CHAPTER 1

HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF BLACK WOMEN WRITERS
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Section A: History of Afro-American Literature.

The history of Afro-American literature can be traced from A. D. 1441, when the folks were brought to America from Africa to work in the fields. They came in chains, and they were whipped, beaten and treated cruelly as though they were not human beings but the property of the people who owned the farms and plantations where they worked. These unlucky Africans were slaves, separated from their families. Though they came from many different countries, with different languages religions and stories to tell, their owners treated them like one single group, and tried to take their stories away. But the slaves kept the stories alive and passed them on from one generation to the next. Many of their stories were about "tricksters", folks or animals who got into trouble and used their wits to save themselves. Brer Rabbit was the most popular character who could outsmart bigger and stronger enemies. The slaves saw themselves like Brer Rabbit, being hurt by people who were stronger and more powerful than them. Moreover, they had to use their brains to survive. Though they were forbidden to read and write, they were brave to create new lines- new songs, new customs, new stories - out of pieces of the lives they lived then. J. Saunders Reddings calls it a "literature of necessity". Their involvement with colour, caste, anguish and rage, has been responsible for the coherence of their group expression. Therefore, a literature developed by them is called the literature of Black Americans.

The strain of racial protest is predominant in almost all Afro-American literatures. It was by the middle of 18th century the black writers began to write in America. They wrote in English in letters, pamphlets, periodicals,
books, and documents of various kinds. They were the apprentices in the learning of a strange skill and this became the Age of Apprenticeship for black literature. The first known piece of literature was written by a black American Lucy Terry (1730–1821) titled, *Bars Fight*. The black writers of the eighteenth century were located in New England. They were better treated because of the influence of religion, hence the religious themes dominated the work of black writers. Jupiter Hammon (1718–1806) and Phillis Wheatley (1754 – 1784) were among the first to publish their works. The last author of the earliest period of black American writing was Gaustavus Vasssa (1745 – 1797).

By 1830, the first age of Afro American literature was over. Protest governed and inflamed the ideas of the black writers. A new climate of tension in American race affected the black writings. Barbara K. Curry in her works comments,

> "The writers who wrote the protest, and who seemed to live it in their bones, were persons born as slaves who had escaped the South or Negroes born in the North who nevertheless ardently supported abolition."  

Thus abolitionism captured the hearts and minds of the writers. From 1830 to 1895 this was the prevailing force in Afro-American literature. This was the second stage, the Age of the Abolitionists. George Moses Horton (1797 – 1883) born a slave is considered to have presented the first works devoted to themes of protest, *Hope of Liberty* (1829) *On Liberty and Slavery*.

> "Am I sadly cast aside,  
On misfortunes rugged tide?  
Well the world my pains deride for ever?  
Must I dwell in slavery’s night  
And all pleasures take its flight,  
Far beyond my feeble sight forever?"  

Black American Literature · Roger Welton
During the same period of George Horton, James Witfield and Mrs Harper; published their volumes of verse, black autobiographies and black fiction. Frederick Douglass (1817-95) viewed the turning point in the history of Black Americans by the Proclamation issued by the President Lincoln. Life and Times his autobiography presented the story of nineteenth century America. The birth of black fiction came in 1850 when three novels were published. The first novel was written in 1853 by William Wells Brown (1816–1884) titled Clotel or the President’s Daughter. The second novel, Blake, and The Huts of America was the only works by Marlin R Delany (1812–1885).

By the end of the nineteenth century, the social and literary conditions for black Americans had changed. This was the beginning of serious artistic consciousness in black literature. Many of the black writers were born free and in spite of oppressive racial conditions they were able to maintain in their writings significant artistic detachments from these conditions. Paul Dumber (1872–1906) was America’s first accomplished black poet. Charles Chesternet (1858–1892) and James W. Johnson were the best writers of fiction. W. E. B. DuBois (1868–1963) was the most gifted and perceptive essayist who researched the facts of black culture interpreted and evaluated what he discovered. This was the third age of Afro American literature, the age of Negro – Nadir followed by the Age of Harlem Renaissance with not much arbitrariness

1920–1940 saw the dawn of The Harlem Renaissance which was the fourth age of Afro-American literature. Public became interested in black lifestyle, how they lived, the things they enjoyed and the things that made them sad and angry. Alain L Locke (1886–1954) published an anthology of black essays, fiction, poetry and drama. The New Negro The first important writer of the Renaissance was Claude Mekay (1889–1948) who expressed his
melancholy and unconcealed anger. Then came Jean Toomer (1894 – 1967) who presented a collection of prose, sketches and poems with a common theme but a contrast portrait of rural black peasant’s life and northern black urban life. The last two major poets of the Harlem Renaissance were Countee Cullen (1903 – 1946) and Langston Hughes (1902 – 1967) and it was the great depression among many things, which killed the Harlem Renaissance.

With the patrician Franklin D. Rossvelt, Americans fought the depression throughout in 1930s. His Civilian Conservation Corps, Works Progress Administration, Public Housing, innovations in health care and to the indigent, young, and old, steadily dissipated the fear and gloom in America. Americans took active part in the World War II by sending white and black armies. But had less of a rude returning of the Negroes as after the World War I, colour and caste had not vanished. In the early 1950s, from America writers like Charles Houston and Richard Wright dominated a certain aspect of an era. What Houston was to the civil rights struggle of the Negroes, Richard Wright was to Afro-American literature. He created powerful images of blacks’ life in American social order. He had a great impact on his contemporary black writers. They all tended to write well and this was the golden age of Afro-American literature. No other black writer has had Wright’s effect upon a group of contemporary black writers. In Afro American literature, the years after the Harlem Renaissance is the Age of Wright, i. e. from 1930 to the end of the 1950s.

Charles Houston and Richard Wright were integrationists. They sailed against all imperfections they found in America. They were not disenchanted with either American or Western culture; they renounced all trust in them and preached for Negroes. They dreamt that America would work for them as it had worked for whites. There developed an anti-integrationism associated with black militancy that rejected the dream shared by Houston and Wright
along with those of all the white bourgeois in America. This anti-integrationism supported not only that white America had sinned against blacks but also against all humanity. By 1960’s, the Negroes understood “Black” was “beautiful” and they had to spread the truth of the worth of blackness. Their doctrine began to appear in Afro-American literature and the recognition of this period was the age of the Black Militant.

Thus the 1960s and 1970s have not been only the years of Civil rights activism but they saw the technological and scientific progress and with this moved towards the twenty-first century. Afro-Americans have had, with approximate dates, from its beginnings until 1830, an Age of Apprenticeship; from 1830 to 1895, an age of abolitionists; from 1895 until 1920, an Age of the Harlem Renaissance; from 1930 until 1960, an Age of Richard Wright, and from 1960 onwards it is the Age of the Black Militant. What lies ahead remains to be seen. Though the subjects treated will not disappear but what shape it will take remains unknown.

Section B: Development of the Black Women Novelists:

Black women have played a heroic role in the fight for freedom and equality. Dr Stephen E Henderson of Howard University says,

“Just as Black literature has always been implicated in our freedom struggle, Black women almost by definition have been involved in literature and of our culture in general” (XXIII)⁴

When tracing the development of black women novelists it is important to note that before 1966 few novels by black women were published. The period from 1970 to the present has seen an increase in publishing of black women novelists. Many black women writers have emerged, each with her particular focus, style and worldview. It is not easy to comment on every
significant black women writers of that time. So to present the richness and
diversity in the spectrum concentration is on a few black women writers.

Table I

Chronology of Development of Black Women Writers in America.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>Amelia Johnson</td>
<td>In God’s Way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>Frances Ellen Watkins Harper</td>
<td>Iola Le Roy, Shadows Uplifted</td>
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<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>Pauline Hopkins</td>
<td>Contending Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>Jessie Fauset</td>
<td>Three is Confusion</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Plum Bun</td>
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<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td></td>
<td>The Cinaberry Tree</td>
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<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td></td>
<td>Comedy, American Style</td>
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<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>Neela Larsen</td>
<td>Quicks and Passing</td>
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<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>Zola Neale Hurston</td>
<td>Jonahs Gourd Vine</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Their Eyes were Watching God</td>
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<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td></td>
<td>Moses Man of the Mountains</td>
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<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td></td>
<td>Seraph on the Sewanee</td>
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<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>Ann Petry</td>
<td>The Street</td>
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<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td></td>
<td>Country Place</td>
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<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td></td>
<td>The Narrows</td>
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<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Dorothy West</td>
<td>The Living is Easy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Gwendolyn Brooks</td>
<td>Maud Martha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Paule Marshall</td>
<td>Browngirl, Brownstones</td>
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<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td></td>
<td>The Chosen Place, The Timeless People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Margaret Walker</td>
<td>Jubilee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Rosa Guy</td>
<td>Bird At My Window</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Charlene Hatcher</td>
<td>The Flagellants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Sarah Wright</td>
<td>This Childs Gonna Live</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1970 Louise Mennweather, *Daddy Was A Numbers Runna*
1970 Tom Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*
1974        *Sulla*
1978        *Song of Solomon*
1980        *Tar Baby*
1988        *Beloved*
1970 Alice Walker: *The Third Life of Grange Coperland*
1976        *Meridian*
1982        *The Colors Purple*
1989        *The Temple of My Familiar*
1973 Alice Childress: *A Hero Ain't Nothin But A Sandwich, A Short Walk*
1974 Alison Mills, *Francisco*
1974 Ann Allen Shockley: *Loving Her*
1975 Gayl Jones, *Corregidro*
1976        *Eva's Man*
1980 Gloria Naylor: *The Women of Brewster Place*
1985        *Linden Hills*
1988        *Mama Day*
1992        *Bailey' Cafe*
1998        *The Men of Brewster Place*
1980 Tone Cade Bambara: *The Salt Eater*
1982 Joyee Carol Thomas: *Marked By Fire*
1982 Ntozake Shange: *Sapphire Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*
1982 Ludre Lorde: *Zanie*

*Iola Le Roy, Shadows Uplifted* by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (See Table 1) is considered by many to be the first novel by a black woman to be published in America. Harper (1825-1911) was a poet, an essayist, a novelist
and an outspoken abolitionist and feminist whose protest themes were not limited to racial concerns. She was interested in a variety of reform movements chiefly those of abolition, women’s rights and temperance. She spent much of her life lecturing against slavery and was active in the Women’s Rights convention of 1856. Harper attempted to refute all negative images of black women held by society.

Labour, demand and myths entertained the nature of black people. They were instrumental in black slavery and became a permanent institution in America by early 1700s. Blacks were considered to be inferiors and had often been associated in the American mind with the ape, especially the orangutang. Interracial marriages were banned as a means of protecting whites from the taint of black blood. Black females were believed to be sexually aggressive while the black males were believed to be constantly meek with the white woman. The white woman at this time was expected to be,

"a wife, a mother, a manager. Yet she was supposed to
be delicate ornamental, original and timid."

From this image of the southern lady, comes the image of mammy the most dominant image of black woman that still exists today. The mammy was a consistent character of white Antebellum and Reconstructive novels. Other negative images prevalent along this time were of the “loose woman” who craved sex inordinately and the ‘tragic mulatto’ who was the product of miscegenation and was opposite to mammy tragic figure. She was the result of an illicit relationship between a slave master and a slave. Then came the conjure woman much feared by white and was not as prevalent in the literature of southern writers as the mammy image. She was the leader of what state owners believed to be dark, evil, superstitious types of religion practiced by many slaves. She was often treated with respect and awe as if
she really could exert power over men Iola Le Roy, Shadows Uplifted, show the heroine different from the contented mammy or the loose woman. She was Christian and not a tragic mulatto but rather a member of a, "Society of intelligent and superior black people."

The images of southern antebellum literature developed stereotypes of black women. Frances Harper and other prominent black abolitionists were aware of the images created during slavery and countered the arguments in their lecture and writings.

In 1900, Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins (See Table 1) published contending Forces. She published two more novels, Winoma: A Tale of Negro Life in the South and South West (1902) and Of One Blood or The Hidden Self (1902-3). Like her black literary contemporaries, Pauline Hopkins countered the negative stereotypes of the race. Much of the writings of the nineteenth and early twentieth century black writers were directed to an upper class, white audience.

According to Barbara Christian in Black Women Novelists, abolitionist novelist often combined the qualities of the natural Christians as Negro and as woman by turning their attention to the black women in their works. To combat the negative images of the black women in southern antebellum literature, these writers created a "positive" black woman image, the christian mulatto, quadroon or octoroon. These images were as close as black women could come to the white women in physical beauty. For this reason from 1861 to 1945, when Ann Petry's The Street was published a disproportionate member of black novels adhered to the literacy convention of the mulatto heroine.

At the turn of the century, life style for most blacks was undergoing major changes. Blacks in the south were the victims of debt slavery system, drastic penal measures and of the ever-present possibility were being launched.
A large exodus of black from the south to the north occurred. By 1918 more than one million blacks were estimated to have left the south for northern cities such as New York, Washington DC, Boston and Chicago.

The first World War brought with it a period of prosperity for urban blacks as well as for black and white women. This prosperity gave way to the developments of black ghettos of which Harlem became the most prominent. Most of the black migrants came up from the eastern coast from Florida, Virginia the Carolinas and Maryland a natural path of migration. Along with them came a group of talented and ambitious blacks from sections of north and islands of the West Indies. They all joined the indigenous black intelligentsia of the metropolis and sparkled one of the most exiting and unusual periods in black American history – the Harlem Renaissance.

The black novelists, artists, poets and dramatists of the Harlem Renaissance were men and women with a sense of social consciousness. They began to explore black American culture in depth for the first time. Jessie Redmon Fauset, Neela Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston are popular and recognized black women novelists of the Harlem Renaissance.

The heroines in the novels of black women writers were “light complexioned” upper-middle class black woman with taste and refinement. Fauset and Larsen were especially noted for focusing attention on this image of the black women. She introduced subject that was not typical such as promiscuity, exploitative, sexual affairs; miscegenation and even incest.

Jessie Fauset wrote four novels, *There Is Confusion* (1924) *Plum Bun* (1929) *The Canaberry Tree* (1931) *Comedy American Style* (1933) She was innovative enough to have written about successful blacks as well as strong independent women, subjects that publishers, critics and audience did not care to accept. Fauset was determined to correct the distorted but established image
of black life and culture and to portray women and blacks with more complexity and authenticity. Her works were typical of the dominant position of the Harlem intellectual at the time. However, Barbara Christian states that,

"her values also posed a serious threat to the New Negro Philosophy. The argument was, if blacks were no different than whites then how could you support the idea of a "unique Negro genius"."

Nella Larsen (1893-1963) published two novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). Critics believe that these novels are based on her life as she was the product of a marriage between a man from the Virgin Islands and a Danish woman. Critics described her as a sensitive child whose life was characterized by constant dissatisfaction and change. In her novels Larsen,

"wanted to correct the impression most white people had that all black people lived in Harlem dives or picturesque object poverty."

Though her novels were well received by public. She was discouraged by the economically depressed condition of that time. Alice Walker gave this account,

"Nella Larsen died in almost complete obscurity often turning her back on her writing in order to become a practical nurse, an occupation that would at least buy food for the table and a place to sleep."

Nella Larsen’s better novel, *Quicksand*, treats in her rich metaphoric and detailed style, very indirectly the familiar subject of the mulatto in American society. Her novel is not in the mainstream of Renaissance writing, still she joins the ranks of early middle-class authors as Charles W. Chestnut, Jessie R Fauset and later writers as Dorothy West.
Alice Walker describes Zora Neale Hurston as a, "Folklorist, novelist, anthropologists serious student." She is described by many as "genius of the south."

Her novels are, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Moses Man of the Mountain* (1942) and *Seraph on the Seawnee* (1948). Zora Neale Hurston (1901-1960) was born in the first all black independent community in the United States. Hurston valued her experiences as a black woman from the south enough to write about them in such a way that they were viewed by many to be a model of the black female experiences in America. Many contemporary black women writers see her as their spiritual ancestors. Lorreeene Bahel says,

"She wrote as a Black woman, identified Black woman, valuing her experiences as a woman as well as a Black person in a society where these areas of experience are generally regarded as valueless, insignificant and inferior to white / male culture."

The "new Negro" pride in black heritage and her intense interest in black folklore, dominated her subject choice and style. In addition to her salute on American race relations her novels were deeply rooted in the folk tradition, and explored a new theme of sex and racism. Hurston used the tradition of black female story telling and myth making that had its roots in Afro-American culture.

Like Nella Larsen, Hurston disappeared from the literary world after an attack by the press. Larsen was accused of plagiarism and Hurston of sodomy. Charges against both women were found to be false but it damaged their career. Both writers fell prey to the racial and sexual stereotypes inflicted upon the black women, their sexual morality and intellectual capacity.
Ann Petry (b 1911) used the elements of oppressed blacks in a hostile world, cut off from society and eventual pressured into destroying the oppressor. *The Street* (1945) centered around the hostile environment of Harlem and its effects on the people. Unlike other stories about black women, Petry had her female characters, “cut off from everything and everybody”\(^1\). In her first novel, we see a struggling, urban black mother attempting to create a better life for herself. Petry wrote *The Street* (1947), *Country Place* (1947), *The Narrows* (1993). She eventually turned, exclusively to writing children’s literature.

Except for Ann Petry, Willard Motley and Richard Wright, all the others had the ability to transcend the mere reporting of accumulated sociological observations. They had explored corruption, depravity of urban slums and there seemed no place else for the urban realism movement to go and so, it died. As the urban realism movement was dying, five novelists were developing who in their first novels, lifted black fiction.

The period from the late 40’s to 60’s saw no black women novelists at the forefront. Although Dorothy West (See Table I) published *The Living Is Easy* in 1948 the works of Richard Wright, Chester H James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison took the centre stage. The dominating theme was the plight of the black women and the black American reached its zenith. Dorothy West (b 1910) began writing during the Harlem Renaissance and in 1948 published a novel, *The Living is Easy*, reviving memories of the fiction of Charles Chestnutt, Jessie Fauset, and Nella Larsen treating the black aristocrats of Boston.

Brooks love of language, people and life, is apparent in her novel, *Maud Martha*, the story of the coming of age of a black Chicago girl. She presented the peculiar ways of the world, various forms of discrimination that she experiences. She was the first black American to receive the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. There is racial consciousness in her works but racial themes do not over shadow her works. Brook's *Maud Martha* was a different type of black female character. This represented a different shift in point of view and intention in the fiction of black women writers and this shift is very evident in the writings of the black women today. About Margaret Walker Marie Evans in her *Black Women Writers* says,

"She has tapped the rich vein of Black experience and fashioned that material into art."\(^\text{12}\)

She has written the progress of black American experiences, from the rural folk ways, religious practices and exhausting labour of the south, through the cramped and confusing condition of the northern urban centers. She hopes to be a racial awakening among blacks militantly rising them to take control of their own destinies. On dialect she is thoroughly researched and linguistically accurate. She reveals the various levels of black mentality, as well as the devotion and hatred of some slaves for their masters. She presents the blacks before Civil War. Her study is of painful historical reality and romanticized self-deception.

The last important novel of this period is *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) by Paul Marshall, where the basic theme is an encounter with the past and the need to reverse the present social order. Her characters are overshadowed by a terrible loneliness which they struggle to overcome through sharing. She is supremely devoted to the creation of her character. In her works she emphasizes on the aspects which affect the character, culture and society. She
consistently delves into the psychology of her character, why they act as they do, as well as into the psychology of the place and time. The essential aspects of her work - description of characters and settings story lines and themes are all integrally related to her characters. The black women in her novels are particularly complex or at least rounded out. She presents women who seem at first to be familiar types – the domineering mother, the prostitute, the martyred mother – only to investigate their personalities so thoroughly that the stereotype is broken forever. Her new forms are sculpted to become characters who instruct us about their particular lives and therefore present the general theme of the culture. Women who tend to be her central characters give voice to that continual transformation. She attacked on sexual and racial stereotypes, from the mammies. She presented the black women's potential as a full person on the social cultural and political issues of the time.

Black writing in the last decade reflected a widespread uncertainty about the direction and possibility for improvement of American race relations. On one hand, there were writers who were optimistic to produce more successful satire than that had been produced before. On the other hand were those authors whose bleak assessment of the national, social, economic, and political climate caused them to predict the outbreak of an inevitable race war. Between the two groups were several authors like Rosa Guy (1966) *Bird At My Window*, Charlene Hatcher (1966) *The Flagellants*, Louise Meriwether (1970) *Daddy was A Numbers Runna* who chose not to treat the contemporary scene at all.

The zeal of the Civil Right movement allowed several black authors the luxuries of moving back from their material and developing the objectively from which they could grow successful satire. The second important movement in black literature in the sixties was a reassessment of the past of the American Literature. Few novelists interpreted the black cultural experience and made new contributions to the understanding of that earlier time.
Sarah E. Wright has written a beautifully painful novel *This Childs Gonna Live* (1969). She has carefully used diction and expressed deep understanding of the dialect humour. She has beautifully portrayed the human misery and equals the quality of Zora Hurston in her treatment of folk humour and in rendering to the dialect approaches.

When black women novelists of the sixties and seventies are explored they are found challenging the definition of woman. They project their own definitions rather than deriving them from the prevailing definition of the white woman. The modern black women novelists are concerned with a total black experience, but they are also concerned about her role as a woman. The writing styles of the early 70's were more relaxed and less rigid. Black women writers, along with others found that it was not necessary to be restricted to writing the realistic tales that were demanded in the earlier part on the century. Today black women novelists have challenged everything from the definition of woman to sexism to racism. They have created more controversy than has ever been witnessed among black writers. The notable writers of this period that have stirred considerable controversy are Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor.

Toni Morrison has earned a reputation as a gifted story-teller. She has created images of humans isolated by their failures in love and then problems with identity. Barbara Christian comments,

"Her work is of fantastic realism. Deeply rooted in history and mythology her work resonates with mixture of pleasure and pain, wonder and horror. Her characters come with a force and beauty of gushing water seemingly fantastic but as basic as the earth. They stand on white Paule Marshall carefully sculpts her characters. Toni Morrison lets her erupt out of the wind, sometimes gently, often with force and horror. Her work is sensuality combined with an intrigue that only a piercing intellect could create."
She wrote *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Songs of Solomon* (1977), and *Tar Baby* (1981). Her novels illustrate the growth of the theme as it goes through many transformations.

Her novels search for beauty amidst the restrictions of life, both from without and within. The friendships between the two girls or women serve as the periscope through which the overwhelming contradictions of life are measured. Her heroines are double faced—looking outward and searching inward, trying to find some continuity between the seasons, the earth, the cycle of life in other people and themselves. Her novels are rich not only with characterizations, but also with signs, symbols omens sent by nature. Toni Morrison finds the language to describe the psychic trauma experienced by many girls. She takes the risks with the language, communicates a link between ones sense of omen’s physical self and the developing spiritual psyche. Her women characters becomes scape goats in their communities because they look at the truth of things. They do not disguise it so become the dumping ground for the feelings of helplessness and horror people have about their own lives. Toni Morrison’s characters illustrate how far they have moved from the stereotypes of the nineteenth century Marie Evans says,

“She reveals the perception of psychological motivation
of the female especially, of the Black particularly, and of
the human generally”

There were many Afro-American women writers aware of the literary explosion to Afro-American literature. They wrote about political, cultural, historical, or philosophical in their point of reference. They wrote about the city, country or suburbs and weaved fantasies or tended towards social realism, or experimented to traditions in style. They left us with the diversity of the black women’s experiences in America. In this, next to come is Alice Walker, who has produced a significant work since 1968 and captured both the American
Book Award and the coveted Pulitzer in 1983. Characterizing Walker's work, Barbara Christian says,

"Walker's work is as organically spare rather than elaborate, ascetic rather than lush, a process of stripping of layers having down to the core. There is concentrated distillation of language which, ironically, allow her to expand rather than constrict. Few contemporary American writers have examined so many facets of sex and race, love and societal changes, as has Walker, without abandoning the personal grace that distinguishes her voice." 16

Alice Walker's substantial body of writings, though varies is characterized by specific recurrent motifs. She emphasis on the black woman as creator, and her attempt to be whole relates to the health of her community. This theme is focused on Walker's two collection of short stories, *In Love and Trouble* and *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, to her classic essays. Another recurrent motif in Walker's work is her insistence on probing the relationship between struggle and change. This encompasses the pain of black peoples live against which the writers protest but she does not ignore. She presents a spiritual legacy of black people in the south. Her work focuses on the struggle of black people especially black women, to claim their own lives, and the contention that this struggle emanates from a deepening of self-knowledge and love.

In 1970, at the height of cultural nationalism, the substance of most black literary activity was focused on the rebellious urban black in confrontation with white society. Walker traces the images of black women in the literature, she illuminates the creative legacy of "ordinary" black women of the south. She emphasized the impact of sexism as well as racism on black communities. Till the early seventies racism was the only evil that affected
black women but she demonstrated the interconnectedness of American sexism and racism based on the notion of dominance and on unnatural hierarchical distinction. She writes that many black women are unwilling to acknowledge or address the problems of sexism that affect them because they feel they must protest black men. She asserts if black women turn away from the women’s movement they turn away from women moving all over the world. Her words are *The Third Life of Grang Coperland* (1970), *Meridian* (1976), *The Color Purple* (1982) and *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989).

In this list of writers there came Alice Childress who brings the history of the times alive. Her genius, and artistry enables to involve her readers in the happenings such that they emerge with the feeling of a lived experience. Her primary and special concern has been the African image. Her writings are realistic avoiding despair and pessimism. Besides the satiric bent and the thematic accent on struggle there is love for her people. Her works are *Mojo: A Black Love Story* (1971); *A Hero Ain’t Nothin But a Sandwich* (1973), the later was anthologized in *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers*.

Then came Alison Mills with her novel *Francisco* in (1974) and Ann Allen Shreckley with *Loving Her* (1974) and Gayel Jones with *Corregidro* (1975) and *Eva’s Man* (1976). The latter was interested in the psychology of characters, their myths, dreams, night mares, secret worlds, ambiguities, contradictions, memories, imaginations and their “puzzles”. She was interested in human relationships, and did not make moral or political judgement of her characters. Her mother and teachers influenced her. She is figured among the best of contemporary Afro-America writers who have used Black speech as a major aesthetic device. She has tried to rescue the Black female personality from the devastation and neglect that it has suffered in a racist and sexist society. Like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Toni Code Bambara and Ishmael Reed, Jones uses a rhythm and structure of spoken language to develop authentic characters and new possibilities for dramatic conflicts.

Thus the major theme throughout Afro-American woman’s literature is to define and express their totality rather than being defined by others. Although, if we see any literature we find that at core, it is concerned with the definition and self discovery in relation to the society in which one lives. But for Afro-American women this natural desire has been powerfully opposed, repressed and distorted by the society’s restriction. Afro-American women writers had to confront the interaction between restriction of racism, sexism and class that characterize their existence. They have their roots in a literary tradition as old as any American literature June Jordan’s *Curl War* (1981), Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafras, Cypress*, and *Indigo* (1982) and Ludre Lorde’s *Zanie* (1982) are as different as their authors, yet they share that perspective that comes from a tradition held in common.

This literature is denigrated by the use of labels that deny its centrality to American life. It is called political, social protest or minority’s literature, which means it lacks craft and has not transcended the limitations of racial, sex or class boundaries – that it supposedly does not do what “good” literature does to express out universal humanity.
This literature reveals a basic truth of the society. In America, the definition of the enslaved African woman became the basis for the definition of the society. The peculiar history and culture of Afro-American women comes out of the peculiar institution of slavery that left a legacy of racism in its wake. Slavery also helped to shape certain elements of sexism that still persists in American society. The work slave women did, provide with an insight into the restrictive concept of woman in pre twentieth century Southern American life for female slavers were both valued and devalued for their physical and psychological strength in the society. Strength was a masculine word, for their lack of beauty in the society and beauty was equaled with woman. It has been said, that Black women writers have been trailed as “literary domestics” serving as cooks, baby sitters, stamp-tickers, girl friends, wines, and “sexual sport” for the men. But they are the integral part of the deep structure of black literature though they got more involved in 1970 with the rediscovery of Zora Neale Hurston. There are several noteworthy aspect be it Toni Cade Bambara’s simplicity and sensuous analysis of creation, freshness and daring in perception of Eleanor Traylor, a challenge in the observation of Gayl Jones, intellectuality in the observation of Alice Walker, deep and consuming wisdom in Alice Childress and in the passionate polemics of Audre Lorde we find the multitude of talented writers creating their own music, and that is the history of Afro-American Literature.

Section C - ASPECTS IN BLACK WOMEN’S LITERATURE:

The history of Black Women’s literature started long before when Black women were finally allowed their right to literacy. Their literature and other creative art were oral, based on story telling and the African / American-African folk tradition Bethel Lorraine comments, “Because Black women rarely gained access to literacy
expression, Black women identified bonding and folk culture have often gone unrecorded except through our individual lives and memories.”

So when Black women began to write creative works, they looked back to their foremothers to recreate their stories. Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston was the spiritual and literary foremother of many modern African – American women writers, who drew from the orature of her African culture and turned the slave culture in her tales, novels and short stories to impart cultural values from one generation to the other. Black American women writers focused on Africa not only as historic ancestor, political ally but as a part and a continuum in which Black women, before the slave trade and since, have recorded cultural history and values through their stories.

Afro-American literature was written by men but it was unable to draw the attention of literary circle, as it had many preconceived notions and prejudices. There were biased criticisms of the literary establishment. Cultures were evaluated by the manmade boundary i.e. natural or continental studies. Thus the writing of Black women has neither gender nor colour in its favour and it suffered neglect and lack of critical attention that led to a distorted view of the work. The critics of the oppressed people’s literature refused to separate the literature from the historical or cultural context in which it was written.

In the last fifteen years, Black women and other feminist scholars explored the dimension of generational and cultural continuity for people of African descent especially regarding women. They explored Black women’s literature through historical. Cultural, feminist and lesbian perspective, using tradition and Marxist methodologies and found it as a woman’s domain. Orature and literature were the modes to communicate, converse and to pass on values to their and other children.
In reference to English language the black on both continents have context of abuse and dehumanization because of the racist societies, race and gender. Black women's writer's imaginatively engaged this English language in their texts. The socio-cultural history of these words is traced in cultural and gendered way and is found that they undermine the hegemony of the west. The language of the black woman's text is “acknowledged power”.

Until the 1940's, Black women in Anglo and Afro–American literature assigned stereotyped roles – related to the problems of society which could not be resolved. Through out the novels of the slavery and reconstruction periods, the southern white literature, fashioned an image of the black women and the mammy figure. They were considered the most prominent black female figure in the southern white literature, direct in contrast to the ideal white woman who was frail, incapable of doing hard work and shimmering with the beauty of fragile crystal. The other prominent black image in southern literature was of conjure woman and concubine.

The black literature also centered mainly on the image of tragic mulatta which revealed the conflict of values that the black faced. Barbara Christian points in her essay “Black Women in Afro-American Literature”,

"The mulatta called up the illicit crossing between cultures. She is American in that she emerges out of the sexual relationship between a black slave mother and a white slave master, a sexual relationship denying the most basic philosophical concept of slavery”.

The Mulatta had the physical characters of black & white and was the mode of cultural transference. She was a tragic figure and did not have much romanticism in her account. The reality of life for black women began with the start of the Harlem Renaissance.
The Afro-American women writers were conceptualized by black and white society hence they could not make a commitment to self-exploration. But writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Paul Marshal or the budding creativity of Gloria Naylor, Alexis De Veau, show they have beautifully expressed and contemplated the tradition from which they have come and the conflict of images that their forefathers had to contend. The development of Afro-American women fiction is a mirror image of the intensity of the relationship between sexism and racism. Early Afro-American women novelist Frances Harper writes,

"Her story's mission would not be in vain if it awaken in the hearts of our countrymen a stronger sense of justice and a more Christian like humanity."\(^{19}\)

While the novelists of Harlem Renaissance, Jessie Fauset with Nella Larsen corrected the impression most white people had that all black people lived in Harlem Dines or in picturesque.

Until forties, most black women fiction writers directed their conscious intention towards a refutation of the negative images imposed upon all Black women. There was a tension between the "femininity" of the heroines and their behaviour. Barbara Christian in her essay, "Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction" points out,

"Iola Re Roy believes that women should work, Pauline Hopkins wants them to advance the race, Faust's characters, thought class-bound have ambition to an unfeminine degree; Larcen's heroine though restricted by conventional morality, senses the power of her sensuality and lay the image of the lady represents."\(^{20}\)

Thus the tensions between the femininity of the heroine, the positive image of the Black women increased through out the first half of the century.
till 1940. By late fifties and sixties the Afro-American women writers not only reflected their own unique cultural identity but also not only defined their cultural context.

The ideology of the sixties had stressed the necessity for Afro-Americans to discover their blackness and their unity in their blackness. While in 1970, there was a major threat to the survival and empowerment of women. Women had to struggle against gender and use the language of protest. Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Gayl Jones exposed sexism and violence. By mid 1970s the conventional definition of good and evil is overturned. The heroines of mid 1970 are socio-political actors, their stana is rebellious; their consciousness has been altered and they probed many facts of the inter relationship of sexism and racism in the society.

The novels of the eightieth continued to explore that sexism must be struggled against in black communities and it connected to racism in black women’s lives. They reflected how the inter relationship sexism and racism effected the lives of black women writers. In order to understand themselves most effectively in their totality as blacks and women. Barbara Christian in her essay “Afro-American Women Fiction” points out,

“black women have been the mule of the world there and the mule of the world here.” 21

A variety of themes and character are in the fiction of the early eighties. Black women writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, or Gloria Naylor analysis the intersection of class, race, gender, and present many styles of life. They approach the issues which confronted them as blacks, as women and as individual selves. This is visualised by their author's sexual treatment of their character. In the fiction of eighties there is an overt exploration of lesbian relationship among Black women and how black community
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views these relationships. Authors like Alice Walker express the lesbian relationship through metaphors of nature and in the form of black English. While Gloria Naylor in *The Women of Brewster Place*, places more emphasis on the reaction of small community to which the lovers belong, as well as their own inter-realization of social views about lesbianism. She shows the oppression that black lesbians experience. Naylor uses metaphors rooted in Afro-American folk speech.

The language and forms of black women’s fiction is derived from women’s experience as well as from Afro-American culture. Alice Walker explore the richness and clarity of black folk English through her own language. Ntozake Shange uses a potpourri of forms related to women; recipes, poisons, letters etc. Toni Morrison finds Afro-American folk tale and folk lore, Paule Marshal uses dream ritual, hallucination and other metaphor of women’s experience. Thus, thematically and stylistically, the fiction of the early eighties communicates the sense that black women should not be perceived as marginal.

In the fiction of Afro-American literature there is nuclear versus the extended family – European / African, white / black. In contrast to the nuclear family, the extended family is the whole community through marriage. Here the responsibility is not limited only to one’s children but to all the children of the community. Along with it is the consciousness of a continuum from the ancestors to the present generation, though it creates a world view that has completes with western nations of family and society.

The ideas from and about African women have continued through generations. They have passed on their cultural heritage and imparted the cultural values and kept their heritage alive. Throughout generations and varying political moments, Black women have continued the alternative practice of
passing on the cultural values of their African forebears to their children. This is reflected in the works of twentieth century Black women writers.

The language of black women writers is acknowledged by Mary Helen Washington as ‘specific language’ with “politics of intimacy” and “grammar of male and female relationships”. Their subject is focused and refined, luminous and significant for the developing and understanding the texts of black women’s literature. The Black Women Writer’s concentrate on their way of saying, share the word with the reader or among the characters or within narrative structures of the text. There is a collective “speaking out” by all the voices gathered within the text, authorial, narrative, character and for the reader, this is the responsive strategy in black women’s literature. The Afro-American literature crosses three continents hence there is linguistic and cultural histories which reflect the multiple linguistic and cultural frame of these continents. There is rich imagination and elegant creative dimensions of their language. There is critical relationship between character and voice. The biogeographical conditions help the concept of their imaginative literature in order to keep the culture moving.

The theme of lesbianism was portrayed early in works of Afro-American women’s literature in eighties. It contributed in the breaking of stereotypes so that black lesbians were seen as women, the exposure of homophobia in the black community and an exploration of how the homophobia is related to the struggle of all women i.e. to feminism. The lib of the seventies explored the relationship between sexism and racism and has developed feminist ideas.

Early Afro-American women’s novels are focused on the black woman’s role as mother because of the negative stereotype of the black woman as mammy that pervaded American society. The emphasis of community and culture with a prerequisite for self-understanding reflects in the works of 1950
to 1960. During the sixties the Afro-American writers felt the necessity to 
rediscover their blackness. While in the early seventies the black community 
itself became a major threat for the survival and empowerment of women. 
There was protest as Afro-American women writers clearly depicted the 
victimization of their protagonist. They tried to send a message that not only 
the white society must change, but also the black community’s attitude 
towards women must be revealed and revised. But in the mid seventies the 
heroines were socio-political actors. They had a rebellious attitude and their 
consciousness was altered because of the supposed crimes they were commit-
ted against motherhood and beyond the restrictions of society imposed on fe-
male sexuality. By the mid seventies Afro-American women fiction writers 
showed the socio-political significant and the centrality in relation to mother-
hood and sexuality. The novels of eighties explored sexism with racism. They 
not only analysed the intersection of class, race and gender but also repre-
sented many styles of life and various issues that confronted them, as blacks, 
as women and as individual selves. They treated the lesbian relationship among 
black women in different themes. There was thematic and organic approach 
on the culture of women as a means to self-understanding and growth. The 
language and forms of black women’s fiction are derived from women’s expe-
rience of Afro-American culture. The new form based on black woman’s cul-
ture revitalized the American novel and opened new avenues of expression. 
The new fiction explores in a multiplicity of ways to which Alice Walker re-
marks,

"Writing to me is not about audience exactly. It is 
about audience exactly. It is about expanding myself in 
as many roles and situations as possible. Let me put it 
this way: If I could live as a tree, as a river, as the 
moon, as the sun, as the sea, as the earth, as a rock, I 
would Writing permits me to be more than I am. Writ-
ing permits me to experience life as any number of strange creations.” 22

The writings of black women compromised a broad and diverse literacy tradition, but they presented it with a personal growth and development and directed it towards creating a whole self. They self-invented themselves, opened the historical and cultural threads that made up their inheritance. They created women who found a locus for their identity and achieved self-acceptance in spite of their cultural identity and appreciated religious faith. Along with culture there is religious dimensions to the writings affirming a religious sensibility by communicating and preserving religious ideas. They reflect a sentiment of black religious experience.

The Afro-American writers recognized themselves not in isolation but in relation to other women, to culture and to creation. They embraced the collective religious consciousness of black culture and tapped the potency of god which was available to them through culture. Writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall and Gloria Naylor presented their female ancestors as self and showed the intensity of spiritual consciousness. Their protagonists claim an authority to what their predecessors claimed, and proved their historical presence. They combined contemporary critical reflection with the power of symbolic imagination. They transformed literal conversion into literacy conversions. Twentieth century Afro-American women writers opened themselves to a deeper self, reclaimed the mythical ideals, which their ancestors created. The values built into their own selves by virtue of participation in a particular social class, religious tradition and ethnic group. They opened to a new depth of religious experience, spirituality and revelations and this is explored by their writings.
Afro-American appropriated Christianity and made in descriptive of what they deemed sacred in the world and in themselves, expressive of their own experience of god in their lives. Toni Cade Bambara says,

"Black women . . do not deal with themselves as God, nor do they remove Him from the human frame of reference."²⁴

The writings of the nineteenth century black women gave voice to the drama of conversion into self-hood by presenting a powerful vision of women in the process of changing and developing their human potential. Their autonomy was restrictive not only because of race but because of gender and cast. The black women maintained the balance between sacred and secular through religion they gathered a vision of freedom and a degree of confidence and belief in political principles so they were able to challenge male authority.

Mythologies have intimate relations with black women writers in their literature. Be it the legend of Sapphirra Wade, “a true conjure women” the opening event of Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* or in Alice Walker’s short story, *Everyday Use* or in Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong For the Window*. We find their metaphorical revisioning of experimental knowledge. The presence of mythologies point towards the element of myth-metaphor, spirituality and memory as they appear in the system of literature rather than towards individual myth of West Africa. The cultural presence within literature acknowledge spoken language as its source. They reformulate the story into frames and reconstruct more ancient pattern of memory and telling mythologies. They gave interpretive significance to the mythology. The texts by black women writers present an older understanding of literature.

Thus the third section brings forwards the various aspects included in the works of Black women writings. In the works of Gloria Naylor the figure
of mammy, the conjure woman and the images of the tragic mulatta is evident in her novel *Linden Hills* and *Bailey’s Cafe*. Her novels reflect the quality of life led by black and the affect of interrelationship of sexism and racism. *The Women of Brewster Place* shows the love / sex relationship and lesbianism. *Bailey’s Cafe* and *Mama Day* brings forward many such aspects of black women writers. Thematically and stylistically the tone of her fiction communicates that the women of colour can no longer be perceived as marginal to the empowerment of all American women and to understand her imagination and reality it is essential for the society to bring a change for transformation.

Thus a few aspects featured in the works of the Afro-American women writers are launched to find a definite shift in their fiction which persists still.
CHAPTER-I

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