CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Arise it’s a brand new morning! (Dove *Mother Love* 18)

Believe in yourself,

Go ahead–see where it gets you (Dove *Mother Love* 63)

Literary artists set the continuum of the tradition of their nationality and are parts of the cultural clime of their era and through their creative output either enrich their tradition by drawing inspiration from their predecessors, or give a new direction to the already available store of works. The American nationality, ethos, and sensibility are entirely different from the British, though it was the native sensibility of the British people that transformed as American enriched with new cultural and traditional values. The difference has been made clear by Emerson in his *The American Scholar*. The great influence of European literature on the formation of the American literary canon as an autonomous tradition was exercised with its cultural plurality, ethnicity, and aesthetic values.

American nationalism began by the end of the colonial period. In 1776, early Americans simulated the European models and thereby they could not produce anything of quality and moreover, early literature expounded politics and religion, with the impact of Puritanism. Later, they developed their unique American taste. Though American literature received its inspiration from British literature, it is different from the British with their reincarnation in vogue. In the middle of the eighteenth century the African Americans gradually moved away from oral tradition and started their commitment to writing by following the white models such as letters, pamphlets, books, and journals. It came out with a body of literature in the Pre-Revolutionary
War period with their creative dialogue with American letters which resulted in rich expressive subtlety and social insight, offering illuminating assessments of American identities and history.

The birth of African American written literary tradition can be traced back to the last part of the eighteenth century. To begin with the Black Americans struggled to get release from slavery to prove their talents. Later, they aimed to get financial freedom also to get their identity. In the third phase, they tried their political freedom to establish their rights. Lastly, they came out with intellectual development to claim their uniqueness as African American writers. African slaves, “remarkably, sought to write themselves out of slavery by mastering the Anglo-American ballistic tradition” in order to “demonstrate that persons if African descent possessed the requisite degrees of reason and wit to create literature, that they were, indeed, full and equal members of the community of rational, sentient beings, that they could, indeed write” (NA xxvii-xxviii). “In his struggle for a better way of life, the Negro has, through necessity made his literature a purposeful thing born if his great desire to become a full-fledged citizen of the United States” (qtd in NA xxxv). The great gift of any literature lies in its enriched cultural heritage, historical perspectives and intellectual contributions. “Africans uprooted from their ancestral soil, stripped of material culture, and victimized by brutal contact with various European nations were compelled not only to maintain their cultural heritage at Meta (as opposed to a material) level” says Baker “but also to apprehend the operative metaphysics of various alien cultures” (Baker, Afro-American 135).

Despite limitations, the Black Literary Tradition flowered with its artistic and creative literary fragrance. The spontaneity of the Africans blossomed forth in their spirituals and in other musical forms; and their folk literature remains till today the pinnacle of glory with its rich storehouse of slave experience. In the past, the Negroes exhibited their uniqueness by creating
their oral literature using their innate musical talents. They are inherently gifted in singing, dancing, using musical instruments, and talented in the artistic form of auditory communication incorporating instrumental or vocal tones in a structured and continuous manner, conveying the pains of their slave past, humiliation, depression, and dehumanization. When they had been enslaved, and tormented by the dominating races, they were determined to show their incomparable talents to the world.

When the Western world refused to speak on behalf of those of African descent, they created their “Anglo-African” literary tradition “in order to demonstrate that persons of African descent possessed the requisite degrees of reason and wit to create literature, that they were, indeed, full and equal members of the community of rational, sentient beings, that they could, indeed, write” (NA Pref. xxviii). African American literature slowly established its beginning in the middle of the seventeenth century with the first full length autobiography A Narrative of the most remarkable particulars in the life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince by James Gronniosaw which became the “Talking book” in the year 1770. It was followed by remarkable attempt in writing poetry by the eighteen year old Phillis Wheatley, “a young Negro girl, an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa” who was acknowledged by eighteen august gentlemen as “qualified to write” (NA, Pref. xxviii). African American literature started flourishing in spite of debates as to whether their writings were ‘art’ or mere ‘propaganda.’

Black Literary Tradition thus branched out into two main channels: the oral and the written. The black writers have transformed their experience of slavery into Negro Literature with their creativity and high imagination. They have produced great literature and art. The folk literature with its oral tradition is the foundation for the black artists to be creative in rich music and oral spirituals in the eighteenth century. The Oral tradition in song and story giving form and
substance to the literature of the black people was born during the antebellum in the southern plantations. The oral forms of the slave period are singing, storytelling, and mimicking. “Oral forms” or the vernacular forms can be “examined and studied for their dramatic structure, conflict patterns, actions, verbal play and interplay, points of view, characterization, transitions, tone, and vigor, visual and auditory imagery, conception of time and value” (Jones 24).

The oral literature of the African Americans reinforced the culture, and social standards. The African oral tradition was their outlet to give vent to their struggles in their New World. We feel the presence of a voice accompanied with musicality in oral forms. The oral literature is the repository of the indigenous traits of the African Americans. The African American poetic tradition emerged from the African oral literary tradition. The use of folklore and folk speech in black poetic diction has played a vital role to strengthen the African American literary forms. African Americans with their many talents in music blended their works with music of a rich kind in oral literature. The impact of African music is clearly visible in the oral literature of the antebellum period. The Storytelling tradition forms the culture of African Americans. Folk literature flourished because of the contributions of the slaves in the Plantation South.

The first experiments of oral literature were spontaneous lyrics like the work songs, field hollers and later the ‘spirituals.’ In their attempt to ‘civilize’ the slaves the priests taught them psalms. These exposures gave them enough knowledge to create their classic folk expression ‘spirituals’ which led to their ‘blues’ the distinct poetic form of the African Americans. Abraham Chapman in his Introduction to Black Voices rightly claims that “the poetic and rhythmic qualities of the spirituals and the dramatic qualities of the folktales were blended with added qualities of emotional intensity and psychological suggestiveness … oral literary expression the sermons of the Negro preachers” (22).
The slave narratives were written between 1760 and 1865. 2,300 former slaves from across the American South were interviewed by writers and journalists under the protection of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) from 1936 to 1938. These former slaves, most of them born in the last years of the slave regime or during the Civil War, rendered first-hand accounts of their experiences on plantations, in cities, and on farms. Each narrative taken alone offered a fragmentary, microcosmic representation of slave life. Read together, they offer a sweeping composite view of slavery in North America. The slave narratives allow us to explore some of the most compelling themes of nineteenth-century slavery, including labor, resistance and flight, family life, relations with masters, and religious beliefs.

When the African American folk forms remained only oral, their identity in the literary world became a question mark. Despite their humiliation, the slaves worked hard to acquire the standard written English. “The slave wrote not primarily to demonstrate humane letters, but to demonstrate his or her own membership in the human community” (Gates, *Signifying* 128). The written literature of slavery and freedom produced a number of great writers including Lucy Terry, Olaudah Equiano, Phillis Wheatley, David Walker, Harriet Jacobs, William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, Frances E.W.Harper, and Harriet E.Wilson. They came out with the dictum that “color is no barrier to black ascension to spiritual heights” (*NA* 127) as it was the theme in one of the poems of Wheatley. More and more prose, drama and poetry were written during this period and thus African Americans entered the world of prose and dramatic literature. During the slave narrative period the important work, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African Written by Himself* was first published in London in 1789 by Equiano, which remains till date the best of the slave narrative. Equiano used autobiography as an abolitionist genre; his narrative reached an international audience and used
the doctrines of both Christianity and Enlightenment philosophy to argue for immediate abolition of the slave trade.

David Walker’s *Walker’s Appeal* made a great impression in the South and inspired and instilled a sense of pride and hope in the minds of the slaves. Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was her autobiography which narrated the story of her life as a slave of a “Dr. Flint,” to whom she was bequeathed as a young girl after her mistress died. She later became an abolitionist speaker and reformer. William Wells Brown became the first African American to publish a play, *The Escape or A Leap of Freedom about the Fugitive Slaves*. He was also an abolitionist and an internationally acclaimed lecturer. William Wells Brown’s first novel *Clotel* or *The President’s Daughter* appeared in 1853, the first full length novel, to add to the major contribution of African Americans. *Clotel* was popular for the sentimental image of the tragic mulatto in American fiction and drama. It was William Brown who introduced the “tragic mulatto” image which later was used by other writers like Langston Hughes.

According to Baker Jr. “Black literature is a verbal art” (*Preface* 254) and the critic takes the responsibility of a “social reformer” and his works being “instruments” help the black men in their social and ethical betterment. After 1920, the black people could write and speak for their rights and have a history of their own. They felt that their tradition sprung from their rootedness, blackness and “shared cultural forms.” All African American literary works reflect their dreams and hopes and inner urges. Their rich experiences in America gave strength to produce a literature with the black “difference.” They raised their voice against the walls that separated them from other human beings which was an unjust practice (*Reconstruction* 57). Gates recorded the truth about the intellectual ability of the black people in *Figures in Black* saying that literary critics like Hume, Kant, Jefferson and Hegel considered the greatness of “the written literature”
which was “the signal measure or the potential innate humanity of a race.” This made them create a literature to show their “intellectual ability” of their written works and “to indict the several social and economic institutions that delimited the humanity of all black people in western cultures” (25).

African American champions wanted to create their own literature in order to showcase their “intellectual ability” through which they express their agitated feeling against the white people. This was made possible with the literature of the Reconstruction to the New Negro Renaissance (1865-1919). A squad of great writers like Booker T. Washington, W.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and William Stanley Braithwaite exhibited their scholarly credentials with their creativity and the aesthetic values in their works. They took “the challenge of producing literature” with “disparagement of their intellectual and creative capacities” for the growth of African American culture when the “nation was working toward unification” (NA 467). Each writer has contributed a unique feature to the black literary canon.

Du Bois was the most prominent writer and leader of the African Americans who talked about the plight of the double consciousness of black Americans in The Souls of Black Folk (1903).

… the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, … this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world … One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (30)
Despite ‘twoness’ being inbuilt in their soul, the African Americans strove very hard to produce their literature. They fought firmly for their rights to bring out their literary talents.

The western educational system provided the African Americans the traditional models and they had a new temptation to probe the literary field with their unique taste. Transplanted into this space, the African Americans absorbed certain aspects of the West thus blending their tradition with the western models. It resulted in African American literature. It is at this juncture we are reminded of T.S. Eliot who gave a call to the literary artists not to divorce themselves completely from the life spring of inspiration given by literary tradition. But he also insisted on the need to add something novel to the tradition of British literature and thus it took a new turn bringing in variegated establishments and movements like the absurd theatre, symbolist poetry, and stream of consciousness and the like. African American literature also grew out of these European and Western literatures by adapting and transforming the cultural traditions with distinct innovations with their innate talents of oral forms in music, mimicry, and dramatic devices. Their literary career started when they were denied their identity as respectable American citizens. They struggled hard to redefine the white/black hierarchy of mainstream discourse. And the post war era in the twentieth century witnessed the birth of revolutionary trends in all forms of literature.

A great literary tradition is born out of the freedom of the individual and the freedom of the country. This notion of freedom struck the imagination of writers while the slave trade was at its height, between America and Africa. African writers derived their sources from their American experiences to give voice to their own quest for freedom. Every text of writers reflects a compound ancestry, the alteration of shared themes, the literary growth of their time, and the essence of the contemporary period. A prominent black aesthetician, Houston A. Baker, Jr. states
that African American “art is a product and producer in an increasing struggle for black liberation. To be art; the product had to be expressivity or performance designed to free minds and bodies of a subjugated people” (Baker Afro-American Poetics 13). African American literary tradition makes a new literary history. This African American literary history talks about all the great potentials of both those schooled in traditional art forms and writers who made unique contributions. Gates concedes the “intellectual ability” of the African Americans who are “compelled to create a literature not only to demonstrate that blacks did indeed posses intellectual ability to create a written art but also to indict the several social and economic institutions that delimited the “humanity” of all black people in western cultures” (NA 2427).

African American literature is an expression of their cultural heritage, traditional values, and conflicts they faced in a racially divided society. It is rich in poetry and music. It is enriched by substantial and pertinent contributions. “The comparable cultural harvest of the black man’s experience, anguish, humor, and creativity in the United States remains a viable and potent source of folk and shared emotional experience … in accordance with their individual needs, talents, and literary visions” (Chapman 22). African American literature has reincarnated out of African culture, with its rich and variegated oral literary tradition; and it also reflects the American ethos and sensibility.

The early African American writers like Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Zora Neale Hurston incorporated African American dialect and folklore into their literature. As Johnson is known for his sermons, Langston Hughes’s blues form helped him “to break from dialect, to maintain a sense of the syntax, vocabulary, imagery, metaphors, and expressive rhythms of a different vernacular and linguistic tradition, but without caricature” (Jones, Liberating 24). Paul Laurence Dunbar’s conflict whether to use the Standard English of the classical poets or the dialect of the
African Americans got resolved in the Harlem Renaissance with writers like Langston Hughes, And Sterling A. Brown. Dunbar’s poetry preserved the essence of African American temperament and outlook on life, with truth and freshness of feeling with the best choice of language and lyrical grace. Dunbar though a product of the era of compromise became the medium for the true interpretation of Negro character and psychology. William Stanley Braithwaite is a key figure in the revival of American poetry in the early decades of the twentieth century. He favoured traditional, formal, lyric voices in African American verse over harsher cries and he became the bridge for the general reading public to give a wide range of African American voices through his compiling of Anthologies. The writers of ‘The New Negro Renaissance’ get the picture of the African American literature in the mid-nineteenth century and early twentieth century “to confirm and to manifest creativity and genius while also documenting and shaping social, political, and spiritual aspirations and conditions” (NA 468).

Harlem Renaissance marked an era of extraordinary creativity and unusual cultural productivity in the North. Harlem became the cultural centre for black people for the growing popularity of blues, jazz, and dance. James Weldon Johnson rightly calls it “the Negro capital of the world.” Houston A. Baker, Jr. in his Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic elaborates on the importance of Harlem Renaissance. Three important events led to a highly intellectual frame of Harlem Renaissance: (i) the meeting of W.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen to celebrate the first novel of Jessie Fauset, (ii) the ‘civic club dinner’ which was the birth place of ‘The New Negro’ and (iii) the publication of “Fire!!.”
According to Baker, Harlem Renaissance was a “self-willed affair” which emerged from the “black American Consciousness,” “the artistic extension of the sociopolitical activities of black Americans during the 1920s. Its end was integration into the mainstream, and its means were not very different from those of white creative artists” (Baker Afro-American 58). Harlem Renaissance marked the beginning of the mainstream integration. Countee Cullen was considered the poet laureate of the Harlem Renaissance because of his interest “in liberating black American poetry from the shackles of the past and in developing a strong literary tradition” (Baker, Afro-American 60). The important writers of Harlem Renaissance are Alain Locke, Marcus Garvey, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Jean Toomer, Rudolph Fisher, Sterling A. Brown, Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen. Among the writers of Harlem, Alain Locke, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes are the literary giants who created a new space for the growth of African American literature.

Harlem Renaissance and the outpouring of creative works necessitated a “critical debate” at a time when the works of African Americans were dubbed as mere documentaries. Zora Neale Hurston, the folklorist recorded the language which was unique, pure, and lasting. Her “Characteristics of Negro Expression” was the first critical document wherein she highlighted the greatest contribution of the African American people to the language: “(i) the use of metaphor and simile; (ii) the use of the double descriptive, and (iii) the use of verbal nouns” (NA 1021). Her extensive travel over the Caribbean and the American South for her anthropological research gave her rich experience for her documentation of African American folklore. She made the effort to record the folk tales of the rural south with their dialect. She transformed the oral tradition into written with her recording of folk tales. It was Langston Hughes who became the father of modern African American literature with his new forms of blues and spirituals.
Langston Hughes’s “Blues at Dawn” is in perfect classic blues pattern. Jones appreciates this poem for it has “the concrete, straightforward language, the incremental repetition” and “oral tradition offers continuity of voice as well as its liberation” (Jones, Liberating 179).

What was once the ‘Individual talent’ of Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown (use of blues as a poetic form and introducing blues in prose) later became the African American literary tradition. His inspiration to compose blues and jazz poetry made him say in his seminal work *The Negro Artist and Racial Mountain* that “jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, … and pain swallowed in a smile” (NA 1270). In his path-breaking poem *The Weary Blues*, Hughes combined black vernacular speech with blues rhythms, breaking from traditional forms.

The Black magazines like *Crisis, Opportunity*, and *The Negro Quarterly* gave encouragement to the writers of the period. African American literary history tends “to focus exclusively on the traditional genres of narrative, poetry, and drama in their “high-cultural” varieties, obscure the range of popular cultural forms in which African American writers achieved considerable success” (NA 1319). The poetry of this period focused mainly on narrative forms. Yet another group intersected this period with their stream of literary works. Melvin B. Tolson, Richard Wright, Robert Hayden, Ralph Ellison, Gwendolyn Brooks, James Baldwin, and Lorraine Hansberry were the important writers who extended their works through the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and beyond.

Alongside their literary outpouring the ‘black aesthetic’ was taking shape. The black Aesthetic and Black Arts Movement are the products of the critic as artist. Some of the African American writers like Henderson (*Understanding New Black Poetry*), Addison Gayle (*The Way...*)
of the New World), George Kent (Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture), Shirley Ann Williams (Give Birth to Brightness), Arnold Rampersad (The Art and Imagination), and Dexter Fisher and Robert Stepto (Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction) highlight the greatness of “black aesthetic.” Baker claims that “black Aesthetic, in its various usages and effects, has given to a newly realized black collectivity and its artists a sense of holism, a sense of an essential reciprocity between black art and black culture” (The Journey 139). Modernism brought a new dawn to the rise of female poets. Gwendolyn Brooks was the first African American writer to win a Pulitzer Prize for Annie Allen in 1949. Many of her poems reflected a political consciousness and civil rights activism. Her ideas on “double consciousness,” “modernism,” and “womanist” themes are subsumed in her poetry. In her long journey as a world renowned poet, she showed her mastery of form and technique in her works, especially in her sonnets through which she managed to inject the black idiom in the Western art form.

In 1957, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was formed by Martin Luther King, the active leader of the Civil Rights Movement. The incident which involved Rosa Parks, a black woman who was unwilling to give her seat to a white man, keeping her individual rights in a bus, triggered off the burning issue of the Civil Rights Movement. In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., organized the March on Washington along with 200,000 protestors, where he made his popular speech “I Have a Dream.” Martin Luther King became a source of inspiration to almost all the African Americans, especially the writers. It made the African American writers enter into the mainstream culture of America.

In the beginning of the 1970s African American literature entered the mainstream as African American writers got the best selling status of their books and award-winning status.
Their books got recognition in the American Universities and got anthologized as part of American literature. All African American writers produced literature rich in significant cultural perspectives, extending enlightening evaluations of American identities and history. They earned widespread critical acclaim. There was a shift in the African American trends from the 1960s to the 1970s in the “remapping of African American cultural and social history,” bringing back the African American “folk forms,” trying to keep women writers in “every literary genre,” giving importance to African American identities, and African American participating “in framing the study of African literature” (NA 2012). The contemporary major women African American writers are Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, June Jordan, Toni Cade Bambara, Shirley Anne Williams, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Rita Dove.

Maya Angelou was the Grammy Award-winning poet, writer, composer and actress who appeared in several Off-Broadway productions. Her important work I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1970) deals with her early years in Long Beach, St. Louis and Stamps, Arkansas, where she lived with her brother and paternal grandmother. It is a remarkably vivid retelling of the turbulent events of her childhood, during which she shuttled back and forth between dramatically different environments in rural Stamps, Arkansas, St. Louis, Missouri, and Glitzy San Francisco, California.

Toni Morrison rose to prominence with Beloved (1987) which won her the Pulitzer Prize. Her fiction was noted for the poetic language, emotional intensity, and sensitive observation of America viewed from a variety of African American perspectives. Awarded the 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature, Toni Morrison was an influential editor at the Random House for nearly two decades. One of the most widely-published and highly-acclaimed African American writers of her generation, poet, playwright and essayist, June Jordan was also known for her fierce
commitment to human rights and progressive political agenda. In volumes like *Some Changes* (1971), *Living Room* (1985) and *Talking Back to God* (1997), Jordan uses conversational, often vernacular English to address topics ranging from family, bisexuality, political oppression, African American identity and racial inequality, and memory. Regarded as one of the key figures in the mid-century African American social, political and artistic milieu, Jordan also taught at many of the country’s most prestigious universities including Yale, the State University of New York-Stony Brook, and the University of California-Berkley.

Toni Cade Bambara is a novelist, short fiction writer, essayist, filmmaker, lecturer, and an educator. Her novel, *The Salt Eaters* (1980), centers on the attempted suicide and healing of the main character, Velma Henry. Toni Cade Bambara always insisted that social commitment is inseparable from the production of art. Bambara’s early years as a social worker and commitment as a community organizer influenced her work from its earliest beginnings. Shirley Anne Williams is a major cultural and literary force in the African American and the larger multicultural American community. Williams explores the African American folk culture in her literary works. The best and perhaps most well-known example is her first endeavor, *Give Birth to Brightness: A Thematic Study in Neo-Black Literature* (1972). One element of folk culture that informs William’s writing, both critical and creative, is “call and response.”

Alice Walker maintained a strong focus on feminist issues within African American culture with her “womanist” theory. She also won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *The Color Purple* (1982). Walker’s writings include novels, stories, essays and poems. Topically, they focus on the struggles of African Americans, particularly women, and they witness against societies that are racist, sexist, and violent. Her writings also focus on the role of women of color.
in culture and history. Walker is a respected figure in the liberal political community for her support of unconventional and unpopular views as a matter of principle.

Gloriya Nayler is “one of the first African American women writers who has studied both her American ancestors and the European tradition,” she “consciously draws on Western sources even as her writings reflect the complexity of the African American female experience” (NA 2543). Her reading of Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, inspired her writing. Her first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, chronicled the lives of seven very different women living in the African American community. The success of the novel immediately made her a prominent figure among the African American women writers. The novel won the American Book Award. Naylor’s third novel *Mama Day* (1988) was her first effort to explore the experiences of the African Americans in the South. It rephrased “the existence of a three-hundred-year-old African American folk tradition.” This novel was a culmination of her concern with the loss of identity and heritage suffered by the contemporary urban African-Americans.

By the late 1970s, many African American women entered into the mainstream white universities, and found the absence of their histories, writers, and theories. In such a situation, the African American scholars “began to excavate a long-forgotten black women’s history and literature to read and teach postcolonial activism of writers such as Bessie Head, and Maryse Conde” (NA 2017). Rita Dove, the second Pulitzer Prize winner, the Poet Laureate, and a Presidential Scholar, has contributed to the history of African American literature with her creative and artistic talents. Dove was born in Akron, Ohio, on August 28, 1952, to Elvira Elizabeth Hord and Ray A. Dove, who broke the race barrier, the first black chemist at the Good Year Tyre & Rubber Company, the only industry in the city. He positively oriented his daughter with his sense of science; her mother, a home maker, taught her the art of storytelling.
In 1970, Dove was accepted by the White House as a Presidential Scholar and was recognized as one of the hundred best high school students in the United States. She then attended the Miami University in Ohio, and then went overseas to attend the University at Tuebingen in West Germany on a Scholarship from 1974 to 1975. In 1977, she was offered a tenure as a track assistant professor at the Florida State University. Dove married the German born writer Fred Viebahn in 1979, fellow student at the Iowa Writers’ workshop. She has a daughter, named, Aviva Chantal Tamu Dove Viebahn. She joined Fred Viebahn at the Oberlin College in Ohio where she finished her first collection of poetry *The Yellow House on the Corner* (1980). In 1981, Dove accepted a tenure as a track Assistant Professor for creative writing at the Arizona State University in Tempe. When Dove was 34 she received the Pulitzer Prize for *Thomas and Beulah*, in 1987, a seminal book about her grandparents’ history. She has fulfilled her dream of creating a history of her family members as part of African American history and tradition.

In 1988 the Rockefeller Foundation Residency at Bellagio gave Dove an opportunity to go to Europe (Yugoslavia, Germany, Italy) and to a 1987 International poetry festival in Mexico city (*Mother Love Poems*). She has been working on the faculty of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville since 1989, holding a chair as Commonwealth Professor of English. She enjoys playing the viola da gamba, a seventh century string instrument related to cello, and her classical voice training. As a presidential scholar with her Fulbright scholarship she had a chance to enter into the mainstream university. She channelizes her creativity in her works. Her scholarship has got widened with her teaching opportunities. Her poetry collections have earned her international regard. She is the sole winner of the Lavan Younger Poets Award, the Renaissance Forum Award in the Arts and Humanities, the Sara Lee Front Runner Award, and the Barness and
Nobel Writers for Writers Award, the John Frederick Nims Translation Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Pulitzer Prize for her *Thomas and Beulah*. Dove has got various positions in the *Callaloo* and the *Tri Quarterly*; commissioner for the Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture in New York.

From 1994 to 2000 she was a senator (member of the governing board) of the national academic honor society Phi Beta Kappa, and she is currently a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Besides her Pulitzer Prize, she has received numerous literary and academic honors, among them 22 honorary doctorates, the 1996 National Humanities Medal, the 3rd Annual Heinz Award in the Arts and Humanities in 1997, and most recently, in 2006 the Commonwealth Award of Distinguished Service in Literature, the 2008 Library of Virginia Lifetime Achievement Award, the 2009 Fulbright Lifetime Achievement Medal and the 2009 Premio Capri (Italy).

Dove as a young poet became the poet laureate of the United States of America from 1993 to 1995. When Dove took her degree in the mainstream university, all the artistic battles had been fought. At present, Dove is the voice of the African American people with her poetic vision of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. When she was appointed poet laureate in 1993, Dove was forty years old, the youngest poet ever to be elected to that honorary position. She was also the first poet laureate to see appointment as a mandate to generate public interest in the literary arts. Dove has been influenced by writers like Paul Laurence Dunbar, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Gwendolyn Brooks, Martin Luther King, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker, the African American literary giants. Dove has got influences from the best collections of books in her youth. Her choice of books found no discrimination at all. She has read stories from Shakespeare to Aesop’s fables in her home-library. Her literary
commitment has started early with her accomplished academic success at the high school level. She was brought up in a loving, supportive, and protected environment which gave her a lot of freedom to traverse and explore the literary world. In the words of the American critic Pat Righelato, Dove has “stepped through doorways, tested herself, and explored what is beyond as an international poet at home in symposia in Berlin, Brazil, Israel, and South Africa, a much-traveled cosmopolitan figure welcomed and admired in many countries” (Righelato, *Understanding* 1).

Dove certainly follows the literary traditions of the pioneer writers, giving importance to conventional writings and at the same time, she stands distinctively on a pinnacle to celebrate her eminence and originality away from contemporaries and predecessors. Dove is rooted in the black race, African American origins and African culture. In portraying the history of African American Literature in her works, she has played a very significant role. Dove “is a different kind of youth” as prophesied by W.E.B. Du Bois in *Criteria of Negro Art*.

We black folk may help for we have within us as a race new stirrings, stirrings of the beginning of a new appreciation of joy, of a new desire to create, of a new will to be; as though in this morning of group life we had awakened from some sleep that at once dimly mourns the past and dreams a splendid future; and there has come the conviction that the youth that is here today, the Negro youth, is a different kind of youth, because in some new way it bears this mighty prophecy on its breast, determination for all mankind. (qtd in NA 982)

Dove offers a vast scope for research with her variegated themes and genres. The commendable contributions of Dove in a variety of genres such as poetry, prose, drama, short story, novel, and musical albums show her multifaceted talents in literature. Her writing “is the sheer musicality of
her language, which, by turns, wails like a jazz riff, roars like a gospel choir, and simmers with a classical elegance” (200) says Steven Ratiner.

Dove has authored seven major collections of poetry namely: *The Yellow House on the Corner* (1980), *Museum* (1983), *Thomas and Beulah* (1986), *Mother Love* (1995), *Grace Notes* (1989), *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* (1999), and *American Smooth: poems* (2004). Dove has published *Selected Poems* (1993) covering all the three major volumes: *The Yellow House on the Corner* (1980), *Museum* and (1983), *Thomas and Beulah* (1986). The first collection of poetry *The Yellow House on the Corner* deals with slavery and freedom. The “house” is in the corner of the street referring to a turning point, and her choice of the colour “yellow” signifies the cultural integration of cosmopolitanism and the interrelation of ethnical influences. “The Yellow House” is not merely a symbol: it also refers to the detached house from the rest due to its oddity. So a corner has a number of connotations including the idea of crossroads, identity choices, and a welcome change too. Dove has introduced her universal themes of mainstream integration which allowed her to avoid being “cubbyhole” as a black poet by part of her audience. *The Yellow House on the Corner* points out, in the poem ‘Ö’, how the finding of a perfect word can allow a writer to “start out with one thing, end / up with another, and nothing’s / like it used to be, not even the future.” The poems in that volume begin with the reference to the author’s childhood neighbourhood in the industrial city of Akron, but reaches out to Countries as far away as Sweden, Germany, Tunisia, and encompasses diverse literature, music, geometry, and the American South where Dove encounters her enslaved ancestors—a meeting that helps to shape her identity but does not limit the vision of her work.

Dove’s second book, *Museum* reveals her most cosmopolitan outlook. Her experience in Germany, her symbolic colour representation, and her recalling of her childhood, occupy a lot of
space in it. *Museum* formulates a larger world foundation, as implied by the museum of the world, history, and culture. This collection focuses on her “key aesthetic features of the "new black aesthetic”” which is to expose her deviation from the black arts movement. It has two important “intertwined concepts, universality and personal experience,” (Pereira *Rita* 75) as it involves both African American literature and writers. And *Museum* further expounds the African American people’s lives, and their adventures.

The third volume *Thomas and Beulah* (1986), the Pulitzer Prize winning double sequence, is a lyrical narrative about her grandparents and it throws light on the history of the African American past. The first section, “Mandolin,” focuses on the poetic experiences of Thomas, who is always haunted by the death of his friend Lem. The second section, “Canary in Bloom” focuses on the dreams and expectations of Beulah from her childhood to marriage. *Thomas and Beulah* tells the story of a very ordinary couple of a minority family, living with their struggles and social segregation. Historical events like the Great Depression, the Black Migration from the rural south to the Industrial North, the Civil Rights Marches of the 1960s, and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy are interconnected as Dove narrates the life history of Thomas and Beulah. This poetry collection reads like a novel with creative autonomy to highlight the history of the African American people. *Thomas and Beulah* also turns over as a musical African American poetic tradition. Dove has a desire to transcend existential boundaries and corporeal restrictions through her *Thomas and Beulah*, which is the essence of the African American dream.

*Grace Notes* deals with the black experience in America and includes a remarkable section on words (“Grace Notes”) and the possibilities of language and moves from “the personal into archetype,” and Mother Love “moves from myth into personal” (Pereira, Rita 117). The
poems in Grace Notes are largely autobiographical. In this collection Dove brings the middle-class Black expression with originality. Dove is determined to probe the ordinary language of the black working class people. In Grace Notes, her roles as a mother, daughter, sister and wife are perfectly intertwined. Her portrayal of the modern black women with “invisible wings” and “the faith to step into blue” is a remarkable achievement. She has never allowed any of “these roles substitute for individual consciousness and imaginative exploration.” According to Judith Kitchen, Dove has created “such a fine cage—golden and filigree” which marks the extremities of our vivid mental image to provide us with “freedom of imagination, the possibility of soaring beyond the bars” (70-71).

_Mother Love_ comments on nomadism, blending of the personal with the mythic, Persephone’s homelessness, and breaking away from home and family. Altogether Mother Love is a brief fusion of the European classical mythology and contemporary African American literature. This collection gives the bondage between the mother and the daughter. Demeter, the goddess of the crops and harvest, had a daughter, Persephone, who was abducted by Hades, the god of the underworld, while she was gathering wild flowers. There is a metamorphosis I of the character, a complete change of physical form, a striking change in appearance, character or circumstances, and the marked and rapid transformation in full form. There is a complete change in the tone and voice of the writer too from the original myth and the intensity of the writer which may be termed as remythologising history in terms of content and form with the same theme. Dove creates a new sense of feminine identification in Mother Love. There is a path to forgiveness as the poems proceed in the final part. There is a sense of maturity as her themes are symbolic of spiritual endurance.
On the Bus with Rosa Parks discusses the determination of the common people’s participation in the Civil Rights Movement. This is her seventh book of verse, where she places the political history. This collection explores a woman’s search for self-knowledge and fulfillment in her search for freedom. And Dove has interwoven poetic reflections on events leading up to Rosa Parks’ historic act of 1955. On the Bus with Rosa Parks portrays Rosa Parks, the common figure rising to be a historic figure.

Her recent collection American Smooth (2004) gives the details about ballroom dancing. In this volume, Dove appears to have accorded the musicality derived from her musical background with a fresh sense of movement and rhythm within the poems that owes something to her developed interest and participation in dancing. As the definition for the book’s title suggests, there is a great attention to imitating motion that mirrors ‘improvisation’ (gives space for spontaneity) and allows individual expression. There is an expansion of her humanism in her poetry collections. Dove tries to resurrect the peace and beauty of the conducive past life through her verse collections. American Smooth demonstrates inspirational and adventurous endeavors with ground-breaking technique as well as a broadening historic measure that has altered Dove’s genre in the past with distinction. Her world of poetry exists in graceful movements with an elegant sense of purpose, changing even the ordinary into an extra-ordinary theme. There are a number of poems that make us experience her world of ecstasies. These experiences central to the life of Dove can be captured in her rhythm, mood, and in the gliding synchronizing movements.

The Darker Face of the Earth, her first full-length play, is an oedipal tragedy of interracial love set on a plantation in the antebellum period, highlighting slavery and freedom. The play has been read on Broadway, and has had full-stage productions at The Kennedy Center,
the National Theatre in London, and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, among others. Though it is about the mother and son relation on the surface level, it focuses mainly on how a young African American faces the controversies of the white world. It is the story of his experience as a slave at the hands of the white people. Dove herself talks of this in her *Poet’s World*: “It’s voyage back into the darker phase of slave history where—despite close human contact the alienation between oppression and oppressed reaches cosmic dimensions” (15-16). Augustus’s life remains one of commitment and loneliness due to his slave birth. There is a lost love and depression in his life. The play takes the problem of the inability of succeeding generations of Africans to respond to the tragedy of Hector. The story derives its significance from the complex notions of justice and responsibility with a conflict between ethics and duty.

“A Presidential Scholar” probes the day-to-day experience of African American women with an insight into their struggle against racism and their resistance to oppression through their educational empowerment. Rita Dove’s collection of short fiction *The Fifth Sunday* was published in 1985. “Fifth Sunday” is also the title of the lead story and refers to those occasional months where there are five Sundays. In the church which Dove attended, the “fifth Sunday” was youth Sunday, and the entire service except the sermon was conducted with the church youth. There is the sense of a fifth Sunday as something special which will occur very rarely. The short story collection was the initial attempt to write the novel *Through the Ivory Gate*. Dove considers herself only as “a writer.” She says in one of her interviews with William Walsh: “I am neither a poet who has tasted the financial fruits of fiction and abandoned poetry, nor am I a poet who has toyed with fiction … I would like the genres to embrace each other, rather than be exclusive” (143).
Dove’s first novel *Through the Ivory Gate* resolves her cosmopolitan stand to gain equal power with the white writers both intellectually and physically. It is a tale of a young African American woman’s growing up, learning to use her varied artistic abilities despite obstacles, and beginning her career. Virginia King, a gifted musician, a devoted teacher, an artist, and a puppeteer, is the central character of this novel. Dove has created a heroine who is educated and talented. Her memories are recollected as she works in an elementary school in her home town of Akron, Ohio. Virginia is a good scholar, and a Cellist. “The book aims to present the richness of a life and its connections to family and friends, culture, place, seasons and self” (Ryman, *The New* 12). Dove incorporates the heroine’s childhood memories in *Through the Ivory Gate*. Dove’s aesthetic signification flourishes in each of her contribution emphasizing specific themes to tell her message. *Through the Ivory Gate* offers eloquent proof that she is a gifted narrator capable of twining a highly understandable narration.

The black woman intellectuals and activists battled against racism, slavery, discrimination, black identity, sexual oppression and economic hardships. Many writers have tried to claim their own history and literature to show their identity to the world. Dove, a proficient artist, has created a new trend to carry on her grandparents’ identity (i.e., the African American identity) in the history of the United States and their relation to history and historical events of their time with the broader view that even ordinary people can be connected to literature. It is the history of the marginalized but it is the history of the universe and it is the subject of any marginalized literature.

Historical elements bring out the small truths of life with historical facts. Dove proclaims that even the ordinary person can be connected to the universe by his/her remarkable achievements. Her intellectual thoughts are woven together as a matrix to bring out the truth of
the world. She gives space to discussion of social justice. Dove stands in the higher order to promote positive examples of accomplishment through her works.

W.E.B. Du Bois in “The Souls of Black Folk” brings out the “new vision” of the African Americans, “to replace the dream of political power-a powerful movement, the rise of another ideal to guide the unguided, another pillar of fire by night after a clouded day” (1903). And he adds:

   It was the ideal of “book-learning”; the curiosity, born of compulsory ignorance to know and test the power of the cabalistic letters of the white man, the longing to know. Here at last seemed to have been discovered the mountain path to Canaan; longer than the highway of Emancipation and law, steep and rugged, but straight, leading to heights high enough to overlook life. (1903)

Dove has selected the “steep and rugged” path which leads to Canaan, the right path to lead to the knowledge of her roots and identity. Dove came through the “steep and rugged” path successfully.

Barbara Smith highlights the talents of black women “who constitute an identifiable literary tradition” and they “manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political social and economic experience they have been obliged to share.” They have “rich coalescing of form and content” to take “their writing far beyond the confines of white/male literary structures” (NA 2307). To strengthen one’s own tradition, one must think in terms of one’s own identity. She contributes the content from the African American historical past blending with her hi[story], and the European forms blending with Western forms like sonnets. Dove would like to evolve her own tradition which alone would guarantee protecting her roots. Dove writes what is real within the black community to throw
light on their life to the world for investigating various solutions to the African American’s race and gender oppression and class exploitation. Dove is the quintessential scholar who has played a major role in the revival of African American literature. Like Countee Cullen whose mission was to liberate black American poetry from the constraints of the past and to spring up a real literary tradition, Dove has liberated black poetry from black ‘separatism’ and has developed a strong African American literary tradition.

Dove is an artist who weaves her African-American experience into a broader perspective of international culture moving beyond the black aesthetic of the Harlem Renaissance and has her identity as a “New Black Aesthetic” writer. Ekaterini Georgoudaki in “Rita Dove: Crossing Boundaries” states that Thomas’s mandolin playing “preserves and conveys” to the future African American people “their rich cultural heritage and the communal values which many of them lost when they migrated from the rural south to the industrial north. The poet inherits both her grandmother’s transforming imagination and her grandfather’s storytelling ability” (URL). As a poet, Dove is both a traditionalist and an iconoclast in terms of her themes and forms. Dove has ushered in a revolution through her poetry focusing on the new racism, and her representation as a cultural mulatto too.

The present study *Tradition and the Individual Talent in the works of Rita Dove* has been undertaken to delve deep into the creative world of Dove and present a comprehensive assessment of her works using the critical tool of the “Black Aesthetic” to study the impact of African American tradition and “the New Black Aesthetic” to assess her original contributions. Though Dove is an African American writer, keeping her traditional approaches in her works, she celebrates her artistic freedom and individual creativity. The title “Tradition and the Individual Talent” is from T.S. Eliot’s famous work *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. 
According to T.S. Eliot, the most individual part of the poet’s work is influenced by the writers of the past, since the greatest themes of the tradition and the literary curiosities of old times attract the present age. In *Tradition and the Individual Talent* T.S. Eliot agrees that the influence of the tradition is different from imitation. Tradition can’t “be inherited” but one has to “obtain with great labour.” It involves “the historical sense” to perceive the “pastness of the past but of its presence.” Dove is such a writer who perceives the ‘pastness’ of the past and the greatness of its ‘presence’ in her works. The historical sense brings the “timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional” (Eliot 146). So it is this historic sense which makes Dove a traditional writer.

Dove has followed the roots of her ancestors but shines as an individual star with her different conceptualization and expressions of life. Dove possesses both the “timeless” and the “temporal sense” to reflect her African American tradition at the same time with her unique approach of combining Western forms. In her treatment of themes she has been called a “New Black Aesthetic” writer by Trey Ellis, in his controversial article “The New Black Aesthetic” of 1989. Though Dove has got her rootedness in African American literary tradition, she hasn’t ever consciously exhibited her realization of colour or race in many of her poems. Dove’s approach is not to hide her black identity, the pride of her being, but to ensure her rich literary heritage which she finds, being on par with other American writers, with her poetical excellence. She crosses the narrow boundaries of black ideology as an African American writer. Her handling of themes announces her cosmopolitanism, universalism, and her innovative techniques in her use of forms.

Rita Dove’s place as a talented writer is unassailable. Her contribution to African American literature is manifold. Dove is the first African American writer to recognize the importance of tradition with her “New Black Aesthetic” approach. Dove has acquired the
knowledge of the past to realize the importance of her tradition. This awareness sharpened the poetic sensibilities of Dove to contribute a new identity to the African American literary tradition. T.S. Eliot’s concept of tradition is identified in Dove’s works since Dove has got her influence from the past and her present works alter and modify the past. The past channelizes the present, and is itself altered and adapted by the present. According to Eliot, a poet’s duty is to acquire, the knowledge of the past to the best of his ability. Such awareness sharpens poetic sensibility and is indispensable for poetic creation. Dove’s poetic sensibility and her awareness of tradition make her an individual writer. Dove has also contributed to her African American tradition: (i) her New Black Aesthetic tradition, (ii) her integration into the mainstream, and (iii) her non-racial themes in her works as a paradigm shift in African American writings. She becomes a unique artist with her lyrical rendering in the free verse pattern. Her blending of the African American idiom with Western music is a master execution in poetry, especially in *American Smooth*.

The whole research highlights how the African American tradition and the unique “New Black Aesthetic” get manifested or inextricably infused in Dove’s works. Dove did not have political or artistic battles to be won since her pioneers had done it for her. She appreciates the strength of black speech as essential to the American way. Dove as a black poet seems to have taken the ideas of the white literary world and to interpret them in the culture of the black people. Dove is noted for her great earnestness in reading the works of the canonical writers. Through her continuous self-sacrifice, she has achieved her evolution from an ordinary writer into an individual writer. She has felt the need for the traditional associations in her existence and contributed. She achieved great literary reputation and proved herself a great intellect, a great thinker, and a tradition maker.
Arnold Rampersad observes that Dove’s “racial indignation” is “more discreet” because “indignation tends to destroy art” and she “apparently believes, especially black art; a confrontation with racism appears to open the world but often only opens a void that gapes deceitfully between the poet and her possession of the wide world” (Rampersad 56). Rampersad talks about the real dream of Dove in his “The Poems of Rita Dove” saying that “Dove wishes nothing less than possession of [the] wide world; she longs for the complete freedom of her imagination” (56). Dove proclaims to the world her acceptance of her black identity through the character Virginia in her fiction. Her acceptance of her race is the main reason for her becoming the poet laureate of the United States at a very young age. When she was studying at the University of Tubingen with her Fulbright scholarship, she was in a very comfortable position and she confessed:

I realized that during my rather sheltered college years at Miami University, in the rural setting of southwestern Ohio, I had filled the role of the striving, gifted Black student extremely well, but without much concern for the outside world. And now, suddenly, in Germany I was on display in a strange environment where some people pointed with fingers at me and others pitied me a symbol for centuries of brutality and injustice against Blacks. So I felt simultaneously alienated both from my home country and from the place I was in. On the other hand … serious travel can heighten the awareness a writer needs to see many sides of a story. (Taleb-khyar 349)

According to Dove, the past African American writers were clinging to racism and ‘blackness’ which proved their incompetency to show their individual talents. But the contemporary writers are looking forward to newness and creativity in their works apart from ‘blackness.’ Dove has
written on a variety of subjects. Her themes are numerous and are derived from the American themes of individualism, democracy, love, romance, tour, family problems, freedom, nature, forces of evil, death, culture and beliefs. Her works, with clear thoughts and sense of beauty in her language, stand the test of time and space. Her phrasing is simple but subtle. After Gwendolyn Brooks, Dove, the multifaceted scholar, is recognized as a great poet with a world view. Dove’s greatness can be compared with the declaration of E. Johnson in *Euphemism, Understatement, and the Passive Voice: A Genealogy of Afro-American Poetry*:

> A people may become great through many means, but there is only one measure by which its greatness is recognized and acknowledged. The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produce great literature and art. No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior. (205)

Dove also contributed to the greatness of her African American tradition. She has used her pen to uplift her race as well as her tradition. She can be compared with any writer who belongs to mainstream American culture. She excels in all her creative output, including her musical variety. The blues, mingling with her works, give rhythm to her works. In the words of Baker, Dove’s “signal expressive achievement of blues” sets in the “translation of technological innovativeness, unsettling demographic fluidity, and boundless frontier energy into expression which attracted avid interest from the American masses” (*NA 2238*).

> Dove, a poet laureate, a teacher, novelist, essayist, critic, dancer, and a blues singer, speaks directly to the people through her lyrics. Art and literature reflect not only the vital components of the ideal society but also the darker side of it. Her works also reflect the vital
elements of human society as well as the fraudulent, critical, and intrinsic set of policies. In the words of Sandi Russell, Dove is the “subtle and penetrating new voice” and a writer “with a superb eye for the unexpected and unexplored in black life … Ms. Dove brings her craft and clear-sightedness is ‘as wide as the world is wide.’ Merging history with the personal, Rita Dove’s economic poetic style, shows the makings of great artistry” (Russell 170).

Dove’s approach is different from others. She sees things with a critical mind. She strengthens this view in one of her interviews with Stan Sanvel Rubin: “there is nothing new under the sun, but it’s the way you see it. For me, as a poet, language becomes an integral part of that perception. The way one sees it …” (170). Dove is a very good observer of all the things which happen around her. Her photographic vision scans all the minute details and they are pasted in her works as if alive. Her narrative technique is accomplished with her logical objectivity. She is known for her “double vision” and she would like to check the difference between ‘perceptions’ and ‘truth’ (Russell 238). As a controlled and trained writer, “Dove shuns sentimentality and keeps a cool eye when it comes to racial or political stances. Wary of the trap many black writers find themselves in, she continues to keep all options open. Hers is an innovative voice that speaks with sonority, not stridence” (Russell 173).

Poetry is highly effectual. It is the source of learning and scholarship. Through their poetry, the writers communicate their happiness, aspirations, hopes, aims, pains, and other emotions. Poetry can heal the wounds in both emotional and physical bodies. Modern African American poetry deals with black life, their set up in social, political, cultural, economical, and intellectual backgrounds. The African American people have a definite and deliberate social purpose for the accomplishment of their African American literature. There has been technological and scientific development in the modern set up and America is the world power at
its zenith. At this juncture, many African American poets have used poetry as their weapon to fight with the unwritten laws of slavery and inhuman discrimination with new perspectives.

Dove’s “poetical concerns—magic of words, the polyphony of voices, and an artistic third space growing out of a revised tradition are as finely tuned in” (Steffen 130) all her poetry collections, especially in Mother Love, and Thomas and Beulah with musicality. Dove is a unique poet having enjoyed a reputation as a poet laureate of the United States of America. She is the supreme master of her style. Her works are thematically vibrant, stylistically aesthetic, and structurally vivacious. She brings a harmonious blending of music and rhythm in her works. Music is the melody which can fill us with solemn beauty. In Dove’s own words, the writers “were real people and how it was possible to write down a poem or story in the intimate sphere of one’s own room and then share it with the world” (SP xxi). This is her epiphany to analyze how the private thoughts of the writers become public art. Hence Dove’s private thoughts become ephemeral and her public art becomes immortal. She delivers her message differently in each work of art beyond African American perspectives.

Today, only three book-length studies of Dove’s works have been undertaken: Therese Steffen’s Crossing Color: Transcultural Space and Place in Rita Dove’s Poetry, Fiction, and Drama (2002), Malin Pereira’a Rita Dove’s Cosmopolitanism (2003), and Pat Righelato’s Understanding Rita Dove (2006). Therese Steffen’s Crossing Color concentrates on “Rita Dove’s Macro-Poetics of Space,” “Rita Dove’s Micro-Poetics of Space,” Movements of Marriage,” “Transcultural Space, Place, and Movement in the Bildungs- and Kunstlerroman,” “Myth’s Remakes,” and “The Voyage Out: On the Bus with Rosa Parks.” This is the first full length critical study offering a comprehensive biographic and literary portrait of Dove and her work in the mainstream of American poetry. Therese Steffen validates the universality of Dove’s
works since Dove crosses cultures, races, geography, nationalities, color, gender, boundaries, and literary genres. She analyzes the linguistic features through which Dove determines her transcultural spaces and places. She makes a clear point how Dove travels through Italian Renaissance, Germanic romanticism, ancient Greece, ancient China, and Modern America to “move unfettered across boundaries and all facets of world culture” and “integrates these elements and fashions them into new coherence, healing the rifts and shifts in our own divisive culture, weaving the fragments into a fabric with a pattern, texture, and voice of her own” (Steffen 164-65).

Malin Pereira’s *Rita Dove’s Cosmopolitanism* (2003) concentrates on “Negotiating Blackness: Dove and the African and American Poetic Tradition,” “Miscegenation, the Primal Scene, and the Incest Motif in Dove’s Work,” “Introducing the Cultural Mulatto in *The Yellow House on the Corner*,” “Museum and Cosmopolitanism,” *Thomas and Beulah: Starting at the “Source” of the Blues Nomad,* and “The Personal Become Myth: *Grace Notes* and *Mother Love.*” This is the first full length critical study taken up by the American Scholar Malin Pereira. Pereira establishes on the literary development of Dove in all her works, combining “Dove’s self-fashioned identity, both personal and poetic, challenges the black essentialism of the black arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s” (Fwd 1). Pereira highlights Dove’s “New Black Aesthetic” views and her cultural mulatto identity within the African American literary tradition without fear or shame. The themes of incest, miscegenation, nomadism, the blues, and patriarchal oppression have been discussed by Pereira. Pereira moves from Dove’s racial specificity to the unraced universal or cosmopolitan artist as Dove “embraces the poetic truth of her complicated and cosmopolitan experience” (Pereira, *Rita* 157).
The next critic Pat Righelato teaches in the School of English and American Literature at the University of Reading. She has written *Understanding Rita Dove* to get more literary experiences in/out of her poetry, themes, use of language, and an adequate understanding of how contemporary writers excel. Pat Righelato attempts a detailed analysis of Rita Dove’s thematic concerns and artistic development while bringing the musical sense of form and expression of history that permeate Dove’s works. Sandi Russell’s “Render Me My Song” talks of Dove’s merging of American history with personal history. A special reading of Ekaterini Georgoudaki’s “Rita Dove: Crossing Boundaries,” Arnold Rampersad’s “The Poems of Rita Dove,” in which how Arnold explored Dove’s humanist vision and her poetic innovation in exploring difference. Stein examines Dove’s historical diversity, global, cross-cultural, and universal themes. Mc Dowell explores her mythic synthesis.

Helen Vendler’s “Rita Dove: Identity Markers” is taken as an aid to support the arguments in the thesis. In several articles, Helen Vendler explores Dove’s treatment of blackness and poetic reach “beyond blackness.” Vendler examines Dove’s identity as expressed lyrically, yet she also explores Dove’s universalism. *Conversations with Rita Dove* edited by Earl G. Ingersoll gives the relevance of Dove’s experiences in writing her works and the reality in each work. Houston Baker examines how race informs—but is “poetically transformed” through Dove’s poetry. Race, gender, and class are interrogated in Ekaterini Georgoudaki’s study of Dove. Patricia Wallace explores the representation of minority cultures by Dove. Kirkland Jones discusses the role of the vernacular speech in the poetry of Dove. Several critics like Georgoudaki, Rampersad, Stein, Steffen and Vendler explore Dove’s “cross-cultural poetics” of African American experience. Robert McDowell, Peter Ericson, Alison Booth, Stephen Cushman and Lotta Lofgren discussed about Dove’s *Mother Love*. The Researcher
makes use of all these critics to strengthen her views on Dove’s ‘Tradition’ and her ‘Individual Talent.’

A quick survey of the previous research by scholars abroad and in India will bring out the distinct features of the present approach. There are a few scholars who have undertaken their dissertations on Rita Dove’s works. *Backward to your sources, sacred rivers: A transatlantic feminist tradition of mythic revision* by House, Veronica Leigh, from The University of Texas at Austin, highlights the “race theories in contemporary revisions of the Demeter and Persephone myth by Rita Dove” (Proquest URL). The thesis was further developed on “the personal, aesthetic, and political motivations underlying the mythic revisions and locates them within the feminist social and theoretical movements of the second half of the 20th century” (Proquest URL). Another research has been undertaken with the title *A habit of translation: Race and aesthetics in the poetry of Rita Dove, Phillis Wheatley and Melvin B.Tolson* by Diana Victoria, from Boston College, USA, foregrounding racial specificity as a necessary element in the writer’s craft. A comparative study on Dove and Wheatley with the theme of abduction in Greek myth and tragedy is also part of this. Yet another work was done on Rita Dove entitling *Trans-pictives: Image as cognitive medium in African American poetry* by R. Mildred Mickle, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, to specify “figurations of the colors black, white and green, trans-pictives of color demonstrates how people have used color to (mis)shape and displace the figurative and physical human form” (Proquest URL). “Excavating memory: Examining the poetry of Rita Dove” by Susan Martin Bailey, Mississippi State University, focuses on the fragmentation and restoration of memory. Kevin Jess Wetmore Jr. the University of Pittsburgh, worked on the title *Athenian sun in an African sky: African adaptations of Greek tragedy*, centralizing how “Greek tragedy has served as a model for adaptation into
contemporary African theatre” (Proquest URL). Carol Keyes from the university of New Hampshire has done the research on Language’s “bliss of unfolding in and through history, autobiography and myth: The Poetry of Rita Dove” tries out “how Dove’s following the bliss of unfolding enacts exploration of three central themes present throughout all of her books” (Proquest URL).

Dove creates the personal space necessary to conquer and transcend prevalent stereotypes of gender and race that limit expectations and circumscribe future possibilities. Dove would like to provoke human contemplation and reveal the eternal truths intended to elevate the consciousness of the world. The innate talents of the African descendants such as singing, storytelling and dramatic talents were authoritatively announced as the oral literature of the African Americans who settled in America. With the help of those oral narratives writers like Phillis Wheatley broke prejudices of both Europe and America and contributed written literature. This written tradition imbibing features of the oral narratives gets its original forms in the hands of great writers like Paul Laurence Dunbar, Claude Mckay, Zora Neale Hurston, Sterling A. Brown, and Langston Hughes.

Gwendolyn Brooks’s blending of the black idiom in the Western art form gave another new break to create a new tradition of the African Americans. Taking a cue from Gwendolyn Brooks, Rita Dove has also created her newness of combining the black idiom with the Western themes or European themes to claim African American world authorship on par with other world writers. She has slightly deviated from her racial themes to common themes in her black idiom. She has made an eternal record of African American presence at the global level to create a new tradition of African American mulatto tradition (integrating of both culture and tradition) by claiming her rights as a citizen of the United States of America and thereby deviates from the
“Black Aesthetic” to start a “New Black Aesthetic” theory as suggested by Trey Ellis in his article “New Black Aesthetic”.

The main focus of this thesis is to highlight the traditional aspects of Dove’s works with her **history as content** and **spirituals, Blues, and jazz as her forms**, and point out where she deviates as a **New Black Aesthetic** artist in her works to weigh her greatness as an individual writer. It was Trey Ellis who coined the term “New Black Aesthetic” in his article “The New Black Aesthetic” (1989). “The New Black Aesthetic” is a movement more of an ideology than the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. In *Rita Dove’s Cosmopolitanism* Pereira supports the account established by Trey Ellis in his article “‘The New Black Aesthetic.’” Pereira states that “the Afro-modernists were considered as “universalists” by the white critics and as “experiments by the Black Arts Movement poets, whereas the Black Arts Movement poets were called by the white critics as “cultural purists” or “separatists” (Pereira, *Rita* 7).

Dove has woven several strings of African American history in her works which in turn reflects the African tradition of her ancestors. Dove has the ability to create her own history with the mainstream integration as emphasized by T.S. Eliot’s concept of the “historical sense” which makes a writer traditional. Dove smells the air of freedom in writing. Dove is very happy and acknowledges that all the battles have already been fought:

Sometimes I feel like getting down on my knees and saying thank you because these battles have already been fought. And these are not easy battles--between confessionalism and beat poetry and formalism, or whether poetry adheres to gender or not, or whether it adheres to whatever black aesthetics. These discussions have been on the table. We haven’t had to clear the path first before writing. (qtd in Steffen, *Crossing* 8-9)
The present work plunges into Dove’s double perspective: her sense of tradition and her uniqueness or individuality in her works. The researcher has examined thoroughly how Dove’s traditional accumulation of knowledge has led the way to her unique achievements. To arrive at a better understanding of these two different aspects (tradition and her uniqueness), two chapters are allotted to work out the traditional aspects and two chapters focusing on her unique qualities i.e., her “New Black Aesthetic.”

Baker in *The Journey Back* asserts that “collective black action” must be “guided by an exact black historical perspective” and “the spokesman calls attention not to his or his people’s similarity to white Americans, or Englishmen or men in general, but to the distinctive features of black life” (125). The second chapter focuses on Dove’s traditional forms with historical importance and her themes in her seven poetry collections, concentrating more on history as content and the poetical devices of *spirituals, blues,* and *jazz,* as forms. T.S. Eliot claims that a poet’s greatness and individuality lie in his departure from his predecessors. The poet must have an understanding and awareness of the “historical sense” which is the simple formula of the traditional works. If a poet has an aesthetic “ideal order” he can produce innovation and novelty in his creation. So the creation of a new work is recapturing the old order and rearranging it with the new perception. Any work is appreciated that is original and individual (Eliot 143).

Chapter III is devoted to the traditional aspects of Dove in her fiction, short fiction, and verse play. Dove is particular about history for the simple reason that it is her “birthright,” and “genetic makeup.” She is “more receptive to the stories of people who’ve been sidelined by history.” History becomes part of her “heritage” and one of her “themes.” Further she explains her stand on her “aesthetics,” she “had both the opportunity to watch from the sidelines,” and this is the reason for her to enter “into the mainstream and insist upon” her “presence.” Though the
former “is passive stance;” the latter is to be done “actively” (Dungy 1036). Dove continues her quest throughout her work, since history is full of quest. This “historical context” is applied to bring out Rita Dove’s tradition and her rootedness in her fiction, short fiction, and play in her treatment of content and form.

Chapter IV brings out Dove’s individuality as a unique writer and how she is splendidly different from her contemporaries as a cultural mulatto personality in her fiction, short fiction, and plays respectively. Malin Pereira has established the concept of New Black Aesthetic by combining both the terms that “the new black aesthetic is not at all “new.”” He has bridged the gap between the two terms, which “is the gap between acknowledging the anxieties surrounding the idea of cultural amalgamation (which Posnock does) and suppressing such anxieties so they emerge in inflammatory rhetoric (which Ellis does)” (4). Ellis traces the elements of the new black aesthetic artists. All the New Black Aesthetic artists have “changed, crossed, and flouted existing genres according to their own eclectic inspirations” (Ellis 243), and the black aesthetic views of the older writers become a cultural threat to African American culture.

Chapter V highlights Dove’s “cultural mulatto” identity, another new term to be added to the hybrid quality of the culturally mixed African American figures in Through the Ivory Gate, The Darker Face of the Earth, and The Fifth Sunday. A cultural mulatto is “a genetic mulatto” of a “black person of mixed parents who can often get along fine with his white grandparents,” and a cultural mulatto is “educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world. And it is by and large this rapidly growing group of cultural mulattoes that fuels the NBA” (Ellis 235). Dove has ultimately changed the stereotyped term “tragic mulatto” of nineteenth century African American literature to an optimistic hybrid potential in her fiction, play, and in her short fiction. She has purposefully given a creative and autonomous space for the
mulatto identity moving beyond the unfavourable representations of earlier African American works. Dove moves towards individuality with her double consciousness in her novel.

Chapter VI gives the evaluation of Dove in the light of tradition and her uniqueness as an African American writer. In her interview with Helen Vendler, Dove insisted on her desire to become first “a poet,” then also a “black poet” and “a woman poet” (488) and Steffen defends Dove’s “literary freedom” as “the result of the subsequent political and cultural reorientation into what we may casually call a ‘fin-de-siècle’ trend toward mainstream pluricultural national identity after decades of racial oppression” (9).

Today African American literature is enriched with the literary scholarship of both male and female writers. African American literature is a combination of both primitivism and modernism mingling both cultures, mingling tradition with more curiosity and anticipations. The New Millennium is the new dawn of African American female writers. Dove as one of the New Millennium writers, moves ahead of her time, space, public, international, racial, cultural, political, and social boundaries to ingrain her African American dreams of integration into the mainstream society in a deeper sense. Pereira cites the ideas of Ellis that the term cultural mulatto refers to the person who “has had a range and mix of cultural experiences” and the recognition of embracing the “complex cultural milieu” (Pereira, Rita 2) experiences. Ellis groups Dove under the New Black Artists since she has articulated the new black aesthetic metrics. Her black aesthetic sensibilities are reflected with the ideas of Posnock in all her works with the new origin of “cosmopolitanism, as practised and preached in the black intellectual tradition, maintains that culture has no color” (qtd in Pereira, Rita 3) as W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, and James Baldwin show.
As a beacon light of African Americans, Rita Dove has accepted herself and racism with a new outlook and has succeeded in her career as a cultural mulatto. Jones in his *Rita Dove, Dictionary of Literary Biography* features her rich themes:

Rita Dove is not only the stereotypical woman writer, nor is she simply the traditional African American author. She appreciated the aesthetics of race and gender but does not feel the need to raise the color problem for mere color’s sake. Dove writes because she enjoys creating word impressions as she wrestles with significant ideas. She defies the disabling pigeonhole or comfortable niche… Dove sets most of her verse in the past, and she handles nostalgia well. In all of her works, she presents a variety and richness of theme and structure found in fine poetry the word over. (51)

Dove has merged African-American history in her works to reflect the African tradition of her ancestors. All her poetry collections witness the presence of African American history, and African American forms.

The next chapter elaborates on the traditional aspects of Dove and her African American roots in her works. Though she is a cultural mulatto, she is firmly rooted in her African American tradition too. Dove’s creations of her African American history in her works, her handling of African American culture with real examples from her life are dealt with in the following chapter. Dove’s influences from the African American tradition in musical forms such as spirituals, blues, and jazz; and her portrayal of history as content are elaborated.