CHAPTER - II

BLACK WOMAN IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION
When black woman made her appearance in the works of white male writers, she was depicted in one of the stereotype roles assigned to her since long, their images being a context for some other major dilemma or the problem the society cannot resolve. The most important black female figure in southern white literature is that of the mammy, Aunt Jemima. She is in direct contrast to the ideal white woman, though both images are dependent on each other for their effectiveness. Mammy is black in colour, fat, nurturing. She relates to the world as an all embracing figure, and she herself needs or demands little, her identity derived mainly from a nurturing service.

Mammy must be plump and have big breasts and arms. She is the mammy in the unconscious of the South, desired and needed since white women would have to debase themselves in order to be a mother. In contrast, the white woman was supposed to be frail, alabaster white incapable of doing hard work. Shimmering with the beauty of fragile crystal, these images are dependent upon one another because the white women could not be ornamental, descriptive, fussy if she nursed and brought up children.
In the mythology of the south, men did not fight duels or protect the honour of a woman who was busy cooking, scrubbing floors, or minding children, since the exclusive performance of this kind of work precluded the intrigue necessary to be a person as an ornament. In other words, leisure time on one's pretty hands made one weak enough to need protection.

The image of the ideal white woman tries to deny the gross physical aspects of being female, gross from the Southern point of view. In contrast, all the functions of mammy are magnificently physical. They involve the body as sensuous, as funky, the part of woman that white southern America was afraid of. Mammy, then, harmless in her position as a slave, unable because of her all-giving nature to do harm is needed as an image, a surrogate to contain all those fears of the physical female.

One could analyse the other prominent black female figure in white southern literature - the concubine, in much the same way. Even the conjure woman is a reservoir for fears - fear in this case of the unknown spiritual world, so that particularly in New Orleans - the centre of catholicism in the south, Marie Laveau, the great voodoo membo, could emerge as one of the most powerful citizens for half a century.

During the same period, Afro-American literature moved in a different direction. While southern white literature had focused on the mammy as the dominant black female image, with some glimpses of the concubine and conjure woman, black literature centred mainly on the tragic mulatto. Such novels as 'Clotel' (1850) by William Wells Brown and Frances Harper's 'Iola Leroy' (1892), the first published novel by a black woman, set the image for the heroine as a lasting image in black lit-
creature for decades to come. Thus, this stereotyping of black woman continues in the works of male Afro-American writers, though with a difference. Images here have been drawn with more sympathy. In the works of major novelists of the period 1945 - 1960, such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, and Ralph Ellison, black women appear as slightly outlined mamies, or victims, or as in the works of Charles William or Claude McKay, as sex - Kittens - women created and used for sex.

In Wright's major works such as 'Native Son' or 'The Outsider', black women appear in the role of a mamma or as a victim, like Beesie in 'Native Son' whose fate is given little thought by the society around her. In 'Black Boy', we do get glimpses of Wright's grandmother, and mother - both long suffering, fantastically religious women, whom the author remembers primarily as being in pain.

Ellison's major work "Invisible Man" again projects the black women in the sole role of mammy. Mary - the woman who rescues the nameless narrator from illness, disappears from the book after she nurses him back to health. It is really ironic that this narrator in the process of making his invisibility "visible" makes his woman characters invisible, using precisely the same stereotypes of the white man that made black man invisible namely marginalizing and stereotyping.

Baldwin's novels present women in more diverse roles. Ida in "Another Country" is a perceptive person, though she shares with many of Baldwin's other women that grating quality that some call the 'Sapphire', named after sapphire in "Amos and Andy" series. Chester Himes' women veer towards
another stereotype - the sex-kitten, women created and used for sex. as in "Pinktoes". Himes pushed his characterization of women to the heights of caricature, perhaps a caricature intended as a comment on the stereotype itself.

In effect, the black women that appear in the novels of these and other novelists come painfully close to the stereotype about the black woman projected by white southern literature in the latter part of the 19th Century. Perhaps images do inform reality.

During the sixties, many black writers like Imamu Baraka and Don Lee present a different sort of stereotype - the idealized black woman saluted as a queen or mother of the universe. They assume that there have been wedges placed between black men and women and that work must be done to remove these wedges. They exhorted black women to change their ways (i.e. stop being sapphires or loose women) in order to deserve the titles of queen or mother. Black women became symbolic holders of the moral condition of blacks in much of the nationalist poetry. In some ways, though, this kind of stereotype, assumes the existence of sapphires, Aunt Jemima and the evil woman - images germinated in the white Southern mythology and enhanced and enriched by film, television and radio programmes even up to the present.

This is not to say that one of the thrusts of contemporary male Afro-American literature was to denigrate the black women. Rather, the black woman herself had to illuminate her own situation, reflect on her own identity and growth, her
relationship as she had experienced it. And during these explosive years, some black writers began to project the intensity, complexity and diversity of the experience of the black women from their own point of view.

Unlike the male Afro-American literature, black women's writing presents a completely different picture. The focus here shifts to the black woman as an individual, struggling towards freedom and selfhood. Right from the slave narratives down to the present times, there has been conscious or sometimes unconscious repudiation of the many myths that surround the black woman. In the slave narratives 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 hardwon escape from the system and their fitness for freedom's potential blessings. They as Frances Foster (1984) says, present, "stronger, more complex portraiture of their sex."

1. Frances Foster "In respect of females - Differences in the Portrayals of women by male and female narrators." Black American literature forum. 15 Summer 66 - 70
And the tradition happily continues in contemporary writing by black women, speaking of which Elizabeth Schultz says:

"The fiction of black women writers in particular demonstrates especially convincingly that free from these racist and sexist images to embrace her black heritage and her woman's heritage, the black woman also flourishes very much as herself."

Certain trends do characterize the writings of black women writers during this period. The image of the tragic mulatto no longer dominates the literature; it is replaced by a diversity of physical and psychological types. The role of mammy is carefully and continually moved from the level of stereotype to that of a living human being with her own desires and needs. The relationship between black men and women is also scrutinized, often in less generic and more particular terms and most importantly black women themselves are projected as thinkers, feelers, human beings, not only used by others, but as conscious beings. There are many black women, these voices say. They have culture, race, sex, sometimes situations in common, but they are not just push button automations who scream when given their cue, cuddle up when given that smile. They are not just stereotypes, for a stereotype is the very opposite of humanness; stereotype whether negative or positive is a by product of racism, is one of the vehicles through which racism tries to reduce the human being to a non-human level.

2. Elizabeth Schultz "Free in Fact and at last. The image of Black woman in Black American literature" Page No. 334
The development of Afro-American women's fiction is, in many instances, a mirror image of the intensity of the relationship between sexism and racism in America for what Afro-American women have been permitted to express, in fact to contemplate, as part of the self, is gravely affected by other complex issues. To be able to use the range of one's voice, to attempt to express the totality of self, is a recurring struggle in the tradition of these writers from the 19th century to the present.

Early Afro-American women novelists indicate, through their stated intentions, their primary reasons for writing their works. Frances Harper, for example, in her preface to 'Iola Leroy,' made clear her purpose when she wrote that "her story's mission would not be in vain if it awaken in the hearts of our country men a stronger sense of justice and a more Christian-like humanity". Harper was pleading for the justice due Afro-Americans who in 1890's were being lynched, burned out, raped and deprived of their rights as citizens in the wake of the failure of Reconstruction. Iola Leroy, Harper's major character, does not attempt to understand either herself as an individual or black women as a group. Rather Iola Leroy is a version of the "Lady" Americans were expected to respect and honor, even though she is black. By creating a respectable ideal heroine, according to the norms of the time, Harper was addressing not herself, black women
Audience was a consideration for Jessie Fausset also,—the most published Afro-American woman novelist of the Harlem Renaissance. She together with Nella Larsen, wanted to correct the impression most white people had that all black people lived in Harlem dives or in picturesque, abject poverty. She tells us why she chose to create the heroines she did in her preface to 'The Chinaberry Tree' (1931). Beginning with the disclaimer that she does not write to establish a thesis, she goes on to point out that the novel is about those breathing spells in—between spaces where coloured men and women work and live and go their ways with no thought of the problem.

Both Harper and Fausset were certainly aware of the images, primarily negative of black people, that predominated in the minds of white Americans. They constructed their heroines to refute those images as their way of contributing to the struggle of black people for their citizenship in this country. To white American readers, self-understanding for black characters might have seemed a luxury. To the extent that these writers were emphasizing the gender as well as race of their heroines, they were appealing to a white female audience that understood the universal trials of womanhood. These writers' creations, then were conditioned by the need to establish "positive" images of black people; hence, the exploration of self could hardly be attempted in all its complexity.
To a large extent, and necessarily so until the 1940's, most black women fiction writers directed their conscious intention toward a refutation of the negative image imposed on all black women, images decidedly "masculine" according to the norms of the times. Nonetheless, from Iola Leroy to Dorothy West's "The Loving is Easy" (1948), there is an incredible tension between the "femininity" of the heroines and their actual behaviour. On the one hand, the writers try to prove that black women are women, that they achieve the ideal of other American women of their time, that is, that they are beautiful (fair), pure, upper-class, and would be non-aggressive, dependent beings, if only racism did not exist. At the same time, they appear to believe that if Afro-American women were to achieve the norm, they would lose important aspects of themselves. The novels, especially those about passing, embody this tension. But even in the novels that do not focus on this theme, the writers emphasize the self-directedness of their heroines, as well as their light-skinned beauty and Christian morality. Thus Leroy believes that woman should work; Pauline Hopkins' heroine in "Contending Forces" (1900) wants to advance the race. Fausset's characters, though class-bound, have ambition to an feminine degree.

The tension between the femininity of these heroines and their "contrary instincts" has its roots in the fact that Afro-American women, contrary to the norm, co-
uld not survive unless they generated some measure of self-definition. If they tried to live by the female version of the American Dream, as pure, refined, protected, and well-provided for, they were often destroyed as is Lutie Johnson, Ann Petry's heroine in "The Street" (1946). And even if they secured a measure of the Dream, some like Cleo in West's "The Living is Easy" become destructive, frustrated and alienated from self.

One notable exception to this trend in early Afro-American women writers' works is Zora Neale Hurston's "Their Eyes were Watching God" (1937). In the journey from this image of the tragic mulatto to a more varied, more complex view of the black woman as she appears in American literature, Hurston's work is transitional. In this novel, Hurston portrays the development of Janie Stark as a black woman who achieves self-fulfilment and understanding. It is interesting that Hurston was obviously aware that the literature of the period focused on the black women's drive toward economic stability and "feminine" ideals. She constructs the novel so that Janie moves through three stages that embody different views of black women. In her relationship with her first husband, Logan Killicks, Janie is treated like a mule; she is rescued from that state by marrying Jody Starks, who wants her to become a lady, "The Queen of the Porch". But Hurston critiques the achievement of economic stability through feminine
submission in marriage as the desirable goal for the black woman. She portrays the disastrous consequences of this goal on Janie, that she becomes in this situation, a piece of desirable property, cut off from her community and languishing in the repression of her natural desire to be herself. Though Janie's relationship with Tea Cake is not ideal, Hurston does present us with a vision of possibility in terms of some parity in a relationship between a man and a woman, based not on material gain or ownership of property but on their desire to know one another.

In its radical envisioning of the self as central and its use of language as a means of exploring the self as female and black, "Their Eyes were Watching God" is a forerunner of the fiction of the 70's and 80's. In general, though most novels, published before the 1950's embodied the tension between the writer's apparent acceptance of an ideal of woman derived from white upper-class society and the reality with which their protagonists had to contend. And most seemed to be written for an audience that excluded even the writers themselves.

But the attempt to present "positive" images of the black woman, to restrict her characterization to a prescribed ideal, did not result in any improvement in her image or her condition. Rather, the refutation of negative images created a series of contradictions between the image
that black women could not attain, though they sometimes internalized, and the reality of their existence. That tension increased throughout the first half of the century until the 1940's when the destruction it created becomes apparent in the fiction written by black women. The heroines of this period, Lutie Johnson in "The Street" and Cleo Judson in "The Living is easy" are defeated both by social reality and by their lack of self-knowledge. Self-knowledge was critical, if black women were to develop the inner resources they would need in order to cope up with larger social forces.

Beginning with Gwendolyn Brooks' "Maud Martha" (1953), we can observe a definite shift in the fiction of the Afro-American women; a shift in point of view and intention that characterizes the novels written today. Afro-American women writers are putting more emphasis on reflecting the process of self-definition and understanding that women have always had to be engaged in, rather than refuting the general society's definition of them. The shift is, of course, not a sudden or totally complete one; there are many phases in the process.

The first phase focused on portraying what the early literature tended to omit, namely, the complex existence of the ordinary, dark-skinned woman, who is neither an upper class matron committed to an ideal of woman that few could attain, as in the novels of the Harlem Renaissance,
nor a down-trodden victim, totally at the mercy of a hostile society, as in Ann Petry's "The Street".

Gwendolyn Brooks claims that her intention in writing "Maud Martha" was to paint a portrait of an ordinary black woman, first as daughter, then as mother, and to show what she makes of her "little life". What Brooks emphasizes in the novel is Maud Martha's awareness that she is seen as common (and therefore as unimportant) and that there is so much more in her than her "little life" will allow her to be. Yet because Maud Martha constructs her own standards, she manages to transform her "little life" into so much more despite the limits set on her by her family, her husband, her race, her class, whites, and the American society, Maud emerges neither crushed nor triumphant. She manages, though barely, to be her own creator. Her sense of her own integrity is rooted in her own imagination, in her internal language as metaphors derived from women's experience, metaphors that society usually trivializes but which Brooks presents as vehicles of insight.

"Maud Martha" cast its influence on Paule Marshall, whose novel "Browngirl, Brownstones" (1959) is a definite touchstone in contemporary Afro-American women's fiction. Like 'Maud Martha', the emphasis in 'Browngirl, Brownstones' is on the black woman as mother and daughter. Marshall demons-
trates through her portrayal of Silla Boyce how the role of mother for this woman is in conflict with her role as wife because of the racism that embattles her and her community. Marshall's novel was certainly affected by society's attitude that black women were matriarchs; domineering mothers who distorted their children who in turn disrupted society.

Few early Afro-American women's novels focused on the black woman's role as a mother because of the negative stereotype of the black woman as mammy that pervaded American society. But instead of de-emphasizing the black woman's role as mother, Marshall probes its complexity. She portrays Silla Boyce as an embittered woman caught between her own personality and desires and the life imposed on her as a mother who must destroy her unorthodox husband in order to have a stable family. Marshall shows that racist and sexist ideology is intertwined, for Silla's and Deighton Boyce's internalization of the American definition of woman and man runs counter to their own beings and to their situation as black people in American society and precipitates the tragedy that their relationship becomes.

Silla, however, is not an internal being like Maud Martha. She fights, supported by her women friends who use their own language to penetrate illusion and verbally construct their own definitions in order to wage their battle. As a result, Selina, Silla's daughter, will by the end of the novel have some basis for the journey to self-knowledge upon which she embarks, fully appreciating the dilemma that her mo-
ther and father could not solve. Finally Selina’s decision to return to the Carribean is her attempt to claim her own history as a means of acquiring self consciousness. In "Browngirl, Brownstones", an appreciation of one's ethnic and racial community becomes necessary for black women in their commitment to self-development.

But by 1970's this tendency to emphasize the importance of community and culture began to change. The fiction in 1970's (when Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye" and Alice Walker's "The Third Life of Grange Copeland" were published, represents a second phase in which black community itself becomes a major threat to the survival and empowerment of women, one in which women must struggle against the definitions of gender. The language of this fiction therefore becomes a language of protest, as Afro-American women writers vividly depict the victimization of their protagonists. Toni Morrison (The winner of 1993 Nobel Prize for literature), Alice Walker, Gayl Jones and Toni Cade Bambara all expose sexism and sexist violence in their own communities. In the novels of early 1970's, there is always someone who learns not only that white society must change, but also that black communities' attitudes toward women must be revealed and revised. In "The Bluest Eye", it is Claudia Mcteer, Pecola's peer and friend, who undergoes this education. In "The Third Life of Grange Copeland", it is the grandfather, Grange, who must kill his son, the fruit of his initial self-hatred, in order to save his granddaughter. Both Claudia and Ruth possess the possibility of constr-
ucting their self-definitions and affecting the direction of their communities because they have witnessed the destruction of women in the wake of prevailing attitudes.

By the mid 1970's, the fiction makes a visionary leap. In novels like 'Sula' and 'Meridian,' the woman is not thrust outside her community. To one degree or another she chooses to stand outside it, to define herself as in revolt against it. In some ways, Sula is the most radical of the characters of 1970's fiction, for she overturns the conventional definition of good and evil in relation to women by insisting that she exists primarily as and for herself - not to be mother or to be the lover of men. In other ways, Meridian is more radical in that she takes a revolutionary stance by joining a social movement, the Civil Rights Movement, which might have redefined American definition of both race and gender. It is important that both these women claim their heritage. This is also true of Merle Kimbona in Marshall's second novel "The Chosen Place, the timeless People". Though published in 1969, the novel depicts a black woman as both outside and inside the black world, as both outside and inside the West. As such, Merle becomes a spokesperson for her people, both male and female who do not always understand their own dilemmas.

Thus Afro-American women fiction writers, like Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gayl Jones, had not only defined their cultural
context as a distinctly Afro-American one, but they had also probed many facets of the inter-relationship of sexism and racism in their society. Not only had they demonstrated the fact that sexism existed in black communities, but they had also challenged the prevailing definition of women in American society, especially in relation to motherhood and sexuality. And they had insisted not only on the centrality of black women to Afro-American history, but also on their pivotal significance to the present-day social political developments in America.

The novels written thereafter and up to the present continue to depict these themes—that sexism must be struggled against in black communities and that sexism is integrally related to racism. Many of them go a step further. They pose the question concerning what community black women must belong to in order to understand themselves most effectively in their totality as blacks and women.

Toni Morrison's novels, of those of the major writers, have moved farthest away from the rebellious woman stance of the previous novels, for she has focused in her two books—"Song of Solomon" (1978) and "Tar Baby" (1980)—on men as much as women. Still she makes an attempt to figure out the possibilities of healing and communing for her women character. Pilate is such a character. Although she derives her accumulated wisdom from her father and primarily benefits
Milkman, her nephew, rather than any other women in the novel. Jadine in 'Tar Baby' is portrayed as the woman who has taken a position so far removed from her community that she becomes a part of the West. In her search for self, she becomes selfish; in her desire for power, she loses essential parts of herself. Thus, Morrison has moved full circle from Pecola, who is destroyed by her community to Jadine who destroys any relationship to community in herself.

On the other end of the spectrum, Walker's Celie comes close to liberating herself through the community of her black sisters, and is able to positively affect the men of her world. The motif of liberation through one's sisters is repeated in Shange's 'Sassafras' in which the healing circle is that of black women - three sisters and their mother.

Between these two ends of spectrum, other novelists propose paths to empowerment. In Marshall's novel "Praisesong for the Widow" (1983), Avey Johnson must discard her American value of obsessive materialism, must return to her source, must remember the ancient wisdom of African culture - that the body and spirit are one, that harmony cannot be achieved unless there is a reciprocal relationship between the individual and the community if she is to define herself as a black woman. So, too, with Audre Lorde's "Zami" (1982), in that she probes the cosmology of her black maternal ancestors in
order to place herself. Lorde focuses more specifically than Marshall on a community of women who live, love and work together as the basis for the creation of community that might affect the empowerment of Afro-American women. These fictional works are similar, however, in that the search for a unity of self takes these women to the Caribbean and ultimately to Africa.

In fact, in many of these novels Africa and African women have become important motifs for trying out different standards of new womanhood. In "Tar Baby", Morrison uses the image of the African woman in the yellow dress as a symbol for authenticity that the Jaded Jadine lacks. It is this woman's inner strength, beauty, and pride, manifested in the defiant stance of her body, that hunts Jadine's dreams and throws her into such a sense of confusion that she flees her Parisian husband-to-be and retreats to the Isle de Chevaliere in the Caribbean. In contrast, Alice Walker reminds us in "The Color Purple", one third of which is set in Africa, that "black women have been the mule of the world there", and that sexism flourishes in Africa. Marshall concentrates more than any of the other novelists of her period in delineating the essential African wisdom still alive in New World black communities.

Mobility of black women is a new quality of these novels, for black women in much of the previous literature, were restricted in space by their conditions. All of the
major characters in these novels have moved from one place to another and have encountered other worlds distinctly different from their own. This mobility is not cosmetic. This means that there is increased interaction between black women from the U.S., the Caribbean and Africa, as well as women of other colour. Often it is the movement of the major characters from one place to another (Tar Baby's Jadine from Paris to Caribbean to the U.S.; Praisesong's Avey Johnson from White Plains to Greneda; Sassafras' Cypress from San Francisco to New York; Color Purple's Nellie from the U. S. South to Africa) that enlarges and sharpens their vision.

Not only is mobility through space a quality of present-day fiction, so also is mobility from one class to another. Thus Jadine in 'Tar Baby', Celie in 'Color Purple', and Avey Johnson in 'Praisesong' have all known poverty and have moved to a point where they have more material security. Still there are many variations in these authors' analysis of such a movement.

In 'Tar Baby', Jadine is able to reap the material benefits of her aunt's and uncle's relationship to Valerian, their white wealthy employer and becomes, in some ways, an Afro-American princess. Morrison's analysis of Jadine's focus on security and comfort emphasizes the danger that obsession with material things might have for the ambitious black women. In pursuing her own desire to 'make it', Jadine forgets how to nurture those who have made it possible for her
to be successful. She forgets her "ancient properties" and succumbs to the decadent western view of woman. Paule Marshall also focuses on the dangers of materialism, on how the fear of poverty and failure has affected Avey and Jay Johnson's marriage and their sense of themselves as black to such an extent that they do not even recognize their own faces. "Praisesong" has, as one of its major themes, middle aged, middle-class Avey Johnson's journey back to herself, an essential part of which is the African wisdom still alive in the rituals of black societies in the West. Alice Walker approaches the element of class mobility in another way. Celie does not lose her sense of community or her spiritual center as she moves from dire poverty and deprivation to a more humane way of living, perhaps because she comes to that improvement in her life through inner growth and through the support of her sisters.

One radical change in this fiction is the overt exploration of lesbian relationships among black women and how their relationships are viewed by the black communities. This exploration is not to be confused with the friendship among women that is a major theme in earlier literature. This new development may have a profound effect on present-day attitudes about the relationship between sex and race and about the nature of women. Sexual relationships between women are treated differently in "The Color Purple", "The Women of Brewster Street", "Sassafras" and "Zami".
In "The Color Purple", the love relationship between Celie and Shug is at the center of the novel and is presented as a natural, strengthening process through which both women, as well as the people around them grow. In contrast, Gloria Naylor in "The Women of Brewster Street", places more emphasis on the reactions of the small community to which the lovers belong, as well as their own internalization of social views about lesbianism. There is more concentration on the oppression that black lesbians experience. In Shange's "Sassafras", the sexual relationships between Cypress and her lover is a part of a community of lesbian women who, while affirming themselves, are also sometimes hostile to one another as the outer world might be. The lesbian community in "Sassafras" is an imperfect one and Cypress' sexual love for another woman is but a part of a continuum of sexual love that includes her involvement with men.

In "Zami", however, the definition of a lesbian relationship is extended. In using the word "Zami" as a title, a word that means "women who live, love and work together", Lorde searches the connections between myth, poetry and history that might shift the focus of the definition of humankind, particularly black humankind, from one that is predominantly male. One question that these novels leave unanswered is whether the bond between women might be so strong that it might transcend the racial and class divisions among women in America and make possible a powerful women's community that mi-
ght effect significant change.

The emphasis on the culture of women as a means to self-understanding and growth is not only treated thematically in the new fiction, but it is also organic to the writers' forms. Increasingly the language and forms of black women's fiction are derived from women's experiences as well as from Afro-American culture. The most revolutionary transformation of the novel's form is Alice Walker's "The Color Purple". It is written entirely in letters, a form that (along with diaries) was the only one that allowed women to record their everyday lives and feelings, their "herstory". And of equal importance, Walker explores the richness and clarity of black folk English in such a way that the reader understands that the inner core of a person cannot be truly known except through her own language. Like Walker, Ntozake Shange consciously uses a potpourri of forms primarily associated with women recipes, potions, letters, as well as poetry and dance rhythms, to construct her novel. In "Song of Solomon" and "Tar Baby" Morrison continues to explore Afro-American folktales and folklore, the oral tradition of black people, which as Marshall reminds us in "Praisesong for the widow" is often passed on from one generation to another by women. This exploration of new forms based on the black woman's culture and her story has revitalized the American novel and opened up new avenues of expression.

Thus thematically and stylistically, the tone of the present-day fiction communicates the sense that
women of colour can no longer be perceived as marginal to the empowerment of all American women and that an understanding of their reality and imagination is essential to the process of change that the entire society must undergo in order to transform itself. Most importantly, black women writers project the belief as Alexis De Veau points out, that commitment to an understanding of self is as wide as the world is wide.

The female characters of Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall and other writers illustrate how far they have moved from the stereotype of the 19th century. If there is one prevalent trend in this literature, it is the movement away from stereotype, whatever the price. Stereotype can be comforting as well as denigrating, and to go beyond set images can be painful. There are many great Afro-American women writers. They leave us with the diversity of black women's experiences in America, what she has made of it and how she is transforming it.