CHAPTER – 2
DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN’S FICTION

The development of African American women’s fiction may be traced back to the slave narratives. The Middle Passage and the experience of slavery are the period of dissolution of the community and any sense of homogenous culture integral to the idea of community. Whatever is written about the experiences of the Middle Passage essentially represent the trauma of shame, pain, suffering, and the struggle for survival. Any idea of the community, if represented at all, in the slave narratives comes primarily in relation to this. In the absence of sustained fictional narrative, traces of the sense of community feelings or the strong desire to achieve that, is reflected mainly in some of the autobiographical narratives and songs.

For the African Americans, cultural representation in the early stage was mainly oral and the ‘vernacular’ tradition in African American literature is made up of the various categories of oral modes of black expression. Different oral forms, such as, folk tales, folk songs, etc. particularly worked as a strong binding force for the community. The ‘Negro Spirituals’ and ‘Gospels’ offered the slaves a “much-needed psychic escape from the workaday world of slavery’s restrictions and cruelties.”¹

Mainly employing the call/response pattern, these oral forms represents the slaves’ need to associate with God and fellow Christians, so as to overcome the sense of loneliness. A sense of loneliness and desolation is rampant throughout these songs:

I am a poor pilgrim of sorrow.
I’m in this wide world alone.²

Out of this feeling of desolation and loneliness emerge the dreams of flying away, leaving the world of care behind:
I've got two wings for to veil my face
I've got two wings for to fly away...³

Such visions of displacement and escape are also coupled together with the urge to associate with family, friends and fellow human beings:

If you get there before I do,
Coming for to carry me home,
Tell all my friends I'm coming too,
Coming for to carry me home.⁴

Then again,

I'm gonna meet all my friends who're gone
Down by the riverside
I'm gonna meet my dear old mother
Down by the riverside...⁵

The idea of going 'home', repeatedly used in most of these songs arises from the need to be reunited with "friends and kindreds." ⁶ The urge to associate is not only expressed in the sacred forms of expression, but also in the secular forms among African Americans. The secular rhymes, songs, ballads, and work songs reflect the tendency to associate with fellow beings:

Me and my gal can pick a bale of cotton,
Me and my wife can pick a bale of cotton,
Me and my friend can pick a bale of cotton,
Me and my poppa can pick a bale a day.⁷

Another popular form of oral expression, the folktales, is mostly intended with double meaning and any simplistic explanation for the stories' meaning does not hold good for proper understanding. The folktales, like the other oral modes of expression, abound in tales of desolation and fascinated escapes, and also embody the urge of
associating with others to overcome the sense of loneliness. These early oral forms of cultural expression were the first instances of resistance against the forced severing of kinship ties and were important for survival.

It is only in the eighteenth century that some form of written literature developed in the African American community. The slave narratives, the earliest form of written expression, may be regarded as a reaction against the forced silence imposed on these people during the time of the Middle Passage. This enforced silence continued during the days of slavery in the plantations. Faced with this deliberate design to enforce cultural amnesia and a consequent displacement and dislocation of the sense of community, the slaves on the plantations put up a strong resistance by bringing together memory and experience to narrate and keep alive a unique history which may be viewed as an assertion of the subaltern voice. The oral tradition was the foundation on which the subalterns base their strong sense of protest in the process of reconstituting the sense of community and consequently the achievement of political power.

*The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*(1789), widely regarded as the prototype of the slave narrative, claims that blacks could represent themselves effectively through the written form. Olaudah Equiano’s (1745-1797) narrative stresses on how he was “first torn away from all the tender connexions that were”, as he says, “naturally dear to my heart....” He, among other things, gives a comprehensive account of the manners and customs of his native land, which stresses on familial and communal ties. Separated cruelly from his near and dear ones, he relates aggravated distress in the form of the ‘auction’ where “without scruple, are relations and friends separated, most of them never to see each other again.” His narrative reveals in unforgettable ways the
atrocities of the Middle Passage, where amidst other distresses, he highlights the enforced silence for there was “not one soul who could talk to me.” In slave narratives, such as Olaudah Equiano’s, two important features are notable: the traditional agrarian quality and the autobiographical elements.

The importance of autobiographical elements is also underlined by Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897) in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), where she states, “It has been painful to me, in many ways, to recall the dreary years I passed in bondage…. Yet the retrospection is not altogether without solace; for with those gloomy recollections come tender memories of my good old grandmother…. ” Even though Jacob’s narrative mainly deals with her harassment as a slave, but what sets it apart, is the beautiful expression of her familial and communal ties. The individual memory expands to bring within its ambit that which is representative of the familial and which further evokes a comforting sense of the community. A noteworthy feature of the slave narratives is that it evokes a trust in the warm, seemingly stable community of the extended slave family. The transition from the oral texts to the earliest extant evidence of the written marks a significant shift in African American cultural representations.

One of the earliest literary texts published by an African American writer is the book of verse by Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784) in 1773 named *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. One of the best known poets of her era, Wheatley’s work was afflicted by “contrary instincts”¹², a result of her adopted culture. Her separate status as neither slave nor free and the early age at which she arrived from Africa to America must be taken into consideration to understand how her work could be turned into a mouthpiece for white colonists without any trace of the sufferings of the Middle Passage and the subsequent slavery. However, Harriet E. Wilson (1828? –
1863?), the earliest known African American woman novelist, in her novel, *Our Nig: or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In a Two-Story White House, North* (1859), focuses on the black woman's struggle to be heard. Using the conventions of the sentimental novel as well as the slave narrative, Wilson, in this novel, deals with controversial themes like inter-racial marriage. Wilson's depiction of the relationship between Mag, a white outcast, and Jim, a working class black man, begins with Jim proclaiming that he has a white heart though he is black on the outside. Once Mag becomes his wife, despite the fact that she has been rejected by the white community, Wilson describes her as Jim's treasure. The relationship is one that arises out of desperation, pity, and convenience, and its result is a life of suffering for the light, but not quite light enough to pass as white child that is produced. It has been noted that, before *Our Nig*, miscegenation was never treated with any degree of normality in American literature.

With the abolition of slavery in 1865, the slave narratives also changed their perspective. The sense of the disintegration of the social bonding and the subsequent attempt at Reconstruction does create the context for the development of the representation of the central transition from the individual to the communal existence. The Abolitionist Movement enabled women like Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) in *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1878) and Elizabeth Keckley (1818-1907) in *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (1868) to dare death to tell frankly of a life offering rape, pain and desolation. An active abolitionist, Sojourner Truth, was one of the most famous anti-slavery speakers of her day. Often lashing out against the evils of slavery, she shamed many people who were apathetic and passive towards the institution of slavery. Her speeches mainly centred on the injustice of slavery and its impact on families. She also spoke about her five children
whom she loved dearly but lost all of them to slavery. She is particularly remembered for her famous “Ar’n’t I a Woman?” speech which she gave at the 1851 Convention on Women’s Rights in Akron, Ohio. Although she never learned to read or write, she dictated her memoirs to Olive Gilbert and these were published in 1878 as The Narrative of Sojourner Truth. This book, and her presence as a speaker, made her a sought-after figure in the anti-slavery woman’s rights lecture circuit. The slave narratives of both ante-bellum and post-bellum periods, amidst the details regarding the rigours of slavery, also focused on various expressions of familial and communal ties.

Over the last hundred years conflicting views of African American culture has been expressed in black fiction and one of the main issues debated is the depiction of the black community. Texts written by African Americans have often been forced to develop a unique voice to be allowed into the market place of ideas. Frances E.W. Harper (1825-1911), one of the prominent voices of abolition in the North, points out that early African American writers attempted to communicate with a white audience with whom they shared no cultural or moral backgrounds. This measured writing in the nineteenth century failed to give an idea of the reality and presents a sanitized view of slavery and the African American community as is evident in the works of Frances E.W. Harper. An important work, however, is her novel Iola Leroy; or Shadows Uplifted (1892), in which Harper undermines the standard of the romance novel in order to seriously question the stereotypical role prevalent at that time, particularly the view that the former slaves were incapable of either cultural or economic advancement without the assistance of the whites. Greatly influenced by the success of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s (1811-1896) abolitionist novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852), she constructed her story on a sentimental format and did her utmost
for the cause of abolition and for the rights of women. The salient feature of Harper’s novel is the heroine’s willingness to be known as a black woman, even though she has all the physical and cultural attributes to ‘pass’ as a white woman. Iola also prefers to work towards racial upliftment among the southern folk at the end of the Civil War rather than live the life of a bourgeois woman. In analyzing Iola and her rejection of Dr. Gresham’s proposal, the reader can come to the conclusion that it was Iola who had to deal with inner struggles, whereas Dr. Gresham was able to overlook issues of racial differences as long as Iola would not publicly admit her heritage. Iola realizes that by agreeing to his proposal, her life and existence would be a façade, and that by concealing her race, she would be concealing implicit aspects of herself. Harper’s use of subtext to discuss race issues within the standards of Euro-American literature was the norm of African American literature for the next forty-five years. But it became increasingly clear that regardless of the advancement of the blacks in America through economics or education, they would never be seen equally cultured by the white majority.

Concern with the shape, nature, and role of the community gained special significance in the aftermath of Emancipation and more so at the turn of the century from the nineteenth to the twentieth. The often-conflicting views of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois problematize the reconstitution of the African American community. In 1895, Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) assumed the mantle as the national leader of black America on the strength of an address he had given at the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia. In his speech, Washington suggested that the best way to ensure progress in the south was for whites to respect the blacks’ desire for improved economic opportunities and for the blacks to respect the whites’ desire for social separation of the races. This speech sums up
Washington’s ideology and is reflected all throughout his autobiographical work *Up From Slavery* (1901). This book, as Washington reveals, was designed to appeal to “a class of people who have money and to whom I must look for money for endowment and other purposes.” A comprehensive part of the book highlights Washington’s urge and struggles to get educated. What is interesting in his narrative is the experience of a whole race attempting to learn and helping each other to get educated.

Washington pays tribute not only to his family members who had helped him to get educated, but also to the many coloured people of his community who “had spent the best days of their lives in slavery, and hardly expected to live to see the time when they would see a member of their race leave home to attend a boarding-school.” In the later part of his autobiography, Washington stresses on the help that he received from black as well as the white members of the community in the establishment and running of Tuskegee (Alabama) Normal and Industrial Institute. From the beginning, as Washington claims, he had resolved to make the school a part of the community and of real service to people so that “no one should have the feeling that it was a foreign institution, dropped down in the midst of the people, for which they had no responsibility and in which they had no interest.” This idea goes hand in hand with the kind of education that was provided to the students, for Washington stressed not merely bookish knowledge but he wanted to give them some practical knowledge of at least one industry so that they could make a living and be beneficial to the larger community. Washington, in his book as well in his public addresses, maintained that “the whole future of my race hinges on the question as to whether or not it can make itself of such indispensable value that the people in the town and the state where we reside will feel that our presence is necessary to the happiness and well-being of the
community.” Washington’s concern was, thus, always with the larger American community.

For the most part, African American readers responded favourably to *Up From Slavery*, but a handful of people doubted the effectiveness of the author’s conciliatory approach to race relations. Wherein the ante-bellum slave narrators had claimed slavery as “hell on earth”17, Washington termed slavery a “school from which his fellow blacks had graduated with honors, so to speak, and with the will and the skill to keep rising.”18 He had taken such a stand to be recognized as a forward-looking, progressive leader, not allowing past advantages to dismay him. Accepting Washington’s emphasis on industrial training for the masses, W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) was more concerned about achieving, for the community as a whole, what he calls the self-evident and unalienable rights, to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, ideals which he picks up from the Declaration of American Independence in 1776. Du Bois labels Washington as “the leader not of one race but of two, - a compromiser between the South, the North, and the Negro.”19 Du Bois, moreover, claims that Washington represents in Negro thought the old attitude of adjustment and submission, quite contrary concepts to the demand of the time. Washington’s programme highlighted economic development and Du Bois felt that it completely overshadowed the higher aims of life for the Negro – that of self-assertion and self-respect. Whereas, Washington’s programme was more concerned with the development of the individual on economic grounds, Du Bois, on the other hand, envisioned a society in America where the African American community would exist in terms of democratic equality as a part of the basic ideology of America as a nation.

In the 1920s began a closer analysis of the black community, culture and heritage when a new generation of black artists came to the forefront, particularly during the
early days of the Harlem Renaissance. It may not be off the mark to argue that the pain of displacement and disintegration is gradually encountered in the narratives of the Harlem Renaissance women writers with the renewed concept of the 'New Negro' and his community. Harlem provided a platform for the African Americans from which the 'new black voice' would be heard around the world. Harlem, as a result of the large migration of talented blacks became not only the centre of the Negro cultural, intellectual and political life, but also the main establishment of Negro protest and thought. Harlem quickly became the headquarter of many African American cultural and political national organizations. Under the effective leadership of spokesmen like W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey, it was probably the first time that the blacks were made aware of the notion of their collective potential. Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), a profound political force during the Harlem Renaissance, is inextricably linked with the 'Back to Africa' slogan. The most controversial figure associated with Harlem in the 1920s, he was regarded as a hero to millions of blacks, as well as, scorned by many of their leaders and intellectuals, like W.E.B. Du Bois. He was the founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) whose main objective was “the general uplift of the Negro peoples of the world.” Whereas leaders like Du Bois stressed the overall upliftment of the African Americans in America, Garvey was concerned with the object of building up a great nation for the Negroes in Africa. He clarified the cause of Africa for the Africans by assuring that “[i]t will not be to go to Africa for the purpose of exercising an overlordship over the natives, but...to have established in Africa that brotherly co-operation which will....build up Africa in the interests of our race.” He recognized that this intention of the UNIA has been misinterpreted by many intellectuals and has been identified “to create discord and discontent among the races...” But at the same time, Garvey puts
forward that the New Negro shall not be deceived on any account, as he has no cause
to lose hope or become faint-hearted. What Garvey laid stress on is the determination
to be heard and be given the rights to which the Negro is entitled. For this purpose,
Garvey wanted the blacks to remain united and as he stated, "The thing to do is get
organized; keep separated and you will be exploited, you will be robbed, you will be
killed. Get organized, and you will compel the world to respect you."\textsuperscript{23} Even though
Garvey died in 1940 without ever having set foot in Africa, his gospel of race pride
and race solidarity endures as a sustaining force in black cultures throughout the
world. At the same time, under his effective leadership, in a compelling time, the
large number of blacks settled in Harlem became powerfully self-conscious of both
their worth as individuals and a collective community. According to Nathan Huggins,
it was a moment when they presumed "to be an actor and creator in the special
occurrence of a people's birth."\textsuperscript{24} In a way it was a moment of powerful self-
consciousness both for the individual and the community.

The congregation into Harlem is connected with the migration out of the south,
which had turned the Negro into an urban and industrial existence. The Negro was
forced from the simple to the complex life, from rural homogeneity to urban
pluralism. Harlem became the largest Negro community in the world and it brought
together black men of the most diverse backgrounds and interests. Strong black self-
consciousness gave rise to the idea of the 'New Negro', connected in its turn with a
search for ethnic beauty and heritage in folk and African culture. The shared
experience of the African Americans in Harlem, according to Alain Locke (1886-
1954), was race building. As Locke states, "Each generation....will have its creed,
and that of the present is the belief in the efficacy of collective effort, in race
cooperation."\textsuperscript{25} The deep feeling of race was the main offspring of Negro life in
Harlem. Here, the Negro achieved a common consciousness and a common life. Locke wrote “In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination.” Race building forced the Negro to reject old assumptions and old images. For generations the picture of the Negro “has been more of a formula than a human being – a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be ‘kept down’, or ‘in his place’, or ‘helped up’, to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden.” The New Negro had to free himself from the fiction of his past and rediscover himself; he had to find himself as he really was. His task was to discover and define his culture and his contribution to what had been thought a white civilization. The renewed self-respect and self-dependence of the Negro triggered off the Negro community to enter a new dynamic phase, wherein the young Negro was in the process of uplifting himself spiritually. His changed attitude towards life, and love for self-expression found ways in his poetry, art, education, and new outlook. It was to be through a cultural awakening that the Negro was to express himself. It is a common argument that the thinness of American culture prompted the Americans to look towards Europe for roots, for the American folk elements had nothing to do in matters of culture. It is also connected with a process of divestment of the familial, regional and natural. For the African Americans there had to be a reversal of this trend and Harlem became the context in which they could look for their roots. Harlem became not only the largest Negro community in the world, but also the “first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life.” Even though each group had come to Harlem with its own motives and ends, but Locke claims that “their greatest experience has been the finding of one another.” Out of this shared experience arose the New Negro: an artistic self-consciousness of the Negro’s human and cultural worth, the sense of an
urgent need for self-assertion, and the belief in a culturally enriched past in America and Africa, a move towards a larger notion of the identity of the self placed in its communal context. The assertive New Negro writers were determined to correct the stereotypical images of the blacks of the plantation days.

The four novels of Jessie Redmon Fauset (1884-1961), *There Is Confusion* (1924), *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1929), *The Chinaberry Tree: A Novel of American Life* (1931), and *Comedy: American Style* (1933) explore themes of race, gender, and class, the last all the more significant because it separates and causes dissension within the African American society. Fauset’s first novel *There Is Confusion* represents the rising black middle class at the beginning of the twentieth century. The novel focuses on Joanna Marshall’s growth as a human being, using the protagonist’s family background, attitudes, and interpersonal relationships as a means of commenting on the important issues of race, gender, and class. Joanna inherits her father’s (Joel Marshall) bourgeois ambitions along with the desire to marry a proper mate who would lead her further to the way of financial success. Like Joanna and her father, there are other characters in the novel who see marriage as a key to fulfilling their aspirations of financial gain and social standing. One such character is Maggie Ellersley for whom financial security takes precedence over love when considering a life partner because of the limited options for black women at that time. Financial and social status are also the major concerns of Vera Manning, a high school classmate of Joanna’s, who wants to ‘pass’ as white as it will enable her to travel in the higher and wealthier white social circles. Vera’s mother, an upper-class black lady, is also of the same mindset and does not allow Vera to marry a dark-skinned man of her choice. Fauset’s depiction of all these characters in the novel is a sharp comment on the colour and class prejudice among bourgeois blacks in America. However, Fauset
presents contrasting attitudes among members of upper-class blacks in her representation of Peter Bye and Philip Marshall who valorize the community over individual interests. Towards the end of the novel, changes occur in almost all the major characters: Vera realizes the price one has to pay by losing one’s own identity in the pursuit of wealth, power, and status; Maggie values Philip for the individual he is and not the class he represents; and Joanna starts looking beyond the superficiality of class differences. Fauset’s major concern in this novel is thus illustrating the importance of community and class unity for the African Americans.

Fauset’s second novel *Plum Bun* carries forward the themes that she had explored in her earlier book. The novel depicts the life of Angela Murray, a light-skinned African American woman, who passes for white to succeed as an artist and secure a wealthy white husband. Angela at a very early age begins associating freedom, happiness and very importantly, wealth, with being white. Her sister, Virginia, however, is dark-skinned and cannot pass for white. In contrast to Angela’s decision to pass for white, Virginia believes that the best way to counter racism is to align with other blacks. As in *There Is Confusion*, Angela’s choice of a life partner is influenced by bourgeois aspirations and class consciousness. She hopes to marry a young millionaire, Roger Fielding, who can provide her with all the material comforts of life. However, class prejudice interferes with Angela’s desire when Roger tells her that he cannot marry her due to their class differences, but is ready to have her as his mistress. Angela’s journey towards self-understanding and self-definition starts at this level when she realizes that marriage without love and respect, even if it brings money and status, is of no significance at all. Moreover, when she gives up her pursuit of passing for white to gain wealth, fame, and social status, she gains peace of mind and is also able to regain her relationship with her loved ones.
The other two novels of Fauset echo the themes of race, gender, and class as explored in her earlier books. Fauset’s novels address these issues “anticipating the works of later African American female writers such as Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Morrison.” Highlighting the growing problem of colour prejudice and class distinction among the African Americans, Fauset valorizes communal love and bonding among the African Americans as a means to prevent the dissension within the community.

Equally important in that phase are the works of Nella Larsen (1893–1964), particularly *Quicksand* (1928). The novel relates the story of a mulatto woman, Helga Crane, who suffers from a broken connection to her cultural heritage. She involves herself with a variety of social and economic levels of black culture, but never feels totally at ease. Helga is the daughter of a black father, who abandoned his family shortly after she was born, and a Scandinavian immigrant mother, who blames Helga for her dark skin that signals Karen Nilssen’s (Helga’s mother) socially taboo first marriage to a black man. Her white mother raises Helga and she grows up in a hostile environment (when her mother remarries) marked by racial prejudice that makes it impossible for Helga to develop a positive sense of African American identity. Kimberly Monda claims that if a black woman’s relational self is determined by the sense of connection with her mother and the "weness" of a black identity, then Helga’s efforts to gain access to her subjectivity appear doomed from the start, because she lacks both of these traditional sources of communal identity. This idea explains Helga Crane’s struggle all throughout the novel.

Helga Crane’s struggle with herself and her surrounding community are figured from the beginning of the novel. The Naxos community dislikes Helga because she does not fit – her passion for fine things and bright colours do not mingle well with
the environment. The novel begins with a description of the costly furnishings of Helga's room at Naxos which reflect her "rare and intensely personal taste." Helga is presented as the epitome of costly refinement, who does not make any effort to conform to the likes of the Naxos society. Her expensive tastes seem to function as a challenge to the white superior community. Helga is further dissatisfied with the prohibitive rules about women's clothing at Naxos, where the Dean maintains that "Bright colours are vulgar--...Dark-completed people shouldn't wear yellow, or green or red." Helga's discomfort with the race question, and her equal discomfort with the prohibitions, makes it difficult for her to fit in the Naxos community.

After a sharp dissatisfaction with the restrictions at Naxos College, Helga eventually finds her way to Harlem and another community of African Americans. But here also Helga feels uncomfortable, and the thought that she does not belong haunt her just as it had at Naxos. Helga finds that though these Harlemites fight the injustice against race, they keep their distance from the suffering masses. Class differentiation had become a prominent issue. Hazel Carby points out that:

Harlem intellectuals were criticized for two major acts of hypocrisy: their announced hatred of white people and deprecation of any contact with white society while imitating their clothes, manners, and ways of life, and the proclamation of the undiluted good of all things Negro which disguised a disdain, contempt, and amusement for the actual culture and behavior of the majority of black people.

Carby's statement highlights the tension and conflict in the lives of the Harlemites and explains Helga's disdain of their hypocrisy.

Eventually Helga's search takes her to Denmark where Larsen presents a supposedly unprejudiced circle of upper-middle class society. Helga envisions this new life while still in Harlem as gratifying her unfulfilled need for recognition all throughout her life: "With rapture almost, she let herself drop into the blissful
sensation of visualizing herself in different, strange places, among approving and admiring people, where she would be appreciated and understood.”

But the Danes also make Helga uncomfortable. The wealthy Dahls dress her in gorgeous clothes and show off her “exotic” beauty to their friends, which make Helga feel “like nothing so much as some new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited.”

As Frau and Herr Dahl dress up Helga for her first social event in Copenhagen, a tea held in her honour, they augment her dress of “shining black taffeta with its bizarre trimmings of purple and cerise” by adding “long... brightly enameled” earrings and “glittering” shoe buckles that make Helga feel “like a veritable savage”.

So, Helga becomes, again a specimen of the very jungle creature she had fled Harlem to escape.

Helga’s further dissatisfaction with the Danes grows out of a vaudeville show she attends in Copenhagen where two black men enter the stage and dance and cavort to an old song. Helga, like the white audience, was not amused by the performance and was filled with a fierce hatred for the Negroes on the stage. Her disgust for the whites is further carried out by her rejection of Axel Olsen’s marriage proposal not only because of the colour of his skin, but also for the depth of his misunderstanding.

Helga’s attempt to define her own identity as a black woman on her own terms brings her to yet another community of blacks in the rural south. But as Debra B. Silverman identifies, “Larsen’s portrayal of the South is not a place for the celebration of life or tales, but a place of hardship; for women, this is a place for children and patience.”

Helga’s marriage to Reverend Pleasant Green draws her into a life of unremitting pain and exhaustion as she gives birth to twin boys and a girl all within twenty months. The marriage does not even offer her the communal approval that she had hoped for. The women of that community listen politely to Helga’s advice about gracing their small, ugly homes with “soft inoffensive beauty”, choosing the “proper
things for Sunday church wear”, and teaching their children the “ways of gentle deportment”, and dismiss her as “uppity” once she is out of earshot. Even though for somet ime, Helga tries to be the submissive, devoted wife and mother her community expects, but very soon her repeated painful labours during childbirth shatter her wifely devotion and religious faith. She is now “determined to get herself out of this bog into which she had strayed.” But being caught in the 'quicksand' of economic dependence, societal norms and sexual vulnerability, Helga can only survive her days deluded by dreams that she will escape her sufferings by and by.

In each of her searches, Helga Crane fails to find fulfillment and finally, “(e)xternal and internal pressures toward self-sacrifice triumph as she becomes a mere extension of her husband and children, lost in escapist fantasies that allow her to tolerate remaining the object of their desires rather than the subject of her own.”

Helga is ultimately not able to grant herself the recognition which her parents and eventually the different communities had failed to give her.

A key text in this new understanding and self-consciousness of the Harlem Renaissance was most certainly Zora Neale Hurston’s (1891-1960) *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). The novel takes as its primary theme the question of female empowerment. During the twenty years covered within the plot, the central character Janie Crawford grows from a diffident teenager to a woman in complete possession of herself. The black woman is figured as the mule of the world, a metaphor taken from black folklore. The novel is a good example of the fusion of creative imagination with folk materials. The scene opens with a description of the transformation central to Hurston’s conception of African American expressive culture:

It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They
became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths.  

The structure of the novel revolves round the idea of a quest. Janie, the heroine of the novel, tells the story of her past life to the community to which she has just returned. This is important for her because Janie is not an individual in a vacuum, rather she is an intrinsic part of a community, and she brings her life and its richness, joys and sorrows back to it. Janie stands as a symbol of self-assertion and independence casting off the words of her grandmother, “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so far as Ah can see”, and the husbands who treat her as a commodity. Janie’s grandmother, Nanny, gets her married to Logan Killicks when she finds Janie kissing Johny Taylor. Nanny does not consider Johnny a suitable mate for Janie because he lacks financial security and the ability to support her in a bourgeois life. Janie’s marriage to Killicks represents her entry to the upper class of the society. Killicks has his own home, land, and livestock, which distinguishes him from the other African Americans in the community. Nevertheless, his marriage to Janie lacks love and equality. Even though Killick’s socioeconomic status make him a suitable partner for Janie, he very soon robs her dreams of love and companionship. Even before the completion of the first year of their marriage, Logan’s attitude towards Janie changes: “If Ah kin haul de wood heah and chop it fuh yuh, look lak you oughta be able tuh tote it inside. Mah first wife never bothered me ‘bout choppin’ no woods nohow. She’d grab dat ax and sling chips lak uh man. You done been spoilt rotten.” Subsequently, Janie elopes and gets married to Jody Stark. This marriage for Janie represents a further immersion into the life of the bourgeois class. But this marriage too does not satisfy her as it cuts her off from any real contact with her community and thus, proves to be more oppressive than her first marriage to Killicks. Being the
wife of the Mayor of Eatonville, she is treated with awe and envy by the other women, which does not give her the opportunity to come closer to them in spirit. Class differences play an important role in the community’s reaction to the Starks. The people are awe-struck by the two-storied house of the Starks, in front of which “(t)he rest of the town looked like servant’s quarters surrounding the big house.”\(^{45}\) The swing-around chairs, spittoons, and other fashionable items in the house of the Starks made the rest of the community “feel that they had been taken advantage of. Like things had been kept from them....It was bad enough for white people, but when one of your own color could be so different it put you on a wonder.”\(^{46}\) As a result, Janie, being the Mayor’s wife, even though admired and respected by the community, was subject to their hatred too. Hurston presents Janie’s rise in class in terms of her loss of identity and community associations.

However, Janie’s subsequent love affair and marriage to Vergible Woods (Tea Cake), after the death of her second husband changes her to a more vibrant and confident woman. But this affair is met with lots of criticisms by the community members who consider Tea Cake beneath Janie’s class. They feel that Janie “sits high, but she looks low.”\(^{47}\) Because TeaCake does not possess the wealth, power, and status of Jody, the citizens of the Eatonville community view him as an opportunist. They take a dim view on the couple’s activities, such as playing checkers and cards, because they associate these pastimes with the low-class individuals. A good friend of Janie, Phoeby Watson, acts as a representative of the community, when she comes to counsel her: “Janie, everybody’s talkin’ ‘bout how dat Tea Cake is draggin’ you round tuh places you ain’t used tuh. Baseball games and huntin’ and fishin’. He don’t know you’se useter uh a more high time crowd than dat. You always did class off.”\(^{48}\) Janie, however, sticks to Tea Cake, because it is with him that for the first time in her
life, she is able to be her real self. However, Hurston presents class consciousness even in the relationship between Janie and TeaCake. When the couple heads to Jacksonville, so that TeaCake can look for a job on the railroad, he takes the money that Janie had pinned to her clothes and goes out with his friends without inviting her. He feels that she is too high class for the individuals he associates with. Just as the Eatonville community views Janie as high class, TeaCake also senses a class difference as well, and uses that as a reason for excluding her from the gathering. Janie, however, does not want to be placed on a pedestal and wants to be a fully participating member of the community. Even after Tea Cake’s death, Janie does not see her life as tragic; she sees it as full and rich, and she brings to her community the message that self-fulfillment rather than security and status is the gift of life - “She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see.”

Janie’s character reveals the many dimensions of the black woman’s soul and the restrictions imposed upon her by her own community. The novel represents the community ambivalently. It invokes not one class but the total community - its languages, images, mores, and prejudices - as its context. Diverse oral performances, such as, personal narratives, folk tales, courtship rituals, speeches, and sermons mingle with a formal narrative structure that charts a woman’s achievement of sense of identity. Hurston, in fact, was one of the first writers to use folk images and speeches, and emphasized on the insular community as the setting of her works. The idea of the community in Their Eyes Were Watching God, no doubt is concerned mostly with racism and sexism, but class had also become a major part of the matrix of the community. Zora Neale Hurston’s works are receiving much praise today,
especially from contemporary black women writers who see her as their spiritual ancestor. Her concern with the relationship between the black woman and her community, and her use of ancient folk images and speeches in her works has given a new dimension to the literature of Harlem Renaissance.

Harlem was an attempt to create and reconstruct the sense of community as a counter to the disintegration, which one had been noticing since the days of slavery. Harlem in the 1920s and the early 1930s may be symbolic of significant changes in African American life and art. From a population of 14,000 blacks in 1914, it went up to 2,00,000 in around 1929. The interaction of blacks coming from different cultural spaces, from all parts of the United States, the West Indies, and even Africa gave rise to the growth of a highly race conscious sophisticated community, equally emphatic in cultural expressions, something unprecedented in American history. It is here in Harlem that the African Americans came to focus on the community as a political force and the community’s cultural representation as a definite strategy for survival and assertion. But it is also noteworthy that economic compulsion played as significant a role as cultural aspirations at both the beginning and the dissolution of the Harlem as a community.

After the Depression set in, Harlem was no longer a happy place to live in. The whole nation, especially the blacks suffered as a result of the plunging of the economy. Black intellectuals and artists realised it all the more that no decent life could be lived under such conditions. The impact of the hostile environment led to a literature of social protest, and the foremost African American woman to be concerned with such a literature was Ann Petry (1911-1997), especially in her novel *The Street* (1946). The novel presents a cruel environment where the competition for survival is fierce. *The Street* tells the story of Lutie Johnson, a black woman without a
husband or a supportive community, struggling to make a better life for her and her family. Lutie stands alone as a black woman without any communal support and thus can be very easily destroyed by the forces of urban America:

It was a bad street.... It wasn’t just this street that she was afraid of or that it was bad. It was any street where people were packed together like sardines in a can.
And it wasn’t just this city. It was any city where they set up a line and say black folks stay on this side and white folks on this side, so that black folks were crammed on top of each other...and forced into the smallest possible space until they were completely cut off from light and air.^^

The myth of the Harlem Renaissance writers: that you can make it if you try is proved absolutely wrong in Petry’s novel. The world of Petry’s novel offers no escape at all.

A similar scenario of the disturbed community is presented in Dorothy West’s (1907-1998) The Living is Easy (1948), which depicts the inter-racial and intra-racial concerns of the middle-class African Americans. The novel focuses on the lives of Cleo and Bart Judson, southern blacks who migrated north in search of the American dream of wealth, success, and fame. Cleo Judson is a strong, determined woman who desperately wants to have power within her community, but cannot. The novel gives us a clear picture of the middle-class African Americans imprisoned within their own small world, with no desire to relate to the black common folks. Thus, we find Cleo who writes letters containing false information to her sisters as a means of ending their marriages with men she considers too low class in their socioeconomic background. Because Cleo has bourgeois aspirations, she wants her sisters also to be married to middle class black men. Similarly, Cleo’s marriage to Bart Judson also reflects her avarice and desire to obtain material possessions as she moves up the socioeconomic ladder. Bart finds it increasingly difficult to meet the demands of Cleo for money to support their lifestyle. The novel ends tragically, with Bart Judson as a broken-down man victimized by racism and classicism as well as his wife Cleo,
whose utter materialism and lack of love for her husband create an empty marriage. West’s criticism of greed and materialism in this novel suggests that the key to African American life and culture resides in an appreciation of communality among human beings. As in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, class differences assume a major role in this book too. The disturbing picture of the black community and the emerging class consciousness are set in tune with the time of Depression.

Another novelist, Louise Merriwether (b. 1923), in her novel *Daddy Was A Number Runner* (1970), however, presents a slim chance of securing a better life than Harlem had to offer. The novel tells the story of Francie, a young black girl growing up in Harlem during the 1930s. Through her we see “a black girl’s attempts to grow into a balanced woman in a world determined to deny her that growth.” But Francie’s sense of belonging gives hope for herself and for her people: “I wanted to hug them all. We belonged to each other somehow.” She lives in a world where black families, unlike Ann Petry’s depiction in *The Street*, aid one another in the struggle to survive. Communal caring and concerns are evident all throughout the novel. There appears to be a paradox in the cultural constitution of Harlem, the coming together of individuals from various sub-cultural backgrounds in search of cultural and communal homogeneity was at the same time paradoxically undercut by class differences that seem to contest the homogeneity.

From the late forties to the sixties, the major theme of the black novel had been the plight of the black male, and this issue was handled by many eminent black male writers of the period, like Richard Wright (1908-1960), James Baldwin (1924-1987) and Ralph Ellison (1914-1994). They created controversy and concern all over the world. This period did not see many significant black women novelists. Instead, black women writers excelled in poetry. Noted poets of the period, Margaret Walker (1915-
1998) and Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000), however, had penned at least one novel each that developed further the idea of the African American community as represented in literature. During the 1950s, the Civil Rights Movement began in the south. As evident in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), literature of that time mirrored the happenings of the period ambivalently. Black women writers like Alice Childress (1920-1994) sharply focused on the economic and racial injustices, especially on African American women. Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965), famous for her play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) deals with the portrayal of the African American family and their lifestyles. Noted poet and novelist, Margaret Walker, mainly deals with the life of the African Americans in an urban setting. She also focussed on the significance of black women’s history and endurance. Walker was concerned with the importance of the mother and grandmother figures in her works and the influence they have on the present generation of black women:

> My grandmothers were strong.  
> They followed plows and bent to toil.  
> They touched earth and grain grew.  
> They were full of sturdiness and singing.  
> My grandmothers are full of memories  
> With veins rolling roughly over quick hands  
> They have many clean words to say.  
> My grandmothers were strong.  
> Why am I not as they? 

In a conversation with Nikki Giovanni, Walker laid stress on the main focus for all her writings: “In anything I write, you can expect my main character will be a woman. I’m interested in the black woman and feel that the black woman’s story has not been told, has not been dealt with adequately.” Walker was also concerned with revising the false myths, the stereotypical images of the black woman and southern life, and
this is clearly evident in her novel *Jubilee* (1966). This novel is reminiscent of the novels of Zora Neale Hurston. Here, we come across many of the various aspects of folk culture: the songs, sayings, customs, food, medicinal remedies, language and so on. Even though the intricacies of the African American community are not directly recorded in her works, but what is important is the prominence given to female friendship, the significance of the history of the black woman, and a true perspective of southern life in the nineteenth century.

Gwendolyn Brooks’ short novel *Maud Martha* (1953) reflects vignettes about a black girl growing up in a closely-knit family. Unlike Ann Petry’s *The Street*, this work emphasizes that the heroine is not alone; she is loved by her family and nurtured by their communal rituals. Brooks, in this novel, at the same time concentrates on the black family and community and the limits of the heroine’s sphere. Her revelations about herself, her lighter-skinned husband, and the problems regarding her skin colour that shadows her world, are poignantly presented here:

But it’s my color that makes him mad....What I am inside, what is really me, he likes okay. But he keeps looking at my color, which is like a wall. He has to jump over it in order to meet and touch what I’ve got for him. He has to jump away up high in order to see it. He gets awful tired of all that jumping. 55

Her dark complexion and her untamable hair are not desirable even in her own community. Brooks deftly handles the lack of community involvement and the alienation caused by the ravages of racism in urban life in this novel. Her concern with the community is better understood from her autobiography, *Report From Part One* (1972), where she talks not only about ‘self’, but of the black extended family as well. Her commitment to the idea of the unified African American family and community is witnessed throughout. “Blacks”, she writes, “need all their strength – male and female, operating together.” 56 Brooks in her novel, as well as, in her other
works, emphasized the hopes for the future African Americans in the communal bonding and concerns.

The 1960s was a decade of dramatic social upheaval and the political implication of the Civil Rights Movement. This in turn gets related to the movement of the Black Muslims. Black people in America, according to Black Nationalists of the 1960s, had to redeem themselves, and the Black Muslims presented an agenda in which African Americans would undertake their own economic, moral, social, religious, and political regeneration as a nation within a nation in America. The writings of Malcolm X (1925-1965) and the Black Arts Movement (1960-1970), particularly the fiction of Henry Dumas (1934-1968) plays a significant role later on to be followed by the writings of Amiri Baraka (b.1934). One important collection of works dealing with the African American community is Mari Evans’ “I Am a Black Woman” and also her popular television show “The Black Experience” (broadcast in 1960s). In this she focused on the tension, the problems faced by the black community in the context of the Black Power Movement and the Black Aesthetics. The excavation of black history and literature from the perspective of African Americans resulted in scholarship that created the foundation for important literary works. In the early 1970s, historical studies, such as, John Blasingame’s *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Ante-Bellum South* (1972) and Garde Learner’s *Black Women in White America* (1973) revised the understanding of the roles of the African Americans in American history. The 1960s and 70s was a period where black cultural nationalism took on a concrete shape in the Black Aesthetics, a literary programme essentially political in nature; it is a discourse which consolidated around the concept of race and seemed detrimental towards accepting any complication of a unitary conception of the black experience. In many cases the emphasis on the use of oral forms led to an affirmation
of a communal vision, which, however, foregrounds unitary uniformity at the cost of the divergences and differences which would have determined the real. The representation of the community in the works of the black women novelists of the 1970s was distinguished by an encounter between the oral and the fictional mode. The Black Nationalist discourse during the Black Nationalist Movement concentrated on a basic opposition between the individual and the community. This opposition intended to position the radical difference of Black Nationalism against the white US capitalist ideology. The economic, political, and aesthetic programme of Black Nationalism was committed to the black community, which was theoretically conceived in sharp contrast to the white US ideology of individualism. At the economic level, the cooperative collective basis of black power may be opposed to the individualist competitive basis of white US society. Despite the inability to establish an economically separate and self-contained black community, the black cultural nationalists did succeed in promoting a powerful sense of cultural unity and independence among the black community. Stokley Carmichael and Charles Hamilton wrote that the goal of national separatism from white US society was to create a cohesive, distinctly black cultural community. Black Nationalist Aesthetic theory reiterated this emphasis, declaring that black art must derive its power and meaning from the black community and must counter the Western Aesthetic privileging of the individual artist. One important point of difference arises from the reaction of the black women writers, such as, Nikki Giovanni, Alice Walker, and Ntozake Shange who regarded the Black Aesthetic as gender biased, essentially masculine. Black women novelists in this period respect the communal emphasis of Black Aesthetic theorists, but question the specific model of community propounded by these theorists. In these novels, black feminine identity is invariably located within a
communal frame; employing multiple points of view and structurally interweaving various narrative strands concerning different characters, these novels formally challenge the very notion of a central individual protagonist. While retaining the communal frame, however, these novels split the black community along gender lines, thus, threatening the unified racial community projected in Black Aesthetic theory. Black women novelists are accused of portraying gender divisions at a time when Black Nationalism required literary affirmation of a cohesive racial community. The splitting of the black community along gender lines in the works of the African American women writers threatened the idea of the unified racial community which was constructed on a traditional hierarchical structure of gender differences. Black Aestheticians who had valued black women’s fiction as detrimental to the interests of the community projected the black women writers as taking not the correct side in the politics of race. But in the 1970s the novel was the predominant form of expression. These novelists emphasized the importance of black oral performances and a novelistic vision of community emerged in the linguistic interplay of differences as noticed in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker’s *Meridian* and Gayl Jones’ *Corregedora*.

Gloria Naylor comes into focus in the 1980s when there has been a sudden spurt in black women writings, the 70s dominated by Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and others. The black community depicted in Toni Morrison’s (b.1931) *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is not in keeping with the requirements of the Black Aesthetics. The novel’s black community is committed to white middle class values and not in line with its own cultural heritage; it is divided by colour bias and sexism. However, the novel performs a valuable cultural function for the black community; it exposes the destructive force of white aesthetic standards and thus, strengthens the arguments of
the Black Aesthetics in highlighting cultural nationalism. Toni Morrison has time and again highlighted the political agenda of African American fiction, “If anything I do...isn’t about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything...” This novel’s critique of black folk values sharply departs from Black Aesthetic ideology, which demanded literary affirmation of the black community’s power to challenge white middle class ideology. The black community in *The Bluest Eye* entirely lacks the resources to counter racial oppression. Elizabeth Schultz argues that *The Bluest Eye* opposes the communal bent of 1960s and 70s black fiction in presenting alienated protagonists who “have more in common with their white counterparts... than they do with other protagonists of the Afro-American novel.”

While *The Bluest Eye* rejects a black folk community that consolidates its cultural entity by persecuting one of its most vulnerable members, the novel also renders impossible the very category of an alienated individual. The structure of the novel, with its interpenetration of strands dealing with different characters, compels us to read Pecola’s story in conjunction with the story of her entire community. Moreover, the novel’s presentation of the black community is not entirely despairing, for it does offer an alternative vision of a positive folk community, embodied in the three prostitutes. Each of these women practices a different folk skill: China is adept at ‘signifying’, Marie tells stories, and Poland sings the blues. The three women household of these prostitutes, a relatively independent economic and ideological space, not only offers an alternative to the white middle class nuclear family, but also constitutes a kind of feminine folk community that is marginal even to the marginal community of blacks. The alternative vision of community, which is only fleetingly evoked at a thematic level, is more fully developed at the level of the narrative voice, which celebrates a lively interplay of differences, to create a multivocal narrative.
media, which is achieved by means of shifts between Standard English and dialect, and the use of free indirect speech. The novel alternates between the first person narration of Claudia and a third person omniscient narrator. The presence of many voices in the text evokes the idea of the participation of a community. Madhu Dubey concludes that the alternative vision of community generated by *The Bluest Eye* is a unique one and that this novel evokes “a community galvanized by differences and contradictions.”

Morrison’s highly acclaimed novel, *Paradise* (1997), takes place in the tiny farming community of Ruby, Oklahoma. Settled by nine African American clans during the 1940s, the town represents a small miracle of self-reliance and community spirit. The narrative is based on the plight of a small town in Oklahoma that was founded by ex-slaves who traveled from Louisiana following the Civil War and were turned away from another lighter-skinned black community during their journey. Originally called Haven, the sons of the town fathers relocate after World War II and rename the community, Ruby. This town in its attempt to turn its face from the oppression of slavery, prejudice, and the insult of being turned away by their own people, has instead come full circle. The story opens in the year 1976, as the second and third generation men of the community, threatened by change, have decided to take matters into their own hands. Times are changing and wisps of the Black Power Movement and the Equal Rights Revolution have begun to wander through the populace. Scapegoats are needed; they are found in a convent on the edge of the town where several torn and battered women have assembled from all over the country. Like the original residents of Haven and Ruby, these women are the outcasts of society, but in the minds of the leaders of this society which has turned in on itself, they are the enemy and must be exterminated. From this stark beginning, Morrison
introduces the women of the convent in their own voices, one at a time, and begins a journey that will wind along a path all the way back to the story of the internal conflicts of the original founders of Haven in the nineteenth century. Along the way, we meet a number of the town’s residents, a group of families and relatives intertwined to form the governing body in Ruby. The women at the convent form a community that transcends their past and is race-blind. They are not relatives or from the same racial background. In a novel etched in violence, Morrison seeks not only to answer the question of why Paradise necessitates exclusion, but also to explore the notion of perfection and utopia on earth. Both Haven and Ruby were founded on principles that their founders thought would stand even as society changed around them. The centrepiece of their society was a literal stone oven, but though it was carefully reassembled when the town moved to Ruby, no amount of moving could stop the passage of time or the flow of change. *Paradise* cannot completely capture the full flavour of the past one hundred years of turbulent African American history, but it does seize upon the essence of the human struggle to understand one another and the place of the African Americans in a larger community.

The late 1960s and 70s saw the task of the reclamation of black women’s history and selfhood by African American women writers like Alice Walker (b.1944). Through her works, Walker gives voice to how the black women develop and cope within their communities, considering the limited freedom afforded to them. In *Meridian* (1976), Walker uses the communal narrative frame which is established by the novel’s call and response method. However, it repeatedly tests its own communal vision, guarding against any easy assumption of a collective voice. Speaking about the structure of *Meridian*, Walker said that when she wrote the book, she realized that “...the chronological sequence is not the one that permits me the kind of freedom I
need in order to create...I wanted to do something like a crazy quilt...something that
works on the mind in different patterns." The novel's diverse short narratives about
women do not, through a simple process through accretion amount to a unified
representation of black feminine collectivity. In fact, several characters, such as, Wile
Chile, Ann, and the nameless girl in prison, are included in the novel primarily
because they finally escape the feminine collectivity that the novel seeks to establish.
However, the novel's vision of community seems strained rather than enriched at the
level of narrative voice. Alice Walker believes that the artist should be the voice of
the people, but the narrative voice of Meridian is quite distinct from the voice of the
people. In fact, the troublesome use of the generalized term 'the people' betrays the
novel's difficulty in assuming a collective voice. After rejecting the absolutist
nationalist community at Saxon college, Meridian decides to go south in search of 'the
people'. The symbolic equation of south and community is typical of Alice Walker's
fiction. However, this natural sense of community is tested at a linguistic level in the
chapters dealing with the people in the south. The Standard English of Meridian and
the narrator sets them apart from the people, who usually speak a form of southern
black dialect. Moreover, the narrator frequently assumes the stance of an ethnographic
interpreter rather than a representative of the black community. Significant in the
technique of the novel, is Alice Walker's use of the quilt metaphor which most
appropriately captures the novel's conception of collectivity as a composite of
diverse, disparate elements.

Walker's Pulitzer Prize winner novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), is considered to be
one of the most controversial novels of African American literature since Richard
Wright's *Native Son* (1940). Both the epistolary form and the theme of the novel
deserve much appreciation. The novel voices forth the story of Celie, a poor, black,
ugly, uneducated, beaten-down woman, in her own language with no authorial interference whatsoever. The story is about the trials and tribulations that Celie encounters in her life to be reunited with her sister Nettie. Even though they were separated, their love was enduring and it proved itself against all odds. The canvas of this novel is extensive as compared to Walker’s previous novels, because here she deals with certain taboo subjects, like lesbian relationship. Celie’s relationship with Shug Avery is not only limited to the physical intimacy that they share; Shug is more of a friend and a sister to Celie and plays a crucial role in the development of Celie as a person. Walker has used the main characters to show how oppressed women can come together and find their inner strength and prevail against all odds. These women suffer oppression from the men in their families and furthermore from their husbands. Instead of coming home and rejoicing in the wonders of family life, the black men depicted in the story come home and physically, mentally, verbally, and spiritually abuse their women. This is the vicious cycle which goes on throughout most of the story. This is pertaining to the overall theme, which is the self-destruction of the black community at a time when they should have been united against the common evil of racial discrimination. Against such a depiction of the community, the novelist depicts the federation among the women to be one of restoration and freedom, and emphasizes the importance of female friendship in the black community - a theme which assumes great importance in Naylor’s novels.

Another creative writer of the period, Paule Marshall (b. 1929), focused on the culture of the Caribbean people in America or within their own island communities. A critic has observed: “Marshall’s great talent as a writer is her insightful portrayal of individual characters as they articulate the complex of a community’s actions and desires.” Marshall’s first novel Brown Girl, Brownstones (1959) tells the coming-of-
age story of Selina, the daughter of Barbadian immigrant parents, in the context of the people who surround her, and especially in relation to her mother Silla. Silla dominates her household: she determines economic matters, even against the resistance of the other parent, and attempts to mould her children’s lives. The novel depicts her at times as ruthless and cruel. Resistance against her is apparently futile – but also becomes a mark of the protagonist’s growth and character. In her attempts at resisting Silla’s influence, in her fears of becoming like Silla, and in her ability to reach a kind of peace with her, Selina establishes her individuality. One strategy by which the novel accomplishes the equal affirmation of individualism and communalism involves Marshall’s establishing her heroine as a character a little apart from her family. This difference is also expressive of Selina’s second-generation status: unlike her parents, Selina has not experienced Barbados, yet both family and community expect loyalty to her being a Barbadian. Selina shows strength of character early on and appears old beyond her years, while also harbouring a wish to escape from her environment. Selina’s independence is linked to her attitude toward values which is connected with her community, specifically through Silla. Because Selina is depicted as an independent and strong-willed character, it appears consistent that she would rebel at some point against what is outlined as the norm of the community. She perceives this norm to be a form of materialism, a devotion to the project of buying a house which pervades the Barbadian community in New York. As a child, she witnesses her mother’s friend, Iris, taunt her mother with the latter’s failure – which is attributed to Selina’s father Deighton – to buy a house by naming a seemingly endless list of women who have bought houses. The community’s insistence on buying a house as a measure of respectability is epitomized in a communal wedding scene in which Deighton has to suffer the rejection of his
community because he has spent money frivolously on luxury items rather than on a
down-payment. Selina rejects such a value system and her rebellion against
materialism recurs throughout the novel, as in her assertion to her mother that there
are things which cannot be bought in stores, such as love and space for oneself, or in
her condemnation of her friends’ money-oriented career goals. Unlike her peers, she
does not wish to fulfill her community’s expectations. Even though, throughout much
of the novel, Selina remains unsure of the values she wants to replace materialism
with, she is certain that she does not want to fit to the mould that the community
seems to have cast for her.

Deighton is also another character who is located between individualism and the
demands of the community, who does not meet the approval of his community
because he does not save money for a house. Percy Challenor, who is something of a
community leader, pronounces what the community thinks of Deighton: “I tell you
those men from Bridgetown home is all same. They don know a thing ’bout money
and property and thing so....I tell you, he’s a disgrace!”  Deighton fully embraces his
Barbadian upbringing, but he does not meet all the standards for full community
membership. Suggie, one of the tenants in Silla’s house, is also one such character
who fully adheres to Barbadian culture and fondly remembers the island. Yet, she too,
is regarded as an outsider by the community because of her promiscuity. Sensing her
own marginality, but refusing to give in to community pressure, Suggie comments:

My people! I’s hiding from them with tears in my eyes....Y’know what they
want me to do?...I must put on a piece of black hat pull down over my face and
go out here working day in and day out and save every penny....I mustn’t think
’bout spreeing or loving-up or anything so....But they’s sadly mistaken....I gon
spend my money foolish if I choose.

Both Deighton and Suggie provide Selina with examples of following the course of
life one has chosen for oneself. Though they end up tragically – Deighton commits
suicide and Suggie moves on to an uncertain existence – they give Selina the warmth, affection, and sense of enjoyment of life that is missing in a community focused solely on work and acquisition.

However, it is her individualism that, in the end, allows Selina to respect or at least regard with more tolerance the values of her mother and her community. The circle is complete when Selina recognizes that her mother was also once driven by her own individualism:

Everybody used to call me Deighton’s Selina but they were wrong. Because you see I’m truly your child. Remember how you used to talk about how you left home and came here alone as a girl of eighteen and was your own woman? I used to love hearing that. And that’s what I want. I want it!^^

Two factors play an important role in changing Selina’s outlook: one is a fuller experience of the world outside the home and the community; the other is the experience of racism. Recognizing that her mother, too, has experienced racism, Selina not only acknowledges unity vis-à-vis a common oppression but also concludes that she has no right to judge her mother or the community. She begins to understand the acquisitiveness of the Barbadian community as a defense mechanism against racism, the wish to own things as an attempt to fight back against exclusion. As Barbara Christian says, this defensiveness results in the community’s “compelling, urging, insisting that every one of its parts bend to the common goal: the owning of a brownstone, the possession of property, as a bulwark against poverty, racism, failure.”66 The pressure to conform can thus be understood as a wish to protect and shelter the younger generation against the hostile white world. Selina’s newly reached admiration of her community’s resilience in the face of adverse circumstances happens at the moment she recognizes herself to be one of them, so that her individualism can now be understood as a variation on a theme rather than
standing in opposition to it. At the same time, however, she knows that she is not willing to do the community’s bidding and thus, feels utter alienation. This revelation, which comes at the moment of greatest harmony between the community and herself, opens up afresh the divide between communalism and individualism. But at the same time, the novel can ultimately be recognized as “one of the most optimistic texts in Afro-American literature, for it assigns even to an oppressed people the power of conscious political choice: they are not victims.”

With the emergence of many new and exciting female voices, we now have a more diverse representation of the African American community in literature. Gayl Jones’ (b.1949) *Corregidora* (1975) is one such work which mirrors the African American family and community. The plot begins in 1947 and centres on Ursa Corregidora, a blues singer who continues her familial legacy of making generations, passing it on, and bearing witness through the medium of singing. Charged with passing down her family’s history of slavery and abuse, Ursa takes the role of a storyteller. Her character often relates the terrible, bone-chilling events that happened to her grandmothers: the slaves, concubines, and prostitutes of Coregidora, a nineteenth century Brazilian plantation owner. Much of Jones’ work also explores a theme of contradictory, coexisting emotions. This theme, specifically of love and hate, is especially visible in this novel when Ursa and her mother discuss the grandmothers’ relationships with their former owner and lover, Corregidora. Ursa uses traditional oral storytelling techniques in delivering her stories. One thing which is important to understand the familial and communal relationships in this book is Ursa’s final realization that black men are not inherently bad, but are the products of their history and society, as are black women.
The basic theme of communal love and concern underlies the works of another noted novelist, Toni Cade Bambara (1939-1995). Her novel *The Salt Eaters* (1980) is set in the community of Claybourne, Georgia during the late 1970s. The plot is built around the attempted suicide and healing of Velma Henry, the protagonist, as she struggles against the fragmentation, rage, and self-will that prompted her existence in isolation. The novel constitutes a distinct paradigm of the African American community in the final decades of the twentieth century. As pointed out by Derek Alwes:

For Bambara, there are only two choices available in any consideration - the right one and the wrong one and the right one always involves subordinating individual freedom to the needs of the larger community. In *The Salt Eaters*, the exercise of personal liberty is inevitably isolating, and isolation is a form of suicide.68

Alwes goes on to say that "[b]ecause the emphasis in *The Salt Eaters* is less on the individual than on the community, the notion of parenting in the novel is also expanded beyond the limitations of the biological relationship." Bambara's main focus in this work is on the fact that in the 1970s, blacks had dispersed within their communities and had set up various political camps. She argues that such division only aids their oppression and talks in favour of a cohesive community. In her essay 'What It Is I Think I'm Doing Anyhow', she explains the reasons for writing this novel:

There is a split between the spiritual, psychic, and political forces in my community....It is a wasteful and dangerous split. The novel grew out of my attempt to fuse the seemingly separate frames of reference of the camps; it grew out of an interest in identifying bridges; it grew out of a compulsion to understand how the energies of this period will manifest themselves in the next decade.20

Throughout the novel, Bambara expertly questions the role of black people in contemporary society and their community. Bambara builds up a structure, which
opens out from the centre involving quite a large group of characters, which suggests
the primacy of the community over the individuals. Velma's fractured psyche serves
as a trope for the disintegration of the African American community where traditional
values and connections beyond the self have been largely ignored. In a significant
manner, Bambara integrates African and Afro-Caribbean concepts of healing and
underlines the importance of the community and the communal ties in the process.

Ntozake Shange (b.1948) is another prolific and powerful writer of the
contemporary period whose novels mainly depict the stress of modern times on black
families and communities. Her novel *Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo* (1982) portrays
the story of three sisters, who choose alternative ways of resisting the set standards of
the society. The story takes place in a post Civil Rights Movement climate where
Shange combines narrative, poetry, magic spells, recipes and letters to take us through
the internal and external journey of the three sisters and their mother, Hilda Effania.
Sassafras, a weaver like her mother, falls into a destructive sexual union with a
saxophone player named Mitch. Mitch indulges in his music and life freely, at the
same time muting that of Sassafras. Sassafras's major goal is to achieve a positive
sense of self, despite the sexism of her lover Mitch. Cypress, on the other hand,
appears to be flowing between the identities of being a heterosexual and a lesbian.
Offended by the overt insulting of women in her dance troupe, she aligns herself with
the lesbian collective. She then discovers that women can be as sexually exploitative
as men. After ending her painful love affair with another dancer named Idrina,
Cypress throws herself into her dancing and eventually finds herself in love with a
musician named LeRoy. Her relationship with LeRoy testifies to her arrival at
personal liberty. The youngest daughter, Indigo, is introduced as completely different
from her sisters. Her world is a world of women, real and imagined. Indigo's travel to
the islands guides her towards African and African American traditions prompting her spiritual growth. The journey of these three sisters is presented mainly as a journey of discovering the richness of African American heritage. The novel also explores Shange’s vision of sisterhood as the ideal community, a community which gives the girls the strength to challenge their identities, but also – through the strength of their mother’s love and patience – a place to return and be whole and content together.

Naylor began writing in the early 1980s, the time when Shange and others had also been engaged with the representation of community. A close reading of Naylor’s novels beginning with her first published work *The Women of Brewster Place* indicates her position in the continuous engagement of the representation of the community among the African American women novelists.
NOTES

2. ibid., p-8.
3. ibid., p-5.
5. ibid., p-19.
6. ibid., p-5.
7. ibid., p-53.
8. ibid., p-140.
9. ibid., p-161.
10. ibid.
11. ibid., p-245.
15. ibid., p-64.
16. ibid., p-128.
17. ibid., p-489.
18. ibid.
21. ibid., pp.-975,976.
22. ibid., p-977.
23. ibid., p-980.
26. ibid., p-964.
27. ibid., p-961.
28. ibid., p-963.
29. ibid.
33. ibid., pp.-17,18.
36. ibid., p-70.
37. ibid., p-69.
40. ibid., p-134.
43. ibid., pp.-19-20.
44. ibid., p-33.
45. ibid., p-58.
46. ibid., pp.-58-59.
47. ibid., p-5.
48. ibid., p-136.
49. ibid., p-231.


64. ibid., pp.-80-81.

65. ibid., p-307.


69. ibid.

The term sister, has a deep old meaning – it was valid, never secondary. Black women had to be real and genuine to each other, there was no one else....There was a profound and real need there...for survival. (And) there is such a thing as ‘the other’...The friend that is the other, and women must hang on to that....What was valued was their friendship...it was spiritual, of first order priority.

(Sandi Russell)