CHAPTER II

RITA DOVE’S ROOTEDNESS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN TRADITION

Black poets have created their own tradition, rooted in a song fundamentally different from its white counterpart. Modern Black poetry is nourished by the work of earlier Black poets, and draws much of its sustenance from the folk sources which have nurtured the race since slavery. (Marilyn Nelson 466)

Unless creative writers are engaged in the task of writing a fairly thorough history of their tradition and culture in their literary outputs with a distinctive voice, the study of their literature would not create any special impact on the readers. Rita Dove has dealt specifically with history and culture in the form of literature. Her works possess the spontaneity which is a distinctive feature of most of the African American literary creations. Thus ‘spontaneity’ which gives a stamp of originality to a writer’s work becomes a feature of ‘tradition’ in the African American context for all their literary outpourings have always been quite spontaneous. She projects the African American experiences of slavery and the consequences of freedom in her works.

A creative artist does not work for the generation of his or her time. A good writer learns the value of tradition by acquiring the historical sense which enables the writer to feel vividly the times he or she belongs to. A good artist is not willing to lose sight of that timelessness that belongs to creative art as a whole. He/she remembers the timelessness and the temporality of the work and becomes conscious of his/her own contemporaneity. Rita Dove is a traditional writer for in her works she exhibits the influence of the forerunners of the African American literature and her unique contributions have won a special place among the writers of the twentieth century and of the new millennium.
African American “tradition is the process of formal revision” of the writers of the past and “if the black writers read each other, they also revised each other’s texts. Hence they become fluent in the language of tradition” (Gates, *Signifying* 124). And the African American tradition “must be shared patterns of language use” which means that there are “discrete uses of literary language in texts that bear some sort of relation to each other” (Gates *Signifying* xix). Besides, the handling of the specific patterns of language, the shaping of the African American cultural heritage by the historical consideration also constitutes the African American tradition.

Any literary imitation may be a “direct or indirect influence” (qtd in *Comparative Literature* 30). The influence of the Greek masters or the English tradition could never be “quantitatively measured” (30) says Weisstein in his *Comparative Literature*. All writers are mutually interdependent, and “in terms of their mutual interdependence,” the writers “might tentatively and dialectically define influence as unconscious imitation, and imitation as directed influence” (*Comparative* 30). Jablon in Chapter Four of his *Black Metafiction* titled “Revision, Dialogism and Intertextuality” remarks that Herald Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* is the corner stone of contemporary theories of influence and quotes Bloom’s words that all the poets “have an oedipal relationship with their literary predecessors,” (82). Gates also formed a theory of literary ancestry in the line of Bloom and talked of three kinds of influence: “texts that provide models of form, texts that provide models of substance, and the text at hand” (*Signifying* 122).

Gates finds that, African American writers “wear a two-toned Harlequin mask of influence” and they “are related to other black texts primarily in terms of substance or content, whereas they seem to be related to Western texts in terms of form” (*Signifying* 122). Dove has also got influences of African American “texts” in “terms of substance” and “Western texts in terms of form.” Dove has inherited some of the forms and content from her predecessors in her
works. This chapter highlights Dove’s historical presentation as “texts that provide models of substance,” and her musical presentation (the use of work songs, spirituals, gospels, blues, jazz, and rap) as “texts that provide models of form.”

A quick review of the African American writers who used history in their works may help in substantiating the present argument that historical sense makes a writer traditional. Thomas Jefferson in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787) made disparaging remarks about the poems of the first published African American female poet Phillis Wheatley. James Weldon Johnson penned the lyric “Lift Every Voice and Sing” a tribute to black endurance, hope, and religious faith that was later adopted by the NAACP and dubbed “the Negro National Anthem.” Dunbar initiated a tradition of African American elegy. His poems of the late nineteenth century inspire a tradition that thrives even among poets writing today. His poems “Frederick Douglass,” and “Booker T. Washington” were written to mark the passing of the greatest of black leaders of the African American tradition. Claude McKay’s “Harlem Shadows” shows his masterful treatment of racial issues which occurred in the summer of 1919.

A survey of African American history reveals the monumental achievements of some of the writers whose relentless effort to carve a niche for themselves in the midst of all the controversies, indeed led to the birth of what is called the African American literary tradition. Among the numerous stars, the twin masters Langston Hughes and Sterling A. Brown did pave way for the birth of a new form of poetry allowing the influence of the musical forms such as the work songs, field hollers, blues and jazz. Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, and other black poets of the Harlem period, express great concern about race in America. Countee Cullen’s “Yet Do I Marvel” reveals his anger and frustration at the plight of talented and sensitive black poets like
him who are suppressed by the white majority: “What awful brain compels His awful hand / Yet do I marvel at this curious thing: / TO make a poet black, and bid him sing!” (NA 1305).

Hughes, more than any other black poet or writer, recorded faithfully the nuances of black life and its frustrations during the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes’s use of the blues idiom is a key feature in the history of African American poetry’s intermingling of folk and popular culture. The poem “The Weary Blues” is a good example of Hughes’ blues: “Down on Lenox Avenue the other night / By the pale dull pallar of an old gas light / He did a lazy sway…. / He did a lazy sway…. (NA 1257). Gwendolyn Brooks turned her taste toward free verse and the sonnet form which were considered abandoned forms and inappropriate in the modern times. She retained, however, her interest in the ballad and its musicality and accessibility. She reviewed history through her poem “Malcolm X,” “a man of powerful intellectual abilities,” who “became legendary, and he was revered by African Americans who believed that their destiny in America depended largely on a profound education in and commitment to the roots of their culture” (NA 1816). Nikki Giovanni’s first published volumes talked about the assassinations of Martin Luther king, Jr., Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, and Robert Kennedy as a way of re-viewing history in her poetry. Her poem “Nikki-Rosa” expressed her reminiscence of her childhood in a close-knit African American home. Her works have the awareness of the Black Aesthetic claim that poetry cannot be divorced from music in the African American tradition.

African American literature has powerful woman poets like Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, and Maya Angelou. The tradition created by these writers must be in motion to continue the journey with new energy and progression. Dove is the youngest poet born late to join this established group in the mid 1970s. Dove being the fresh source of energy and vibrancy in the present age helps the school to be active with more validity.
with her publications of poetry. Dove is a substantial modern individual with leadership quality to prove her literary talents to the world. Her high public acclaim gives a permanent place not only in African American but also American literature which is to prove her as a recognized traditional poet.

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). When Dove has entered the mainstream university as college student, she has witnessed the absence of African American history, culture, and African American identity which were excluded from the American history. Hence, Dove’s works thematically blended African American history, culture, psychodynamics of African American family life, and their quest for identity.

Baker in “Sightings: Black Historical Consciousness and the New Harbors of the Fifties” says that the African American writers “travel all the way back to origins and record their insights in distinctive forms designed for a black audience” (Baker, *The Journey* 53). Dove has recorded her grandparents’ history (*Thomas and Beulah*) in a lyrical form to represent her black tradition and culture to reach the black audience. “Dove is attentive to the potential of combining oral and written expression: in the very incongruity there is poetry to be made. In such poems, the poet enlarges her own historical consciousness and constructs a method of psychological enquiry that she was to elaborate…” (24) states Pat Righelato in *Understanding Rita Dove*.

Dove has woven several strands of African American history in her works which in turn reflects the tradition of her ancestors. In order to announce to the world that the African Americans have their strongest traditional African American history, Dove has penned her
epoch-making poetry collection *Thomas and Beulah*. In one of her interviews with Ratiner, Dove asserts that ordinary people can’t be represented in history because the story of heroes and important personalities occupy the greater part of history. But Dove was quite intent on representing her identity (African American ordinary people’s identity) in history. So she has connected her grandparents’ history as the mainstream literary heroes and heroines. Her explanation is clear when she says: “that ordinary people are not represented in history, that history gives you the tale of heroes, basically … cultural memory is remarkably short in our day and age because communities are disintegrating, so there is no oral or communal sense of carrying on a tradition” (Ratiner 16). Dove has created a new trend to perpetuate her grandparents’ identity in the history of the United States and their relation to history and other historical events of their time with the broader view that even ordinary people have a rightful place in literature for every ordinary African American has fought for the freedom of the race, democracy and civil rights.


According to Baker, black tradition “is an extraordinary self-reflexive tradition, a tradition exceptionally conscious of its history and of the simultaneity of its canonical texts,
which tend to be taken as verbal models of the Afro-American social condition, to be revised’” (Baker, *Signifying 4*). Dove’s historical representation is analyzed with four different perspectives (“text that provide models of substance”): (i) inclusion of her **personal history** (Dove uses her grandparent’s personal life to record as history with her poetic fervor), (ii) **re-viewing history** through historical figures and incidents, (iii) **political history** (history which was responsible for the Civil Rights Movement and racial freedom) with social relevance, and (iv) **re-mythologising** history (blending ancient myth and African American themes). The African American experience is fine tuned beautifully in Dove’s Pulitzer Prize winning *Thomas and Beulah*, the **personal history** of her grandparents’ experiences.

Dove suggests reading her poetic work in sequence as “these poems tell two sides of a story and are meant to be read in sequence.” *Thomas and Beulah* is highly appreciated for its cultural and historical aspects. It is admired by a broad range of readers and scholars. Dove “achieves a no tragic perspective by calling on the traditions of black expression that have long helped African Americans deal with suffering and injustice” (Keller 123). Historical events like the Black Migration from the rural south to the Industrial North (“The Event” SP 141), the Civil Rights Marches of the 1960s (“Wingfoot Lake” SP 198), the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and other significant incidents are woven with the life history of Thomas and Beulah. She has exercised her creativity to introduce her tradition and to give the world more correct ideas of the black people. *Thomas and Beulah* moves from (i) personal to the Universal (ii) Universal to the social (iii) social to the racial and (iv) racial to the particular (women).

The personal history of Dove’s grandparents is presented in *Thomas and Beulah*, which tells the story of a very ordinary couple of a minority family, living with their struggles and social segregation. The first section, “Mandolin,” with twenty-three poems, describes the life of
Thomas, and his experiences as a marginalized individual, and how the significant events interconnect with an illuminating history. All the incidents projected are those that have taken place between 1900 and 1969 around Akron, Ohio, her native topographic point. Even a casual reader is sure to locate the three important points of focus which are; firstly the couples’ sense of identity, secondly their sense of individuality, and thirdly their cultural constraints to overcome their racial problems in their own place.

Though the whole volume of *Thomas and Beulah* presents Dove’s personal encountering with her grandmother, some of the poems are specifically personal. The very first poem “The Event” recollects the African American dream of going to the industrial North in pursuit of getting their livelihood or some new start in life. The industrial North allured the peasant folks who hoped to find a miraculous change in their style of living. Some people got their life settled in the North and some had lost their lives without realizing their wishes like Lem, Thomas’s friend who drowned in the river. When developing the historical markings in *Thomas and Beulah*, Steffen senses that Dove makes everyone realize “art is the ultimate home place for the displaced” (109).

In *Thomas and Beulah* personal history intersects with the history of the United States of America. Dove has recorded her grandparents’ life in a narrative sequence which is equal to the slave narrative of African Americans. So this collection can be called “sequential lyric” (Keller 114). Keller is of the view that *Thomas and Beulah* is in the “Episodic” line, and “her approach of this long narrative is in the greater African American cultural traditions such as “innuendo, metaphor, circumlocution, and abbreviated suggestion” (114). The whole piece is packed in a poetic narration. Dove’s narration is distinct and intact. African American history starts with the poem “The Event.” It is the black Exodus from the South to the North which is popularly known
as the ‘Great Migration.’ Dove has scrutinized the couple’s life in Akron, starting with Beulah’s family moving to Akron in 1906; 30,000 workers migrating to Akron in 1916, Thomas’ departure from Tennessee in 1919 for the river boat life, Thomas’s arrival in 1921 in Akron and how the couple got married in December 1924, the birth of the first child Rose in 1926.

Thomas bought a new car for a trip to Tennessee in 1928, the Goodyear-Zeppelin Airdock was built in 1929, which at that time was the largest one in the world without interior support. Thomas lost his car due to the Depression (“Nothing Down”) and his second daughter Agnes was born in 1930. The very next year in 1931, the Airship Akron disaster took place. The third child Liza was born in 1932 (“Under the Viaduct, 1932”), the fourth child in 1935 (Joanna); Thomas got employment at Goodyear Aircraft in war relief work in 1942, and Beulah took a part-time job in Chorlotte’s Dress Shoppe in 1946 which gets described in “The Great Palaces of Versailles”; the final phase ends with Thomas’s first heart attack in 1960, his death in 1963, the March on Washington in 1963, Beulah’s picnic with her daughters in 1964, her sickness in 1966, and her death in 1969.

Dove also evidences how the couple underwent a trauma due to their slave past, longing for freedom, (Beulah’s dream to see China), their double-consciousness (they are black, they are Americans), their repression, dreams, hopes, renunciation, their interpersonal relationship, their individual struggle to overcome disparities, and finally gives the photographic effect in presenting how Thomas and Beulah try to preserve their morality in spite of the personal conflicts and how they carry the value of self-respect and the ability to envision their life.

Forty years of their married life is narrated alongside with references to African American history. Their life is inseparable from that of all the major problems faced by all African Americans primarily the unemployment problem which is underlined carefully by Dove.
in “The Satisfaction Coal Company”; it is here where Thomas begins his part time job as a janitor and continues for eight years from 1934 onwards.

Only very recently have historians begun to explore that entire era in any depth and what impact the great migration, as they call it now, had on not only Southern communities and Northern communities but a host of other things. So much has been done or talked about the uprooting of the black family through slavery, but this was a second uprooting and displacement. It’s the first time that blacks in this country had any chance however stifled, of pursuing “the American dream.”

(Scheneider 116-117)

Thomas’s arrival in 1921 is historically connected with the great migration of the blacks from the South to the Industrial North. Baker writes about the work culture of the Northerners from 1890 to 1920. The migration of 30,000 workers to Akron in 1916 is anchored with the journey of Beulah’s family from Rockmart, Georgia, in 1919 and their restricted job selections, poverty and unsuccessful dream. Their marriage took place in the year 1921 and they went on a trip to Tennessee after four years. Their life reflects not only this particular division of domestics and laborers but also the couple’s varying backgrounds of slave past in Georgia and his free Tennessee traveling.

Everyday experiences become history as time passes on. But only selected and noted figures get their names into history due to their rich contribution to the betterment of society. According to Dove black people also contributed to the betterment of American society, which never got highlighted as they were a segregated lot. Dove is deft in tapping the literary possibilities in the experiences of the mundane reality and by presenting the personal history against the background of socio-political history. She gives permanence to certain historical
events. Ekatirini Georgoudaki aptly brings out Dove’s interest in the “underside of history” in “Rita Dove: Crossing Boundaries.” Thomas left Tennessee for the riverboat life. His friend Lem accompanied him with the musical instrument which Thomas considered his ‘talisman.’ The two friends “were inseparable” (SP 141) but unfortunately, Lem got drowned in the pursuit of picking the “Them’s Chestnuts” (SP 141) on Thomas’ request. Thomas was haunted with the thoughts of his friend’s death throughout his life just as African Americans were obsessed with the dead and lost tradition and culture of their native country.

We see Thomas as a disgusted figure playing Lem’s Mandolin in his memory. The half shell Mandolin reveals his position of a half shell survivor. Again, the Mandolin is used as an image to play a kind of tragic note throughout his life with his sense of guilt and the subsequent emptiness of his life. Thomas found his life miserable, having a guilt feeling and a second class citizenship in a racially segregated country. He continued his distressing journey with the guilt consciousness. His agony continued in “Variation on Pain.” His only remedy for his pain was his mandolin, the musical instrument as the African Americans’ only solace, creating music for all situations with their chanting and singing. He tried to forget his bitter past, “two greased strings / for each pierced lobe: / so is the past forgiven” (SP 143, 16-18).

The poem “Variation on Pain” pictures Thomas’s traumatic condition of cultural variation along with his psychic disorder. Thomas heard from the “two strings, one pierced cry” (SP 143 1). He tried in “so many ways to imitate / the ringing in his ears” (SP 143, 2-3), but failed to produce the same effect. “Jiving” (the musical term associated with the swing music or jazz music) shows the kind of easily broken, damaged delineation, a self-contradictory individual existence of Thomas.
Heading North, straw hat
Cocked on the back of his head,

in Akron, Ohio
1921,

on the dingy beach
of a man-made lake. (SP 144, 1-12)

The poem “Straw Hat” gives the details of the degraded condition of labour of the migrated African Americans in the North. Thomas “sits out / the last minutes before dawn, lucky / to sleep third shift” (SP 145, 2-4). He was caught in the storm of life to feel that “he wasn’t perfect, that / no one was perfect” (SP 145, 10-11). Even music couldn’t give him consolation, because “work is a narrow grief / and the music” (SP 145, 19-23) is like a “woman reaching into his chest to spread” only pain in his body. The poem is written with trope, to use language in a figurative or non literal sense. “Courtship” tells about how Thomas courted Beulah with her “pleated skirt” (SP 146).

The poem “Air Craft” recounts the Airship disaster. The Airship, the symbol of American success, gave way to “five second blast.”

Afternoons, the hall gaped with Aluminum
glaring, flying toward the sun; now
Though, first thing in the morning, there is only
grey sheen and chatter
from the robust women around him
and the bolt waiting for his riveter’s
five second blast. (SP 160, 4-10)

There was the shattered crash of the New York stock market in the same year which came to be
known as the Great Depression. In 1930 Thomas and Beulah lost their car due to depression. In
1931, the Airship Akron disaster took place. The fact that the American civilization was built up
by the hard labour of the African Americans is highlighted. Every innovation is given to the
world with the hole-and-corner work of the African Americans.

“The Zeppelin Factory” clearly narrates the innovation and the commercially successful
largest building in the world without interior support. In 1929, the Zeppelin factory was
constructed. Thomas’s work pressure didn’t allow him “to sit / right down and cry” (SP 154). His
decline in self-confidence during that period reflects the general decline in the standard of living
of almost all the African Americans. When the “wind caught, / “The Akron” floated out of
control, / …but the third, / muscles and adrenalin / failing,” (SP 154, 14-22). This death incident
reminded Thomas about his friend’s death.

needed workers, all right-
..................................

That spring the third
largest airship was dubbed
the biggest joke
in town,  (SP 154, 2-12)

The African Americans saw their past through all the incidents in their lives. The Zeppelin Air
Dock symbolizes the innovation and commercial success of the United States of America, but for
Thomas it was like the afflicted Jonah who was in the belly of a fish for three days as a
punishment for his disobedience. Now Thomas also felt that he was in the belly of a whale as a punishment for being an African American.

“Variation on Gaining a Son,” pictures the plight of the unfortunate father, Thomas, who craved to have sons. It was the problem with all black families who desired to have male children and not female children who were the scapegoats of racism. In “Under Viaduct, 1932” Thomas speculates over the upcoming birth of a third daughter against the backdrop of union violence. The title “Variation” is a typical African American title. “Variation on Guilt” verbalizes Thomas’s guilt over his friend’s death and the inward throbbing of Thomas as it is the characteristic feature of black Americans in the North. It also pictures the large family problems, unemployment, his desire to have a son, to “teach him how to step / between his family and the police” (SP 156, 9-10).

In “Roast Possum,” Thomas tells two tales about horses hunting possum for Malcolm to his grandchildren. There was salvation in his approach to draw from one generation to another by making perceptible history and myth, fact and fiction. This poem is nostalgic, and it is a tale of his childhood in “Wartrace” (a place in Tennessee) “on the map and was buried / under a stone, like a man” (SP 167, 26-27). Thomas’s narration to his grand children is in the form of a story because folk sources “… have nurtured the race since slavery” (Waniek 217). By telling all his experiences to the younger generation, he preserved the history as well as shaped the future. Through the story “he can savor like a possum dinner the experience of simultaneously recollecting the past and shaping the future. Survival itself, and particularly the generational continuity of the family and its stories, is affirmed” (Keller 128).

Thomas narrates the story to his grandchildren of his Tennessee roots and his childhood experiences and the values of the southern rural community. “A granddaughter / propped on each
knee, / Thomas went on with his tale—” (SP 167, 6-8). Thomas’s experiences are carefully handed down by Dove to the next generation to have a historical record of African American heritage. “I come from a long line of storytellers—not that storytelling was cultivated in my family, but more in line with black American oral tradition, where anyone who could tell a good story was a favored guest” (Walsh 146)

“Thomas at the Wheel” clearly depicts the life of Thomas and Beulah through the years of depression and world war, discriminated world of tragedy in the “neon script leering from the shuddering asphalt” (SP 172, 4). “Thomas at the Wheel” summarizes how Thomas experienced his migration from the South, his married life with Beulah, their life with his daughters, the Depression, the two World Wars, interracial differences; they are in a circular move to remind.

Thomas in his death bed
This, then, the river he had to swim.
Through the wipers the drugstore
shouted, lit up like a casino,

.....................

he laughed as he thought oh

the writing on the water. Thomas imagined

his wife as she awoke missing him,
cracking a window. He heard sirens

rise as the keys swung, ticking. (SP 172, 1-24)

This poem is a very important ‘wheel’ of Thomas to talk of his death and resurrection. There is a reference to the underworld river Styx which becomes his salvation. There is a Biblical reference to the writing on the wall about the death of Belshazzar. He was the king of Babylon who died

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because of his barbarities. Similarly, “the writing on the water” prophecies his fate to die in water, as his friend died in water because of him.

The last three poems “The Stroke,” “The Satisfaction Coal Company,” and “Thomas at the Wheel” talk of his old age and his recalling of the accumulation of knowledge or skill that results from direct participation in events or activities with others. “The Stroke” recounts the disarrays in his mind, and the consequences of his stroke brought back his profound homecoming to his married life with Beulah, his relationship with his friend Lem, and his reunion with his dead friend Lem.

The history of the suffering of the ordinary folks has been recounted through the sufferings of Thomas. Low self esteem is writ large across the life of Thomas. He has never taken effort to come out of his guilt feeling. It is the will of God to take his friend’s life. He has never understood the law of nature, and he has lived a very narrow life without any interest, no optimism, no hope of conquering challenges, and not willing to allow the test of time and knowledge. But his wife Beulah is willing to be positive, with a lot of self-esteem, with interest in leading a more imaginative life. The title “Canary in Bloom” connotes various levels of meanings as suggested by Cavalieri as canaries “have beautiful song; it’s also a term that musicians use for the female vocalist. And the canary is the type of bird that miners take down to the mines to test for poison gas leaks” (qtd in Steffen 102). This caged bird is used with more domestic focus to transfuse the inward restricted life of Beulah who is filled with imagination and fantasy about life but faces only an unfavorable position and unfulfilled dreams.

The second section of “Canary in Bloom” with twenty-one poems focuses on the dreams and expectations of Beulah from her childhood to marriage. Thomas and Beulah unravels the story of the common folks living with their conflicts and societal isolation. It’s a rare
combination of “fact and fiction” and the cultural critic Linda Hutcheon’s comment is cited by Steffen in “Re-Presenting the Past” that history and literature are “a contradictory conjunction of the self-reflexive and the documentary is precisely what characterizes the post modern return to story in poetry,” (96).

“Canary in Bloom” is entirely different from Thomas’s section as it is seen from the perspectives of Beulah, Dove’s grandmother. Beulah did not get the experiences of the Southern folk culture as she came to Akron at the age of two, from Georgia. Beulah has a mixed cultural heritage as her father is half Cherokee. Dove wants to show the gender difference by way of showing individual identity and the problems faced by women particularly. Dove also moves from the particular to the general. She is very particular about pointing out the essential differences in their personal points of view. Beulah’s section is dominated by more domestic work, art of home making, and her yearning to see China whereas Thomas’s section is permeated with more of his sense of guilt over the past events, his regret for his actions, and his fear of living in a new environment. “Weathering Out” particularizes the monotony of her work, and her desire to move away from it.

The first poem “Taking in Wash” in Beulah’s section “Canary in Bloom” starts with the oppressive situation of every woman outside her home. The drunkard father called her “Pearl” in order to make her, his own. The common imagery “a silk stitched rose” is a motif in all of Dove’s poems which suggests the incest motif, a common theme in African American writers. Here, Beulah’s father “is making the hankies sail” (SP 175). Beulah’s father is a dangerous man for her. Her mother being the moral center of the family saves her from her father with her “tight dark fist” (SP 175). Here Dove’s anxiety over both white and black male characters is conveyed. “A Hill of Beans” also highlights Beulah’s embarrassment over men. When another man
appeared in the kitchen, “she smelled / fear in his grimy overalls, / the pale eyes bright as salt” (SP 181, 25-27). The whole poem narrates the trauma experienced throughout her life.

Steffen, in *Crossing Color* summarizes Dove’s interview with Bill Moyers on the importance of “individual events” which are to be connected with historical events:

. . . In Thomas and Beulah I call my grandparents to show how grand historical events can be happening around us but we remember them only in relation to what was happening to us and individuals as that particular moment. How we act in our lives is how we memorize ourselves in the past. (Qtd in *Crossing Color* 97)

Steffen is of the view that “Dove’s reclamation of her ancestors’ lives represents both an aesthetic and an eth(n)ic act of historical recovery” (97). Arnold Rampersad vindicates the gullibility of the individuals’ expression of pain. He has mentioned that “Dove’s special empathy as a historical poet seems to be with the most sensitive, most eloquent Blacks, individuals of ductile intelligence made neurotic by pain, especially the pain of not being able to express themselves…” (Steffen 53). Dove makes use of the details of history and the political situation that move her beyond the narrow notion of naturalism. Through her presentation of African American history, she garnered recognition and prestige from the predominantly white literary world by the publication of *Thomas and Beulah* to receive both critical acclaim and commercial success simultaneously. In the words of Sandi Russell, Dove’s uniqueness is portrayed as “a subtle and penetrating new voice” and she has “a superb eye for the unexpected and unexplored in black life.” Dove is the great expert in “merging history with the personal” and her “economical poetic style shows the makings of great artistry” (Russell 170). Ultimately Dove has recorded her grandparents’ history as an individualized unsterotyped subject in *Thomas and
Beulah which has been the real quest of every African American in the white dominated traditions.

Womanhood is the period in a girl’s life after she has evolved through childhood and adolescence. Dove’s womanhood celebrates her high acclaim as a mature artist. To walk with Dove is to be in motion with her guiding spirit and courage as a singular dedication to the African American womanhood in the new century along with her black rootedness. The second poem of this section, “Magic,” brings out the artistic talents of Beulah, her dreams of visiting Paris, after seeing the picture of the Eiffel Tower in the Sunday paper. She makes it a point to visit Paris, a dream of her own. “Next morning the Sunday paper / showed the Eiffel Tower / soaring through clouds. / It was a sign / She would make it to Paris one day” (SP 176, 26-30).

Beulah did not like the “yellow scarf” of Thomas in the poem “Courtship, Diligence.” She feels no romance over the performance of Thomas; instead she criticizes his mandolin as “Cigar-box music!” (SP 176, 9). She would “much prefer a pianola / and scent in a sky-colored flask” (SP 177, 10-11) rather to a Mandolin, the instrument which was used by Thomas. Throughout her life her father’s incestuous behavior troubles her. She could not admire any man because of the traumatic experience in her life. This reference is given to indicate the incestuous relations, a common phenomenon used by many African American writers like Ralph Ellison (Invisible Man) and Toni Morrison (The Bluest Eye). These novels have been visibly woven into the text that offers to reveal secrets about incest in the African American families.

The poem “Promises” throws light on Beulah’s wedding with Thomas. She sees Thomas in “his hulk in the vestibule, / lumsy in blue serge, / his fingers worrying the / lucky bead in his pocket” (SP 178, 16-19). The final stanza reflects Beulah’s judgment of the unreliability of men. When she feels that “every day a wilderness–no / shade in sight,” (SP 179, 1-2) the monotony of
her repeated labour in her house of dusting and cleaning is hinted at. Through “Dusting” Beulah dusts her own teenage happiness and the domestic freedom she enjoyed in her house. This poem is symbolic of cleaning her etheric (the outer layer of our body) body as she cleans the household articles. She would like to forget the principled external mundane work of her subsistence. She naturally gets energy when she does her work because “each dust / stroke a deep breath and/ the canary in bloom” (SP 179, 17-20). The title of Beulah’s section is taken from this important and signature poem. “The patience and expenditure, fed into the intensity of her inner life,” (95) concludes Righelato.

Beulah’s married life is “Desert-in-Peace” (SP 180). She is wrapped with stresses and hardships in her married life. Her teen-age love gives her a kind of happiness, but she dusts those memories from her mind with a view to cleanse her mind and body. This is not only the problem of Beulah in particular, but also the problem of the African American womenfolk. This is the universal impediment. The poem “Weathering Out” narrates the experiences she had during pregnancy. Beulah daydreams through her seventh month of pregnancy. She feels very relaxed when Thomas goes “to look for work, her coffee flushed with milk” (SP 183, 2). She goes with Thomas to see the new “Zeppelin nosed forward in its silver envelop” (SP 183, 10). She compares her condition to “that large and placid, a lake” as she carries her baby in her womb. She enjoys her pregnancy listening to the movement and sound of her belly and feels that, “Little fellow’s really talking” (SP 183, 17). Dove records the precious moments of a pregnant woman.

We see Dove’s theme of family and neibourhood, the important community integration among the African Americans. Beulah imagines this psychological space at least through her children. She finds her fulfillment in her family and neighbourhood. The passersby admire her canary’s song, a kind of happiness she passes to others. The following poem “Motherhood” gives
her negative dream of her child. As a mother, she has the heavy feeling that she has to protect the child from all evil forces. She must be a responsible mother to care for the child at all situations. Her worries come in the form of a dream to threaten her. “Motherhood” expresses the threatening forces of the “white wolf.” She has to kill the white wolf to save her baby. This poem is a pointer to Beulah’s fear of white people. “Mother Love” is more of feminine and deals with feminstic conflicts. She brings in the Miltonic concept of man’s first disobedience. She puts forward her views on terror and wickedness of the modern life. It is everywhere. When she awakes, her “small wild eyes / go opaque with confusion and shame, like a child’s” (SP 185, 21-22).

The poem “Recovery” resumes Beulah’s married life with its remoteness and repressions in hardship in the heavy confined ambiance. “Years ago” Thomas “had promised to take her to Chicago,” (SP 196, 5) but he failed in his promise. Beulah is always caged in her parlour, without her freedom to see her favourite places. She sings her canary song to get happiness which is never liked by Thomas. He is never friendly with the bird. Beulah hates Thomas’ staying at home all the time. She wants to feel the air of freedom when Thomas goes away from her. When Thomas stays at home, Beulah retires herself into the parlour to have her “birdsong in the air” (SP 196, 12). In “Magic” Beulah unifies similar self-will resourcefulness and daydreaming to get away from the daily grind of her natural depression of family. “The Great Palaces of Versailles” brings out the reality of race and problems of women which keep Beulah’s dream forever deferred. Again, Beulah thinks that all her dreams are unrealized primarily because of the discriminations against the African Americans.

In “Nightmare” Beulah dreams of the death of Thomas wherein she has the physical irritation “itching” as a symbol of her childhood fears, her loss of somebody, and her being a
widow. Thomas’s death occurred in 1963. Beulah remained a widow for the next six years. Beulah’s independent nature allows her to gaze at the star while the children sleep. She loves her freedom. She wants “a little room for thinking” (SP 188, 1). She builds her own castle in the air. She reclines in the backyard while the children nap and dream of “building a palace” (SP 188, 16), but “she would open her eyes / and think of the place that was hers / for an hour–where / she was nothing, / in the middle of the day” (SP 188, 18-22). Beulah’s growth of a productive inward life starts with an outward eye. She struggles with her prescribed role which prefixes her fate. But she gains confidence from her long battle with fate to find consolation in the outside world. She acts very smart when she finds a job in a dress shop. It is an outlet for her mental strains. She runs her family; she provides food to people during the Depression; she shows mercy to the daughter of a prejudiced neighbor. She is shocked to see the French ladies. She learns the outside life as she comes out of her house. As the poems progress, Beulah’s apprehensions of life gets intensified. Her attitude toward Thomas softens too. The experiences of Beulah epitomize the psychological journey of the people of her race towards freedom and independence which were denied to the African American people.

It was bondage during slavery, social discrimination, lack of opportunity and denial of all rights and the resulting unemployment during the post bellum period multiplied their sufferings. In this hostile social climate happiness in married life was like the will o’ the wisp. Few families escaped the fatal discrimination. These important problems of the African American people are brought out by Dove through her poetry in a subtle way. The last three poems relate to Beulah’s experience as a widow. A very important historical event is indicated in the poem “Wingfoot Lake.” She is taken on a segregated Goodyear picnic. According to Beulah, this is as an “act of mercy” because
dragging her to their husband’s company picnic, 
white families on one side and them 
on the other, unpacking the same 
squeeze bottles of Heinz, the same 
waxy beef patties and Salem potato chip bags. 
So he was dead for the first time 
on Fourth of July–ten years ago (SP 198, 8-15).

Beulah is reminded of her 36th birthday when she is taken to a swimming pool for the first time in her life. She is not willing to enjoy this picnic in the Jim Crow land. They have everything separately. She hesitates to accept this kind of get-together as it is a new kind of experience. But Beulah’s daughters living in a multicultural reality accept this change willingly and view life from a new perspective. So her daughter Joanna says: “Mother, we’re Afro-Americans now!” (SP 198, 25). This poem announces the period of integration of both Africans and Americans outwardly in the history of America. African Americans also get opportunities for their further progress.

Again, “Company” also confirms Beulah’s preoccupation with her memories of Thomas, her life full of debates and arguments. But she sees the conversion in her daughters, taking issues in an easy way, not pondering over everything very critically and adapting themselves very considerably. So she also compromises with Thomas. She “tells him, listen: we were good, though we never believed it. And now he can’t even touch her feet” (SP 200). There is a sense of belonging and a sense of love. At this company picnic, Beulah remembers the March on Washington D.C. and its effects in the lives of her children.
The poem “Pomade” is an example of African American Culture. Beulah’s talents advance as she learns the art of making perfume. She compares her with Thomas’s sister Willemma, a woman known for her admiration. Her life is an example of the African American life in the Southern region. Willemma’s life is more restricted than Beulah’s life, but she lives happily. Dove makes a sharp contrast between the life style of the African Americans in the Southern region and in the Northern region.

It was Willemma shushed the pack of dusty children
and took her inside the leaning cabin with its little
window in the door, the cutout magazine cloud taped to the pane
so’s I’ll always have shade. It was Willemma

…………………………………………………………

she walked five miles to town for Scotch tape
and back again. Gaslight flickered on the cockeyed surface
of rain water in a galvanized pail with his sister
to get out while she still was fit. (SP 192, 10-29)

The poverty of the rural South is shown through Willemma’s life. Dove has enjoyed her life at college without undergoing this kind of segregation or poverty. But she heard her grandparents talking about the discriminations and other types of marginalization during their period.

“Headdress” talks of her relaxation in her mundane life and a new kind of experience to her inventive vitalities. “Sunday Greens” encapsulates her disappointments. At the same time she “remembers her mother in a slip / lost in blues, / and those collards, / wild-eared, / singing” (SP 195, 21-26). “Obedience” highlights Beulah’s wish to become a charwoman to get relief from her daily household tasks. African American women were very much interested in jobs to gain
financial freedom. This kind of life gave them hope. In the beginning Beulah hoped that she would “make it to Paris one day.” Paris is the national capital, and a favored place of creative subtlety, racial ideology, beauty and refinement. It is now the financial, commercial, artistic, and intellectual centre of France. The city’s many attractions include the Eiffel Tower, the Notre-Dame de Paris, the Louvre, the Pantheon, the Pompidou Centre, and the Paris Opera, as well as the Boulevards, public parks, and the gardens. African Americans always dreamt of going to Paris. According to Pereira *Thomas and Beulah* “constitutes an important beginning” for Dove since she “is trying to demonstrate that her personal cosmopolitanism has roots in the African American culture and experience that preceded her generation. Thus, she is not deviating from the tradition…” (Pereira, *Rita* 109).

Dove’s cultural syncopation has more complex purposes of recovering African American culture within the very framework of America. Each individual poem acts on its own and gives a significant connection to the whole collection. In this collection Thomas’s individual story is intertwined with twentieth century black history exhibiting Dove’s narrative talents. The literary part highlights the aesthetic sense of Beulah’s canary’s music, and her dreams of “China.” The poems “Magic,” “Dusting,” and “The Great Palaces of Versailles,” give the artistic life Beulah wanted to have. Though Beulah has unfulfilled dreams, she has lived a fruitful life always expecting some new vision in her life. Dove herself acknowledges the spirit of Beulah in her interview with Schneider:

Beulah as being a strong woman who still has no way of showing how strong she could be. She is one who really wants to travel, to see the world. She is curious; she is intelligent; and her situation in life does not allow her to pursue her
curiosity. If there is anything I want to honor in her, it is that spirit. (qtd in Steffen 102)

In the second section, Dove has poured out the age old traditional problems of women. Beulah is a strong woman, but there is no chance for her to prove her talents. Her spirit is crushed. She decides that “there is no China.” Despite their limitations, women show their dedication and intellectual influences in the field of literature as well as their tireless commitment to their family and country. In *Thomas and Beulah* the sequence towards the northward movement highlights the importance of African American Slave narrative and the example of the African American written tradition.

The poem “D.C” represents the city, which is the museum for past presidents. It’s the historical meeting place of the lovers on their visit. Culture and heritage form an important thrust area in this poem.

A bloodless finger pointing to heaven, you say,

is surely no more impossible than this city:

A no man’s land, a capital askew,

a postcard framed by imported blossoms—

and now this outrageous cue stick

lying, reflected, on a black table. (*SP* 22, 5-10)

“This outrageous cue stick” refers to The Washington Monument. The final poem of the second section highlights woman’s loneliness. Dove’s scholarship gave her the chance to go to Europe. Her travel to Europe and her experiences find expression in this poem. There is a parallel link between the political incidents and the personal love affair, the ecstasy of the lovers. Hence the
individual is connected with each moment of history. These two wishful grownups had greater scope and values beyond their own country and beyond each other.

*Grace Notes* establishes Dove’s childhood memories. She recalls her memories of fishing with her grandparents and brother in “The Fifth Grade Autobiography.” She could even recall her grandfather who “smelled of lemons” (GN 8, 21). Another poem “Buckeye” elaborates her kicking and lobbing buckeyes as weapons in childhood battles. The poems in *Grace Notes* are largely autobiographical. In this collection Dove brings in the middle-class Black life with originality. Dove is determined to probe into the ordinary language of the black working class people. *Grace Notes* also speaks of Dove’s experiences in her childhood. “Flash Cards” tells her experiences when she was ten years old. “Summit Beach, 1921” marks the segregated beach to identify the bitter reality in their life. The gap between the past and the present is connected in a way to bridge it. In the poem “Canary” the cage image gives the metaphorical sense. The historical and cultural slavery of the African American women is generalized here to represent their state of being in America. The third section of *Grace Notes* delineates motherhood. The poem “Pastoral” tells the happiness of a mother on seeing her new born baby.

Her substantial presentation of the character Beulah in “Canary” reveals the minds of the African American women in general. This poem becomes “a prologue” to the volume *Grace Notes* according to Pat Righelato.

“Summit Beach, 1921,” the poem that acts as a prologue to *Grace Notes*, …the Negro beach, “mandolin” in the first stanza, and the date, 1921, are a reminder of Thomas’s arrival in Akron, his courtship rituals, and the racial prejudice that Dove’s grandparents encountered. It laconically documents the racist and gender divisions of that era. *Grace Notes* sets “Summit Beach, 1921” as a historical
marker to gauge the possibilities for young black American women sixty years on from the conditions of the 1920s. (112)

Autobiographical poems are deliberately given to represent her real voice. Autobiographical works are by nature subjective. Some sociologists and psychologists have noted that autobiography offers the author the ability to recreate history. Dove also contributed autobiographical elements through her poetry. The second section of The Yellow House on the Corner contains her autobiographical poems.

The Yellow House on the Corner has poems on her adolescence. “Adolescence I,” “Adolescence II,” and “Adolescence III” contemplate Dove’s transformation from her childhood to adulthood. Her erotic feelings and understanding of the relationships are analyzed in “The Boast,” and “First Kiss.” The fourth section deals with the problems of sex and adolescence. Dove has depicted the very day-to-day experiences of the Africa American women and their cultural choices in the poems on Adolescence. “Adolescence-I” describes the American teen culture and its strangeness in this section: “‘A boy’s lips are soft, / As soft as baby’s skin’” (SP 42, 5-6). Dove stresses the common people’s experiences, especially the womenfolk, through her fourth section. “Adolescence-III” records “the Freudian displacements of family life and dream of romance with its elaborate rituals of preparation, the battery of effects indented to slay the opposite sex” (Righelato Understanding 25). “Cholera” explicates cultural practice, irrational belief, and unhealthiness of the people.

“Adolescence-II” draws the young girl’s desire to become an adolescent and waiting for her puberty in the bathroom, “Although it is night, I sit in the bathroom, waiting. / Sweat prickles behind my knees, the baby-breast are alert” (SP 43, 1-2). “A Suit For Augustus” tells of Dove’s coming of age, her personal history with the political history. She mentions the death of
Kennedy: “that winter I stopped loving the President / And loved his dying. He smiled / From his frame on the chiff’robe” (SP 21, 1-3). She felt “the doorknobs” of her knees “begging to open” and “spilled and unpuzzled” (SP 21, 14-15).

The autobiography “A Suite for Augustus” is interconnected with history and African American middle class experiences. Dove’s ecstasy over her love is revealed when the lovers feel that they have horizons beyond their own country and beyond each other. The poem gives details about Kennedy’s photo, (his death in 1963), D.C. monuments, cherry blossoms and ice. The very ordinary love affair becomes a historical incident along with the political associations. The woman worshipped Augustus as her hero because of his fame through satellite. Augustus, the black man was serving the American Government, the only prestigious position the African Americans could aim at, which also symbolized their progress.

*Museum* has many autobiographical poems. Section III completely talks of the specific characteristics of Dove’s childhood and family. “Grape Sherbet” is a memorable poem which recalls the Memorial Day of preparing barbecue (an event or meal at which food is cooked outdoors over an open grill or fire), and how the children enjoyed the day with their daddy grilling, children playing and eating sherbet. Dove is trying to “remember the taste” when she writes the poem “but it does not exist” (SP 105). “Anti-Father” recounts Dove’s disputes over her father’s teachings to her that “the stars / are not far / apart” (SP 112, 5-7) and “outer space is / inconceivably / intimate” (SP 112, 25-27). In “A Father Out Walking on the Lawn” Dove remembers how her father goes for a walk in the lawn for twenty one years. These incidents are narrated to retrieve her past life forever.

“A number of poems in *Museum* posit an American largeness of spirit that, in exceptional cases can overcome segregation, deprivation, or displacement” (Righelato 43). Yet another
important autobiographical poem of Dove’s black identity and her “cultural negation” in Britain is “Agosta the Winged Man and Rasha the Black Dove.” In “There Is No More Beautiful Way: Theory and the Poetics of Afro-American Women’s Writing” Baker says that African American “intellectual history privileges the unseen and the intangibly personal” and “the trajectory of this history is from what might be called the workings of a distinctively syncretic spirit to autobiographical incorporation or expressive embodiment of such spirit-work” (136).

Dove’s position as both “artist and artifact” and her identity as a black artist are revealed through Rasha, the snake charmer who moved slowly with “the black suit jacket / thrown off like a cloak” (SP 98, 45-46). There is a “triangle reference among Rasha, Agosta and Schad.” Rasha’s bone deformity is shown in order to differentiate the normality of life. Colour becomes the foundation of ethnic separatism which is explored in the form of art. It is again the celebration of art with newness from the normal order of life. The black skin represents her personal identity and the identity of her race which is inseparable from their life. There are other images like “chicken,” “birds,” “snake,” and “fresh eggs” to support her new effort for a fresh beginning, i.e. livelihood and sprightliness. The entire section talks about the theme of identity. Dove frankly promulgated her identity as “Black Dove” by using her name in the title to announce to the world that she is an African American artist.

“My Father’s Telescope” is a symbolic poem connecting her past and present. In this poem, her roots are identified. Akron is her own place to recall her childhood memories. What we see through the telescope is not very close, but by keeping a watch over the telescope we keep things closer. The telescope is a Christmas present. Dove traces the father and daughter relationship, her father’s quest for updating his scientific knowledge and the family relationship. Dove looks back at her “childhood” and understands that her “parents had aspirations and
frustrations outside those concerned” with their “upbringing.” Through the image of the telescope, Dove links “the continuum between the vast and the familiar” which is “comforting.” Dove reflects this “continuum” in historical terms (Righelato 59).

In *Grace Notes*, her role 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).

Poems like “Courtship, Diligence,” (*ML*), and “The Bristo Styx” (*ML*) (her daughter’s growing independence) tell her personal history. In poems like “Canary” (*TB*), “Sonnet in Primary Colours” (*ML*) Dove links her personal connection with the singer Billie Holiday and the painter Frida Kahlo.

Dove’s personal history also gives room for reviewing history, an added skillfulness to present African American history through historical figures. African American history is filled with many inspiring individuals like Malcolm X, David Walker, Banneker, Rosa Parks and others who strove hard to leave their mark in the history of the United States of America. Their deeds became synonymous with the rich legacy that is African American culture. Dove also gives a prominent place for some of the celebrated African American historical figures in her works. The slavery sequence of *The Yellow House on the Corner* has a number of poems which focus on historical figures.

Dove’s history through historical characters is revealed in poems such as “Belinda’s Petition,” “The House slave,” “David walker,” “The Abduction,” “The Sailor in Africa,” “The
Transport of Slaves From Maryland to Mississippi,” “Pamela,” “Someone’s Blood,” “Cholera,” “The Slave’s Critique of Practical Reason,” and “Kentucky” in *The Yellow House on the Corner*, the third important section. In the words of Righelato, the experience of slavery is “to reveal the underside of history and to present this underside in discrete moments” (19). All these poems depict the struggles of the African Americans in general, especially black women.

“Belinda’s Petition,” the first of the slave narratives, completely explains the “place” of “pitiable Life” and the predicaments of the female persona. This poem is in slave monologue. We are reminded of the first formal record of the petition in Massachusetts in 1793 by an ex-slave known as “Belinda.” The slave narratives inform “verbal witness of the possession of a humanity shared in common with Europeans” (Baker, *Signifying* 128). This poem is an example to review history with an eye on the concise overview of the long history of struggle to repair the damage wrought by the transatlantic slave trade.

I am Belinda, as African,
Since the age of twelve a Slave.
I will not take too much of your Time,
but to plead and place my pitiable Life
unto the Fathers of this Nation. (*SP* 28, 3-7)

Belinda’s plea “to the honorable Senate and House/of Representatives of this Country to give her freedom” has been documented in this poem. The tone is very much depressing and painful. Belinda’s individual quest for freedom, her cultural ignorance and the white imperialism are cleanly connected. “The House Slave” also depicts the condition of the African Americans since the persona “can’t fall asleep and weeps” over her slavery. The struggles faced by the slaves soon after the declaration of Independence in 1782 are exhibited.
The next poem “David Walker” again brings the historical figures David Walker and Solomon Northrup. They were free to travel but they encountered death and renewed confinement. They “are the most wretched, degraded and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began” (SP 30). The white people “strip and beat and drag” Walker as “rattlesnakes” (SP 30). His final condition is:


The abolitionist press is perfectly appalled.

Humanity, kindness and the fear of the Lord

Does not consist in protecting devils. A month–

his person (is that all?) found face-down

in the doorway at Brattle Street,

his frame slighter that friends remembered. (SP 30, 25-31)

The next poem “The Abduction” talks of Solomon Northrup “from Saratoga Springs” who “woke and found” himself “alone, in darkness and in chains” (SP 31, 15). “The Transport of Slaves From Maryland to Mississippi,” pictures the inner soliloquy of a slave who rejoices over his racial social class. But we see death and freedom go hand in hand. In their death, they got freedom. Dove preserves a penetrative touch on the slave past of the Blacks which is one of the marked racial influences among the blacks. “The Transport of Slaves From Maryland to Mississippi” expounds the theme of slavery with pungent criticism. The poem has a note: “On August 22, 1839, a wagonload of slaves broke their chains, killed two white men, and would have escaped, had not a slave women helped the Negro driver mount his horse and ride for help” (SP 32). The slave woman thought, “I don’t know if I helped him up / because I thought he was our salvation” (SP 32, 1-2).
“The Transportation of Slaves from Maryland to Mississippi” reproduces the painful moments in their history. According to the slave woman, her act of helping is as important as his killing of the white men who are responsible for their state of slavery. This section is followed by the murder of the two white men. The pathetic situation of the Negro driver made the slave woman help him, when she saw him,

\begin{quote}
The skin across his cheekbones
burst open like baked yam–
deliberate, the eyelids came apart–

his eyes were my eyes in a yeller face. (SP 32, 7-10)
\end{quote}

*The Yellow House on the Corner* is an example of narrative form as historical research, and photographs the hardships faced by the African Americans in the form of a slave narrative. “Belinda’s petition” arouses the declaration of independence in its appeal for abolition. “The House Slave” is a real lamentation over the plight of the field slaves. “Pamela” describes the slave woman’s escape from slavery to get freedom. “The Slave’s Critique of the Practical Reason” portrays the escape only in day dreaming. “Kentucky 1833” is a poetic monologue with the deeper sense of words that “it’s a crazy feeling that carries through the night; as if the sky were an omen we could not understand, the book that, “if we could read, would change our lives” (SP 40).

“Banneker” (Benjamin Banneker was an African-American astronomer, clockmaker, and publisher who was instrumental in surveying the District of Columbia) is nominated as one of the members to the mission of designing the city, which turned to be Washington D.C. He is referred to as “a capacious bird” planning in his mind to write another letter to President Jefferson about the “statue / of Benjamin Franklin / before the library” (SP 93, 20-22). These
figures opened up the horizon of the self making mythology of Americanness. “Banneker” is an example of black American achievements. The cultural vision is clearly shown in the poems “At the German Writer’s Conference in Munich” and “Banneker.” “At the German Writer’s Conference in Munich” is written in a laconic way or in an effective short note form. The black writers walked through middle Ages in its complex contemporaneous organization “banner.”

Above them all a banner

unfurled and inscribed

in Latin. May be it says

Association of Tapesters

in the Union of wives…. (SP 102, 35-48)

The extended skin of the banner arouses the racist theorizations which are the exclusive features of the tapestry. This feature is contrasted with the “mold-breaking freedom” of Banneker, the first man to predict a solar eclipse. In “Banneker,” her voice is so determined by race, with her use of the words “black” and “white” at times confirming racist and tyrannical divisions. Dove herself commented that her poetry surpassed “race,” addressing mankind on a world-wide level, using history as its pretext. In the poem “Banneker,” Banneker is described as a “white-maned / figure stalking the darkened / breast of the Union” (SP 94, 34-36). As a “white-maned” figure, Banneker is believably an older man perchance owning knowledge, ability, and wisdom as a male lion but with ferocity. Dove says Banneker has both blackness and whiteness. Banneker’s thinking and language are dynamic. Dove uses the historical figures in order to bring back authentic history.

The poem “The Slave’s Critique of Practical Reason” identifies Kant’s philosophical work. Dove acknowledges in her work the personalities with gratitude, who participated in the
anti-slavery movements. The poem not only gives the history of the United States, but also the positions of the black Americans and slavery during that period. “The Slave’s Critique of Practical Reason,” claims the personal philosophy improved while picking cotton. The persona feels that she is “the only dark / spot in the sky” (SP 38, 9-10). Race is a feature of African American life driven with powerful contradictions. It is the unwritten law of social conflict and the threat which stops cultural development in America.

And the final poem “Kentucky, 1833” unravels the desire of the African Americans for recreation on Sundays. There is always a kind of emotional thirst for freedom like the white community’s. The last part of the poem conveys her thirst for book learning which is the sense of superiority in whites.

    Jason is bucking and prancing about–Massa said his name reminded him of some sailor, a hero who crossed an ocean, looking for a golden cotton field. Jason thinks he’s been to great things – a suit with gold threads, vest and all. Now the winner is sprawled out under a tree and the sun, that weary tambourine, hesitates at the rim of the sky’s green light. It’s crazy feeling that carries through the night; as if the sky were an omen we could not understand, the book that, if we could read, would change our lives. (SP 40, 16-23)

Dove displays a broader sense of history while creating “more global patterns of history, the patterns of imperialism, the perpetrators and victims of slavery, the cycles of injustice and enterprise. The past has lessons for us, … as the past can hardly be expected to furnish forth a basic survival kit for the present” (Righelato 60).

    The poem “Cholera” interprets the customs and irrational beliefs of the black people and how the innocent people are thrown into the fire at the doctor’s command to reduce the fever. It
reveals the cultural rituals, and superstitions of the African Americans. They have the belief that at least after death they would have freedom from both fever and slavery. The cholera outburst is controlled only for the whites. The African Americans’ disease is due to their repression and painful experiences. So they were allowed to “walk in the graveyard” and “stretch out” their “arms.” Those who were “strong enough / rose up too, and wailed as they leapt” (SP 37).

The impact of the World War II and the sufferings, the penalization, and tortures are given with her own identity as an African American in her homeland in The Yellow House on the Corner. Dove tries to get their culture from their individual characters. “Sightseeing,” precisely details the traumatic experiences of the Second World War where we see the broken statues. Her familiarity with war sight made her think from a different perspective. “Sightseeing” can be an (inner) sightseeing of the subtleties of war. She has the capacity as writer to see things twice with their internal and external forces. Having lived in Germany, Dove is aware of the cruelties of war.

“The Snow King,” uses bird imagery to denote the position of the common folk. In “The Snow King” the images of the frozen bodies of the sparrows are shown to give the plight of the victimized mankind. There is a symbolic reference to the king’s nature with words like “slow fire,” “garnet,” and “cracked heart.” Though the garnet stone is a symbol of resurrection for the Christians, it is compared with the classical myth of Persephone, who, like Christ, comes back to the earth each spring to renew the energy of the earth. The poem employs the present-tense to evoke the present condition and how from ages it is carried on for generations.

Your face, though I didn’t know it

Our lives will be the same–

your lips, swollen from whistling
at danger,

and I a stranger

in this desert,

nursing the tough skins of figs. (*SP* 4, 13-19)

The victims are compared to the frozen bodies of dead sparrows. They were killed in the name of ethnic purity. This mass execution was employed for cultural purity. Freedom was given to them only in their death. In the last two lines of the poem, “The snow king roams the lime-filled spaces, / His cracked heart a slow fire, a garnet” (*SP* 9, 9-10) are used ironically to highlight the pathetic plight of the people without resurrection, identity, and roots. “The uneasy parameters of the politics of mythic consciousness are rendered in the ambivalent moral status of the snow king” (Righelato 10).

*Museum* starts with the title “The Hill Has Something to Say,” centering the blending of the past and the present along with the divergences between the modern and the Middle Ages. The probing of nature and humanity clears the probing of the life of the past. The “Hill” represents the natural phenomenon while the land represents human life. The “Hill” as such can’t say anything, but the condition in which it appears, tells the real story of the place. The entire section focuses on the European tourists’ reflections upon classical Greek and medieval Italy. This is a kind of continuous and profound contemplation or musing over the two way commutation between past and present.

The very first poem of *Museum*, “The Fish in the Stone,” gives a reminder of the past, a proof of the past history, and the existence of the African Americans in the past. “The fish in the stone / would like to fall / back into the sea” (*SP* 69, 1-3). The fossilized history of black suffering is personified here. The fossil becomes a bridge between the present and the past.
“Patient, he drifts / until the moment comes / to cast his / skeletal blossom” (SP 69, 14-17). The turbulent past of the African Americans is very clearly depicted here. The fish is not given a chance to live. It becomes a fossil to become an example of the black people. Dove is eager to bring their history to public view because its profile has been “stamped by a white light.” The fish becomes the bend of fate that might have led to the living fish. The reluctance of the fish to go back to the big sea in order to get away from the charge of the world is beautifully painted in this poem. The poet is optimistic that the skeleton will blossom forth one day after a long patient wait. The “voluptuous Braille” of the fern speaks through silence and it is a record in Braille, which only when stroked with sensuous fingers renders meaning.

Dove feels that the fossil-fish represents the connection between “nature and culture” and it is the shift from “flux to fixity” and “nature” to “culture.” The poem brings a moral force within the present and the past. A poem is an accomplished thing; the dead fossil becomes the object of that transformation. Even the “skeletal blossom” lived with its dead state and becomes the subject of culture and history. In the same way, Dove’s works are fossilized to carry her message to the future generation with her artistic creativity. The fossil image is both a throwing of time of life and the forming of carved architectural style.

“Nestor’s Bathtub,” rejects the stereotypical order of life. “Tou Wan Speaks to Her Husband, Liu Sheng,” “Catherine of Alexandria,” “Catherin of Siena,” “Boccaccio: The Plague Years,” and “Fiammetta Breaks her Peace” give details about the stresses and strains of women in society. The feminist voice clarifies the physical dispossession and adversity. The speaker of “Tou Wan Speaks to Her Husband, Liu Sheng” realizes her narrowness of the life imposed on her. Her intention is to sublimate her sensual desires into the warmth of Christ. Dove as an African American has her interest in analyzing the legendary figures who led their lives as earth
born figures. These historical figures speak history more than any text. Other than the historical
figures, Dove brings some political events which get recorded in her works to remind us always
of their achievements or autocracy to the world at large.

Dove gives a neat presentation from all the avenues to understand African American
history. Her presentation of political influence in the lives of African American people adds
beauty to the reading of her works. The Politics of History is conveyed through “Parsley,” the
last poem of Museum. “Parsley” a political satire on General Trujillo, not only shows language at
the threshold of life and death but also interprets tyrannical political practices by disclosing the
dictator’s subconscious mind. Dove happened to see a book entitled Petersilie in Berlin (which
in German for “Parsley”) where the writer sits every Saturday for champagne. Dove started
reading the book which was a new area of her knowledge. She could see photographs of the
Dominican public of the 1937 massacre in October, when General Trujillo slaughtered 20,000
Haitians who worked side by side with the Dominicans in the cane fields, having each worker
pronounce the word “perijil”—spoke ‘l’ instead of ‘r’—Haitians, whose French creole did not
provide for an ‘r’ that was rolled on the tongue were executed.

One of Dove’s best known poems is titled “Parsley” which she read at the White House.
Trujillo aimed at the execution of the Haitians as a matter of racial cleansing. The poem
skillfully employs the models of sugar cane, a parrot, the death of Trujillo’s mother, and the
word itself; thus, the poem closes: “The general remembers the tiny green sprigs / men of his
village wore in their capes / to honor the birth of a son. He will / order many, this time, to be
killed / for a single, beautiful word” (SP 135, 68-80). “Parsley” returns to a dreadful instant in
Caribbean history. The poem dramatizes the slaughter of thousands of migrant Haitian sugarcane
workers by troops complying with the decrees from the Dominican Republican dictator General Rafael Trujillo on October 2, 1937.

The second part reveals the inner world of the psychoneurotic character of the dictator. He feels vexed by the presence of the people who cannot “roll an R like a queen. Even a parrot can roll an R.” When Dove saw this as a new and speakable subject, she immediately made up her mind to connect a parrot imitating spring. She created a parrot with the colour of parsley to express her thought very easily. Through one of her students, she got a green parrot of the parsley colour. The first part became a Villanelle. “The Cane Fields” has five tercets as in a Villanelle. The last four lines make a quatrain with a couplet. The third line of each tercet has two alternate rhymes “cane appears,” and “imitating spring.” It has nineteen lines as in the original French Models of Villanelle. The biblical tradition reports “shibboleth” as a permanent password used by the men of Gilead to distinguish the escaping Ephraimites who pronounced the initial [f] as [s] (Judges 12:4-6). “Parsley,” however, is in the German cultural background and it transforms the German prose into a transcultural icon.

*On the Bus with Rosa Parks* has poems relating to African American liberation and freedom. The Civil Rights Movement is extended in *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* along with the personal life of Rosa Parks, the unknown domestic worker in the segregated South which was made a public issue. She was the courageous activist of the Civil Rights Movement. It is a revolutionary poem, and depicts the reason for the civil rights movement and the resilient nature of the black women. This volume foregrounds the political suppression of the black people since the civil rights movement. The title was generated by Dove’s daughter, for on one occasion the poet and her daughter actually found themselves on a bus trip with the famous civil rights heroine, Rosa Parks. This volume is against the Jim Crow laws in the United States enacted
between 1876 and 1965 emphasising segregation of public schools, public places, and public transportation, and the segregation of restrooms, restaurants for whites and blacks.

“Lady Freedom Among us” represents women as the embodiment of freedom in the world and evokes the spirit of civil rights and racial freedom. The poet analyzes the critical moment when Rosa Parks whose name is associated with the civil rights movement stepped into history. Dove told a Women in the Arts interviewer:

I’ve always been obsessed by the voices that are not normally heard. I think it comes from the women I knew as a child, the women in the kitchen who told the best stories. They knew how the world worked, about human nature, and they were wise, are wise. When you are marginalized in any way—race, gender, age, class—you must learn to listen and pay attention very carefully if you are going to survive, and—women have known this since time immemorial—you have to anticipate what is expected of you, what you can get away with, how far you can push yourself. That makes you an extremely sensitive human being. It’s the lemonade you get out of the lemons. (URL)

Steffen comments that On the Bus with Rosa Parks “is her homage to those who paved her way into political and artistic freedom as well as her poetic integration of a politically segregated world before her” (161).

“In the Lobby of the Warner Theatre, Washington D.C.” gives the details about Parks’ attendance at Amistad’s Premiere. “The Situation is Intolerable” and “The Enactment” are two poems where Dove talks of racism and political mobilization for the Civil Rights Movement. “Climbing In,” “QE2 Transatlantic Crossing,” and “Third Day” are some of the poems which explore African American history, first Dove as a child, later as woman and lastly as an
accomplished poet. “The Situation is intolerable” elaborates the segregated bus set up among the
blacks and the whites. Dove records the discrimination very clearly as history to remind the path
through which they walked to reach the real freedom of their mind and soul.

Dove captures Rosa Parks’ historic act of refusal in “Rosa,” the centerpiece of the title
sequence in 12 taut lines as in a haiku. After the work Rosa would like to rest. But the irony is
that she wasn’t allowed to rest in the bus. Her pain made her violate the rules of the whites and
show her anger. Rosa Parks “stood” straight “when they bent down,” to highlight the height of
Rosa Parks in the freedom of African American people. How Parks becomes a “true inspiration”
is shown in “In the Lobby of the Warner Theatre, Washington D.C.”

she was the true inspiration, she was living history.

The audience descended in a cavalcade of murmuring

sequins. ..................

She had learned to travel a crowd

Bearing a smile we weren’t sure we could bear

To receive, it was so calm a suturing. (RP 86, 9-15)

“Rosa” tells about the ordinary black woman who travelled in a bus in Montgomery, Alabama,
on the first of December 1995, refused to leave her seat to a white man and she was arrested and
imprisoned. Dove is a master at transforming a public or historic element into greatly creative
private thoughts.

“Black on a Saturday Night” gives her real favorable reception of blackness. She never
makes any attempt to show herself as a white writer. She reveals her identity as an African
American. She wants to prove her literary talent to the world as an African American writer.

“Claudette Colvin Goes to Work,” tells about another Negro woman who was arrested as “she
refused to get up out of her seat on the bus and give it to a white person” (RP 79). This is the second attempt by Claudette Colvin. This poem is written in first person narrative. She sums up the situation:

I take the Number 6 bus to the Lex Ave train

and then I’m there all night, adjusting the sheets,

emptying the pans. And I don’t curse or spit

or kick and scratch like they say I did then.

I help those who can’t help themselves,

I do what needs to be done…and I sleep

whenever sleep comes down on me. (RP 80, 29-35).

“Three Days of Forest, a River, Free” makes up a woman’s desire to get independence, without seeking the help of a man. The woman’s courage to face life is fuelled with her self-confidence. The following passage from “The Enactment” portrays a young woman speaking out against racial cruelty:

Then all she’s got to do is

sit there, quiet, till

the next moment finds her - and only then

can she open her mouth to ask

“Why do you push us around?”

and his answer: “I don’t know but the law

is the law and you

are under arrest.” (RP 81, 16-23)
This poem carries a strong message, and the poetic voice speaks directly to readers. It also elicits sympathy for those who were subjected to racist actions in the 1960s. Dove writes this poem as if it were prose. It is well executed with dialogue and language that are associated with everyday conversation.

**Remythologising** history is a real artistic talent wherein the writer preserves history with classical themes which will easily reach the readers on the one hand and classical figures who can be adapted to suit the contemporary situation on the other. In *Mother Love*, Dove remythologises history with her *revision* of the original myth of Demeter and Persephone. The *Mother Love* collection presents the bondage between the mother and the daughter. Demeter, the goddess of 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 complete change in the tone and voice of the writer from the original myth and the intensity of the writer 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*. Demeter as a mother mourned despondently to save mother earth from the pressurized structure of carnal abuses, and gender discrimination. This myth analyses the balance between classical and contemporary atmosphere. Dove moves from the world of myth to her own voice as an African American woman in the middle of the poetry collection, and shares her experiences in the strange land, and ends the mythic cycle perfectly. Dove acknowledges that she was inspired by Rilk’s “Sonnets to Orpheus” for writing the *Mother Love* sonnet sequence. Dove says that “sonnets seemed the proper mode for most of this work–and not only in homage and as counterpoint to Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus*” (*ML Fwd*).
Mother Love is the modern rendering of the classical myth of Demeter and Persephone. The sonnet form which was disowned once is used by Rita Dove as an effective form of communication, “an intact world where everything is in sync, from the stars down to the tiniest mite on a blade of grass” says Dove in her introduction to the Mother Love poems. Mother Love deals with the relationship between mother and daughter merging the Demeter-Persephone myth. It mainly talks about the treachery and re-formation among all three women: “mother-goddess, daughter—consort and poet” (ML Fwd). Steffen cites the idea from Treusch-Dieter on the importance of mythical inclusion in a work of art:

… mother-goddess, daughter-consort and poet—are struggling to sing in their chains,” Dove writes in her foreword to Mother Love wrestling with fate, life through death is indeed inseparable from wrestling composure and form. Myth, the oldest and most widespread form of “speaking about gods” in the ancient world of oral tradition, is above all determined, even over determined, material whose narrative inscribes itself into history with “Blood and fire.” (ML 129)

The biological cycle of the natural richness of regeneration is given in the form of a modern rendering of the classical myth of Demeter and Persephone.

The first poem “Heroes” leads us into the mythical cycle, with images like “flowers, weedy field, house, water, poppy, miserable garden, stolen jar,” (ML 3) and to realize the importance of both good and evil of our life. The second section starts with “Primer” and elaborates on Persephone’s childhood, abduction by Hades, and Demeter’s grief over Persephone’s disappearance. “The Search” delves into the ‘loss’ of ‘herself’ wandering “under a ratty sweater” (ML 10) to show nomadic identity. There is search for her identity beyond “indifference.” The next poem “Protection” brings the nomadic snail figure and indicates her
capture by Hades. “The Narcissus Flower” explains the perplexities of life and how the character moves from her innocence to her understanding of life in the first place, and from legendary life to the life of constituting an original pattern of the life cycle in the second place.

Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, plucked a narcissus flower in the field, a little away from her friends, and she was dragged into the underground kingdom by Hades. Demeter, the mother of Persephone, the goddess of corn and fertility, was inconsolable; she abandoned her duties, and disguised as a mortal wandered the earth with grief. The whole cycle is in seven sections in sonnet and near sonnet forms with small deviations. This collection carries historical memories and serves as an expression of culture and a projection of the individual psyche.

The use of myth is the instrument through which Dove connects the ordinary day-to-day affairs to create an extraordinary effect and adapts the ideas of classical literatures. In this particular collection, Dove revises the actually received myth with the modern protagonist, making her the representative of a group, connecting with a public historical event. Dove also handles her theme of myth to highlight the mysterious ideas on contemporary life. Through *Mother Love* Dove evaluates the degradation and corruption of the modern world on the one hand and brings her personal experience and the racial constraints on the other.

*Mother Love* incorporates the characteristic features of womanhood: motherly affection, sacrifice, tolerance, forgiveness, protection, fortitude, and tenderness. Poems like “Persephone Falling,” “The Narcissus Flower,” “Persephone Abducted,” “Demeter Mourning,” “Persephone in Hell,” and “Demeter Waiting” are written in order to show the intimate relationship between the mother and her daughter. Another poem, “Nightmare,” elaborates her worry about her husband who recovers from a stroke.
The very first poem “Heroes” laconically tells the ordinary event of picking the flowers in the field in three nine line stanzas, in twenty-eight lines (two sonnets). The unanticipated viciousness of picking a poppy, the life source of an old woman, which is predetermined and inevitable, makes the protagonist a murderer. She is in quest of water, which is a source of life to energize the dying plant. The picking of the flower forecasts the defunctness of the protagonist. There is a tragic tension in the poem. It makes us curious about what will happen to the flower and to her.

Part II has twelve poems which elaborate on the persona’s childhood, abduction, and Demeter’s grief. There are different voices in this section: (1) there is the autobiographical presence of the poet herself; (2) there is an impersonal narrative voice; (3) there are the voices of Persephone and Demeter in a very antique mode, and (4) the impersonal voice of nature (Righelato 162). *Mother Love* is “a rueful confession that nature’s enchaining of the female slews the feminist desire to take control” (Righelato 163). Dove brilliantly brings out African American slave history by re-mythologising the classical myth.

“Persephone Falling” from *Mother Love* is a myth of her predestined destiny. Persephone as an active agent does not gather the flower but she “pulled / stooped to pull harder and Hades claimed his due; she is lost” (*ML* 9, 2-3). Her irresponsible behaviour made her accept her predicament. This is portrayed in “The Search” where Demeter again as an irresponsible mother leaves Olympus and wanders in search of her daughter and confronts the same kind of predicament of seduction by her own brother Poseidon, the God of sea and water. Though she takes the form of a mare, to escape from Poseidon, he takes equine (resembling a horse) shape and rapes her. The African American incestuous relationship is beautifully substantiated through
the myth. Here myth portrays both the psychological and the communal horror of the modern world.

“Persephone Abducted” is a reminder of the curse of Persephone as she was screaming, and struggling, that no one could hear and help her. “Her features withered” as she was “singing in the field” (ML 13). “Protection” brings out the nostalgic feelings of Demeter. She sees “the slim vine” of her neck, her hair “the stubborn baby curls” which “hangs and shines” as “trained ivy” (ML 11). The nomadic state of the African American identity is suggested here in this poem “the snail has lost its home” (ML 11). Here the mother persona is the African American Demeter. Dove merges nature and human life with the fusion of ruefulness and loss. As she is the queen of the underworld, she is advised to “eat fear / before fear eats” (ML 12) her. Hades abducted her as “a knife easing into / the humblest crevice” (ML 12). This whole section sums up the modern horror of sexuality, brutality through nature’s fertility. The next poem “Grief: The council” is set in verse or song to be chanted or sung in response of the alternating voices. The voice of an African American woman with the voice of culture gets its permeation with hope to get recovery and renewal from their old status.

“Wiederkehr” (City in Arkansas, USA. A state in South Central United States; one of the Confederate states during the American Civil War; also called a land of opportunity) is symbolic of Hades’ male chauvinism. When there is an opportunity, she leaves the monotony and she later regrets the bitter experience of homesickness and expects her mother to visit her. “The Bistro Styx” is about the meeting of the mother and daughter to bring out the parental discernment. Demeter, the mother and the civilized woman, records the niceties of her daughter’s brand-new fashionable clothes. Persephone seals her fate, eating seven seeds of a pomegranate in order to become part of the underworld. Now she can never be away from the underworld. The title is
again symbolic of her eating the fruit in “Bistro Styx,” an underworld restaurant. She becomes part of the underworld. She can come and see others for a short period, but she will stay permanently in the underworld which becomes her second home. In the case of women, after their marriage, their husband’s house becomes their permanent house in the Indian culture. The Biblical context gives the first disobedience of Eve who ate the forbidden fruit to become part of the Earth, her new world away from the protection of God. Dove presents the predicaments of women from all perspectives.

Part V of *Mother Love* gives the plurality of voices in Persephone’s mind. The next poem “Nature’s Itinerary” is also in the voice of the poet persona. And the “Sonnet in Primary Colors” gives the spirit of freedom which can be won out of suffering. The persona is in “one black wing” the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo recalls her relationship with her partner Diego Rivera. She with her indomitable spirit gives her paintings as her votive offerings to God. This is the celebration of art and creative spirit. “Demeter Mourning” tells the inconsolable feeling of Demeter as a mother who loses her daughter. She feels that she can “laugh again at / a bird, perhaps, chucking the nest” (*ML* 48). “Chucking” refers to a psychological term in organizing items into familiar, manageable units; it often occurs automatically. As an African American mother, Dove can’t accept the cultural irregularities in her daughter.

In “Afield” Demeter watches her daughter walking “under the cloud, languid white oars,” and wandering with her “hands pocketed, hair combed tight” to “get back” to Hades. The mother feels the pull of the fateful cycle, the rhythm of nature, also feminist in the contemporary sense. The sestet gives the idea how women are partially cut off in the patriarchal society. There is violence in nature’s fertility which promotes decomposition; the natural cycle becomes the
subject of the whole of the section. Here Dove’s concern is to show cross cultural fertility in a multicultural society.

The last poem of part V, “Lost Brilliance,” informs the wistfulness of her imperial underground comfort as Hades’ queen. Persephone remembers how Hades’ chariot drags her through the underworld Styx, the river of classical legend which brings the souls of the dead to the underworld, by Charon, the boat man. The subjugation of erotic preoccupation is portrayed in the following lines:

In time, I lost the capacity
for resolve. It was as if
I had been traveling all these years
without a body,
until his hands found me—
and then there was just
the two of us forever:
one who wounded,
and one who served. (ML 52, 26-34)

Part VI has nine poems that reflect myth and history. Demeter is unwilling to discharge her duties as a responsible Goddess of agriculture in “Demeter Waiting.” She grieves that “I will drag my grief through a winter / of my own making and refuse,” (ML 56, 8-9) and she continues that “shit on the cicadas, dry meteor / flash, finicky butterflies! I will wail and thrash” (ML 56, 11-12) and she is consoling herself to wait until her daughter’s return in the next cycle. This can be elaborated as the real human experience.
The poem “History” claims a reasonable question. “Why did history / happen only on outside” when there are proofs embodying the pregnant woman and her knowledge of “an embryo track an arc / across her swollen belly from the inside / and knew… it emerge a monster” (ML 59, 6-10). There is a sign of the property of producing history abundantly and sustaining vigorous and luxuriant growth with the symbol of a pregnant woman along with the sign of the renewal of energy too. “Lamentations” gives the pastoral tradition to get fulfillment and contentment from nature, which is a source of tranquility, harmony, peacefulness, love, and serenity. Having been the object of cultural stereotyping, Dove characteristically moves from the passivity of objectification to an active examination in her art of how myth shapes and accounts for human behavior. In the poem “The Horse and Tree” the freedom of nature is explicitly expressed. Nature’s universal theorization is identified through mythic identity.

“Mother Love” (the title of the sequence) is in the sonnet form with longer lines. It is an interaction between the modern and the classical through the melting pot of gender. When Demeter was disguised as an old woman she was offered hospitality by the four daughters of King Celes and Queen Metanira. In return, she also offers her care to Queen Metanira’s baby son Demophone. In the process of making that boy immortal, she anoints him with nectar by day and puts him on the fire at night to burn out his mortality, a kind of cultural refashioning. She gets a chance to take revenge on patriarchal society.

Susan Van Dyne remarks that “Dove seems to avoid distinctively racial subjects, attitudes, or idiom more often than she adopts them” (68), but uses this mother-daughter theme to place Dove in a “specifically African American tradition of female poets,” theorizing that “poems of black motherhood are a central feature of this tradition… the figure of the mother is
much more consistently valorized as a source of racial pride, endurance, and political resistance” (73) (qtd in Dyne, *The Poetics* 152).

Part VII fully remythologizes Dove’s personal travel experiences in Sicily, and verbalizes nature. These sonnets trace Dove’s search for the ruins of Demeter’s temple near Agrigento on the Island of Sicily. Dove travelled to find the Goddess of Agriculture in her place. There are eleven poems with significance, because number Eleven displays the qualities of intuition, patience, honesty, sensitivity, and spirituality, and is idealistic. Others turn to people with ‘Eleven’ for teaching and inspiration, and are usually uplifted by the experience. In systems such as Astrology and basic Numerology, eleven is considered a Master Number. Number eleven is a master vibration and as such should not be reduced to a single number. People with this number could be both idealistic and visionary, and they are attracted to the unknown. They can be unusual, interesting, and magnetic personalities. Through the variety of the constructions, the disappointments of the persona are communicated.

Dove is “consciously” working “at exploring” history because she finds “those junctures—where History with a capital H intersects with lower-case history—fascinating” as she “was acutely aware of the discrepancies between history as I experience it and History as it was reported.” Naturally Dove has been fascinated by the “interstices” as “they are the nodes where we can be most aware of the ways in which we negotiate life, from the innermost feelings to the outward presentation.” Dove strongly believes that her “poetry often emanates from the crossroads” and she loves “the view it gives” her (Dungy 1029). Dove “was watching history occur,” when she was “on the sidelines.” The March on Washington (August 28, 1963) took place on her eleventh birthday. Her father participated in the March and Dove watched it on TV. She witnesses the big Vietnam protests when she was a young girl.
In “The “Blues Aesthetic” and the “Black Aesthetic”: Aesthetics as the Continuing Political History of a Culture” Baraka claims that:

The Blues Aesthetic is not only historical and carrying all the qualities that characterize the African-American people, but social in the same way. It must be how and what black life is and how it reflects on itself. It is style and form but it is the continuum of the content-the ideas, the feelings’ articulation-that is critical as well as the how of the form. Yet form and content are expressions of each other. (Baraka 105). (emphasis mine)

Baker elicited the idea of Henderson about oral tradition and said that “Afro-American ordinary discourse is” continuing “with Afro-American artistic discourse and that an investigation of the Afro-American oral tradition must finally concern itself, not simply with a lexicon, but also with a grammar” (104). Any black poetry and music of African American culture and “their various forms, techniques, devices, nuances, rules, and so on are identified as fundamental structural referents in the continuum of black expressive culture” says Baker in his Blues Ideology.

Structurally speaking … whenever black poetry is most distinctively and effectively Black, it derives its form from two basic sources, Black Speech and Black Music… By Black Speech…the speech of the majority of Black people in this country… This includes the techniques and timbers of the sermon and other forms of oratory, the dozens, the rap, the signifying, and the oral folktale… By Black music I mean essentially the vast fluid body of Black song-spiritualls, shouts, jubilees, gospel songs, field cries, blues, pop songs by Blacks, and in addition, jazz (by whatever name one calls it) and non-jazz by Black composers who consciously or unconsciously draw upon the Black musical tradition. (79-81)
Any culture portrays a particular society at a particular time and place, the tastes in art and manners that are favored by a social group, all knowledge and values shared by a society, and the attitudes and behavior that are characteristic of a particular social group or organization. African American culture is the integration of the cultural traditions, values, and norms of the indigenous African slaves as well as the European settlers. According to Calverton, there are three chief contributions made by the Negros to American culture: “the Negro Spirituals and to a less extend the Blues” in song; “Negro folklore” in tradition; and “Negro Jazz” in music (Baker, Afro 34).

Dove’s works have enough of proof to drive home her rootedness in African American forms, Negro folklore, blues, jazz, gospels, sermons, storytelling adhering to traditional standards of correctness (“texts that provide form”). Dove has used folk-forms, spirituals, and Blues to appreciate the formal literary genres of the African Americans in the line of Langston Hughes and Sterling Browne who are the leading literary mentors of black literary forms of spirituals, and blues. Music becomes the soul of Dove’s poetry exalted by blues, jazz, with the penetrating feel of structure and musical rhythm. Dove, no doubt a musician, and a well-known singer, formulates each of her works combining with music. In her interview with Dungy, she states that “during the course of my writing life I’ve heard and played many different musics—blues and jazz, call-and-response, symphonic and ensemble—and I think now my poems are actually getting up and walking around” (1028). Dove consistently uses the structures of jazz as the base of many of her personal poems along with her lyrical memoirs. All the major volumes of her poetry collections follow the African American musical patterns.

According to Dove, poetry is the meeting of words and music. All her poems have the influence of music which is the real flesh and bone of her poetry. The poems can’t be read
without the association of rhythm. Hers is a natural stream of music. Two of her collections, *Grace Notes* (1989) and *American Smooth* (2004), have musical titles, the former relating to classical music, the latter to ballroom dance. Poems such as “Geometry”, “Cameos,” and poems from *Mother Love*, and *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* bear witness to her musicality. Music is the ethnic outlet for African Americans which appealed to the post modern writers. It is acknowledged to have other forms of cultural production by black folks for their literary critical writing.

The poems “Lightnin’ Blues,” “Compendium,” and “Definition in the Face of Unnamed Fury” elaborate on disappointments, the problem of accommodativeness, and confusions which demand a lot of maturity on the part of the African Americans to face and later solve their problems. “Definition in the Face of Unnamed Fury” gives the sense of failure and to escape from the dehumanizing racial oppression: “each note slips/into querulous rebuke, finger pads
cored with pain, shallow ditches/to rut in like a runaway slave/with a barking heart … (SP 159). His feelings are given in musical textures with words. His life is not a tragic one, but he represents the whole African American mass. “It almost feels like a tenor sax belting out a be-
pop phrase” (Ratiner 17) (This style of jazz ultimately became synonymous with modern jazz).

“Lightnin’ Blues” gives the bad luck of Thomas to have his car broken down. The whole family was saved from heavy injuries and loss of life. While the family was listening to a “canary” on the radio, Thomas was trying to drive his car during a heavy down pour of rain. It is symbolic of their struggling through life. Dove believes that her poems reflect an intensive relationship to the music of the spoken word in each connotation. It becomes easy for Dove to bring out the folklore techniques in her poetry to differentiate American variety. The first poem “This Life” is written in African American folklore tradition.
As a child I fell in love
With a Japanese woodcut
of a girl gazing at the moon.

I waited with her for her lover
He came in white breeches and sandals,
He had a goatee—he had
your face, though I didn’t know it…. (SP 4, 7-19).

The poem “The Bird Frau” narrates how the mother anticipated her wounded son’s arrival with her preparation of the “parakeet.” The image of War is plainly demonstrated by killing the bird for her wounded son. She fed the “parakeet” and killed it to make her son happy. Nature is both a destroyer and a source of food. “The Snow King” is another example of the folklore tradition.

In a far far land where men are men
And Women are sun and sky,
The snow king paces. And light throws
A gold patina on the white spaces
Where sparrows lie frozen in hallways. (SP 9, 1-5)

The other poems in the folklore tradition are “Sightseeing,” “Robert Schumann, Or: Musical Genius Begins with Affliction,” “Teach Us to Number Our Days,” and “Nigger Song an Odyssey.” “Sightseeing” precisely shows the fatal accident of the Second World War. She saw her position also in another country as an alien and has undergone this war struggle in her mind. As a common onlooker, she describes how the German villagers returned after their agreed occupancy in their church, only to see
a consort

of broken dolls! Look they were mounted

snapped off wings and other appendages.

The heads rolled the farthest. Someone

a deserter, perhaps, or a distraught priest.

Whoever it was, the job was interrupted,

So to speak, in mid-step: this forearm

to look at a bunch of smashed statues. (SP 10, 5-33)

The third poem of The Yellow House on the Corner “Robert Schumann, Or: Musical Genius Begins with Affliction” talks of the persona’s excess of creative energy. He is ruled by music. Music has taken hold of his entire life. His life is deteriorating and he becomes mentally ill and finally dies in the mental asylum. Schumann, the hunter of music hears a “cry in a thicket of it’s own making” (SP 6). The poem is full of music. Schumann is moved by the music, his excitements are due to music. The poem tells the tragic end of Schumann in a mental asylum. Dove uses music as an instrument to cure mental disturbances. Schumann is able to live in a world of fantasy because of music. He uses women as “the source of his artistic composition.” There is an ebb and flow between his moral life and lawlessness. Dove creates a frenzied mood in a romantic situation.
“Healing laughter or saving ironic distance is often evident in the folk culture and folk music with which suffering and injustice” (Keller 123) are expressed in Dove’s poems. In *Thomas and Beulah* Dove brings in “healing laughter” or “saving ironic distance” (Keller 123) a common feature of African American folk culture and folk music. “Thomas at the Wheel” is a fine example of folk laughter.

he laughed as he thought *Oh*

*the writing on the water.* Thomas imagined

his wife as she awoke missing him,

cracking a window. He heard sirens

rise as the keys swung, ticking. (*SP* 172, 20-24)

Thomas looked helplessly at the “glove compartment” containing medicines which would save him from his heart attack and bring back his life. Thomas “laughed as he thought *oh / the writing on the water*” remembering the Biblical writing as he dies. Dove brings the Biblical allusions very close to her writing to instill her African American original Source, the Bible of all western writers.

Dove’s verse, its superiority, quality and relations, are quite different. Dove establishes her literary experiences of poetry from her direct participation in events or activities. Dove had been in Akron, Ohio, a German American community, where she got the chance to sing German songs in fifth and sixth grades. She learnt music also as she learnt lessons. In a 1998 interview conducted by Malin Pereira and published in the Summer 1999 issue of *Contemporary Literature*, Dove states:

I believe that language sings, has its own music, and I’m very conscious of the way something sounds, and that goes from a lyric poem all the way to an essay or
to the novel, that it has a structure of sound which I think of more in symphonic terms for larger pieces. I really do think that sonnets to me are like art songs. That’s one thing. I also think that resolution of notes, the way that a chord will resolve itself, is something that applies to my poems—the way that, if it works, the last line of the poem, or the last word, will resolve something that’s been hanging for a while. And I think musical structure affects even how the poems are ordered in a book. Each of the poems plays a role: sometimes it’s an instrument, sometimes several of them are a section, and it all comes together that way too. (URL)

Dove’s family enjoyed listening to music daily, their record collection included works ranging from folk songs to chamber music. Dove began taking cello lessons at the age of ten. Numerous books were well preserved by her father in her home. During her childhood she thought of books as her companions. Her parents permitted their children to go to the library and allowed them to read all kinds of books.

According to Crummell, the language of any literature is important as it expresses the spirit of the particular community. He feels that “a language without its characteristic features, stamp and spirit, is a lifeless and unmeaning thing,” and any effort to translate from English to the black vernacular is “so great a blunder” (17) which was quoted by Gates in Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s. Like Langston Hughes who in The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain confessed, “why should I want to be a white? I am a Negro … and am beautiful…” (228), Dove preferred to preserve her black identity than to turn white. She substantiates black cultural values against the European culture with her black traditional poetic forms. Dove proves
that the black people are different from the white people with their distinct black poetical forms like spirituals, blues, and jazz.

The form of the spirituals is stunning with its reality base, and it is the fusion of American and Western Hymns. No one can deny the fact that the finest poetry of the black Americans including the Negro Spirituals were created during the Abolitionist Age. The spirituals are religious songs sung during the slavery period. It was Langston Hughes who enumerated the beauty of spirituals first and used them in his work. The spirituals and blues of Hughes gave inspiration to all subsequent African American writers to have their unique tradition in form.

Blues are defined as a lyrical expression. This “music about God and the Bible was sung during work time, play time, and rest time as well as on Sundays at praise meetings” (NA 5). The spirituals “offered them much-needed psychic escape from the workaday world of slavery’s restrictions and cruelties” (NA 5). “Pamela” is a slave monologue with the theme of spirituals: “She stepped / into the open. The wind / lifted–behind her, / fields spread their sails” (SP 34).

At two, the barnyard settled

into fierce silence–anvil,

........................

She stepped

Into the open. The wind

lifted–behind her,

fields spread their sails. (SP 34, 1-9).
Another slave monologue “David Walker” is also set in spirituals. “Free to travel, he still
couldn’t be shown how lucky” (SP 30). “Three Days of Forest, a River, Free” also adds to
Dove’s use of spirituals.

Who can point out a smell
but a dog? The way is free
to the river, tell me,
Lord, how it feels
to burst out like a rose. (SP 92, 15-19)

“The Hill Has Something to Say” gives the theme of spirituals: “and takes its time. / What’s left / to climb’s inside us, / earth rising, stupefied” (SP 74). “Fox Trot Holidays” from American Smooth contributes to the spirituals: “one man and / one woman, rib to rib / with no heartbreak in sight– / just the sweep of paradise / and the space of a song (AS 19).

Spirituals and gospels are the expressions of African American culture and tradition. Through these forms, they got their survival and sustenance in their hazardous life. The poem “Teach Us to Number Our Days” (YHC) is an example of spirituals. This allusion is taken from the Bible. In the Bible, Moses prayed to God to teach him to number his days in order to remember God whose magnificence saved them from afflictions. The poem “Cholera” is also written in spirituals.

The very weak got a piece of bread
and fires were built, though the evening was warm.

Said the doctor, You’ll live.

I walk in de moonlight, I walk in de

Starlight
Who could say but that it wasn’t anger
had to come out somehow? Pocketed filth.
The pouring-away of pints of pale fluid.

*I walk in de graveyard, I’ll walk
Through de graveyard

Movement, dark and silken.

The dry-skinned conjurers circling the fire. (*SP* 36, 11-22)

Negro religious songs and shouts are practiced to express their own feelings and emotions while praying. To mitigate their work pressure, the Negroes sang labour songs, and other forms of musical patterns. “Nigger Song: An Odyssey” explains the dauntless nature of the black youth who with their strength of mind adventure into the “excavation sites, and the black entrails of the earth,” in order to prove their determination.

The poem explains how six black youths ride into “the grey-green nigger night” (*SP* 14), the uninhabited landscape, like Odysseus. They “sweep past excavation sites; the pits / Of gravel gleam like mounds of ice” (*SP* 14, 6-7). They turned “into the black entrails of the earth / the green smoke sizzling on” (*SP* 14, 10-11) their tongues. The famous mythical Greek hero Odysseus after all his adventure returned home, but these modern riders never come back. Their quest was nothing but to face danger. Like Odysseus, the black men wanted to embrace danger as their life saving order. The irony is the Greek hero had returned after all his adventures; but the black heroes can never come back from their afflictions. Their destiny is to enjoy danger and embrace death. Here Dove’s use of stressing a normally weak beat is identified.

Music is inbuilt in the African American people’s soul. They sing everything not leaving their personal joys and sorrows, and even communal trials and tribulations. No instrument is
alien to the black people. Creativity would be at its peak when the black artists accomplish and enumerate their music as a sort of conglomeration of social, political, witty, and artistic expression. Through their creative talents they want to differentiate the black identity from the white people’s.

The poem “Straw Hat” determines the essential quality of music in the North. It delineates the hard work done by the men. Through music, the numbness of the artists’ pain, the scabs on their wounds, are explicitly observed. Their inner life is exposed throughout the poem. The poem “Gospel” gives a kind of solace to Thomas unlike his other poems. “Swing low so I can step inside - / a humming ship of voices (SP 165).” There is comfort and solace in this song for Thomas. Righelato could realize that the instrument mandolin expresses his entire mood of pain and helps him to do away with it finally.

The gospel music idiom carries the poem thrillingly and seductively: the short lines of the quatrains cut and shape while the enjambment slithers and escapes historically. In a loving vibrato of cold and hot, stanza and syntax, like tenor and contralto, high and low, create an ongoing pattern in which Thomas “swims homeward warbling.” If the mandolin is the instrument of isolated lyric pain, the gospel choir shares, elaborates, and cathartically chases pain heavenward. (86)

In “Gospel” Dove retrieves the black folk heritage. She brings the “healthy” “single contralto” in order to regain the powerful singing of the female characters too. Keller quotes Levine that “the rise of gospel music corresponded with a sharp ending division between the sacred and secular in black culture” (126). Keller quotes the words of Mahalia Jackson in her Forms of Expansion that “Blues are the songs of despair, but gospel songs are the songs of hope” (126). The personal agony is slowly changed to the general problem, and it represents the voice of the whole
community. Dove goes from the individual attributes to the general difficulty, which moves from the specific to the general. There is a ray of hope in the poem. They expect some kind of reward in the next world. “Swing low” is a recurrent theme in Spirituals which is ever present in the writings of African Americans. “Swing low, sweet chariot, / coming for to carry me home” is a historic African American spirituals of Hughes. Dove also writes the same historic African American spirituals.

_Swing low so I_

can step inside –

.................

blank with promise.

yet how healthy

the single contralto… (SP 165, 1-31)

The poem “Gospel” takes us to the next phase of poetry, i.e. from Thomas’s mandolin to Gospel music. This is again to show the increasing popularity of Americans changing from the old music to a new challenging hopeful music. Gospel music also gives a kind of spiritual experience and people become excited and attain ecstasy. “Gospel” is written with quatrains of four lines each with the contralto, along with tenor, the intermediate between alto and baritone or bass of the musical instruments. Dove’s musicality is proved in each poem with her choice of words and the selective patterns in poems according to the mood of the poems. The Mandolin can isolate lyric pain, by sending Thomas’s pain heavenward. It is a kind of meditation and an inner healing of Thomas to remove all his diseased thoughts and emotions from both his physical and spiritual bodies. Music is used as psychotherapy and a healing agent.
**Thomas and Beulah** also expresses “a toughness of spirits resilience” in their life. It is designed with oral narrative. This story was given her by her grandmother when she was ten or twelve. The whole story is in the oral tradition, starting with the very first poem “The Event.” Through their blues, they give shape to “technological innovativeness and boundless frontier energy.” Their life becomes the life history of both the Africans and the Americans. All Negro music has got the nourishment from the African American’s soul, so as to carry the musical exponents to their African American tradition. Thomas always carries the mandolin with him, which is “an intimate and portable version of the South, a cultural signifier of the migrant black male, its tactile “geography” of shape, surface, and texture the map of pain,” (77) says Righelato. Thomas and Beulah, blues artists, are suffering both physically and mentally but they are always celebrating their blues song.

*Call and Response* is a poetic structure in the folk seculars originating from West African music. It preserves the subtlety of the feelings and emotions of the individuals in communicating their spirit in the form of call and response. The leader may sing the first line and the chorus repeat the same at regular intervals. It’s the direct language of the people with a pictorial vision, and incarnations of ideas, and intense feelings. It’s a natural process of their originality and inner demeanors. The respondent and the leader form the team with the chorus. The AB pattern / AAB pattern is used. Sometimes the first line is repeated twice by the leader followed by a third line by the chorus. The poem “Grief: The Council” (TB), is written with the pattern of *Call and Response*.

I told her enough is enough.

Get a hold on yourself, take a lover,

Help some other unfortunate child.
to abdicate

to let the garden go to seed

………………………………………………

And your basic sunshine pouring through
the clouds. Ain’t this crazy weather?
Feels like winter coming on.

at last the earth cleared to the sea

at last composure (ML 16, 1-41)

“All blues songs involve improvisation, sometimes just in terms of timing and emphasis, sometimes more elaborate reinvention of melodies and even meanings” (NA 22).

The poem “Refrain” is written in country blues with its refrains. Dove’s rootedness in her tradition gives space to write blues to exert her influence from her forebears. There is a slight ray of freedom and hope while he was waiting for the birth of his first child. He is with the family, feeling the togetherness with a lot of expectations. Thomas and Beulah are blues artists who translate their anxieties and angsts such as pain, loss, injustice, despair, rejection in their life into singing with musical instruments. The blues artists interpret their experiences with their musical sense to understand their own life. The poem “Refrain” speculates on his sexual and sentimental experiences. It is in the spirit of country blues. Dove’s use of music in “Refrain” “taps the expressive range and complexity of secular songs in the tradition of black country blues” (Keller 124).

The man inside the mandolin
plays a new tune

every night, sailing
past the bedroom window:

Take a gourd and string it

Take a banana and peel it

Buy a baby blue Nash

And wheel and deal it

……………………

Count your kisses

Sweet as honey

Count your boss’

Dirty money (SP 148, 1-16)

This poem gives a new kind of hope and new beginning to the singer. His creativity is rejuvenated. He is empowered with a new talent for singing a new rhythm. He longs to regain his lost freedom. His mind is refreshed when he sings “Love on a raft / By the light o’ the moon / And the bandit gaze / of the old raccoon” (SP 149, 29-32). It is the long established country blues used by Dove.

“Compendium” also reveals the desire of Thomas to have a male-child. This was the stereotypical problem of men in any country. “Compendium” shows how a family man sacrifices his desires and wishes for the sake of his daughters. Self identity and positive spirits are her weapons to be resilient in nature. The whole of “Mandolin” with blues theme is like beads in a string to give beautiful musical notes to the listener. It is a representative poem of the African American male in a segregated society.
Canary usurper

of his wife’s affections.

Girl girl
girl girl

In the parlor, with streamers,

a bug on a nail. (SP 158, 5-10)

Alice Walker in *Meridian* explores the relevance of the *Blues* experience in the life of the black people. The *Blues* “is the song of the people transformed by the experience of each generation, that holds them together, and if any of it is lost, the people suffer and are without soul…” (271). The last but important poem “The Oriental Ballerina” searches for a new spirit, independence, and the quest for cheerfulness. Beulah is compared to a mechanical doll. This refers to the dwarfed status of black women characters. The dolls are used only for the sake of entertainment. After use, the dolls are thrown away purposefully. This Ballerina is dancing to the “wheeze of the old rugged cross” (SP 201).

The colour blue is associated with all the suffering both of them faced in their life. Beulah ends her life without fulfilling her dream of going to China, her earnest desire to travel, her ambition to find the secrets of life before death, to enjoy the treasures of life, and to create a world of her own. The Orient is the land of the rising sun, but ironically there is no sun in her room. “In this room / is a bed where the sun has gone / walking” (SP 201, 26-28) and Beulah’s face gets warmth through the window. It indicates her death. In the moment of her death, she realizes that “there is no China” (SP 202).

……….. The ballerina dances

……….. at the end of a tunnel if light,
she spins on her impossible toes—

……………………………….

its cheeks. There is no China;

no cross, just the papery kiss

of a kleen x above the stink of camphor,

the walls exploding with shabby tutus. … (SP 202, 43-52)

The fourth section of American Smooth has poems on “BLUES IN HALF-TONES.” Poems like “Bolero,” “Samba Summer,” “Rhumba” are some of the examples of Blues. “Rhumba” has the antiphonal expression of blues rhythm as it connects two events together; the first part gives the commands or directions of the dance, and the second one, its execution.

A touch again:

\[ dip \text{ down} \]

this time, twist

\[ but \text{ spread your arms;} \]

in the knees,

\[ give \text{ me some tone} \]

but soft, follow (soft)

\[ (more \text{ tone}) \]

The reach, that last yearning

\[ & \text{ connect}…. \ (AS \ 108). \]

“The antiphonal mode of different voices with differing kinds of authority is a significant structural feature” which Dove employs in most of the works, and specially in Mother Love. Dove tries to bring out the historical initiative of her works and combining her contemporaneity
to speak through “different voices.” *Mother Love* combines “oral tradition and formal literary decorum” in order to “enact the process of friction, energy, and accommodation by which a vernacular idiom comes into contact with literary conventions that have evolved from a European tradition of letters” (Righelato 23-24).

The first poem of *Mother Love*, Part V “Blue Days” is blues in spirit and mood. The very name suggests the mood. The speaker is the poet herself. Dove particularizes the variations on the activity indicative of belief in the superiority of men over women, and female subservience to nature’s cycle in menstrual rhythm. The role of a blues singer is written in “Rusks.” The persona feels that she is tired of “tearing” herself “down.” So she gives her consent for others to enjoy “the throne of blues for a while,” because “half a happiness is better / than none at goddam all” (*ML* 61, 13-14).

“His Shirt” is in the syncopated rhythm of a Hughes poem of a vertical line format, a form of foreplay appropriate to a love poem. It is in the *In medias res* pattern, a beginning either at the midpoint or at the conclusion, rather than at the beginning.

```
does not show his
true colors. Ice-

blue and of stuff
so common

........

a sail surprised
by boundless joy. (*SP* 59, 1-20).
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The collection *American Smooth* has many poems with syncopated rhythm. “Soprano” from *American Smooth* gives the expression of rap.

When you hit
the centre

of a note, spin
through and off

the bell lip
into heaven,

the soul dies
for an instant–

but you don’t need
its thin

resistance
nor the room
(piano shawl,
Mirror, hyacinth)

Dissolving
The Blues gave birth to Jazz, the musical form of poetry. Jazz is an individual performance with rhythmic beauty which highlights the day-to-day affairs. It emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century in African American communities with the confluence of African and European music traditions. It is the expression of the artistic meeting of elements and is used in ragtime, opera, and other European classical music. It is instrumental music strongly impacted by the sound of the African American voice. Jazz is a song, very personal with new musical flexibility. These types of song have an introduction, a break, and choruses with main themes, along with the secondary connecting theme. It follows the call and response pattern and allows improvisations, syncopated cadences, and other definite structures.

We were dancing – it must have

Been a foxtrot or a waltz,

something romantic but

requiring restraint,

rise and fall, precise

execution as we moved

into the next song without

stopping,

......................
being the *sine qua non*

of American Smooth. (*AS* 39, 1-14)

African American dance, like other aspects of African American culture, finds its earliest roots in the dances of the hundreds of African ethnic groups that made up African slaves in the Americas.

Dance in the African tradition, and in the tradition of slaves, was a part of both everyday life and special occasions. Dance is an art form with body movements of rhythmic expression. It is used as a form of expression, social interaction and sometimes in a spiritual performance. It is a non verbal communication. Dance can be participatory, social or performed for an audience with the view to show social, cultural, aesthetic and artistic significance. In dance, syncopation is often used by dance teachers to mean improvised or rehearsed execution of step patterns that have more rhythmical nuances than standard step patterns. It takes advanced dancing skill to dance in this sense.

Dove directly applies the rhythms of dance to the rhythms of her poetry, especially in *American Smooth*. Every stanza of “Bolero” consists of one extremely long line followed by a shorter and even shorter line. For example, in one stanza she writes: “How everything hurts! Each upsurge onto a throbbing toe, / the prolonged descent / to earth” (16-18). Not only does the content of the poem portray this lively Spanish dance, but also the extremely long first line followed by the two shorter lines reflects the “slow / quick-quick” triple meter of the dance itself.

Moreover these black Americans should dance and sing in an African way, with a command of rhythms often intricate and exotic, a penchant for the use of percussion instruments (including clapping hands and stomping feet), an affection for contrapuntal chants, and a sense of harmony which can apply both to sounds and to choric moves all reminiscent of Africa .... (*HAAL* 295)
Dove could “dance and sing in an African way, with the command of rhythms” which are “reminiscent of Africa.” The title of the poem refers to “a folk dance in duple time that originated in Cuba with Spanish and Cuban elements; features complex footwork and violent movement.” There are two independent melodic parts used in harmonic relationship. Improvisation is allowed and it gives space for spontaneity. In an interview with McDowell, Dove shares her view of the importance of dance:

In African American culture, dance has always been a key element—a communal activity that soothed and united all levels. Everybody was expected to know how to dance, which usually meant hand-dancing (jitterbug or shag), as well as whatever new dances came along on the R&B scene. I grew up believing that any get-together was a good enough excuse to dance...because the dancing there was more exuberant, more in-your-face, more demanding...they would merge and dance down the gauntlet...even entire dances would be forged. So I danced all through college, at parties and in the dormitory hallways—but it was of the shuffle-and-bop-to-the-beat variety. When I went to graduate school, I walked into my first student party at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and was shocked to find everyone just standing around talking! (URL)

Dove extracts the critical dance trap in this collection. With the grace of an Astaire (United States dancer and cinema actor noted for his original and graceful tap dancing (1899-1987)), Dove’s magnificent poems pay homage to the kaleidoscopic cultural heritage from the glorious shimmer of an operatic soprano (The pitch range of the highest female voice) to Bessie Smith’s mournful wail whose music conquered Europe before the Allied advance, like the ballroom-
dancing couple of the title poem, smiling and making the difficult seem effortless, Dove explores the changing aspects between mental representations.

Eventually, *American Smooth* presents the people, the language, and culture of both African American and American, in the United States of America, with the natural tune of accordant, cultured, and gradual movement in dance. Each section expresses the grace of their dance movement coupled with history and syncopated expression of rhythm. The first section *Fox Trot Fridays* thirteen poems explain the war through music. The opening poem “All Souls” reveals Dove’s homelessness in Charlottsville, Virginia, in 1998 when many of her manuscripts were destroyed in the fire. She started her new life as Adam and Eve. They were free to enjoy freedom in the garden. Here Dove makes her personal pain universal when she refers to the first parents.

“Rhumba” captures the mental exercise of dancing perfectly. The duple (musical) time of this dance creates a rhythm like the rhythm of the poem. Dove gracefully combines the thoughts of the two individual dancers as they dance together as partners. The format of the poem offers the reader a chance to read the poem three times in three different ways. You can read the poem left to right and see both dancers’ thoughts as they occur, or you can read just the female dancer’s thoughts, or just the male dancer’s thoughts. This creates multiple windows into the experience. Line breaks, commas, periods, and ellipses occur in dance just as they do in poetry. Each dance has a distinct feel, an imbedded cadence that will suggest a certain shape or silhouette on the page.” The restrictions of the dance create restrictions on the page. Dove aims to captivate readers with the perfect arrangement of words

The flight in the poem, “American Smooth,” resembles the culminating moment when the dancer can simply move and the writer can express his/her thoughts freely. Rita Dove’s
passion for dance and poetry, and her blending of the art forms, sheds light on her own passion for both mediums of expression. Standard dances like the Waltz, Fox Trot, and Tango parallel literary classics and traditional forms, and rhyme and meter. Yet, with the dance, in *American Smooth*, the partners are free to release each other from the closed embrace and dance without any physical contact. They can improvise and bring forth individual expression like a poet. This freedom, improvisation, and blending of dance and poetry is reflected in the title of the book and the poems themselves. Dove embraces dance and poetry without contradiction.

“Variation on Reclamation” depicts the slow recovery of Teddy, a wounded soldier. There is no music to raise his spirits. “How could he recover without a song?” (AS 63). “The Return of Lieutenant James Reese Europe” recalls how the black infantry were equipped and the band leader’s victory parade in 1919. These black soldiers brought jazz to Europe. “Lieutenant James Europe’s band played jazz all over France; ironically, they became goodwill ambassadors for the very country that had reviled them” (Dungy 1029). His return is a real return to his racism. “Ripont” the final poem of the second section summarizes their capturing of sixty of their enemies, and equipping several artillery and antitank weapons. Dove recalls her journey with her husband and daughter to the French village to learn about the “unknown soldiers” who recorded their bravery in history. There is no punctuation to bring the intensity of war, which was a time bound one. Dove bridges the historical consciousness bringing the past and the present into the poem.

The poems chosen for a deep analysis have undoubtedly numerous examples of snippets from Dove’s life and the experiences of those whom she has chosen to project, which in turn hold the key to the history of their race. Following the trends set forth by the pioneers of African American literary tradition she has brought within her poetic realm (i) the record of history
through her personal experiences and her grandparents’ experiences in *Thomas and Beulah*, (ii) given a poetic rendition of some of the slave narratives in *The Yellow House on the Corner*, (iii) and given masterly strokes in the select use of African American musical forms such as spirituals, the blues, the gospels, sermons, and jazz in *Museum*, and dance in *American Smooth*. In the next chapter Dove’s handling of the African American traditional features found in her verse play, fiction, and her short fiction is dealt with. Dove’s rootedness in the African American tradition and her closeness to her history and culture get further emphasized in the close analysis of her play and fiction.