CHAPTER 1

Lighting up Hidden Lanterns: An Introduction

The familiar urge to see in heroes only virtue and in villains only malice has an analogue in the desire to see in the oppressed only unrelieved suffering and impotence. This ideal construct – the pure victim, becomes unconvincing to me, at least with respect to the American colored, when one comes face to face with the American racial situation through the works of the prolific writer, Zora Neale Hurston. Some historians opine that the American Negro never opposed slavery in any meaningful way – that is by any political means. Zora Neale Hurston’s work to me is path-breaking in this respect wherewith she suggests, nay firmly believes, that the cultural spaces which the Blacks created were a meaningful site for indirect political resistance in the absence of the means for a frontal attack. Ethnic identity provided a serious alternative to the African Americans, giving them meaningful means of survival and self-affirmation. Amidst all the brutalities and injustices of the antebellum and postbellum racial systems, Black men and women were able to find the means to sustain a far greater degree of self-pride and group cohesion than the system they lived under, ever intended for them to be able to do. The subjectivity of the Black spirit, rooted in its ethnicity, had vital celebratory and emancipatory functions. This is not to argue that the system was more benign than it has often been pictured, but rather that ‘Blacks’ proved to be more resilient and less malleable than they are often believed to be. To me, Hurston’s life and work bears testimony to these facts.

It is a historical fact that for nearly four hundred years Africans were forcibly brought to the American South to be enslaved. Ruthlessly torn from their motherland, Black men, women and children were dumped into slave ships, where they journeyed in the most inhuman conditions. Through their cruel treatment during the ‘Middle Passage’, traders were preparing their ‘human cargo’ for their new role, that is, that of slaves. Blacks are savages,
and primitive enough to be exploited -- these were some of the ideological bases on which Blacks were enslaved.

The society of the American South into which Blacks were brought was a plantation society where cotton may have predominated as a mode of economic exchange, but the white male was the lord and master. In other words, it was strictly a patriarchal, imperialist socio-economic order based on white supremacy. In the white colonialist worldview, it was assumed that only Blacks were so inferior that they could labor happily in the sun with all the unfeeling complaisance of oxen. Moreover, what would they need in return – they would feel blessed to be under the ‘care’ and ‘wardship’ of a white paternalist. To ward off any recalcitrance against the system, the white master or his farm representative would resort to what can be termed terrorising tactics in the modern-day parlance. Ruthless whipping and killing of farm labourers, parading of Black women in the nude, were some of them. Slave marts were organized where slaves were auctioned and sold off as property. At these slave sales, more often than not, mothers and children were brutally snatched from each other and husbands were separated from wives beyond any hope of re-union. Familial, linguistic and tribal ties were often broken, when families and communities were thus scattered.

From the foregoing discussion one need not assume that slavery was the only ill that afflicted the Blacks in America. The post-bellum Southern society and the supposedly ‘non-racist’ North were no different. Lynchings and other brutalities apart, post-1865, too, Blacks were relegated to socio-economic sectors in which direct contact or competition with Euro-colonists would be virtually nil except as subservient lackeys or ill-paid industrial workers. Through various exploitative mechanisms based on a white/patriarchal/capitalist order, African Americans continued to be excluded, segregated and victimised both in the American North and South. Bell Hooks has termed this experience as ‘living on the edge’ when she observes in her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*:

As Black Americans living in a small Kentucky town, the
railroad tracks were a daily reminder of our marginality. Across those tracks were paved streets, stores we could not enter, restaurants we could not eat in, and people we could not look directly in the face. Across those tracks was a world we could work in as maids, as janitors, as prostitutes, as long as it was in a service capacity. We could enter that world but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracks, to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town (Preface).

Much worse however than, though related to their physical and socio-economic exploitation, was the psychic dehumanisation to which the Blacks had been subjected all along. This was aimed at completely crushing the ‘personhood’ of the Blacks. The ‘pioneers of civilization’ fixed the slave as essentially primitive – the Negroes are cannibals, they are only biological creatures, they are animals – were some of the myths that prevailed. Whiteness was made synonymous with Light, Justice, Truth, Reason and Virginity. Blackness was Ugliness, Evil and Darkness. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. suggests in his book, *Figures in Black* that Blackness was made a trope of absence (21). The relation between blackness and stupidity was made self-evident. Treatises on an obvious relation between cranial capacity, skin color and intelligence prevailed. Gates refers to Hegel who calls Africa the land of childhood, which, lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of night. He maintains that there is no “culture” in Africa and moral sentiments too, are non-existent. Since history assumes a crucial role of memory – of a collective cultural memory in the estimation of a civilization, so the assumption was that of the absence of memory among Africans (Gates, Figures 20-21).

These sentiments about the Negroes not being a culturally distinctive and identifiable ethnic group on account of an absence of a community of tradition, of a definite historical past and consequently of an uncertain future were voiced well into the 1970’s by social scientists and cultural critics alike. In his path-breaking book, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Lawrence Levine has quoted the views of several social scientists and cultural critics on
what to them was the ‘cultureless/Americanised’ state of the African American during the century following their freedom. Horace Mann Bond used the term “quintessential American” for them, and Gunner Myrdal and his associates called them “exaggerated American”. Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey said that at the time of emancipation, the freed Negro was panic-ridden due to the absence of intra-psychic defences like group pride, group solidarity and group tradition (Levine 442-43).

In a nutshell, one could say with Frantz Fanon that the Negro was “over determined from without” (Black Skins 116). The fact however, remains that despite these pressures bent upon classifying, de-civilizing and imprisoning the Negroes, they not only survived but also expanded and diversified, until the picture today is of multiple cultures and sub-cultures existing in various environments and participating in multifarious ways in the socio-economic lives of their respective societies. Blacks in America represent the tribal, peasant and rural proletariat and middle-class levels of socio-cultural survival.

Undeniably, these human beings, like anyone else had to work hard at making comprehensible the destinies that had been imposed on them by brute force. The daily job of living for Blacks did not end with enslavement. Real survival meant adapting not only to the exigencies of the natural environment, but also to the everyday hardships caused by the dehumanising practices of the white social, political and economic systems. The survival of Black aggregates and their diversification into most New World niches definitely suggests some powerful and independent adaptive mechanisms. This is where the rich Black cultural past came in as a viable pattern of life and as an indispensable support system that provided to them pools of symbolic and material resources.

Despite the de-historicizing and primitivizing objectification of Blacks by the white imperialist, the fact is that Africans were inheritors of a distinctive history and group tradition. It is pertinent to refer to Frantz Fanon’s “frenetic rummaging” through all the antiquity of the Black man, where he
says:

What I found there took away my breath.....All of that, exhumed from the past, spread with its insides out, made it possible for me to find a valid historical place. The white man was wrong. I was not a primitive, not even a half-man, I belonged to a race that had already been working in gold and silver two thousand years ago. And too, there was something else, something else that the white man could not understand (Black Skins 130).

Fanon then goes on to mention the existence of religion, customs, science, sculpture and poetry as signs of a distinctive Black heritage.

The glory of African Americans, to my mind, rests in the durable fiber of humanity imbibed from a strong and ancient heritage, in the face of what undoubtedly has been the most repressive epoch in modern world history. Upon the hard rock of racial, social and economic exploitation and injustice, Black Americans forged and nurtured a distinct identity – they formed and maintained kinship networks, loved, raised and socialised children, built a religion and created a rich expressive culture in which they articulated their hopes and feelings and dreams. They were not ‘inarticulate ciphers’, objects who were continually acted upon by forces over which they had no control, but actors in their own right who not only responded to their situation but often effected it in crucial ways. And this intellectual thought was not restricted to the few Blacks who escaped North, got education and formed what could be termed the intelligentsia or the ‘elite’ Black group; a reconstruction of the Black folk experience shows richness of expression, sharpness of perception, uninhibited imagination and complex imagery. It is visible in the total Black ethos or what can be called their way of life. This includes certain virtues and ideals, certain manners of independence and hospitality and general ways of looking upon the world, which give them a distinctive diversity of languages, religions, customs and institutions. It also meant sharing a fundamental outlook towards the past, present and future and common means of cultural expression which could well have constituted the
basis of a sense of common identity and worldview capable of withstanding the impact of slavery.

Attempts were made to extirpate the tribal organization, language, family structure and religion of the Blacks. Nevertheless, the journey to the New World did not inexorably sever all associations with the Old World; aspects of the traditional cultures and worldview the Blacks came with, continued to exist as a dynamic, creative part of group life in the United States. Retaining aspects of their indigenous culture was actually a rejection of essentialist notions of identity – an act of self-affirmation and relocation by returning to their cultural identity, which for Blacks in America, positioned as they were, was a personal and a spiritual necessity, that enabled their survival.

Culture, we understand, is not fixed. It is a process that takes its shape through the interaction between past and present. Although self-preservation is the first law of nature, but the toughness and resiliency of a culture are determined by its ability to react creatively and responsively to the realities of a new situation. With respect to the Blacks, too, survival rested not so much on the indelibility of cultural contents, as it did on creativity and innovation. The African worldview interacted with that of the Euro-American world into which it was carried and a fresh African American perspective was created. Lawrence Levine opines:

For all of its horrors, slavery was never so complete a system of psychic assault that it prevented the slaves from carving out independent cultural forms. It never pervaded all of the interstices of their minds and their culture, and in those gaps they were able to create an independent art form and a distinctive voice (30).

Central to the African Americans past culture were certain patterns of verbal art – folk tales, songs, myths, proverbs, jokes, verbal games and magic. The materials of African American oral expressive culture give voice to the distinctive, multi-layered, meaningful subversive ethnicity of the Black community. From the first African captives, through the years of slavery, and
into the twentieth century Black Americans kept alive important strands of African consciousness and verbal art in their tales, folk beliefs, games, speech, humor, songs, dance and aphorisms. All these served the dual purpose of not only preserving communal values and solidarity but also providing occasion for the individuals to transcend, at least symbolically, the inevitable restrictions of their environment and society by permitting them to express deeply held feelings which ordinarily could not be verbalized. The most common form of folk narrative was the folk tale and the anthropomorphic Brer Rabbit type stories, among others, were a vital part of the Negro heritage, and a psychological necessity for Blacks.

In the Preface to his *Mother Wit From The Laughing Barrel*, Allan Dundes says that “Mother Wit with its connotation of collective wisdom acquired by the experience of living and from generations past is often expressed in folklore” (xiii). The call-and-response pattern which was reinforced in America by the practice of living out hymns in religious gatherings, placed the individual in these gatherings in constant dialogue with his/her community, allowing him to bask in the warmth of the shared feelings of those around him. The central communality that had bound the African societies together, could not be completely eroded, as spirituals, both during and after slavery, continued to be the product of an improvisational individual and mass consciousness and creativity. These spirituals also made the Blacks’ fantasy life very rich by allowing them to dream of an all-Black positive reference group, of sending messages to the dead or of being reunited with them joyfully in the next world. Secular work songs which became increasingly important after freedom and represented the ethos of the Black folk could transport singers beyond time and the singing of blues, too, had elements of catharsis and solidarity.

In essence, all elements of the Black folk (ethnic) culture — sacred/secular songs, folk beliefs, myths and folk tales, were not only instruments of survival but of a compelling African American ethos and a cultural style. These instruments of life became the catalysts of sanity, of health and of self-respect, by enabling Blacks to create the necessary space
between them and their owners and by preventing legal slavery from becoming spiritual slavery. Important elements of their shared African heritage remained alive not as ‘quaint cultural vestiges’ or as ‘elements of minstrelsy’, as Whites would have it, but as vital, creative and self-affirmatory elements of Black culture. Imagination became the key to this cultural liberation. For this entire oral expressive culture of the Blacks, a sense of community was vital, so this not only had a cathartic, but integrative function as well.

Slaves were as Professor Hobsbawm has called them “pre political beings in a prepolitical situation” (qtd. in Levine 54). Within their frame of reference they used different, no less effective means of escape and opposition. The sacred-secular universe they created was a serious alternative to the societal system created by southern slaveholders. And yet I do not wish to suggest that the entire being of the Blacks was reactionary or repudiative. In *Toward the African Revolution*, Frantz Fanon wrote that without oppression and racism there could have been no blues (47), but Ortiz Walton’s views are important as a response to Fanon’s statement when he says “The Blues cannot be reduced to a reaction against what white people do and have done; rather they would be more accurately conceived of as a positive form that affirms and preserves African American culture” (Walton 34).

The historical use of folklore by Blacks clearly helps one to capture the joys and pains, to gain some of a people’s angle of vision and world view in order to better understand the inner dynamics of the group and the attitudes its members had towards each other as well as towards the outside world, to comprehend the mechanisms that members of the group erected to guard their values, maintain their sense of worth and retain their sanity. Post-bellum Black men and women too, dwelt upon their past and filled their lore with stories of slaves who, regardless of their condition, retained a sense of dignity and group pride. Family legends of slave ancestors were cherished and handed down from generation to generation. Negroes told each other of fathers and mothers, relations and friends who committed sacrifices worth
remembering, performed deeds worth celebrating and who endured hardships that have not been forgotten.

The question to me is one of cultural perception as well as of power relationships. I understand that the Blacks acknowledged and feared the masters' power, but within their Euro-African world view, they understood different sources and types of power, some of which their masters could not comprehend. While the master's power was the power to dominate and control, the Blacks' power was a creative and self-affirming power. It would be pertinent here to quote the views of Jean Francois Lyotard wherewith he believes that in oral societies where narrative dominates, ways of knowing are legitimised as a product of actual social relations and not valorized and reified as a separate 'objective' category. It is science which classifies the narrative-dominated oral world as belonging to a different mentality, 'savage, primitive, undeveloped'. From this view develops the entire history of cultural imperialism from the dawn of Western civilization. Lyotard judiciously winds up his discussion by calling forth the need for a weaving of different practices, rather than a monolithic discourse.\footnote{2}

Blacks' self-legitimising view of reality did limit their master's power, great though it was. It did so by the creation of an alternative discourse. What Barbara Christian suggests with respect to feminist criticism, becomes true in this context also:

In every society where there is the denigrated Other whether that is designated by sex, race, class or ethnic background, the Other struggles to declare the truth and therefore create the truth in forms that exist for her or him. The creation of that truth also changes the perception of all those who believe they are the norm (Perspectives 160).

The conscious aim of the Blacks was not to reverse the hierarchical order of the imperialist discourse, but it did lead to a questioning of the philosophical assumptions on which this order was based. All this could never have happened if slavery had so completely closed in around the slave, so totally
penetrated his personality structure as to reduce him to a kind of *tabula rasa* upon which the white man could write what he chose.

Social conventions we know determine literary ones also. The social philosophy that denied the humanity of the Blacks and the economic policy that relegated the Black people to the bottom of the economic ladder, made it very difficult for a very long time for anyone to write a book with credible Black characters as the focus of attention. It would be worthwhile to quote Catherine Belsey in this respect. Belsey feels that the task of ideology is to present the position of the subject as fixed and unchangeable, an element in a given system of differences which is human nature and the world of human experience, and to show possible action as an endless repetition of ‘normal’ familiar action. Such ‘reductive normalizing’ serves as a paradigm for the ways in which ideology codifies, normalizes and reifies, thereby leading to a stable form of ‘othering’. The people to be othered are homogenized into a collective ‘they’. All ‘their’ actions and reactions are repetitions of ‘their’ normal habits. In this normalizing discourse, the thrust is on body as scene/seen (Belsey 83).

Even when the Negro became a presence to reckon with in American writing, he was portrayed in such a way as to justify his exploiters. In his book *The Negro in American Fiction*, Sterling Brown has made a valuable analysis of the presence of the Negro character in books written both by White and Black writers in the 19th century and up to the mid-twentieth century. Novels like J.P. Kennedy’s *Swallow Barn* (1832) written in the plantation tradition of pro-slavery fiction, explained slavery as a “benevolent guardianship” which was necessary for “a childish people’s transition from heathendom to Christianity” (S. Brown 18). When slavery was attacked and Negroes were shown as human in novels like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), it was countered with scenes of squalor in the North. The contented slave, the clown and later the wretched freedman became the Negro stereotypes. Complete, complex humanity was denied to the Negro. Sterling Brown rightly suggests that the Negro was presented in such a way that he personified loyalty, mirth, servility, quaintness, exuberance,
The works of Reconstruction written in the Plantation tradition, resurrected slavery in practice, though not in name, by creating a picturesque interest in the Negro of the ‘Glorious South’. Thomas Nelson Page’s *In Ole Virginia* (1897) and *Red Rock* (1898) are peopled with Negroes who have the happy mentality of puppies. Joel Chandler Harris’s *Uncle Remus’s Tales* also turns out to be a singing of the ‘glorious’ days of slavery. In Kate Chopin’s *Bayou Folk* (1894), Negroes are models of loyalty and self-denial. Sterling Brown’s views are quotable when he says, “Negro characters, at their best are shown only in relationship with kindly southern whites, at their worst, in relationship with predatory Yankees. They are never shown in relationship to themselves” (62). When threatened with Negro domination via Negro voting, education and work, the southern authors added the stereotype of the brute Negro. Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman* (1905) and *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902) portrayed the Negro as savage unless kept in place. The Black and beastly almost became synonymous in these books.

The master narratives, or the “metropolitan canon” (87) as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin would call the above mentioned works by white/pro-slavery authors insisted on validating the image of an essentially de-humanized Negro, or a de-privileged ‘periphery’ and its necessary co-relate – a privileged ‘centre’. The ‘centre’ alone was ‘knowledgeable’ enough to understand and do what was best for the ‘brute margins’ (Ashcroft et al 32). Absence of written English by Blacks was taken to suggest total absence of reason among them. Though five slave narratives had been published between 1760 and 1789, they were dubbed as merely derivative and Negro writers mere ‘parrots’.

This was where the need arose to create an alternative discourse – not only as a corrective gesture, but as a new and different way of ordering reality, different from the reality structured on white lines. This is where the role of the Negro intellectual assumed importance. A Black cultural renaissance became imperative. The artist, it was hoped, would be a redeemer
and help Blacks take a few giant steps up the Great Chain of Being. In his book *The Negro in American Fiction*, Sterling Brown opines that the Negro artist had a fine task ahead of him and that Negro writers were expected to accept responsibility of portraying the truth of Negro life, and of depicting him as a vital being in himself (4). Ironically, however, this did not prove true of early Negro writing. Robert Bone suggests that this was on account of the conflicting pattern of identification and rejection which the Negro artist suffered as a member of a distinctive cultural community (Bone 3-4). Frantz Fanon has called this “the massive psychoexistential complex” of the Negro, which according to him results in the Negro enslaving himself, after having been enslaved by the whites (*Black Skins* 41-82). There was a sort of a psychological battle between assimilationism and Negro nationalism within the Negro artist which became manifested in literature either in an unconscious desire to be white or in an unconscious self-hatred. W.E.B. Du Bois has described this dilemma of Negro identity as a perpetual “twoness” in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*. “It is a peculiar sensation,” Du Bois succinctly opined, “This double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” The Negro, Du Bois said was a kind of seventh son “born with a veil, and gifted with a second sight in this American world.” It is a strange, prismatic vision because that world “yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (*DuBois, The Souls* 615).

Among educated Blacks, alienation from roots appeared to be the strongest. The Negro middle classes became extremely hostile towards the Black masses. They indulged in a kind of psychological “passing” at the fantasy level. The polar opposite to this tendency, however, was the defensive urge to blackness within the race. Segregation, separate group tradition, common heritage of slavery, along with the growth of race pride reinforced the sense of solidarity. It was this conflicting pattern of Negro cultural experience in America that had far reaching echoes in Negro writing as well, and this is what prevented early Negro writing from presenting a valid picture of the
Negro. Negro writers developed a tendency to 'exploit' race material, thereby fostering the twin myths of Negro primitivity and of 'progress' on white lines. Negro characters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, more often than not, turned out to be essentially in the minstrel tradition or 'Just-like-white-folks' characters.

The early years of the twentieth century was the period when hostility towards Negro masses was shown in expressions such as “The bad Negro keeps the good Negro back”. This classist attitude of the Negro middle class finds expression in Sutton Griggs’s *Pointing the Way* (1908) when he calls “colored people of the lower order – besotted men and slovenly women, denizens of the slums” (qtd. in Bone 18). Lillian Simmons, the central character of Otis Shackleford’s novel of the same name, written in 1915, voices like sentiments when she says that “She could understand why Jim Crow cars and all other forms of segregation in the South were necessary, but she could not feel that it was fair to treat all colored people alike, because all were not alike” (qtd. in Bone 18).

The Harlem Renaissance which roughly covers the decade of the 1920s and was basically an artistic and intellectual movement, largely the result of the great migration of Blacks from the South to the North during World War I (1914-18), was also largely a manifestation of this dualism of thought of the Negro artist in America. During the war, thousands of Southern rural Blacks attracted by job opportunities in Northern factories and mills and eager to escape the rigid confines of the Southern caste system, migrated to the industrial centers of the North.

Though migration and the war experience were not without their share of setbacks and disappointments, yet there was a new and positive spirit emerging paradoxically from the frustrations and disappointments of the war years. Spatial separation made it possible for Negroes to live in an almost all-Black-world. Separate community development provided Negroes with new opportunities for independent action. They supported Black civic institutions, read the Black press and participated in Black political organizations.
Abandoning at least temporarily the goal of an integrated society, they rallied their followers around the banner of race pride and group solidarity and sought to gain control of the ghettos into which they had been herded.

The most striking expression of the new spirit was the literary and artistic renaissance that centered in Harlem, which became a Black city within the city of New York. Alain Locke, the Black philosopher of the age, expressed the dominant feeling of the times when in his essay 'The New Negro', which is a sort of introduction to his seminal book *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, he said of this city that until that moment

... American Negroes have been a race more in name than in fact, or to be exact, more in sentiment than in experience. The chief bond between them has been that of a common condition rather than a common consciousness; a problem in common rather than a life in common. In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination. It is – or promises at least to be – a race capitol (5).

Locke even equated this unusual outburst of creative expression to the "resurgence of a people" (Foreword xi). The intellectual and artistic movement that exploded in Harlem between 1917 and 1929 indicated to Winthrop D. Jordan the self-consciousness of the age. Alain Locke proclaimed a new philosophy, the New Negro philosophy. The New Negro, he said was both proud of his race and insistent on his rights as an American. Locke’s anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, becomes almost a representative work of the 1920s being a magnificent expression of the Negro culture that was fast becoming conscious of its separate identity. It is almost a manifesto of the Harlem Renaissance, with its inclusion of the work of thirty-three authors and three graphic artists. For the Harlem poet the mood was especially celebratory of the past and optimistic for the future. Langston Hughes’s poem *Youth* echoes this euphoric mood: We have tomorrow/Bright before us/Like a flame (qtd. in Locke 5).
To assert a new personality for the New Negro, it became necessary to rediscover the Black heritage. So, much effort by poets, writers, artists and musicians went into the explication of the Negro’s folk tradition of whatever was known of the civilization of Africa. The spokespersons for Harlem school emphasized the hitherto positive contributions of Black people and stressed the need for recalling a group tradition through retrospective thinking. In an essay ‘The Negro Digs up his Past’, included in Locke’s anthology, Schomburg says that the definite and determined desire to have a well-documented history was to be a stimulating and inspiring tradition for the coming generations (Schomburg 231). Added to this was the renewed interest in Negro folk-history. Unlike the Black writers of the past, they found their material in the folk experience of the Negro people – in rural life in the South and the West Indies and in the street life of the Northern ghettos. Unlike their immediate predecessors of the ‘Talented Tenth’ school, who wanted to write only about middle class characters struggling to make a ‘just-like-white-folks’ life, Harlem writers celebrated that which is special in the Negro life. This included the spirituals, the blues, the folk legends and the spirit of mutual understanding that can develop only among people who have suffered together. They rejected the white stereotype of Africa as a continent of unrelieved barbarism and began to deal sympathetically with African themes.

Ironically however, Harlem did not stop at just that. Harlem also became the hub of salons and night clubs, where the jazz style of singing and dancing took shape. Artists, writers and musicians shed the constraints of the past and boldly experimented with new material and new forms. White intellectuals and litterateurs ‘discovered’ Harlem. They sought in Negro life an alternative to what they disliked most in white America – its conformity, its prudishness, its hypocrisy. Cabaret, jazz, the jungle dance – these exotic aspects of the Negro in Harlem served a new kind of white psychological need. If to Blacks Harlem was a city of refuge from white racism, to whites it became the exotic city of celebrating the ‘uninhibited’ and ‘primitive’ quality of Negro joy and exhilaration and of finding a vent for their post-World War I alienation and melancholy. White money and white patronage thus poured in.
Carl Van Vechten, the uncrowned white prince of Harlem in the 1920s, became a name to reckon with, both amongst Whites and Blacks.

In a society posited on white supremacy, which had always viewed the Black with contempt and pity and conditioned him to accept himself as a shuffling, head-scratching, sub-human being, this sudden 'courting and cultivating' by cultured whites was too good to be believed. It was indeed exhilarating for Blacks to be valued not for what they might become – middle-class / white-like, but for their essential self – their Negroness. The Blacks went all out to please the white client and audience as best as he/she could. Huggins, however rightly points out that this seemingly straightforward 'cultural explosion' was not so simple as it appeared. It embodied the contradictions of the white-Black relations of the age. Behind the mask of white patronage was hidden what Louise Thompson has called the "refined racism" of the white 'master.' Huggins's views in this respect are very pertinent, which I quote here:

Yet the Black-white relationship has been symbiotic; Blacks have been essential to white identity (and whites to Blacks) ... Whites have needed Blacks as they have needed the blackface minstrel mask – a guise of alter ego, And Blacks-sensing this psychic dependency – have been all too willing to join in the charade, hiding behind that minstrel mask, appearing to be what white men wanted them to be, and finding pleasure in the deception which was too often a trick on themselves. The way that the Negro has been used by whites, and the way he has permitted himself to be used, exposes the deep moral tensions that have characterized American race relations. Harlem in the 1920s gave to this interdependency a sophistication and charm, but at its very core the game of masks remained the same (Huggins 84-85).

Black identity, which had become locked into the white man's fantasy construct in the image of 'Black-as-buffoon,' a subservient Aunt Jemima or
Uncle Tom stereotype, now became the ‘Black-as-exotic’ stereotype. He was the savage of the Jazz Age – the unspoiled child of nature, sexually uninhibited, defying prohibition, finding joy and abandon in exotic music and dance. To the white mind, the Black woman as prostitute was just an extension of the ‘lewd wanton’ Black woman of the antebellum era. It would be naive if a Negro presumed that he had after all, gained human status in white eyes. Walter White in an enlightening essay ‘The Paradox of Color’ clearly states that “New York Whites receive Blacks as artists, but refuse to accept them as men” (362).

If Black Harlem had been left alone and had not been discovered by whites, the whole story might have been different. The sense of urgency to promote culture might have been less prevalent but would have been more honest. But the fact remains that Black Harlem could not be left alone, and in a sense it was as much a white creation as it was Black. The white patron became a self-appointed teacher, guide and judge and his search for ‘authentic’ Negro voices was a search for fulfilment of his own needs. It became impossible for the Negro identity to maintain its integrity under the aegis of the white patron.

The confusion of realms that marked the Harlem Renaissance with respect to aesthetic, literary and cultural theory did not truly signal the acceptance of folk narratives or even of Negro cultural heritage per se. On the other hand it led to an uneasy accommodation with the past. Blacks had to watch and evaluate how whites read and ‘used’ Black art and to praise those works, which could result in the most ‘useful’ reaction. Du Bois outlined what he called “the social compulsion” of Black literature. As early as 1921, he wrote in the Crisis:

Negro art is today plowing a difficult row. We want everything that is said about us to tell of the best and highest and noblest in us. We insist that our art and propaganda is one. We fear evil in us will be called racial while in others it is viewed as individual (DuBois, “Negro Art” 239).
Each piece of creative writing was thus to be a political statement, ‘a bombshell fired into the heart of bourgeoisie culture’ proving that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human and that he too had a gift comparable to other (white) men. This unofficial literary programme of the Harlem Renaissance tended to break with the use of folklore in any meaningful way. Black writers did use materials from their past, but the emphasis was on past as passed. Blacks, it was supposed had progressed and moved on to more contemporary issues. Since folklore was considered to be tied to the past with embarrassing references to humiliation and oppression, the use of these was definitely not expected to promote the type of art the Harlem theorists wanted.

Another roadblock in the uneasy relation with the past that hindered the acceptance of folklore literary tradition was the omnipresent use of dialect therein. In his discussion of Negro dialect, Charles S. Johnson moaned that many users of dialect made Blacks look uneducated and ridiculous (297). Since dialect got in the way of true aesthetic appreciation by Whites and did not allow Black literature to be taken seriously, it didn’t form a part of the New Negro Program.

Although Langston Hughes was one of the few writers of his time who said that if an American Negro artist could escape the restrictions the more advanced among his group put upon him, there was a great deal of unused material ready and waiting for his art, but the same Hughes expressed his Du Boisian dilemma in his 1927 essay, ‘The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain’ by saying that:

But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America - this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible (Hughes 1267).

In The Weary Blues, the opening lines of the first and last poems suggest polarities of consciousness: “I am a Negro” and “I, too, sing America” (Hughes 1257). Cullen’s Color poems are haunted by the unresolved conflict
in his self-perception as simultaneously a Black man and culturally assimilated, though admittedly, socially ostracized Westerner. Helga Crane, the heroine of Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1929) is what Du Bois would call “torn usunder” because being unable to reconcile to the reality of her race, her sexuality is driven from one obsession to other. Claude Mckay’s *Home to Harlem* is no sentimental cry to return home because to Mckay there is no home to return to. To Mckay, beneath the carnival of the White Harlem world is pain, loss of direction and loss of the self. Jessie Fauset’s novels employ the theme of “passing”, a phenomenon that exemplifies the shakiness of the upper middle-class Blacks. Ironically, “passing” is a major theme of the 1920s when race pride was supposedly at a peak. Talented Blacks found it essential to pass as whites in order to fulfill themselves.

Du Bois, while proposing a theory of art from the perspective of the Black Americans, had called upon Black writers in a 1926 address ‘Criteria for Negro Art’ to stop handing everything over to “a white jury” and wanted them to review and acclaim their work by their own “free and unfettered judgment”. He had deplored the idea that Black writers were being called to “lucrative ways of earning a living” (DuBois “Criteria” 259). As early as 1920 also, he had called upon writers to “tell the tale and sing the song from the heart” (DuBois “Negro Writers” 233). However, the attitude of most Harlem writers and artists remained ambivalent.

Before I come to the special and distinctive role that Zora Neale Hurston played in removing this ambivalence of her times and in foregrounding her subversive pride in a Black ethos, I would like to discuss the vital role that the seemingly faceless and voiceless Black woman had played in Black self-affirmation and celebratory survival all along the period of Black presence in America. The Southern plantation society and the Northern bourgeois society, as we know, were avowedly patriarchal. Ironically, the Black man too, internalised this sexist ideology because it suited him. Racism, one understands was not the last word in oppression. If one looks at racism to the exclusion of sexism, one misses at least half the picture. Beneath Black men with their burden, always stood Black women,
historically unseen and unheard, eclipsed by the pressing issue of race.

Black women had been brought to America to breed slaves, to attend to the personal needs of slaveholders, to care for their families and to work in fields, too. Crucial in the preparation of the Black female for the slave market had been her complete dehumanisation and repression. This was specially so because she was to work in close contact with the white family and no recalcitrance on her part could be tolerated. Her roles included those of a maid to the white household or a wet nurse to the white children. She carried out these roles often while neglecting her own children. For all this she was repaid by being made victim of the sexual mores that are typical of the relationship of colonizers to the women of the conquered group – she was shamelessly subjected to sexual assault and then dubbed an ‘evil temptress’. She was used as breeder of slave ‘property’. During the era of slavery, the White/male population thus, objectified the Black woman as concubine, breeder, mammy and mule.

Central to the racist ideology of the whites and to the patriarchal concept of the Southern plantation order were the myths of the beautiful, pure, Christian, weak, helpless, white alabaster lady and the necessary co-relate to this – the lewd, ugly but voluptuous, tetherable and strong Black woman. Given the southern planter’s definition of sex as an animal function, the Black woman was defined as all flesh and matter, devoid of mind and spirit. Body type or physical characteristics were made the essence of a woman’s being, Black or white. Slavery, which had led to the sexual exploitation of the Black woman was actually designed to intimidate the entire slave population. Robert Staples is right when he suggests that the Black women had their role fashioned out of the racial oppression they endured and the need to assume the task of Black survival (30).

The rape of the Black woman, however, was not a chance occurrence that was limited to the period of slavery. In post-emancipation era, sexual abuse of the Black woman continued for economic reasons. In this period, the Black male was either left unemployed by the whites deliberately or he
refused to work at jobs that did not allow him to maintain any sense of pride or achievement. It was then left to the Black woman to work for the family's survival, which again more often than not put her in a sexually vulnerable position. In many cases there was no man in the household at all. When the male was present, but unemployed, the fact that the woman was the only breadwinner in the family had psychological effects on marital relationships. Black men who felt a loss of masculinity, blamed their women for the oppression they suffered under a chaotic and irresponsible economic system.

When the race/sex hierarchy of the white supremacist society became threatened by the assertion of the self-confidence and indomitable dignity of the Black woman, the former termed her an Amazon, a dominating matriarch and a castrating bitch, responsible for emasculating the Black man. The White woman who felt sexually threatened by her, castigated the Black woman for her shamelessly seductive role, or dubbed her a fat, ugly, unclean, asexual 'Aunt Jemima'. Bell Hooks rightly points out that “Devaluation of Black womanhood after slavery ended, was a conscious, deliberate effort on the part of whites to sabotage mounting Black self-confidence and self-respect (Ain’t I 59).

One wonders how the victims of this multiple oppression could have acquired the image of a dominating matriarch. Joyce Ladner gives a valid answer in his book Tomorrow's Tomorrow: “The problem is that there has been a confusion of the terms ‘dominant’ and ‘strong’. All dominating people must necessarily be strong but all strong people are not necessarily dominant” (46). What has been labelled a destructive matriarchy is nothing more than the shifting of responsibility from the male to the female. Role-shifts are responses to economic exigencies. The Black woman’s self-reliance needs to be distinguished from dominance or power. Her adoption of the role of provider deserves praise and compassion, not condemnation. It was the sturdy spirit of the Black woman that was literally responsible for the survival of the Black people in the ante or post-bellum South. In a September 1963 article in the New York Post, Lena Horne rightly opines:
I think Negro wives, no matter what their age or background or even their understanding of the problem, have to be terribly strong – much stronger than their white counterparts.... They have to be spiritual sponges, absorbing the racially inflicted hurts of their men. Yet at the same time they have to give him courage, to make him know that it is worth it to go on (qtd. in Staples 95).

Even in motherhood, heroic acts of African American slave mother and post-emancipation mother are legendary. Frederick Douglass, the great abolitionist recounts how his mother walked twelve miles in the nite to see him and walked back (310-11). Booker T. Washington writes in Up From Slavery, “One of my earliest recollections is that of my mother cooking chicken late at nite and awakening her children for the purpose of feeding them” (17).

In the white/male worldview, however, thinking and acting like a ‘nigger woman’ continued to be the most pejorative concept. The society of monopoly capitalism and white racism that seemingly emasculated the Black man, continued to put the Black woman in the unnatural position of concubine, breadwinner and mother. For a long time, the history of the image of the Black woman in America largely became the history of her objectification by the white male imperialist. Staples is right in suggesting that because of her powerless status, the Black woman was forced to live with these myths about herself for very long, not only in life, but in literature also (35). Slavery was treated as a male phenomenon. Black females were, it was assumed, female animals, whose lot it was to lay their eggs and die. In history and in literature, the specificity of the Black woman’s experience was left unmentioned. Gerda Lerner has called this the double invisibility of the female aspect to all history (Preface xvii). This resulted in the stereotypes of Black femininity and the myths of Black woman’s images remaining unquestioned till the 1960s and even later.

Even the feminist movement which began around the 1960s, for very
long remained a white/upper class movement and it completely ignored the existence of poor, working class, Black and other non-white women. It made ‘gender’ the only basis for sexist exploitation, to the complete exclusion of race and class. Consequently it had nothing to do with what Bell Hooks calls the “lived experience” (Feminist 3) of the oppressed majority of women. In a 2003 article “Against All Odds”, Clarissa Myrick-Harris has quoted Paula J. Giddings who says, “Black women tend to be marginalized both in Afro-American studies and in women’s studies” (Myrick-Harris 8).

What is more shocking, however, is the fact that Black men too, especially in postbellum America completely internalised this sexist ideology that a patriarchal social order is the only viable foundation for society. They began to view women as a second sex with distinctly limited privileges and felt that a ‘real’ man is he who can ‘control’ his woman. Subconsciously Black men developed a paranoia towards what they thought was an ‘uppity woman’ – the woman who was forced to work to keep the home fires burning. To subjugate this woman, men asserted their manhood by using brute force and physical prowess. Often Black men expressed hatred and violence towards Black women not for any fault of the latter, but simply to be admired for their masculinity.

From the writings and speeches of Black male political activists it is clear that they saw Black liberation as a move to gain recognition and support for an emerging Black patriarchy. Interestingly, in a 1982 essay ‘If the Present Looks Like the Past, What does the Future look Like’, Alice Walker points out that virtually all Black leaders appear to have chosen wives for the nearness of their complexion to white. And if Black women pointed to such things, they were told that these are not ‘serious’ or ‘political’ issues and mean nothing to the Black liberation struggle (In Search 302). Even in the 1960s, when Marcus Garvey, Amiri Baraka and Martin Luther King were fighting for Black women’s political (voting) rights, no one ever thought of their social equality or of their victimization by both Black and white men. It was taken for granted that for the Black man to be strong, the Black woman has to be weak.
The sufferings of Black women were dismissed as irrelevant by Black men because sexist socialization taught them to see women as objects of no value or worth. Amongst the numerous examples quoted by Bell Hooks to discuss the structure of patriarchy is an extract from John Stoltenberg’s essay ‘Toward Gender Justice’. Stoltenberg says that, “Under patriarchy men become the arbiters of identity for both males and females, because the cultural norm of human identity, by definition, is male identity – masculinity” (Hooks, Ain’t I 99). Women all along were supposed to be ignoramuses whose only worth-admiring virtue was their capacity to worship masculinity. In the year 1897, when leading Black intellectuals such as Francis Grimke, W.E.B. Du Bois and Alexander Crummell had formed the prestigious American Negro Academy for the promotion of Literature, Science and Art, they limited its membership to “men of African descent”.

There had been some attempts at centralising the Black woman’s experience, for instance by writers like William Wells Brown, Charles Chesnutt and Anna Julius Cooper. But these writers inadvertently took upon themselves the business of softening as many differences as possible between the ‘degraded’ Black woman and the ‘deified’ white woman. Brown’s Clotel in his 1853 novel, Clotel is a ‘Quadroon’. Brown even goes so far as to suggest “...indeed, the greater portion of the coloured women, in the days of slavery, had no greater aspiration than that of becoming the finely-dressed mistress of some ‘white man’” (W. Brown, 40). Chesnutt’s story The Wife of His Youth is a nineteenth century story about a Black Black woman. But this story deals with the Black woman as a problem. Anna Julius Cooper’s A Voice from the South (1892) is often considered the first Black feminist text. When Cooper said that “…the world needs to hear her voice”, she gave a clarion call for women’s education and for women emancipators to be released from the paralysing grip of caste prejudice (A Voice 121). In spite of her bold feminist stand, Cooper is herself not free from the grip of the ethics of true womanhood. Truth, Harper and Amanda Smith are described by her as “gentle” or charming. Her images of Black women in A Voice are almost entirely of privileged women: the struggling, ambitious, intellectual, fatally
beautiful Southern mulatto women, a “cream colored” aspirant to a white culture club, etc. Majority of Black women in the 1890s, however, were sharecroppers, domestic servants, launderers or waitresses. Their struggle was for the necessities of life – for bread, dignity and for the simple right of possession of their bodies. To be known ‘just-like-white’ women was, therefore, another misrepresentation of the true image of the Black woman, who did not want to be known as beautiful, helpless and chaste.

It goes to the credit of the Black woman, that despite being a victim of this multiple bind – object of contempt and of physical/mental/ emotional abuse by white and Black men as also white women, she survived and dared to create herself. For her, survival became a form of resistance. She created herself not only in defiance of the forces that subjugated her, but also as self-affirmation. Despite all attempts at the Black woman’s erasure from social, political and literary history, and total misrepresentation of her image, she wrote herself down and did so to correct and revise the negative image imposed on her by the dominant culture. She gave a first hand knowledge of her subject in defiance of outsiders who had always defined what she looked like, how she sounded, how she behaved. When the Black woman got down to writing about and speaking about herself, it was about her indomitable will, her moral courage, her spiritual strength and her legacy of female bonding that she wished to be known by. By writing herself down, the Black woman could also convey the difference between “abasement of condition” and “degradation of character” (29) (Terms used by Iola Leroy in Francis Harper’s novel of the same name). Alice Walker’s observation would be pertinent in this context:

I believe that the truth about any subject only comes when all the sides of the story are put together, and all their different meanings make one new one. Each writer writes the missing parts to the other writer’s story. It is then the “whole story” emerges (In Search 49).

Black women have had a long tradition of bonding together in a
community that has been a source of oral and folk stories of survival and of psychic and emotional support. The salient, seemingly passive older slave women consistently translated the Black slave woman’s role as nurse and breeder into ethnically progressive and individually creative identities. They instilled in their children positive survival skills, aided in their development of self-awareness and created among the younger slaves, the group-mindedness and independence that were and still are the mainstay of Black families. But because in the early years of slavery, Black women rarely gained access to literary expression, this Black woman bonding and folk culture had often gone unrecorded except through individual lives and memories. Later, Black women writers fashioned a literature of cultural identity in the midst of brutal racist/sexist oppression. They did so by developing literature based on the folk culture, gender solidarity and female bonding as self-affirming rituals. They voiced in their literature, not only hate and bitterness, but also neighbourly kindness and sustaining love. Based on their experience, Black women developed symbols, language and modes of expression that specifically reflect the realities of Black female lives in a dominant white/male culture.

Reviewing theoretical contestations among American feminists, especially in the last two decades, Ann R Cacoullos in her 2001 essay “American Feminist Theory” quotes among others, Black feminist critics Barbara Christian and Judith Butler. Barbara Christian suggests that “people of color have always theorized – but in forms quite different from the Western forms of abstract logic”. This different kind of theorizing appears “in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and in proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas are more to our liking” (qtd. in Cacoullos 86). Christian rejected the language of the hegemonic discourse as mystifying because being formed of incomprehensible linguistic jargon it tended to exclude the woman and mystify her position. Judith Butler, too, voices similar opinion when she suggests that the subject is a production of and constituted by performatives acts. Gender is not a stable identity but constituted by its repeated performances in language, where utterances are a
doing and an action of some kind. The term “women”, Butler says, “is open-ended and resignifiable” (qtd. in Cacoullos 107). The whole idea of the many voices of Black feminist criticism was that in any feminist theory of gender, racial and sexual differences in specific historical conditions of production and reproduction should be taken into account. There is nothing like ‘women as such’ or innate (gender) identity. All human identities are constructed socially and linguistically.

Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell and Anna Cooper, all these are the voices of Black political activism in the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth century. In literature, starting with Phillis Wheatley, the slave poet of the eighteenth century, we have Linda Brent (Harriet Jacobs) and Harriet Wilson in the nineteenth century and Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Toni Cade Bambara, Jamaica Kincaid among others in the twentieth century. These silenced women, moved by an inexplicable will, often challenged through their writings, the abuses they suffered and the restrictions placed upon them. The sheer strength of these ‘known’ Black women and their desire to be heard and set free – set a precedent for Black women then, as well as now. Their refusal to be inwardly brutalized has aptly been summed up by Mary Burgher as the “wholesome self-esteem” (112) of the Black women down the ages.

In 1772, when the eighteen-year old Phillis Wheatley, who in Alice Walker’s words ‘owned not even herself’, successfully defended her ‘slender sheaf of poems, written by herself’, before the ‘august’ Boston group, which led to the publication of Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral in 1773, she launched two traditions at once – the Black American literary tradition and the Black woman’s literary tradition. It is relevant to quote just four lines from her published two volume verse to exemplify her daunting spirit:

Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
Wonder from whence my love of freedom sprung,
To me, it is not so much about what Wheatley sang, but the very fact that given the victimisation she was subject to, she could even retain the notion of a song.

Just as Wheatley became the first author to publish Black poetry, Ann Plato was the first Black to publish a book of essays in 1841 and Harriet E. Wilson was the first Black person to publish a novel in the United States in 1859. Our Nig by Wilson is a compelling novel of a Black woman’s expanding consciousness in a racist Northern antebellum environment, which has recently been rediscovered after almost one and a half century of oblivion. Also belonging to the mid-nineteenth century is Harriet Jacobs, who gained power through her wit and intelligence which she put to use by concealing herself/her identity at various stages in her life. She wrote her autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl : Written by Herself* (1861) under the pseudonym, Linda Brent, thereby concealing her identity. Then, there is the story of Jacobs’s concealing her reading ability to prevent her white master from sending obscene notes to her. She controlled her sexuality by choosing the man who will father her children. Lastly, for the love of her children and for saving them from being enslaved, Jacobs hid herself in her granny’s house for seven years.

Coming to the twentieth century, one meets in Maya Angelou a poet, singer, dancer, autobiographer, actor, director, composer and editor. The five volumes each of her autobiography and verse depict her life from an eight-year old sexually traumatised, silenced child in 1936 to a naive, unwed mother giving in to her teacher’s “monthly requests for lovemaking” in return for money and promised stardom, to a “phenomenal woman” in 1978, who could assert her selfhood against odds that were inimical to the Black woman’s growth.
Alice Walker, born in 1944, explores the dynamics of empowerment she gained through her matrilineage in her autobiographical essay, ‘In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens’. She calls her mothers and grandmothers “Creators” and intensely spiritual women. Being artists was an everyday part of their lives, Walker tells us, because it was their way of putting their chaotic life in order. Besides writing, she tells us of the Black women’s skill in gardening and quilt-making. In the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, there is a rare priceless quilt on display made up of bits and pieces of worthless rags, but is the work of the powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling of a person. This quilt, Walker tells us is captioned – “Made by an anonymous Black woman in Alabama, a hundred years ago.” Walker lauds her Black grandmother’s ability to leave her mark on the world in the only materials she could afford and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use (In Search 238-39). It would be pertinent to quote the views of Houston Baker, Jr. and Charlotte Pierce Baker who think that:

It [Quilt-making] constitutes survival strategy and motion in the face of dispersal. A patchwork quilt, laboriously and affectionately crafted from bits of worn overalls, shredded uniforms, tattered petticoats and outgrown dresses stands as a signal instance of a patterned wholeness in the African diaspora (706).

If to Walker quilt-making was artistry, to Paule Marshall neighbourhood talking was both art and therapy for women of her mother’s generation. Marshall attributes her “narrative art” to the “wordshop” in her mother’s kitchen, in her famous essay ‘Poets in the Kitchen’, first published in 1983. This passionate talk by groups of women every afternoon re-affirmed their self-worth after the humiliations of everyday life and became an exuberant outlet for their creative expression. To Marshall, this talk became her gateway to “…the rich legacy of language and culture” (1952) of her ancestors.

Resurrecting the works of Black women authors roughly after the
1960s, has thus facilitated the resurrection of the African American woman’s literary tradition, which is both unique and deep-rooted. It clearly suggests, that to be / to have been a woman of the Negro race in America and to be able to grasp the deep significance of the crisis is to have a unique heritage. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. suggests that the works of Black women configure into a tradition not by the biology of race or gender per se, but because writers read other writers and then ground their representations of experience in models of language provided largely by other writers to whom they feel akin. This is what Gates calls, “formal bonding” and through this, he suggests, we can know a literary tradition (Foreword, Iola Leroy xviii). It becomes a corrective historical process of self-definition by contemporary women not to essentialize womanhood, but to honor and validate the experience of women, experience that has been denied and distorted by the patriarchal cultural heritage. The Black woman’s literary tradition thus, results in an unconscious handing over of the creative spark which was an innate gift of the otherwise mute and voiceless Black woman. It may also be considered as a story of survival of the Black woman, told by the Black woman herself, in as much as it is a handing down to their daughters, grand daughters and great grand daughters, a respect for possibilities and how to grasp them.

A meaningful link in this tradition of Afro-American women’s writing is Zora Neale Hurston, one of the most prolific writers of the twentieth century. Alice Walker mentions how during her search for the Black collectors of folklore, the Black anthropologist, the Black hoodoo doctor, she found Hurston’s name as “... a footnote to the illustrious all-male list” (A. Walker, “Zora” xii). Throughout her works, Hurston lights up, what I choose to call ‘hidden lanterns of survival’, of identity and of self-affirmation in the picture she paints of slaves and their descendants. The Black men and women who populate her works are not a cowed and timorous Black mass but a people who, however circumscribed by misfortune and oppression, were never without their means of resistance and never lacked the inner resources to oppose the master class, however, extreme the price they had to pay. Above all, Hurston wrote as a Black woman about her own experiences. By giving
herself the power of language and of assigning meaning and worth to her own experience as a woman in racist/sexist/classist America, she challenged what Elizabeth Meese calls the “phallocentric structure of knowledge” (143). Main (male) stream theorizing, Hurston understood, intuitively has the tendency to forestall the phenomenon of multiple female experience and this also led to the hegemony of one interpretive order of meaning, which Hurston rejected. Like her mothers and grandmothers, who were artists and writers in their own right, Hurston, too spoke to the general Black female experience in a society which dubs this experience as inferior, valueless and insignificant.

In the works of Zora Neale Hurston the beauty, strength and pride in a compellingly Black ethos become the tools of self-affirmation, celebration and survival in the face of racist-sexist exploitation and discrimination. Hurston made it her life’s passion – both as a person and as a writer – a ‘Black’ and a ‘woman,’ to throw light on the primacy of the human spirit. Above all, she wrote as a Black woman about her own experiences and therefore, in some respects spoke to the general Black female experience in America: “I had seen white folks pass on green and therefore assumed the red light was for me,” was the explanation that a young, self-possessed, impish Zora gave to the authorities to escape punishment when arrested for crossing against the red light (Gilbert and Gubar, Norton 1488). This is the kind of strength and self-determination that characterized not only Zora the person, but Zora Neale Hurston (1901-1960), the most prolific African American woman writer who lived and wrote at a time when the question of identity for the African American was fraught with an overwhelming sense of conflict.

Hurston truly succeeded in resolving this conflict. To her, being Black is avowedly being beautiful, strong and proud. This beauty is more of an ‘inside stuff’ than an outside imposition, this strength is more a strength of the spirit over intellect (reason), and this pride is the pride of tradition, history, folklore, culture. To her the ‘color of the mind’ born of the ‘color of the skin’ becomes reason enough to celebrate life. “Among the thousand white persons,” she says in her path-breaking essay ‘How it Feels to be Colored Me’ “I am a dark rock surged upon and overswept, but through it all, I remain
myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again” (Hurston, “How It” 154). Hurston’s anthropological interest and research under the leading contemporary American anthropologist, Franz Boas, helped her in her struggle to dramatize Black folk culture as a sign of cultural difference. Whereas some students of Franz Boas, Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, turned to societies outside of Europe and North America to point to what the West had lost but the cultural anthropological work of Zora Neale Hurston concentrated upon the cultural ‘other’ that existed within the racist order of North America.

In the twenties, thirties and forties, there were tremendous pressures on Black writers. Militant organizations like the NAACP, expected them to be ‘race’ people, defending Black people, protesting against racism and oppression. Richard Wright, who was one of the big names of the forties and had set the model for the period, had brooded aloud in *Black Boy* about the absence of hope, joy and traditions in Negroes. Wright’s Black characters are victimized, hunted people who, in Hurston’s view, created the impression that Black lives were nothing more than the sum total of their oppression. They were a problem, economically deprived and psychologically crippled. To Hurston this meant interpretive blindness of the lives of Blacks. She draws a clear distinction between public and private construction of Black selves in her works. She declared her first novel as a manifesto against the arrogance of whites who assume that Black lives are only defensive reactions to white actions. In the essay, ‘How it Feels to Be Colored Me’, which I have mentioned above, she boldly asserts,

But I AM NOT tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal whose feelings are hurt about it. . . . No. I do not weep at the world – I am too bust sharpening my oyster knife (153).

Zora Neale Hurston made it her life’s passion both as a writer, and as a
person—a ‘Black’ and a ‘woman’, to uphold the subjectivity of the human spirit of the ‘Negro.’ ‘How it Feels to be Colored Me’ is an excellent example of Zora Neale Hurston at her exasperating best with respect to ‘Negro’ stereotypes. Published in 1928 at the beginning of her career, this essay presents two stereotypes: the ‘happy darky’ who sings and dances for white folks, for money and for joy, and the educated Black person who is, underneath the thin veneer of civilization, still a ‘heathen’. She knows that there is nothing inherently wrong with a Black person “seated on a stump picking away at his banjo and laughing,” but what is wrong is the insistence of the powerful that that is all the person does. She was equally astonished at the “ridiculous notion” of “reversion to type” (Hurston, “What White” 170-71). For the passionate, nationalistic adult who exulted in her color, her “Africanism” and her ability to feel, the effects of this “curious folklore doctrine” were too damaging to let go. Langston Hughes, an important Harlem poet spoke of his own cultural difference from Hurston thus:

She wanted to be primitive and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive…. I was only an American Negro – who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa – but I was not Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem (qtd. in Howard 22).

Hemenway is right in suggesting that Hurston’s work shows her struggle to dramatize folklore as a sign of cultural difference (“The Personal Dimension” 31).

In the present study, I would like to focus my findings on how Hurston in her works insisted on the subjectivity of the individual which resents all forms of objectification at the hands of an oppressive and deterministic sociocultural reality. To her as she suggests in an essay ‘Art and Such’ “what went on inside the Negro was of more importance than the turbulent doings going on external of him.” She wanted to correct the “made of bent wires without insides at all” image of the Negro as paraded in the American Museum of Unnatural History (Hurston, “Art and Such” 22). And for this she chose to
light up the path of inward journey for the Negro. She meant for the so-called ‘Negro’ to rely on his own power – the power of deep-seated spirituality which came from the unshakable inner knowledge of his own values and talent.

Alice Walker has rightly identified Hurston as a prime symbol of “racial health–a sense of Black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings....” (qtd. in Gates, “Zora” 289). Ironically, Hurston’s strategy was not designed to please. Added to this was the ‘eccentricity’ of a Black woman determined in the period between 1920 and 1950, to have a career as a writer. It continued to be an age of naturalized male intellectual superiority. Given this background, it is no wonder that Hurston’s entire career output, judged by male critics, both white and Black, ensured her fall into obscurity for over two decades or worse still, misrepresentation. The acceptance of feminist and Afro-centric (cultural) criticism by the literary academy in the 1970s led to a place for Hurston in the canon of American literature. She was rediscovered by Robert Hemenway, Mary Helen Washington and Alice Walker in the seventies.

It was in the field of folklore that Hurston did her most admirable work. She was perhaps the only important writer of the Harlem literary movement who undertook a systematic study of the African American folklore – the goldmine of authentic tales, songs and folkways of Black people, unresearched by any Black scholar until Hurston. Ralph Ellison, one of the big voices of the times had approvingly spoken of folklore in ‘The Art of Fiction: An Interview’ wherewith he had affirmed that folklore reflects specific forms of humanity:

found in those communities offering drawings of the group’s character. [They] preserve mainly those situations which have repeated themselves again and again in the history of any given group; [They] describe those rites, manners, customs, and so forth, which insure the good life, or destroy it, and [they] describe those boundaries of feeling, thought and action which
that particular group has found to be the limitation of the human condition. [They] project this wisdom in symbols which express the group’s will to survive; [they] embody those values by which the group lives and dies. [And although sometimes] these drawings may be crude, they are nonetheless profound in that they represent the group’s attempt to humanize the world (qtd. in Howard, Zora 56-57).

It is ironic however, that despite the particular race consciousness of the twenties and thirties and in spite of the fact that the Harlem movement had as one of its stated goals the re-evaluation of African American history and folk culture, there was little work done in these areas by the Harlem literati. In terms of the consummate uses of folk sensibility, i.e. the cluster of psychological, emotional and psychic states which have their basis in myth and folklore, the Harlem movement had left much to be desired. No Harlem writer/artist had made a serious attempt to come to terms with the instinctive elements of the Black experience. Most of them had a sort of tendency to cater to the trendy concerns of the white circles in which they found themselves. For a truly original literature to develop, it was essential for Black writers to come to grips with the cultural ramifications of the African presence in America.

The essence of Black literature needed to be in the nature of the distinguishing character, tone and guiding beliefs – what Neal calls the ‘ethos’ of the people. This literature would realize its limitless possibilities only after the creative writers had come to some kind of an understanding of the specific as well as the general ingredients that must enter into the shaping of an African culture in America. In his Introduction to Dust Tracks on a Road Larry Neal is of the opinion that:

In order to do this, it would be necessary to establish some new categories of perception: new ways of seeing a culture which had been caricatured by the white minstrel tradition, made hokey and sentimental by the nineteenth-century local colorists,
debased by the dialect poets, and finally made a ‘primitive’ aphrodisiac by the new sexualism of the twenties (xiv).

Hurston, nourished in her childhood on the Black folktales and tropical fruits of Eatonville, Florida returned in 1927 to her hometown on a Colombia University scholarship to do formal folklore research. Thus began her unique effort to tell the tales, sing the songs, do the dances and repeat the sayings and doings of the Negro farthest down. It was out of this material that Hurston was to fashion her career as writer. To her, Eatonville is not an outmoded form of historical consciousness, but a living reality. She firmly believed that Black culture was/is essentially ‘rural’ and ‘oral’. She deplored commercialisation. When Hurston complained about the ways in which intellectuals transformed folk culture by reproducing and reinterpreting it as high culture, she identified a class contradiction.

Zora Neale Hurston’s book of folklore, *Mules and Men*, published in 1935, the one authentic book of Negro folktales, which though published a little after the Harlem Renaissance is not only her manifesto of pride in Black cultural difference, specificity and distinctiveness, but also her challenge to social-ideological structures that marginalized Black ethnicity and experience. It poses a question before those ‘talented’ Blacks who were involuntarily implicated in these ideologies or who were victims of cultural dualism. Hurston insists on the centrality of a self-defined African American worldview in order to destabilize the white/male/elitist view of the universe as the norm, Hurston clearly wanted to challenge the interconnectedness of race, sex and class as a philosophical basis for the pattern of dominance and hierarchy in society. Secondly, she was worried about the erasure of Black ethnic culture under the flux of standardization as the imperialist discourse had all along talked of the manifest destiny of ‘higher’ civilizations to displace ‘lower’ ones either through outright elimination or through Christianization.

Hurston’s most highly controversial stand was her opposition to the 1954 Supreme Court desegregation decision, which she criticized because she
thought it implied the inferiority of Black teachers, Black students and Black schools in the South. She resented any suggestion that whites were superior and that Blacks could learn better if they went to school with them. This was consistent with her cultural philosophy that Blacks had adorned a rather pallid American culture with colorful, dramatic and dynamic contributions at the peak of the Harlem Renaissance. In every art form, she saw truly original expression rooted in Black culture. In language, for instance, Hurston said in an essay 'Characteristics of Negro Expression' that

...whatever the Negro does of his own volition he embellishes. His religious service is for the greater part excellent prose poetry. Both prayers and sermons are tooled and polished until they are true works of art....the prayer of the white man is considered humorous in its bleakness. The beauty of the Old Testament does not exceed that of a Negro prayer (834).

Hurston wanted to act before it was too late. She wanted to write of Blacks in relation to themselves and in a relation of difference from ‘mainstream’ culture. She had pre-empted what Alice Walker had said years later in an interview in 1973:

Black writing has suffered, because even Black critics have assumed that a book that deals with the relationships between members of a Black family – or between a man and a woman is less important than one that has white people as a primary antagonist. The consequence of this is that many of our books by “major” writers (always male), tell us little about the culture, history, or future, imagination, fantasies, etc., of Black people, and a lot about isolated (often improbable) or limited encounters with a non-specific white world (Howard, Zora 33–34).

The cultural difference of Blacks is, however, not a pathological difference for Hurston. It is a difference that arises out of a shared group past with a unique history and experience which finds its best manifestation in various traditional African American oral narratives. Robbed of all other
continuities, prohibited from free expression, denied a written history for centuries by white America, Blacks were driven to rely on oral recitation for a sense of past. Hurston believed that both memory and pride persisted. Embodied in spirituals, heroic legends, proverbs, traditional jokes, but specially in folktales, the tradition became a reservoir of figurative language that helped Black people survive and affirm themselves as culturally unique. This complex system of cultural communication was transmitted across generations of Blacks through the folk process of repetition. It would be pertinent to quote a few lines from the Foreword to the book *Afro-American Anthropology: Contemporary Perspectives*:

Patterns of socially learned motor behaviour are probably not readily destroyed, even by extremely repressive conditions; and the aesthetic and creative possibilities implicit in these traditional patterns and their cognitive accompaniments may have been among those cultural traditions most readily maintained under slavery (Mintz 5).

For Hurston, the discovery of personal identity for Afro-Americans was closely bound to the exploration of cultural identity. Their independence lay in the fullness of their ethnicity. To Hurston, freedom is measured by the depth of Blacks' involvement in a self-affirming, self-identified folk culture and especially by their ability to participate in that culture on their own terms through its two most valued forms: words and stories. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls Hurston a "Wordsmith" of the first order as she makes language a reliable mechanism to support and develop the cultural consciousness of her characters. Karla Holloway in the Preface to her book *The Character Of The Word* suggests that "...language is probably a more efficient and accurate means of making a cultural statement than are artifacts, behavior and appearance – traditional cultural markers of anthropological research" (3). A speech act is a way of framing a community, acknowledging a membership and sharing a culture. Hurston's academic training taught her to recognize laws in dialect as well as the dialect's creative capacity to contain the most subtle variations of thought and culture. More than linguistic meaning, it is
the cultural meaning that is important to Hurston.

Exotic primitivism, as I have already discussed, had become one of the most ambiguous products of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston helped to add new dimensions to this interest and helped remind the more bourgeois members of the Renaissance of the richness of racial heritage. Hurston insisted on a different, not deficient culture. Hurston’s effort of representing the mythology of her culture was more a natural act than a self-conscious manipulation of linguistic structures. “This acquiescence to the primacy of the word is acknowledgement of oracy – the significant codicil to any definition of Black words and Black linguistic artful acts” (Holloway 36).

Hurston’s writing, is no ‘Blackness Inc.’ where ‘blackness’ is being marketed as a consumable cultural product as a function of capitalist exchange, but an alternative site to ground the articulation of identity and history. It breeds that traditional sense of community, essential not only for psychic survival but for political action also. There was a compelling need in Hurston to retain cultural traditions as an affirmation of their value and beauty and also as a form of subversion and resistance to white racist/sexist/capitalist discourse, seeming always to be closing in and threatening to shut out African American men and women. Her entire literary output becomes a sort of defiance against racist, gendered and classed construction of social identity and subjectivities, by her exploration of the relationship between public and private construction of self. Some Renaissance writers wished to judge literature/art by calling it successful in the same degree in which it could be an index of repudiation of white cultural norms. To Hurston this would be madness. Black literature had its own metaphors and idiom which are not repudiative, but a measure of rhetorical self-definition. In Hurston’s works, one finds what Bell Hooks calls the “yearning” for a “liberatory Black subjectivity” (Yearning 27, 22).

In the present study I wish to decipher that selected works by Hurston project an interventionist, oppositional stance in a multi-ethnic environment. Hers is an emergence from the margins to enrich and problematize the center
of largely white/male/America/feminist academia. She allows her works to become a site for ideological contradictions to come into play by drawing on the rich reservoir of Black figurative discourse which allows for multiple significations and a destabilizing of the ‘phallogocentric’ order of meaning. It is the Blacks’ ability to interpret and transform experience through creative use of language that confers power and knowledge on them, thereby aiding in their survival and self-affirmation. The present study will examine the quest for survival and self-affirmation (as a part of the Black cultural ethos), as and how it is portrayed through the characterization and thematic patterns in the selected works of Zora Neale Hurston. Since all her characters are depicted against the paradigm of a socio-cultural-economic background of contemporary American society fraught with the nexus of racism and sexism, I propose to decipher Hurston’s faith in the intrinsic potential of human subjectivity which celebrates the ‘color of life’ comprising visions and ideals indigenous to the ‘Black’ persona.

This study will be divided into six chapters, inclusive of Introduction and Conclusion. In the present chapter on Introduction my effort has been at the outset to state my contention that Hurston’s works clearly reflect a celebration and suggestion of African American folk culture as the writer’s only creative resource and their past as the people’s only viable tool of survival and self-affirmation. I have also focussed on Black-White relations, on the Harlem Renaissance and on the Black female bonding (in life and literature). In the second chapter I shall analyse some of Hurston’s short stories in the light of my argument. In the five stories that I have taken up, I find Hurston repeatedly showing the triumph of love, loyalty and justice. This victory is not so much of the body as it is of the spirit. Achieving this level of spiritual victory was possible for Black men and women only on the basis of their folk wisdom. The third chapter is given to a study of Mules and Men, Hurston’s anthropological work or her book of lyin(g). Lyin(g) is a traditional African American word for figurative discourse, tales or stories. These ‘lies’ confer a distinct sense of identity and solidarity on Black men and women and provide them with a meaningful resource to live by. Chapter four is devoted
to a study of Hurston's two major novels – *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. My main focus in this chapter will be on how Lucy in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* create a sense of selfhood rather than being objects of male ownership. They do this on the strength of the self-determining forces of folkways and folk stories. Chapter five is given to an in-depth study of Hurston's autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*. To me this is a manifesto of self-definition and self-determination with self-fashioned tools. Hurston's education, instead of alienating her from her folk roots, brought her closer to it and permitted her a much needed personal space that helped her survive, despite her triply marginalized status. I conclude my thesis in the sixth chapter by saying that Hurston has successfully reinforced newer ways of seeing and thinking, not only for her own race, but has also opened up horizons of what Hemenway would call an “autonomous imagination” for all races, nations and people of all times (*Biography* 243).
Notes

1 Anthropologist Melville Herskovits has given the name “cultural imponderables” to these aspects of culture. He suggests that these areas of culture are often the most persistent; they exist below the level of consciousness and are the least changeable. Moreover, the main concern of the whites was to break down the economic life of the Negroes: social structures broke off of necessity. But whites tended not to interfere with these cultural patterns of the slaves as these became associated in the white mind with Negro inferiority or at least with peculiar racial traits.

2 The discussion on Lyotard’s views is sourced from Ashcroft, et al 163-164.

3 Uncle Remus narrates the Brer Rabbit tales to entertain a white child. He is a mouthpiece of the Southern policy and not only says what his ‘superior’ hearers want to hear, but perhaps also believes in it himself. At one point in the book he calls Negro education “...de ruinashun er dis country...” and goes on to add “what’s a nigger gwinter ‘lam outen books?’” Harris’s use of comical elements seemed to imply that the ‘loud guffaw and the wide grin’ were peculiar stereotypical traits of the black race.

4 This is a Foreword (vii-xxii) by Henry Louis Gate, Jr., the General Editor of the series called ‘The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Women Writers,’ published by the Oxford University Press in the year 1988. The series includes the salient texts by Black women written between 1890 and 1910, what Gates calls “The Black Woman’s Era.”