Chapter 3

The Ancestor in African American Fiction

The ancestor as a figure and as a metaphor entered the African American imagination even as early as the oral creative constructs in the period of plantation slavery. The secular and the religious songs, spirituals, and the call and response patterns, time and again evoke the presence of Africa as physical and spiritual space. There were attempts to recuperate the loss incurred in the capture, Middle Passage, and subjugation, through reestablishing the ties with the ancestor and the ancestral. African customs, rituals, and kinship relations, are evoked as resistance to obliteration.

In her essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” (1984), Morrison refers to the figures of the grand-parents in Ralph Ellison and Toni Cade Bambara, and the healers in Bambara and Henry Dumas. The presence and the use of the ancestor in the literary imagination may be traced through a close reading of the following texts as being illustrative: Harriet Jacobs’ *An Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*, Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Meridian and *The Temple of My Familiar*, Paule Marshall’s *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* and *Praisesong for the Widow*, Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred*, and Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*.

In the engagement with the ancestral, the home metaphor is a dominant one in the earliest examples of literary texts created by the African Americans as they experienced and resisted the obfuscating onslaught as they found themselves in the alien environment literally away from and without a home.
When home could only be constructed and lived in the imagination, the very process of construction privileged a journey back in time and space. In the recreations of the wished for space, the unrecoverable physical and emotional gap calls for bridging, and in the process of spanning the gap, the ancestor and the ancestral assume a prominent role. The call of the ancestor has both a physical and an emotional dimension, as well as a religious one. Freedom and home are not only Christian, but also political, in the context of race and slavery, as is evident in many of the secular and religious songs, the earliest of the literary texts created by the African Americans.

At the same time that the oral texts flourished, the written form took shape in the slave narratives. Despite the fact that these narratives were mainly addressed to the anti-slavery and abolitionist ears to foreground a sense and picture of reality, the call of the distant and the past prompted the evocation of the ancestor, in many cases to underline that which has been lost and the consequent cultural price paid for it. The debilitating distance was sought to be overcome by focusing on the binding, protective and healing roles of the ancestor. One of the earliest texts to manifest this projection is *An Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). It is a first person account presented through a pseudonymous narrator, Linda Brent, who deals with two roles, the fallen woman and the mother of two children. A happy childhood was followed by sexual harassment in the hands of lecherous men, followed in turn by the birth of two children and a heroic fight to save them from plantation slavery, during which Linda spent seven years in hiding in her grandmother's storeroom. The grandmother, Marthy, signifies the ancestor. She is a woman with intelligence, a strong sense of the self, and abundant creative abilities, which are
reminiscent of African women in the distant homeland. She commanded from all both respect and awe. To Linda, separated from her mother early in life, the presence of Marthy in the neighbourhood, provided both protection and a role model, a feature, the value of which was time and again highlighted by Toni Morrison. Hazel V. Carby states:

It was the grandmother’s labor that fed and clothed her when Mrs Flint neglected her slave’s material needs, and it was the grandmother who stood as the source of a strong moral code in the midst of an immoral system. In a considerable number of ways, Jacob’s figure of the grandmother embodied aspects of a true womanhood; she was represented as being pure and pious, a fountainhead of physical and spiritual sustenance for Linda, her whole family, and the wider black community. (1)

Though it may be pointed out that the ideology of ‘true womanhood’ is partially coloured by the white world, in the final count it is the traditional African vision of life which triumphs, as is evident in Marthy’s initial and later determinate reaction to the circumstances of Linda’s first pregnancy. In response to Linda’s agonized confession, Marthy reacts: “O Linda! Has it come to this? I had rather see you dead than to see you as you now are. You are a disgrace to your dead mother. . . . never come to my house again.” (2) However, in the end the dedication to family, the ancient African virtue, triumphs over any put-on value of sexuality. The narrative that begins with the words describing childhood experiences: “I had also a great treasure in my maternal grandmother, who was a remarkable woman in many respects.” (3), ends poetically, “the retrospection is not altogether without solace; for with those gloomy recollections come tender memories of my good old grandmother, like light, fleecy clouds floating over a dark and troubled sea.” (4) It is this protective, sustaining role of the ancestor figure that Morrison
predicates as central to African American culture and its narrative representation. Apart from the figure of the grandmother, Jacob’s narrative throughout the text also evokes the ancestral in the reiteration of the significance of African rituals, particularly those related to death and the grave. African ancestral values are contrasted with the norms of plantation slavery in the anguish of having to decorate the mistress’s house, while the father’s body was lying just a mile away. Latter, the father’s grave turns into a source of strength imbibing ancestral wisdom at a moment of crisis, as she decides to flee the South.

The role of the ancestor became more significant and culturally and socially more productive of value during the Harlem Renaissance, when Africans from all over the diaspora made a concerted attempt to overturn the experience of dispersion and fragmentation by reestablishing a sense of homogeneity across time and space. The beginning of this process, however, may be traced to the turn of the century, to the debate between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois, between assimilation and assertion, a debate that had its roots in the experience of the post-bellum reconstruction. It is also the period of the beginning of African American modernism, which again is a period of transition from issues arising in African and African American sociopolitical experiences, to when the writers felt comfortable enough to start inscribing and translating into their works, what they had learnt about their African heritage. The publication of journals like *Opportunity* and *The Crisis* were instrumental in introducing certain ideas of Africa into the African American creative imagination. The journals focused on issues of race and on the alienation of the African American elite from African American
culture because of their lack of knowledge of African culture. While Marcus Garvey was championing a “Back to Africa” movement, W. E. B. DuBois advocated intellectual and cultural consciousness for African Americans through art. In his essay entitled “Criteria of Negro Art”, DuBois expressed a firm belief in the power of art to serve as propaganda for his race, to achieve the avowed political goal. He argued: “it is a bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of Beauty, of the preservation of Beauty, of the realization of Beauty, and we must use in this work all the methods that men have used before”. (5), and it is in this context that the folk culture assumed a creative role in inculcating a sense of cultural heritage and identity in an oppressed group. For DuBois, African culture and African American heritage were rich enough to help blacks in the United States regain their political and cultural consciousness. Hence, in the subsequent days of the Harlem Renaissance we notice the primacy of Africa and the ‘folk’ assuming the role of manifesting the ancestor and the ancestral.

Among the literary texts of the African American women in their evocation of the heritage, a prominent example is Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). The formal narrative is more or less in the form of bildungsroman, representing the growth of a female voice to a sense of self and freedom. It shows the experiences of a diffident teenager Janie Crawford becoming a woman in possession of herself. The idea of freedom is manifested in resisting the grandmother’s flawed vision of life, when she intends to imbibe in Janie, through marriage, the image of a southern white woman. Janie launches herself into a quest for fulfillment, and her dream is achieved in her third husband, Tea Cake, a traveling bluesman dedicated to
aesthetics, a man of nature or natural man, who seems at ease and in being what he is. In the epilogue we find Janie cherishing Tea Cake's memory, who is killed by her after he had contracted rabies, as a mentor and spiritual guide. It is Tea Cake who imbibes in Janie the importance of the link with the larger community, even in her quest for individual freedom. The journey back from the unstable present travels through the ancestor figures to the ancestral Africa, which figures time and again also in the poetry of Langston Hughes and Claude McKay.

One of the writer who is referred to by Toni Morrison as having made a significant use of the ancestor is Toni Cade Bambara, who had always insisted that social commitment is inseparable from the production of art. The Salt Eaters (1980), among other issues, focuses on social activism, community well-being, and personal and collective history. A multi-layered novel, it is set in the community of Claybourne, Georgia, during the late 1970s. The plot centers on the attempted suicide and healing of the main character, Velma Henry, as she tackles the fragmentation, rage, and self-will that have driven her in the past. She comes under the care of the famed healer, Minnie Ransom. Boundaries of time and space, imagination and reality are frequently blurred, as when Minnie Ransom, and her spirit guide, Old Wife, freely commune throughout Velma's healing and even 'travel' to a chapel for prayer. All the main characters are related in some way to Velma, whose fractured psyche serves as a trope for the splinterings and fractures of the community, where fundamental values, like connections with the best of people's traditions and attention to spiritual well-being have been left behind in the wake of the civil rights movement. The novel integrates African and Afro-Caribbean spiritual
and healing traditions with those from Western religion and other spiritual practices. It includes references to prayer, tarot, cowrie shells, herbal and folk medicines, loa, rootwork, and obeah, among others. Under Minnie’s guiding hand, Velma will move backward in time to relive her fear and rage, as well as to recover lost wisdom and rootedness. Illness, however, becomes a matter of community as well as individual healing; as Velma returns to health, she is also restored to a community badly in need of its own healing. Minnie is the ancestor figure, imbibing within her the timeless wisdom of the community. Her characterization is a departure from the usual representation of conjure women, healers, or mammies in African American literature. Wearing a red dress, hot pink headwrap, kente cloth, a silk fringed shawl, and an armful of bangles, she is fully sexual, a celebration of African American womanhood, and is deeply committed to her community and its collective as well as individual well-being.

Among the contemporaries of Toni Morrison, the narrative space of Alice Walker is most replete with the presence of the ancestor and the ancestral wisdom as the sustaining and protective force of community well-being. In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), which is a collection of essays, articles, reviews, and commentaries, written between 1966 and 1982, Walker, among other concerns, highlights a historical past that binds the collective and focuses on the many pioneers who forged the road to female creative expression and freedom as the bedrock of the flourishing of the African American community, despite its falterings and pains. The essays often stress the importance of ancestral heritage in bridging the past, present, and future, and in sustaining the development of a whole, temporally unified
self. In a passage that strongly echoes Toni Morrison’s comments on the ancestral past in “Rootedness: the Ancestor as Foundation”, Walker writes: “If we kill of the sound of our ancestors, the major portion of us, all that is past, all that is history, that is human being is lost, and we become historically and spiritually thin, a mere shadow of who we were.” (6) Motivated by her ideology of ‘womanism’, Walker underscores the special significance of the maternal ancestor for the black woman: “How simple a thing it seems to me that to know ourselves as we are, we must know our mothers’ names” (7) At a time when the Black Nationalist and the womanist ideologies were jockeying for prominence, Walker’s celebration of the mother initiated the black feminist appropriation of the mother as a means of legitimizing a feminine revision of history and cultural tradition. Walker’s position suggests that the reproductive cycle carries the germinating possibilities of a new history, despite the metaphorical alignment of the mother, in contemporary nationalist discourse, with the forces of political conservatism.

In Alice Walker’s fictional space the presence of the ancestral figure is first underlined in the figure of the grandfather, in The Third Life of Grange Copeland,(1970) who, it can be said, facilitates the novel’s task of reclaiming the mother in an oblique and displaced fashion. As if in compliance of the ideological construction that the mother is a potential threat to revolutionary actions the politically transformative potential of the mother-daughter relationship is displaced to the relationship between a girl and her grandfather. That Grange, in his third life, represents a displaced mother is clearly signaled by his entry into Ruth’s life at the exact moment that her mother dies. Grange’s figurative alignment with the ancestral-maternal rather than the
paternal principle becomes even more apparent when he instigates Ruth’s rejection of her father, and encourages her retrospective identification with her mother. In *Meridian* (1976), Walker undertakes what she has visualized as the project of excavating the submerged layers of black maternal history. Walker’s womanist version of history arises out of her conviction that “there are always people in history (or herstory) who help us”. In a significant move, the novel goes on unearthing and reconstructing the buried layers of the history of marginal cultural groups of the United States, including the Native Indians. Walter Longknife struggles to preserve his historical vision of himself and his people, but the geographical site of his vision, the burial mound of the Sacred Serpent, is appropriated and violated by the country officials who turn the mound into a public amusement park. Meridian is, however, able to retrieve the historical significance of the Sacred Serpent through her recursion into her own ancestral history. As elsewhere in the novel, it is the feminine ancestors who preserve the transformative possibilities of unofficial history. Meridian’s great-grandmother, Feather Mae, prevents her husband from erecting his farm over the burial mound. Sharing the Native Indian vision of life and death as a unified continuum, Feather Mae is renewed by her communion with the spirits of the dead buried in the Sacred Serpent. Taking after her great-grandmother, Meridian respects the value invested in the ancestral dead in Native Indian culture. At the burial mound, Meridian rejoices over “so tangible a connection to the past” (9). Her experience of ecstasy at the Sacred Serpent, emblematic of the ancestral past, becomes her source of strength in her fight for change: “She could summon whatever energy a task that had to be performed required, and . . . this ability seemed to her something
her ancestors had passed on from the days of slavery."(10) The novel’s tribute to the sustaining power of the ancestral past is itself a gesture of cultural renovation, restoring the belief system of the Native Indian culture. Walker’s epigraph to Meridian, taken from Black Elk Speaks, mourns the massacre at Wounded Knee, and the elegy reverberates throughout the novel, as it attempts an imaginary recuperation of each of the values lost at Wounded Knee. The dream of the Native Indian people, historically put to death at Wounded Knee, is imaginatively recaptured in Feather Mae’s dream of ancestral spirits at the Indian burial mound. If Black Elk laments the loss of a centered vision, Meridian’s experience at the Sacred Serpent replaces this center, reassembling what has been historically scattered. The novel symbolically compensates for the death of the “sacred tree” through its celebration of the Sojourner tree “that mighty, ancient, sheltering” tree (11) that seemingly dies early in the novel only to be resurrected at the end. Eschewing chronology, the circular structure of Meridian shifts rapidly back and forth in time, focusing similar experiences and issues through different temporal lenses. In the narrative time of the novel, the historical past of slavery, Meridian’s ancestral past – the story of Feather Mae – and the narrative present of Meridian’s life are quilted into a multilayered vision of time as a synthesis of past and present. In The Temple of My Familiar (1989) Walker argues that the roots of African American women’s hope for spiritual wholeness lies within the soil of their African origins. The plot is a collection of loosely related stories and a stream of dreams and memories. It presents a notion of the past and the present, in which all things are possible through change, respect, and self-awareness. This optimistic view of the world is presented through the memories of Miss Lissie,
a woman who has experienced several incarnations, in the process accruing ancestral wisdom. A cascade of memories, ancient and contemporary, connect the basic issues of ‘womanism’ to the various stories, within which dignity, honour, and grace, are ruthlessly denied to those in spiritual, or physical bondage, making it nearly impossible for them to achieve wholeness. The importance of the connection between the past, present, and future, is summed up by one of the character, Fanny Nzingha: “all daily stories are in fact ancient and ancient ones current. . . . There is nothing new under the sun.” (12)

The daughter of a second generation Barbadian immigrant parents, Paule Marshall’s works were greatly influenced by her West Indian ancestry, which in turn reach further back to Africa as the point of origin and establishing a diasporic perspective. Carol Boyce Davies states: “She dramatizes the contradictory spaces between ancestry and youth, tradition and modernity, African civilization and Western civilization, old and new worlds.” (13) In The Chosen Place, the Timeless People (1969), the protagonist, Merle Kimbona, is the focus of the search for and reconciliation of the self with the African diasporic historical past. The setting is Browne Island, an imaginary landscape in the Caribbean. It is a space almost equally divided geographically and economically; one part, Bournehills, wallowing in poverty, while the other, New Bristol, under the grip of modernization schemes. Merle is the link between the opposing forces and is engaged in a process of healing the rift that dogs the displaced Africans in the diaspora. The ancestral figure is Cuffee Ned, the leader of a slave revolt, who is projected as the possible healer helping in the reconstitution of the historically and psychologically fragmented sense of self. His spiritual guidance would make possible for the
people of the island to negotiate the pains of a fragmented past and look
towards forging a viable future. Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983),
which, quoting Eugenia Collier, Boyce Davies refers to as “a move to heritage
in terms of reintegration” (14) is another definitive text using the ancestor as a
positive figure in community sustenance. Great-Aunt Cuney is an ancestral
figure urging continuity with an African past and engaged in a battle of
generation opposition with Avey, the grandniece; who imbibes western
cultural values. The narrative is designed as a form of journey on a Caribbean
cruise by Avey, a middle-aged, middle-class African American woman in
psychic distress, engaged in a form of reverse middle passage, which re-
integrates her with the African heritage she had allowed to wither away. This
is what may be regarded as the literature of reconstruction, a politically
motivated literary representation geared towards the reconstruction of
fractured identity. In *Praisesong’* another significant ancestral presence is
Lebert Joseph. Although Marshall never states this explicitly, it is obvious that
Lebert Joseph is the incarnation of the African deity Legba – trickster,
guardian of the crossroads where all ways meet. Like Lebert Joseph, Legba is
a lame old man in ragged clothes, intensely personal and beloved and is the
liaison between man and the gods. He is vital to numerous rituals, both in
West Africa and in the New World. Thus Lebert Joseph, in his implied role of
Legba, contains many linkages: Africa and the diaspora; the carnate and the
spirit worlds; the present generation, the ancestors, and the yet unborn.
Marshall’s technique of evoking the ancestral, the presence of the past in the
present, operates in a manner in which the geographical gap brought about by
the middle passage is bridged through an establishment of the cultural link between the material and the spiritual, in a process of signification.

Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred (1988)* is part science fiction and part a meditation on family lore. Using the fantastic convention of time travel to move the protagonist Dana on repeated trips from twentieth century southern California to antebellum Maryland, Butler narrates the coming of age of an African American woman during the social revolutions of the 1970s. According to Butler, the novel was written as her attempt to understand her own identity and the experiences that had shaped her ancestors. During her travels into the past, Dana comes to understand slavery as a psychological as well as a physical danger, and she also learns how inadequate the average twentieth-century education is for knowing one's historical past or for surviving without technological aid. As she lives and becomes friends with other slaves, in the transportation to the past, she develops a new understanding of heroism and perfidy, of human potential and human limitations. With her great-grandfather Rufus, she insists upon mutual respect despite or because of the differences that society affords to race, gender, and condition of servitude.

A definitive use of the ancestor as figure and as metaphor is noticed in the works of Gloria Naylor, particularly in the figure of Mattie Michael in *The Women of Brewster Place (1982)* and the central protagonist in *Mama Day (1988)*. The first is a collection of seven stories, which may be said to be held together by the suffering of the women in the dead end street and by the overseeing and guiding presence of Mattie, who in the course of the narration assumes an almost mythical figure of the ancestral motherhood, guiding,
protecting and preserving the African American women through poignant sufferings. Nursing the traumatized Ciel after the accidental death of her child, Mattie travels from the narrative present to become the ancestral mother: “Ciel moaned. Mattie rocked. Propelled by the sound, Mattie rocked her out of that bed, out of that room, into a blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time. . . . They flew past the spilled brains of Senegalese infants whose mothers had dashed them on the wooden sides of slave ships. And she rocked on.” (15) *Mama Day* tells the story of the title character, Miranda Day, and her great-niece, Cocoa, set in a magical world created against a background of family history and unique geography. Following an elaborate map of Willow Spring, the setting, a family tree of the Day lineage, and a bill of sale for the most important ancestor, Sapphira Wade, the novels begins with a prologue giving the pedigree of the island and its inhabitants, dating back to 1799. From its current vantage point of August, 1999, the prologue reaches back to 1823, the time that Sapphira Wade seized power from the white landowner, Bascombe Wade, whom she killed. Sapphira also convinced Bascombe Wade to deed all of Willow Springs to his former slaves and her descendants, who still own the land in 1999. Most of the novel is presented through the omniscient voice of the island – with special emphasis on Mama Day, whose musings involve her premonitions and attempts to “listen” to the messages of her heritage. At the end of the novel Naylor’s all-knowing narrator looks forward to Cocoa assuming the matriarchal role after Mama Day passes away. A significant point to note is that African American Women’s fiction written in the 1970s and after had to contend with the Black Arts Movement
opposition to differences in terms of gender in the attempt to project a unified Black cultural entity. Morrison’s novels need to be studied in this context.

References:

3. Ibid, 283
4. Ibid, 315
5. Ibid, 782
7. *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden*, (1983), 276
10. Ibid., 145
11. Ibid., 48
14. Ibid., 118