her daughter from her first marriage. It takes weeks for her to accept, react and act on this episode and the delay is disappointing. Lewis, Viola’s son has no prospects because he sees himself as a failure in life. All these add up to the family’s dysfunction. All characters see life entirely on their own terms and assume that separation is the only solution to all problems. Viola’s family members are
dealing with a variety of unpleasant issues including drug abuse, rebellious teens, infidelity and illness. The novel is also about the family falling apart and the family coming back together at the end. As such, this novel is a testament to the love between parents and their children. It presents all the struggles black families currently endure like finding stability in unstable times, freedom from dysfunction, freedom from abuse, rearing children, balancing all the duties and responsibilities that need to be done. It shows a world where no one ever grows up into matured beings. Nevertheless they mend the pieces at the end. McMillan paints a real picture of a family in a maze. It is a serious novel which has raised her stature as a thoughtful and an insightful commentator on families and relationships. Terry McMillan uses this novel to explore themes common to families of all races and cultures.

Terry McMillan’s sixth novel *The Interruption of Everything* (2003) discusses the dilemmas of Marilyn Grimes in her midlife. At the opening of the novel Marilyn devotes a great deal of thought and time to romance and motherhood. All this while, too many demands are thrust upon her and there remains too little room for her to breathe. As Marilyn Grimes approaches middle age she finds herself in a loveless marriage, a demanding family and an ever-growing list of unfulfilled dreams. Hence she charts out changes in her arduous life. Marilyn Grimes is the mother of three grown kids and her life revolves around her husband Leon, her kids and her mother-in-law Arthurine. Marilyn’s two best friends, Paulette and Bunny are part of her life and they add meaning to her life and depth to her character.

*Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Fiction* (1990) edited by McMillan, consists of works by a wide range of post 1960 authors both established
and emerging. It is a collection of fifty-eight short stories and excerpts from novels by African-American writers including Trey Ellis (b. 1962), Willam Demby (b. 1922), Charles Johnson (b. 1953), Colleen McElroy (b. 1935), Darryl Pinckney (b. 1953) and Gloria Naylor (b. 1950). The anthology includes an introduction and short story “Ma Dear”. In her introduction to the text, McMillan states that Dr. Martin Luther King’s dream would come true someday when all African American writings would be estimated by their merit and treated on par with the American writings. As she informs us in her introduction the fifty eight stories in the collection were selected from three hundred submissions. Hence there has been a kind of renaissance in black fiction. At times the African American writing is becoming increasingly difficult to categorize. This work dispels a number of myths about contemporary African-American literature and the culture. The scope of the stories demonstrates the variety and richness of African-American life – its tragedy and pathos, its humor and absurdity. Many of these stories prove that African-American life is not solely a response to racism. Further, she has edited this anthology with the goal of supporting and promoting other emerging African American writers.

Terry McMillan is widely recognized for her literary representations between black women and men, focusing on the experience of successful African American women and emphasizing their quest for personal fulfillment. She departs from the stereotyped view that African American literature primarily dwells on race, racial pride and protest. Nevertheless her works are not completely devoid of social criticism. Terry McMillan does not demystify African Americans to the world. Instead she focuses her attention on complex social problems existing in contemporary American society. McMillan
highlights individual problematic situations, evincing her response to the problem and sets the reader to thought regarding the issue. Thereby the reader does not stop, being a mere spectator but personally involves by identifying himself with the characters. Handling universal themes, concerning day today issues but more relevant to African American community, McMillan has won admiration from multi racial readers thus opening the doors to a wider audience.

Terry McMillan’s fiction lends variety to African American literature because her novels have happy endings. Her inimitable style of combining humour with serious contemporary issues is unique. Her works are optimistic and not depressing in theme.

Terry McMillan deliberately uses conversational style in her fiction. She desires to portray the thoughts, emotions of her characters in a naturalistic manner avoiding artificiality. In an interview with Wendy she says, “I’m stacking up stuff about the story and thinking about these people – I’ve known who they are for a while, I see them and I sort of know the story, but they haven’t started talking to me yet. It’s like a picture that’s out of focus. I don’t force things on my characters, I wait and watch them grow.” She completely depends on the technique of stream of consciousness, concentrating on the building of characters and not the development of plot. As Valerie Sayers says in her review, “The miracle is that Ms. McMillan takes the reader so deep into this man’s head – and makes what goes on there so complicated – that his story becomes not only comprehensible but affecting.” Her writing style enables her to achieve this goal. In an interview in 2002, McMillan revealed that her novels are driven by characters and not by plot. In fact her novels scarcely have plots because she devotes much time on building the psychology of her characters focusing on their intimate thoughts, sentiments and
reflections. She unravels the minds of her characters and lays it bare to the readers. Thus she portrays them accurately to the readers, hence her use of unrefined language for which she received criticism to a great extent. She defends her use of profane language by saying that her characters speak exactly like their prototypes in society. Though Terry McMillan has been criticized for her use of vernacular English and her focus on popular culture, it is these very aspects which make her novels appealing to readers.

The present study, “Terry McMillan’s Fiction: A Thematic Study” illuminates the crux and essence of the themes of McMillan’s fiction which share common features. This study is an attempt to analyze the underlying themes of Terry McMillan’s Fiction. The manifold themes namely, Self-Affirmation of Black Womanhood, Facets of Black Motherhood, Female Bonding and Men’s Inadequacies found in McMillan’s fiction are woven from real life because they portray hidden and sordid realities of African American society. It is to be noted that these themes are not found in isolation in McMillan’s novels but they are entangled and form an intricate pattern throughout her fiction. Nevertheless, the threads of these universal themes run through each and every novel and bind it into an integral collection, wherein McMillan has displayed human emotions in different hues.