CHAPTER – II
BLACK FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS : THEORETICAL CONTEXT

1.1 INTRODUCTION

A brief discussion of Black Feminism in the Afro-American context is imperative as the researcher considers the issue of Toni Cade Bambara’s feminism. The researcher is also going to examine the various strands of Black Feminism, its current trends and some of its inherent contradictions and inadequacies.

While the “Radicals” highlight the politics of gender, sexuality and woman culture and “Marxists” talk of class and material basis of exploitation, Black Feminism on the other hand, takes off on the dual issue of racial and sexual discrimination and proposes a different attitude with which one could approach and appreciate woman’s experience in Black or Third World communities, especially America. The need to formulate such an approach arises from the fact that the historical and social realities surrounding Afro-American women are essentially different from those of white women. Even though the experience of women’s oppression as women’s experience is universal, obvious major inherent contradictions like dominant patriarchy and traumas of slavery system lend a different dimension to their experience as Afro-American women.

Therefore, the most decisive factor that distinguishes black feminist perspective from the ideological basis of White Feminism is the specific historical experience of the black woman. While the white woman is oppressed as a woman only, a black woman is oppressed by the same white patriarchy as a non-white and very often by the white men as well. With this perspective at the back of mind, let us see different strands of Black Feminism.


1.2 REASONS FOR THE EMERGENCE OF BLACK FEMINISM

Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Barbara Smith, Barbara Christian, Alice Walker and a host of others point out the specific reasons that account for the emergence of black feminism. Smith, in her essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” (1982) elaborately points out a number of reasons that hinder the growth of black feminism. First, “the fact that for most of the time we have been in this country we have been categorically denied not only literacy but the most minimal possibility of a decent human life. In her landmark essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”, Alice Walker discloses how the political, economic, and social restrictions of slavery and racism have historically stunted the creative lives of Black women” (1). The second reason, as Smith notes, is the books written on feminist criticism by white women. These books “were not clearly perceived as the cultural manifestation of an oppressed people” (2). The third reason, as Smith observes, is that ‘there is no political movement to give power or support to those who want to examine Black women’s experience through studying our history, literature, and culture. There is no political presence that demands a minimal level of consciousness and respect from those who write or talk about our lives” (2). The fourth reason, as Smith concludes, is that ‘there is not a developed body of Black feminist political theory whose assumptions could be used in the study of Black women’s art. When Black women’s books are dealt with at all, it is usually in the context of Black literature, which largely ignores the implications of sexual politics. When white women look at Black women’s work they are of course ill-equipped to deal with the subtleties of racial politics. A black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are critically interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity. Until a Black feminist criticism exists we will not even know what these writers mean. The citations from a variety of critics which follow prove that without a Black feminist critical perspective not only are books by Black women misunderstood, they are destroyed in
the process” (2). The fifth reason is the dissenting voice of black women writers who see themselves unrepresented in the terms of the new canon and the new methodology. The sixth reason is the oppression and suppression of the black women. Black women faced the same struggles as white women; however, they had to face issues of diversity on top of inequality. Black feminist organizations emerged during the 1960s and 1970s faced many difficulties from both the culture they were confronting and their adjustment to their vulnerability within it. These women also fought against suppression. In the autobiography of Anne Moody, she has a quote that brings the idea of Black Feminist into focus, she states “... we were told in the same breath to be, quiet both for the sake of being’ lady-like, and to make us less objectionable in the eyes of white people” (22). Black women not only had to deal with racism, but sexism as well and it was even more prevalent with black males. The black women were oppressed because of certain stereotype attributed to black women, that is, mummy, Sapphire, whore and bull dagger. The pop culture media has advanced and perpetuated the stereotypes further, as witnessed by the early appearance on the screen of black icons and stereotypes. The movies exploited the black image and dehumanized the black figure in their depictions. Donald Bogle, in his *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies, and the Bad Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films*, lists five different racial stereotypes that emerged in films: the Toms, the Coons, the Tragic Mulattos, the Mammies, and the Bad Bucks. These names are just an example of how insignificant these black women’s lives have become, and it is not only white people who continue the name calling, but also more importantly black males.

Finally, it is to be noted that many Third World men have felt threatened by women’s organizations and have tried to maintain what positions of power they had by reinforcing fears and myths about the women’s movement, arguing that the women’s movement was irrelevant to women of colour as could be seen by their lack of representation in it. Smith
has listed five myths that have been used by Third World men to “divert Black women from our own freedom” (5) :

1. the myth that black women are already liberated;
2. the myth that racism is the primary (or only) oppression black women have to confront;
3. the myth that feminism is nothing but man-hating;
4. the myth that women’s issues are narrow, a political concerns and people of colour need to deal with the “larger struggle”;
5. the myth that “those feminists are nothing but lesbians”.

These myths illustrate long-held misconceptions about black women, including the belief that the extraordinary strength black women have shown in the face of tremendous oppression reveals their liberation.

These are, and a few more, important reasons that gave rise to black feminism.

1.3 DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK FEMINISM

Black feminism refers to a variety of feminisms which are identified by their opposition to the Racism and sexism encountered by Black women. In its various forms it undertakes a sustained critique of the racism and ethnocentrism of white-dominated systems and practices including feminism.

As Valerie Smith has argued, its critique is multi-faceted :

Black feminists seek not only to dismantle the assumptions of dominant cultures, and to recover and reclaim the lives of black women, but also to develop methods of analysis for interpreting the ways in which race and gender are inscribed. (18)

Black feminism emerged as an important force in the Western World in the 1960s and 1970s. The roots of Black feminism may be traced back to the nineteenth century abolitionist movement in the U.S.A. The abolitionist movement, which was primarily launched against slavery, also provided impetus and strategies to black women for their fight against sexual discrimination. Sarah Grimke’s “Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women” attacked the social order that subjugated women and
put-forward demands for women’s rights. Grimke’s ideas of feminism were much more radical than those of Mary Wollstonecraft and other liberal feminists. This revolutionary feminism was a political necessity to fight racism, classism, sexism, capitalism and patriarchal society. The ideas behind Black feminism movement were often influenced by a mixed tradition of left activism and socialist feminism with a view to foregoing a coalition between women of color and progressive movements. Black Feminists emphasised the idea that all forms of white feminism must reckon the evils of imperialism and challenge them. Leading Black Feminists like Audre Lorde, Gloria Joseph, Alice Walker and Gloria Hull have criticised the idea that feminist ideology derived from white experience is capable of addressing the problems of women in all parts of the globe. They also provide the inadequacy of white feminist perception to understand the role of gender in the field of black male thinking. As Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis observe:

The juxtaposition of Black women’s consciousness and white feminism sets the stage for the need to construct different political sites for challenging the nonsatisfactory realities of the male female polarities. The difference recognized in the sexual relationships between Black women and Black men in contrast to white women and white men relates to the question of power. Male dominance as a salient problematic factor in male-female sexual relationships cannot be considered as a universal trait applicable to all men. (58)

In the field of feminist criticism, black women struggled to establish a tradition that would reflect their distinct concerns. Smith on her path-breaking essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism”, said:

Feminism is the political theory that struggles to free all women: women of color, working class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women – as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism but merely feminist self-aggrandisement. (27)
Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Sonia Sanchez, Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Maya Angelou, Jamaica Kincaid, Gloria Naylor and a host of others have enabled (in the words of Alice Walker) “black women, especially those most marginalized by race, caste and class, to have their voices heard and their histories read” (94).

The poets, the novelists and the autobiographers devoted to the retrieval of the African-American tradition – the language, songs, stories, dance, cuisine and all the practices such as quilt making, baking, gardening that have shaped the daily lives of black people. In fact, the point of view of Black feminist writing may be termed Afrocentric, as opposed to Eurocentric – that is, it has its roots deep in African culture, it draws on the religion, values and language of Black communities and on an independence of orality, culture and community activities and in particular, on the cultural significance of mothering and female bonding. Their texts are different from white feminist texts, because African American women writers share a collective legacy of racist and sexist domination in addition to an awareness of historical continuities. Initially Black feminist writing used the form of the autobiography to explore the evils of a patriarchal, slave-holding society in which even white women, while subjugated, were still as oppressive as white men. After Emancipation, these writings articulated the sufferings of African American women and the entire African American community in a sexist, classist society. Later Black feminism manifested itself in the tradition of coloured Women’s Club that developed as a psychological and social response to the evils of the larger society. There are, however, a number of organizations such as The Combahee River Collective, The National Black Feminist Organization, The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, The Black Panther Party, to name a few, who have been focusing on the problems faced by Black Women. In addition to these organizations, some international magazines like *No More Fun and Games: A Journal of Female Liberation* have been playing a vital role in this regard. *Black Women’s Manifesto* (1970), the publication of *Third World Women’s Alliance*, aims at opposing
both racism and capitalism. Azalea : A Magazine by Third World Lesbians (1980), a Literary Quarterly, published by The Salsa Soul Sisters, deals with the problems of lesbians, womanists and women of colour. The Sisters are now known as African Ancestral Lesbians United for Societal Change, and is the oldest black lesbian organization in the United States. The contribution of the female activists tied to the civil rights movement, a radical lesbian feminist group, the separatists and Women’s Studies is remarkable and worthy to be noted for the noble task they are discharging. To be more precise, these organizations came to be formed with a view to meet certain specific issues such as reproductive rights, sterilization abuse, equal access to abortion, health care, child care, the rights of the disabled violence against women, rape, battering, sexual harassment, welfare rights, lesbian and gay rights, aging, police brutality, labour organizing, anti-imperialist struggles, anti-racist organizing, nuclear disarmament, and preserving the environment. Because all of the women were affected by sexism as well as racism in their various fields of employment, these issues were specifically addressed by these organizations. Despite hard and arduous efforts of Black feminists, Black Feminism did not prosper upto expectations. As Patricia Collins observes: “Even though Black women intellectuals have long expressed a unique feminist consciousness about the intersection of race and class in structuring gender, historically we have not been full participants in white feminist organizations” (7). bell hooks also accuses feminism of excluding Blacks from participating fully in the movement, thus she criticizes Betty Freidan’s The Feminine Mystique (1963) because though it is heralded as paving the way for contemporary feminist movement, it is written as if the Black/ lower class women did not exist. In hooks’s opinion, racism exists in the writings of white feminist, and as a result, female bonding is difficult in the face of ethnic and racial differences. If Collins and hooks accuse of white feminist organizations and white women writers, Michelle Wallace, a famous Black Feminist, takes to task her own people by stating “We exist as women who are Black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working
independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle– because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done : We would have to fight the world” (Internet 22).

If Wallace is waiting for congenial environment for the development of feminist movement, hooks advocates certain ways for the success of black feminist movement. In her book, Feminist Theory : From Margin to Centre (1984), she discusses topics such as the goals of feminist movement, the role of men in feminist struggle, the relevance of pacifism, solidarity among women, and the nature of revolution.

To strengthen Black feminist movement, hooks suggests certain goals to be followed.

1. She discusses the importance of black women in the feminist movement.
2. hooks discusses power as it pertains to women and oppression.
3. hooks stresses the importance of education as a goal of feminism and advocates the development of “the development of an educational methodology that addresses the needs of all women.”
4. hooks also argues for feminist advocacy of child care, to “emphasize the need for collective parenting.”
5. Regarding male violence, hooks asserts “We must acknowledge that men and women have together made the United States a culture of violence and must work together to transform and recreate that culture. Women and men must oppose the use of violence as a means of social control in all its manifestations : war, male violence against women, adult violence against children, teenage violence, racial violence etc.”
6. Incorporating a critique of capitalism into her critique of second-wave feminism, hooks analyses the nature of work as it applies to women.
7. Regarding sexuality, hooks states that America’s culture is fundamentally sexist, and prejudiced in favour of the economically advantaged and the economically driven of the mature and the heterosexual, and controlled by those who see power as both a means and an end.
8. With regard to the exclusion of men from the feminist movement, hooks asserts : “Men who actively struggled against sexism have a place in feminist movement. They are our comrades.”
9. Solidarity among women is necessary
10. In regard to the themes to be followed, she suggests racial, social, political, economic, moral and sexual, as well as those relating to age and gender. These themes have the potential to transform contemporary American society on almost every level.

1.4 THE EMERGENCE OF WOMANISM

The earliest feminist movements, led by middle class white women, advocated social changes such as woman’s suffrage. These movements were largely white middle-class movements and had generally ignored the black working-class woman who has suffered the worst oppressions in American history. Belonging to the subjugated gender in the subjugated race, she has had to contend with exploitative demands from white masters as well as the black, masterly men. In the literary imagination of America, she has been repeatedly depicted as a large, matronly nanny, or as a curvaceous set subject. White writers as well as black are guilty of such gross simplifications. Angered by the neglect of mainstream feminism, the black women are grouping themselves under a different banner which denies even the vocabulary of the white race. Walker calls this ‘womanism’, a philosophy quite distinct from white ‘feminism’ such as Showalter’s. Walker and other womanists pointed out that black women experienced a different and more intense kind of oppression from that of white women.

The term womanist first appeared in Walker’s *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens : Womanist Prose* (1983), in which the author attributed the word’s origin to

the black folk expression of mothers to female children, ‘You acting womanish’, i.e. like a woman ... usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or wilful behaviour. Wanting to know more and in greater, depth than is considered ‘good’ for one ... [A womanist is also] a woman who loves other women sexually and/ or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility ... and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men,
sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female .... Loves music. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (34-35)

It is obvious from the passage quoted above, that black womanism celebrates blackness, black roots, the aspirations of black people, and presents a balanced picture of black womanhood. Walker coined the term “Womanism” because feminism needed a new word that would capture its complexity and fullness. As Walker noted in the New York Times Magazine in 1984, “I don’t choose womanism because it is ‘better’ than feminism... I choose it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it; because I cherish the spirit of the women (like Sojourner) the word calls to mind, and because I share the old ethnic – American habit of offering society a new word when the old word it is using fails to describe behaviour and change that only a new word can help it more fully see” (94). Despite Walker’s claims to the contrary, she suggests in her definitions of womanism (e.g. “womanist is to feminism as purple is to lavender”) that the womanist/ black woman is stronger and superior to the feminist/ white woman.

Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi thinks that the black womanist will recognize “along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations ...” (Ranveer 45). Sherley Anne Williams has also approved and accepted this term propounded by Walker. Its premises and compulsions demand, of course, that black women must believe in the wholeness of community.

Black womanism does not believe in dividing black society from within on sex lines, but stands for integration and has faith in the “wholeness” of black society. Black womanism also indicates a notion of sisterhood developed by Fran Sanders:
I am not and never have been a sister to any man except my brother, Danny, and I feel that the whole thing is about to go too far. It seems positively incestuous. I mean, how does one make the transition from brother to lover if need be? Do I suddenly see this man who has previously been addressing me as sister as a potential lover? Not hardly! ... Better to see the woman as a woman and treat her accordingly, while at the same time trying to upgrade the quality of the relationship. (45)

Alternatively, according to Julia Hare as quoted by Hudson Weems, “Women who are calling themselves black feminists need another word to describe what their concerns are” (229). Weems similarly asserts that women of African descent who embrace feminism do so because of the absence of a suitable existing framework for their individual needs as African women, therefore she suggests and defines African womanism as:

... an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is for grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, need and desires of African women. It critically addresses the dynamics of the conflict between mainstream feminist, the black feminist, the African feminist and the African womanist. (229)

Womanism is an alternative theory to feminism. Womanism focuses on the Black female experience with writings detailing racial issues, classist issues and sexist issues. bell hooks who slightly differs, insists that:

Racism abounds in the writings of white feminists; reinforcing white supremacy and negating the possibility that women will bond politically across ethnic and racial boundaries. To womanist writers, racial and classist oppression are inseparable from sexist oppression. Many womanist writers even portray racial and classist oppression as having precedence over sexist oppression. This is because the womanists believe that the emancipation of Black woman folk cannot be achieved apart from the emancipation of the whole race. Womanists therefore believe in partnership with their men folk. This characteristic distinguishes womanism from feminism which is mainly a separatist ideology. (230)
Therefore, Womanism differs from feminism because it recognizes the triple oppression of Black women wherein racial, classist, and sexist oppression is identified and fought against by womanists, as opposed to the feminism main concern with sexist oppression. Womanism thus makes it clear that the needs of the Black women differ from those of their white counterparts, and by recognizing and accepting male participation in the struggle for emancipation it again differs from feminism in its methodology of ending female oppression. And unquestionably, Womanism is rooted in Black culture which accounts for the centrality of family, community, and motherhood in its discourse and as an ideology has extending beyond the frontiers of Black America to being embraced by many women in and from Africa, and in other parts of world.

There are a number of Black feminist writers such as Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (“Womanism : The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English” 1985), Sherley Anne Williams (“Some Implications of Womanist Theory” 1986), Hudson Weems (“African womanist : Reclaiming Ourselves” 1998) and bell hooks (“Black Feminism : Historical Perspective” 1998), to name a few, who have used the term womanism with a view to describe the African female experience. The term womanism used by Walker and the term used by these various African womanist writers might differ slightly. Yet, there are many points of similarities. First, it is to be noted that the term womanism is mainly based on the experiences of African American women. But the critics today used the term as an ideology that represents all Black females and non-white women’s experiences. There are still some critics who, realising the elasticity of the term Black, have applied the term to mean all those people who are non white by descent. It is, however, indisputable that womanism is very relevant to all Black women’s situation around the world. Second, the history of discrimination and oppression in America is responsible for the formation of ideology and theory articulation. Poverty and harsh economic conditions in
South Africa significantly shape their experiences. This social and political history of the South Africa formed an indigenous theory. Third, some aspects of Black feminism via womanism incorporates lesbianism which suggest that lesbianism is an acceptable and viable option for women to end their oppression. Hence, well known African American female writers advocate lesbianism in their works (Walker projects lesbianism as a weapon of female bonding). However, in Africa lesbianism has not gained much ground because overwhelmingly, heterosexual marriage and family structures are central to the African female experience. The critics of lesbianism like Mary Kolawole, Joseph Adeleke observe that “to the majority of ordinary Africans, lesbianism is a nonexistent issue because it is a mode of self expression that is completely strange to their worldview” (231). Adeleke goes a step further and asks: “is lesbianism, the annihilation of heterosexuality not a shift towards what Black women used to say they rejected as being pro white culture and somehow an aberration among Blacks? Can one still regard marriages and family life as fundamentally important to Black women considering this new phenomenon?” (231)

These challenges leave the position womanism in the context of the African female experience in Africa in question which necessitate the quest for either a fusion of the existing theories in order to accommodate the apparent peculiarities or evolution of a new set of theories to cater distinctly to the African woman in Africa.

... wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is social transformation. It is not about warring with men, the reversal of role, or doing to men whatever women think that men have been doing for centuries, but it is trying to build a harmonious society. The transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest. The new word describes what similarly minded women and myself would like to see in Africa. The word “feminism” itself seems to be a kind of red rag to the bull of African men. Some say the word by its very nature is hegemonic or implicitly so. Others find the focus on women in themselves somehow threatening ... Some who are genuinely concerned with ameliorating women’s lives sometimes feel embarrassed to be described as ‘feminist’ unless they are particularly strong in character. (231)

These approaches are indeed a beginning in defining and formulating an indigenous African gender theory; however, neither Stiwanism nor Motherism has gained wide acceptance or popularity as an indigenous African gender theory. Sotunsa Mobolanle Ebunolouwa, commenting on the need of a critical theory for African female writers, observes:

... a critical need for African female writers and critics to evolve and/or synthesize an indigenous African theory in order to properly situate and locate the peculiarities of their experience in gender discourse. And should African females fail to evolve an appropriate theory for the purpose of foregrounding a truly African gender discourse, the implication would be to categorize them, according to Mary Evans (Evans: 1983: 225) as ‘headless chickens’, thus a practice without theory, therefore, headless chickens rushing in mindless circles before they finally collapse in death. (232)

1.5 THE CORE THEMES

The Black Feminists dealt specific, core themes. All African-American women share the common experience of being black women in a society that
denigrates women of African descent. The commonality of experience suggests that certain characteristic themes will be prominent in a Black women’s standpoint. For example, one core theme is a legacy of struggle. Kate Cannon observes: “throughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of what supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman’s reality as a situation of struggles struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive the other black exploited and oppressed” (Collins 33).

Black women’s vulnerability to assaults in the workplace, on the street, and at home has stimulated Black women’s independence and self-reliance. In spite of differences created by historical era, age, social class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, the legacy of struggle against racism and sexism is a common thread binding African-American women.

Books by African-Americans about the black experience were a conspicuous feature of post war American literature. Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1978) and Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982), to name a few, portrayed the dynamics of black families struggling to survive in a racist world. Among their most memorable characters were black women caught in a double bind of racism and sexism as they raised families and fostered enduring relationships. These two novels and a few more impart the message: if white society did not resolve the dilemma of discrimination and segregation in the midst of a democracy peacefully, it would be resolved violently. In her article, “Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination”, Patricia Hill Collins categorically states that the economic, political, and ideological conditions may not be the most fundamental oppressions, and these conditions certainly affect many more groups than Black women. Collins further observes “Race, class, and gender constitute axes of oppression that characterize Black women’s experiences within a more generalised matrix of domination. Other groups may encounter different dimensions of the matrix, such as sexual orientation, religion, and age, but the overarching relationship is one of domination and the types of activism it generates” (3).
Legacy of struggle constitutes one of the several core themes. Maria W. Stewart draws our attention to a series of core themes such as treatment of the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression, her call for replacing denigrated images of Black womanhood with self-defined images, her belief in Black women’s activism as mothers, teachers, and Black community leaders and her sensitivity to sexual politics.

A wide range of African-American women intellectuals have advanced the view that Black women’s struggles are part of a wider struggle for human dignity and empowerment. Anna Julia Cooper, Alice Walker, Lindsay, Steady, and a host of others point out the theme of human solidarity. Walker describes the term “womanist” as “Womanist is to feminism as purple is to lavender” (xi). To Walker, one is “womanist” when one is “committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (xi). A womanist is “not a separatist, except periodically for health” and is “traditionally universalist, as is ‘Mama, why are we brown, pink and yellow, and our cousins are white beige, and black?” Ans : “Well, you know the coloured race is just like a flower represented” (xi). By redefining all people as “people of colour”, Walker universalizes what are typically seen as individual struggles while simultaneously allowing space for autonomous movements of self-determination” (Collins). This humanist vision is also reflected in the growing prominence of intellectual issues and global concerns in the works of contemporary African-American women intellectuals.

1.6 ACHIEVEMENTS

Having seen the reasons for the emergence of black feminism, the evaluation of Black Feminism, and the Black Feminist theories like Womanism, Motherism and Stiwanism evolved out of Black feminist movement, it is to be noted that the Black Feminist movement, to a large extent, has succeeded in achieving certain aims and objectives. Calvin C. Hernton has paid a glowing tribute to the Afro-American woman:
After nearly four centuries of oppression, having been raped, murdered, lynched, spat upon, pushed through back doors, denied human respect, thought of and treated as sluts and mammies and Negresses, fit only to breed and suckle babies, to wash and cook and scrub and sweat, after having been sexually depersonalized and taken bodily for the having, the Negro women of the modern era are just beginning to be recognized as human beings, as sexual creatures clothed in their own personal skins, as American citizens with public rights and duties, private longings and desires, like any other citizen of this republic. (Plakkoottam 19)

Walker coined the term “Womanism” in 1983 in her collection of essays entitled *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, which would define African American feminism for a large number of African women who had been to define ourselves within and without the white dominated feminist movement. This term continues to be used to describe current feminist thought by women of African descent and it is applied to the historical understanding of Black women’s writings, theory and history.

In 1993 the word womanism with the meanings Walker bestowed on it was added to *The American Heritage Dictionary*. The concept has had a profound influence in the formulation of theories and analytical frameworks in women/ gender studies, religious studies, black studies, and literary studies. Because of the linking of black women and spirituality in Walker’s project, many African-American female theologians have incorporated womanist perspectives in their work. Prominent black womanist theologians and scholars of religion—such as Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Katie Geneva Cannon, Delores s. Williams, Emilie Maureen Townes, and Marcia Y. Riggs—bring womanist perspectives to bear on their black church, canon formation, social equality, black women’s club movement of the nineteenth century, race, gender, class, and social justice. The impact of womanism goes beyond the United States to Africa where many women scholars and literary critics
(Chikwanye Okonjo, Tuzyline Jita Allan, and Mary Modupe Kolawole, in particular) have embraced it as an analytical tool.

Walker’s womanism has also generated debates and controversies. Clenora Hudson – Weems proposes an alternative terminology – Africana womanism – that is different from Black feminism, African feminism, and Walker’s womanism. Many of the debates and controversies about womanism focus on the differences and tension between womanism and black feminism. Patricia Hill Collins offers an excellent critique of both womanism and black feminism. Hill Collins notes that the debate about whether to label black women’s standpoint womanist or black feminist is indicative of the diversity among black women. According to Hill Collins, “Walker’s definition thus manages to invoke three important yet contradictory philosophies that frame black social and political thought, namely, black nationalism via her claims of black women’s moral and epistemological superiority via suffering under racial and gender oppression, pluralism via cultural integrity provided by the metaphor of the garden, and integration/assimilation via her claims that black women are ‘traditionally universalist’” (37).

Walker has consistently received criticism for her woman centered writing, often accused of being anti-male- and particularly anti-African American male. While Walker’s work proves that it is not anti-male, but is pro-female, she is clear about the oppressive relationships between women and men in this society, and in African and African-American communities.

Despite her limitations, Walker and other ‘womanists’ believe in the collective power of ‘womanhood’, and call for the reordering of social, religious, economic, political and aesthetic priorities in these present, volatile years of gender dispute in America. A novel such as Walker’s The Color Purple (1982) tells us how this may be done. The cause of black feminism is adequately supported by the testament of history, and gains strength by foregrounding the major issues of race and class in addition to the talk of gender. Barbara Christian in her study Black Feminist Criticism (1985) observes that within the larger map of the women’s movement in the
twentieth century, black feminism is America’s most vital and original contribution.

To conclude, judging by the three trends in American Feminism – The American Feminism, The Black Feminism and womanism – one can see the movement gathering force and subtlety as the years go by. From the aesthetics of the canon, to the emergence of a new methodology, to the politics of race, considerable advance has been recorded in four decades. True, there are divergences within feminism, but that itself is proof of a self-reflecting critical consciousness.

2.1 BLACK FEMINIST CRITICISM

In her essay on “Rethinking Black Feminist Theory” (1987), Hazel V. Carby asserts that there are two things to be noted if one would like to study black feminist theory. First is to consider the history of Black Feminist Criticism. Second is to analyse its major tendencies. Commenting on both the aspects, Faye Powell observes: “One of the major contributions black feminists have made to feminist theory is to provide the historical and the cultural analysis that weaves the various forms of oppression into a coherent theory for action” (7-8). With the publication of Smith’s “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” (1977), it was felt that the conditions of both politics and literature could provide the necessary basis for an adequate consideration of black women’s literature. Smith argued that since the “feminist movement was an essential precondition to the growth of feminist literature, criticism, and women’s studies”, the lack of an autonomous black feminist movement contributed to the neglect of black women writers and artists, there being no “political movement to give power or support to those who want to examine Black women’s experience” (2). Hence, without a political movement there is no black feminist political theory to form a basis for a critical approach to the art of black women. Smith argued for the development of both the political movement and the political theory so that a black feminist literary criticism would embody “the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of
Black women writers” (2). In other words, black feminist literary criticism, like black feminist political theory, analyzes how different systems of oppression interlock and function to disenfranchise black women, while proposing solutions to eradicate oppression for everyone.

The black feminist movement paved the way for black women’s writing to be recovered and later institutionalized in the academy, as well as the emergence of black feminist literary theory. Smith conceptualized the black feminist movement and black feminist literary criticism as mutually constituting and redefining each other: “Logically developed, black feminist criticism would owe its existence to a black feminist movement while at the same time contributing ideas that women in the movement could use” (Patterson 3). Of course, not all black women’s writings are feminist, nor is there a linear move from Harriet Jacobs to Zora Neale Hurston, to Margaret Walker, to Toni Morrison, to Alice Walker. In addition to black feminist movement, there are other factors like the political, economic and social that are linked to black feminist criticism. These other factors propelled the larger political movement from which it emerged. Books, conversations, key essays and interviews helped to define and expand black feminist criticism. With this perspective at the back of mind, let us see the development of history of black feminism and its major tendencies.

In the wake of a greater awareness of the black culture in the 1960s followed by the phenomenal emergence of black feminist critics in the 1970s and the 1980s, a host of ideas have been incorporated in the cannon of black feminist literature and critical ideology. The whole concept of race (black) is challenged as meaningless. The focus at times is on creating a new body of critical tradition by adopting paradigms not acceptable to the feminist philosophy in general. Black Feminists argue that most women have more in common with men than with their white counterparts. Maggie Humm has suggested that “the central motifs of black feminist criticism need to become pivotal to the feminist criticism rather than the other way round” (106). Expressions like “Womanism” substituting the traditional notion of feminism
have gained a wider currency in the critical idiom of the black feminist. Alice Walker, in her collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), for instance, describes the term womanist as “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” (xi). Walker addresses the notion of the solidarity of humanity. To Walker, one is “Womanist” when one is “committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.” A womanist is “not a separatist, except periodically for health” and is “traditionally universalist, as is ‘Mama, why are we brown, pink and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?’ Ans. : ‘Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower presented’” (1983 xi). By redefining all people as “people of color”, Walker universalizes what are typically seen as individual struggles while simultaneously space for autonomous movements of self-determination. Reading black feminist author, therefore, is a political act that must be made a self-conscious act.

In keeping with the reconstructive philosophy, the black feminist criticism focuses on certain principles identifying black women’s creativity in earlier generation through folk art including quilting, music and gardening. Approaches by other critics like Audre Lorde have concentrated on the intuitive language of black women, and use as a critical basis in place of traditional techniques. Mary Helen Washington has rightly observed: “Black women are searching for a specific language, specific symbols, specific images with which to record their lives” (Rajeswari 167). Feminist theorists attempt to reclaim and redefine women through restructuring language. For example, feminist theorists have used the term “Womyn” instead of “women” some feminist theorists find solace in changing titles of unisex jobs (for example, police officer versus policeman or mail carrier versus mailman). Some feminist theorists have reclaimed and redefined such words as “dyke” and “bitch” and others have invested redefining knowledge into feminist dictionaries. Smith’s “Toward a Black Feminist Literary Criticism” (1982) combines a political orientation with a new aesthetics to express black
women’s brutally complex experiences. How language operates, how it creates a “wild zone” free of symbolic order, sex roles, otherness, is a constant concern of black feminist critics.

Black feminist critics believe the issues that concern black women writers should be expanded and given a greater place in literary discourses. In this sense they tend to be engaged in a variant of the “feminist critique” put forth by Elaine Showalter, namely, the attack on male-centered literary values, but they are celebrating the feminine as well. Black feminists are interested in explaining texts for motifs of interlocking racist, sexist and classist oppression. Smith points out “the concept of the simultaneity of oppression is still the crux of Black feminist understanding of political reality and ... is one of the most significant contribution of Black feminist thought” (32). Black feminist critical discourse points out how black women, in confronting with multiple jeopardy, define and sustain a multiple consciousness essential for their liberation.

Another key issue related to black feminist critical thought involves efforts to redefine the importance of black women’s culture. Culture gives substance to the writing, for it is a body of work devoted to the retrieval of the African-American tradition – the language, songs, stories, dance, cuisine and all the practices such as quilt making baking, gardening that have shaped the daily lives of black people. In fact, the point of view of Black feminist writing may be termed Afrocentric, as opposed to Eurocentric – that is, it has its roots deep in African culture, it draws on the religion, values and language of Black communities and on an interdependence of orality, culture and community activities and in particular, on the cultural significance of mothering and female bonding. Black feminist approach has placed a greater emphasis on the role of historically specific political economies in explaining the endurance of certain cultural themes. Leith Mullings has rightly observed: “Culture ... does not arise out of nothing; it is created and modified by material conditions, by the ideological frame of reference through which
people attempt to deal with the circumstances in which they find themselves” (Kulkarni 4).

Of equal concern in black feminist critical thought is its interest in an iconography reflecting black women as complex selves, their spiritual journey from victimization to the realization of personal autonomy or creativity, the centrality of female bonding, personal relationships in the family and community, reclaiming such figures as the black mother image; the iconography of women’s clothing, and black female language. There is in it also a heightened appreciation of the deconstructive category of difference which as opposed to Euro-American philosophy, involves a fuller understanding “of a vision of history and of African-Americans as a dis inherits, colonized people, a vision that sanctions their resilience of spirit and pursuit of social justice, of a tragi-comic spirit of life, of tough-minded grip on reality, an extraordinary faith in the redemptive power of suffering, and patience, of a highly developed talent for dissimulation, and finally of a vigorous zest for life” (5). Such an act of writing in difference carries relevance specifically for the African American women as the victims of multiple jeopardy. Literature – both its creation and its analysis – provides a means of overcoming the fragmentation of consciousness induced by the racist, sexist, and classist culture.

Another facet of black feminist criticism is that it accuses of furthering fragmentation of the self and of the family and community. They propose to construct an aesthetic which particularly endeavours to evolve a world in which their men will be included. As Alexis De Deveaux notes:

I see a greater and greater commitment among black women writers to understand self, multiplied in terms of the community, the community multiplied in terms of the nation, and the nation multiplied in terms of the world. You have to understand what your place as an individual is and the place of the person who is close to you. You have to understand the space between you before you can understand more complex or larger groups. (Tate 55)
E. Frances White expressed her belief that feminists need to revise the movement’s relationship to the concept of the family. Reconstructing the black family is essential to ridding ourselves of the jungle-like atmosphere of the streets. Comer states:

Unfortunately, the Negro community is not now set up to offer to its disadvantaged members a set of standards and a psychological refuge. There is no Negro institution beyond the family that is enough in harmony with the total American culture to transmit its behavioral principles, and is meaningful enough to Negroes to effect adherence to those principles and sufficiently accepted by divergent elements of the Negro community to act as a cohesive force. (Jenkins 424)

According to White, “the family is not only a source of male dominance, but a source of resistance to racism as well (Internet 5). Reconstructing the black family does not only mean providing subsistence. The black family must have a definite structure, one that may not be like the present popular model. For all our sakes, we must stop thinking of the black father as a nonentity, a breeder, a stud. In some way we must strengthen the prestige of the black male throughout the fabric of the black extended family. Black feminist criticism helps us to identify how black women’s literature extols community, how it offers an aesthetics of unified voice avoiding the primordial discord or separatism.

Michael Awkward brings out another dimension of black feminist literature. In his book, *Inspiring Influences*, Awkward points out that black women writers often seek to build up nexus with their female predecessors or the “spiritual foremothers”. Harold Bloomian “anxiety of influence” seems to be inappropriate to black women in general and to the black women writers in particular. Inspiring becomes the appropriate metaphor for influence for them. Paule Marshall or Alice Walker, for instance, have been especially conscious of their debt to their literary forefathers like Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks, Flannery O’Conner and many others.
To sum up, Black Feminist critics, far from tying everything into a narrow egocentric practice, try to identify themselves as the breakers of the past critical traditions and reformers of traditionally restrictive textual practices and linkers of literature to black individual and collective life. However, future needs for this branch of criticism demands a sense of realization that their criticism, as Annette Kolodny puts it, would be ‘shortsighted if it summarily rejected call the inherited books of critical analysis simply because they are male and Western’ (Kulkarni 89). Methodology based on eclecticism would be what they ought to be looking for to avoid critical absolutism. This criticism must now emphasize a rigorous textual analysis in order to point out succintly the thematic, stylistic and linguistic differences among individual black women writers. If they practise such strategies, black feminist critics at some theoretical level will be making viable implications to the whole Third World feminist criticism.

2.2 MAIN FEATURES OF BLACK FEMINIST THEORY

With a view to properly situate and locate the peculiarities of women’s experience, the feminists have to evolve an appropriate theory. In her article “In Praise of Theory: A Case For Women’s Studies” (1983), Mary Evans notes that the feminists if they want to practise should have a theory. Evans further adds that a practice without theory is like “headless chickens rushing in mindless circles before they finally collapse in death” (225). Sushila Singh in her Preface to Feminism: Theory, Criticism and Analysis (2004) notes the significance of feminist theory. As Singh observes: “Literary theorists believe that feminist theory / criticism does not denote simply the addition of a new subject matter to an existing system of knowledge. By adding ‘women’ to ‘Literature’, feminist criticism helps to expose the incompleteness of what once seemed universal. Therefore, a rethinking on the whole critical enterprise becomes necessary” (iii).

A theory is an explanation. African American women writers and critics seem to offer their own explanation through their literary discourses. African American women writers seem to inscribe with and within their texts
certain literary strategies which are at once abrogative and appropriate. Their work, both artistic and critical, tends to focus on their self-definition – their coming out of silence. They reject classic literary theories as oppressive. They find most other critics racist and misogynist and accuse other feminist critics of consciously developing their ideology only in reference to white upper middle class women who often practise feminism only in order to become part of the patriarchal power structure. They criticise one and all involved in the politics of race, gender, class and the politics of interpretation as well.

Feminist theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical, or philosophical discourse. It examines women’s social roles and lived experiences, and feminist politics in a variety of fields, such as anthropology and sociology, psychoanalysis, economics, criticism and philosophy. Feminist theory also focuses on an analysing gender inequality and the promotion of women’s rights, interests, and issues. Themes explored in feminism include art history and contemporary art, aesthetics discrimination, stereotyping, objectification (especially sexual objectification), oppression and patriarchy. Commenting on the enterprise of Black feminist theory, Patterson observes: “Black feminist theory, as a political enterprise, embodies analogous goals, and has used black women’s writing, including fiction, poetry, autobiography, memoir and manifestos as loci from which to theorize its goals and responsibilities” (2).

Barbara Christian is one of the founding mothers of contemporary African-American feminist literary criticism. In the 1980s Christian became known for her criticisms of theory. She expressed her opinion about theory in the essay “The Race for Theory” (1987). In her essay, she warned that the theory trend had the potential to undo the activist work she and others had done to make literary criticism accessible to broad, non-academic audiences. Many scholars thought of this essay as anti-theory, but for Christian, it was not anti-theory, only anti-inaccessibility Christian challenged the jargon-y language of theory, ‘I see the language it creates as one which mystifies rather
than clarifies our condition, making it possible for a few people who know that particular language to control the ‘critical scene’” (Gloria Bowles 1). Further she added, “as a student of literature, I am appalled by the sheer ugliness of the language, it lack of clarity, its unnecessarily complicated sentence constructions its lack of pleasurableness, its alienating quality” (1).

There are arguments and counter arguments in regard to the essentiality of theory. Alice Walker has noted such a problem of white feminist criticism in her essay “One child of One’s Own”. Walker criticised the position taken by Patricia Meyer Spacks who wrote The Female Imagination. In introduction to her book, The Female Imagination, Spacks quotes Phyllis Chester’s comment focusing on the lives of white middle class women : “I have no theory to offer to Third World female psychology in America ....  As a white woman I’m reluctant and unable to construct theories about experiences I haven’t had.” To which Spacks added. “So am I.” Walker challenged Spacks’s exclusive concentration on white middle-class writers by asking : Why only these? Because they are white, and middle class, and because to Spacks, female imagination is only that. Perhaps, however, this is the white “female imagination”, one that is “reluctant and unable to construct theories about experiences I haven’t had.” ... Walker’s point should be seriously considered, for a black feminist criticism cannot afford to be essentialist and a historical reducing the experience of all black women to a common denominator and limiting black feminist critics to an exposition of an equivalent black ‘female imagination’ (Hazel V. Carby 6).

Feminist theories have emerged as early as 1792 in such publications as “The Changing Woman”, “Ain’t I a Woman” (1851), “Speech After Arrest for Illegal Voting, and so on. “The Changing Woman” is a Navajo Myth that gave credit to a woman who, in the end, populated the world. Sojourner Truth not only advocated for her rights in the court but also advocated for the liberation of all black women. In the wake of the Civil War (1867) Truth noted, “there is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about colored women” (Leela Desai 53). She warns, however, “if
colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before” (53). Her words were prophetic, for during Reconstruction, as bell hooks notes “as black men advanced ... they encouraged black women to assume a more subservient role” (53). Truth suggested such a subordination was already beginning in 1867. “[Colored women] go out washing ... and their men go idle ... and when the women come home, they ask for their money and take it all, and then scold because there is no food” (53). After her arrest for illegally voting, Susan B. Anthony gave a speech within the court in which she addressed the issues of language within the constitution documented in her publication “Speech After Arrest for Illegal Voting” in 1872. Anthony, less a theorist than a brilliant political organizer, elaborated on fundamental natural rights doctrine in some of her statements. Of particular interest are the arguments she developed in connection with her celebrated trial for civil disobedience on June 18, 1873. Anthony was under indictment for having voted in the 1872 Congressional election, a violation of the law. Anthony questioned the authoritative principles of the constitution audits male gendered language. She raised the question of why women should be punished under law but they cannot use the law for their own protection (women could not vote, own property, nor themselves in marriage). Although there were not any feminist terminologies based on their arguments, all of these women have founded a lexicon of debates that contribute to feminist theory. Truth raised the issue of the intersectionality debate and Anthony raised the issue of the language debate. Sojourn Truth, Harriet Tubman, Ida Wells and Rosa Parks are not exceptional Black women as much as they are epitomes of Black womanhood.

Nancy Cott makes a distinction between modern feminism and its antecedents, particularly the struggle for suffrage. In the United States she places the turning point in the decades before and after women obtained the vote in 1920. She argues that the prior Woman movement was primarily about woman as a universal entity, whereas over this 20 year period it transformed
itself into one primarily concerned with social differentiation, attentive to individuality and diversity. According to Susan Kingsley Kent, during the inter-war years, the profile of feminism was diminished due to Freudian patriarchy. Juliet Mitchell did not agree with Kent. She said that Freudian theory was not wholly incompatible with feminism. Some feminist scholarship shifted away from the need to establish the origins of family, and towards analyzing the process of patriarchy.

In the immediate post-war period, there are a number of feminists that Europe produced. The researcher cannot expound their feminist theories for want of space. Some of the important theories are – Simone de Beauvoir (The Second Sex 1949), Toril Moi (Sexual/Textual Politics 1985), Kate Millett (Sexual Politics 1970), Betty Friedan (The Feminine Mystique 1963), Germaine Greer (The Female Eunuch 1970), Elaine Showalter (A Literature of Their Own 1999), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubbar (The Madwoman in the Attic 1979), Jane Marcus (Art and Anger 1988), Julia Kristeva, Bracha Ettinger, Luce Irigurary and a host of others.

Having seen the significance of a theory in a work of art and various theories developed during the immediate post-war period, let us see the distinguishing features of Black Feminist Theory.

2.2.1 Intersections of Race, Class and Gender:

Activist and Cultural Critic Angela Davis was one of the first people to articulate a written argument centered on intersectionality, in Women, Race, and Class. This intersectional approach to understanding oppression, which concepts such as multiple jeopardy, triple jeopardy, and intersectionality emphasized, became the re-defining analytical frame work through which black feminism understood and tackled black women’s oppression. One example of the concept of intersectionality can be seen through Mary Ann Weathers’ publication, “An Argument for Black women’s Liberation as a Revolutionary Force.” Weathers states that “black women, at least the Black women I have come in contact with in the movement, have been expending
all their energies in “liberating” Black men (if you yourself are not free, how can you liberate” someone else?)” (Internet 4). Women of color were put in a position of choosing sides. White women wanted women of color and working class women to become a part of the women’s movement over struggling with their men (working-class, poor, and men of color) against class oppression and racism in the Civil Rights Movement. This was a conflict for women of color and working-class women who had to decide whether to fight against racism or classism versus sexism – or prioritize and participate in the hierarchy. It did not help that the women’s movement was shaped primarily by white women during the first and second feminist waves and the issues surrounding women of color were not addressed. Contemporary feminist theory addresses such issues of intersectionality in such publications as “Age, Race, Sex, and Class” by Kimberle Crenshaw.

Crenshaw, prominent feminist law theorist, coined the term intersectionality in her study “Mapping the Margins : Intersectionality, Politics and Violence Against Women of Color” (1995) which suggested that legal theory must consider the intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality in order to understand how laws, which purport to be equitable, do not treat black women fairly.

When Crenshaw was asked about the origins of the concept of intersectionality, she answered:

It grew out of trying to conceptualize the way the law responded to issues where both race and gender discrimination were involved. What happened was like an accident, a collision. Intersectionality simply came from the idea that if you are standing in the path of multiple forms of exclusion, you are likely to get hit by both. These women are injured, but when the race ambulance and the gender ambulance arrive at the scene, they see these women of color lying in the intersection and they say, “Well, we can’t figure out if this was just race or just sex discrimination. And unless they can show us which one it was, we can’t help them.” (Internet 1)
The article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color” is about intersectionality as a way of framing the various interactions of race and gender in the context of violence against women of color. To quote her:

I have used intersectionality as a way to articulate the interaction of racism and patriarchy generally. I have also used intersectionality to describe the location of women of color both within overlapping systems of subordination and at the margins of feminism and antiracism. (Internet 11)

In her previous article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (1989) she has categorically stated about the concept of intersectionality. To quote her: “In an earlier article, I used the concept of intersectionality to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s employment experiences” (Internet, 1). After giving the implication of intersectionality, she goes further and gives two categories of intersectionality, namely, structural intersectionality and political intersectionality. Race, gender and class constitute the primary structural elements of the experience of many Black and Latin women in battering shelters. Factors such as race, gender and class or sexuality are often critical in shaping the experiences of women of color. Political intersectionality highlights the fact that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agenda. In political intersectionality, she tries to analyse how both feminist and antiracist politics have functioned in tandem to marginalize the issue of violence against women of color.

Through an awareness of intersectionality, says Crenshaw, “We can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the
means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics” (14).

Crenshaw gave the idea a name while discussing Identity Politics in her essay “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color.”

Another Feminist theorist is bell hooks who introduced the intersectionality theory. Hooks wrote two articles, namely, “Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre”, (1984) and the second edition, featuring a new preface, “Seeing the Light: Visionary Feminism” (2000). In the preface to the first edition, hooks, talking about black Americans in her hometown, discusses the meaning of her title, “From Margin to Centre.” To quote her:

Living as we did – on the edge – we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked from both the outside in and the inside out. We focused our attention on the centre as well as the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and centre. (2)

A distinguishing feature of Feminist Theory is hooks use of what is contemporarily called Intersectionality in her analyses. Crenshaw has used the term Intersectionality to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black Women’s employment experiences. hooks used the term analysis for intersectionality. An analysis of oppression that considers the intersecting nature of race and gender was pioneered by black feminist organizations of the 1970s.

Feminist critical practice pays particular attention to the articulation of gender, race and class. Social, political, and economic analyses that use class as a fundamental category often assert the necessity for white and black to sink their differences and unite in a common and general class struggle. The call for class solidarity is paralleled within contemporary feminist practice by the concept of sisterhood.
This appeal to sisterhood has two political consequences that should be questioned. First, in order to establish the common grounds for a unified women’s movement, material differences in the lives of working-class and middle-class women or white and black women have been dismissed. The search to establish that these bonds of sisterhood have always existed has led to a feminist historiography and criticism which denies the hierarchical structuring of the relations between black and white women and often takes the concerns of middle-class articulate white women as a norm.

hooks criticizes the “Sisterhood” framework of second-wave feminism, saying that the “emphasis on Sisterhood was often seen as emotional appeal masking the opportunism of bourgeois white women” (Internet 1). The concept sisterhood implies unity between women. “Sisterhood” was defined by a shared sense of victimization. This, she suggests perpetuates the prevailing sexist patriarchy that “teaches women that to be female is to be a victim” (Internet 4). She explores several ways in which society in general and women within that society absorb and manifest this particular belief, and then goes on to explore other ways in which enacting the concept of true sisterhood is challenged through sexism, hetero-sexism class-ism and racism.

Another distinguishing feature of Feminist Theory is hooks’ insistence on the inclusion of men in the feminist movement. Patricia Bell Scott’s Selected Bibliography on Black Feminism (1982) classifies all African-American women as Black Feminists. Cheryl Clarke did not agree with Scott: ‘I criticized Scott, some of the women she cited as ‘black feminists’ were clearly not black feminists at the time they wrote their books and still are not to this day” (Collins 1).

The term Black Feminist has also been used to apply to selected African-Americans primarily women who possess some version of a feminist consciousness. Beverly Guy-Sheftall contends that both men and women can be “Black feminists” and names Frederick Douglass and William E. B. Dubois as prominent examples of Blackmale feminists. hooks criticizes the antifemale stance of second-wave feminism, asserting that this position
“alienated many poor and working-class women, particularly non-white women, from feminist movement” (2). According to hooks, the second-wave feminists “reinforced sexist ideology by positing in an inverted from the notion of a basic conflict between the sexes, the implication being that the empowerment of women would necessarily be at the expense of men” (2). hooks also points out that, by excluding men from the feminist movement, second-wave feminists essentially reinforced the sexual division of labour by making feminism the solely the responsibility of women.

hooks asserts that, “Men are not exploited or oppressed by sexism, but there are ways in which they suffer as a result of it” (2). hooks suggests using the negative effects of sexism on men as a way to motivate them into participation in feminism. According to hooks, women alone cannot achieve the goals of feminism, because, “men are the primary agents maintaining and supporting sexism and sexist oppression, they can only be eradicated if men are compelled to assume responsibility for transforming their consciousness and the consciousness of society as a whole”(2). Conclusively, hooks asserts that, “Men who actively struggle against sexism have a place in feminist movement. They are our comrades”(2).

The term Black feminist yields the most restrictive notion of who can be a Black feminist. Both the organizations The Combahee River Collective’s “A Black Feminist Statement” (1982) and Bever Guy-Sheftall offer biologically deterministic criteria for the term black and African descent that produces a certain consciousness. According to these organizations, women can be only feminists who have undergone some type of political transformation.

Though the term Black feminist could also be used to describe any individual who embraces Black feminist ideas, the separation of biology from ideology required for this usage is merely seen in the works of Black women intellectuals. Sometimes the contradictions among these competing definitions can be so great that Black women writers use all simultaneously.
Deborah Mc Dowell’s essay ‘New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism’ has to say in this regard:

I use the term here simply to refer to Black female critics who analyse the works of Black female writers from a feminist political perspective. But the term can also apply to any criticism written by a Black woman regardless of her subject or perspectives book written by a male from a feminist or political perspective, a book written by a Black woman or about black woman authors in general, or any writings by women. (2)

It can be inferred from her statement that elite white men could be “Black Feminists.” From Mc Dowell’s perspective, whites and black men who embrace a specific political perspective, and black women regardless of political perspective, could all potentially be deemed Black feminist critics.

Sherley Williams who wrote her essay “Some Implications of Womanist Theory” focuses on both men and women who could examine black men’s literature in addition to black women’s. A womanist analysis of black men’s literature would allow critics to examine not only black men have written about women, but also what they have written about themselves: womanist inquiry, on the other hand, assumes that it can talk both effectively and productively about men. This is a necessary assumption because the negative, stereotyped images of black women are only part of the problem of phallocentric writings by black males. Williams’s contention overturned Smith’s earlier notion that black women’s writing was the only possible subject of black feminist criticism. In so doing, Williams suggested that black women’s and men’s literature developed and existed coextensively, and believed that the application of womanist theory to male texts would end the separatist tendency in Afro-American criticism.

Michael Awkward who wrote Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and Politics of Positionality (1995) critically addresses in his second chapter “A Black Male’s Place in Black Feminist Criticism”, the potential gains and dangers of black men engaging in black feminist analyses, generally forces
critics to consider how their own identities inform the politics and practice of literary analysis. Awkward’s book elucidated the fact that all acts of interpretation are rooted in a position or a standpoint, and questioned the notion that one particular group was necessarily in a better position to analyse its cultural production than an outsider.

Valerie Smith who wrote, “Split affinities: the case of interracial rape” (1990), and “Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings” (1998) foregrounded black feminist criticism as a strategy that could be used to analyse not only literature, but also other forms of cultural media, including film, art, and music. For Smith, black feminist criticism functioned as a strategy of reading that analyses the “intersection of constructions of race, African-American theories and literary criticism, gender, class, and sexuality” (xiii).

According to Smith, a white woman or a black man committed to this type of analysis could render a black feminist analysis of a cultural text. Smith emphasized the fact that one must be trained to engage in black feminist analysis, and that the more people involved in implementing its goals, the more likely it is that its goals will be actualized. Smith, like Williams and Awkward, conceptualizes black feminist criticism as a project that could be undertaken by individuals who were committed to engaging critically black women’s writings, lives, and histories.

Another feminist theorist is Patricia Hill Collins who introduced the sociological theory of ‘Matrix of Domination”; much of her work concerns the politics of black feminist thought and oppression.

With the passage of time, the term ‘Black Feminist’ which was widely used yet rarely defined encompasses diverse and contradictory meanings. Collins wrote *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness*, and the Politics of Empowerment (1990). Collins is principally concerned with the relationships among empowerment, self-definition, and knowledge; and she is obviously concerned with black women: it is the oppression with which she
is most intimately familiar. But Collins is also one of the few social thinkers who are able to rise above their own experiences; to challenge us with a significant view of oppression and identity politics that not only has the possibility of changing the world but also of opening up the prospect of continuous change.

Collins is best known for her ideas of intersectionality and the matrix of domination. hooks approaches with law. To Collins, intersectionality is an “analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation and age form mutually constructing features of social organization which shape black women’s experiences and, in turn, are shaped by Black women” (Collins 299). For her theory of intersectionality, Collins was influenced by Max Weber, and George Simmel, two theorists working in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century. Weber’s concern was to understand the complications that status and power brought to Marx’s idea of class stratification. According to Weber, class consciousness and social change are more difficult to achieve than Marx first thought: status group affiliation and differences in power create concerns that may override class issues. For example, race may be more important than class for two racially distinct families living below the poverty. In such cases, social change becomes less likely. Simmel was concerned with how modern living in cities created different kinds of friendship patterns.

There is a way in which Collins blends these two approaches while at the same time going beyond them. Like Simmel, Collins is concerned with the influences of intersectionality creates different kinds of lived experiences, and social realities. She is particularly concerned with how these interact with what passes as objective knowledge and with how diverse voices of intersectionality are denied under scientism. Like Weber, she is concerned about how intersectionality creates different kinds of inequalities and how these cross-cutting influences affect social change. Collins sees intersectionality working within a matrix of domination.
The matrix of domination refers to the overall organization of power in a society. There are two features to any matrix. First, any specific matrix has a particular arrangement of intersecting systems of oppression. Just what and how these systems come together is historically and socially specific. Second, intersecting systems of oppression are specifically organized through four interrelated domains of power: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal. The structural domain consists of social structures such as law, polity, religion, and the economy. The disciplinary domain manages oppression. The hegemonic domain legitimates oppression. The interpersonal domain influences everyday life. Collins sees the four domains of power as interrelated and thus influencing one another. By themselves, the structural and disciplinary domains are most resilient to change; but the hegemonic and interpersonal domains are open to individual agency and change. Bringing these domains together creates a more dynamic system, wherein the priorities of black feminist thought and understanding the contradictions of oppression can empower social justice causes.

Her ideas of intersectionality and the matrix of domination challenge many of our political assumptions. Black feminist epistemology, for example, challenges our assumptions concerning the separation of the private and public spheres. Intersectionality also challenges the assumption that gender stratification affects all women in the same way; race and class matter, as does sexual identity. Intersectionality motivates us to look at just how our identities are constructed at the expense of others: “These examples suggest that moral positions as survivors of one expression of systematic violence become eroded in the absence of accepting responsibility of other expressions of systematic violence” (Collins 247).

Barbara Smith is an American, lesbian feminist who has played a significant role in building and sustaining Black Feminism in the United States. Since the early 1970s she has been active as an innovative critic, teacher, lecturer, author, independent scholar, and publisher of Black feminist thought.
With a view to voice the problems of women of color, she along with Audre Lorde and Cherrie Moragh co-founded Kitchen-Table: women of Color Press, the first U.S. publisher for women of color. During her time as the publisher for Kitchen Table, Smith continued to write. A collection of her essays, articles, reviews can be found in “The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender and Freedom.” “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” (1982) was first published in “All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Brave: Black Women’s Studies” is frequently cited as the break through article in opening the field of Black women’s literature and Black lesbian discussion. She further says that without a political movement there was no black feminist political theory to form a basis for a critical approach to the art of black women. Smith argued for the development of both the political movement and the political theory so that a black feminist literary criticism would embody “the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers” (170).

Smith writes about the critics. In many ways, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” acted as a manifesto for black feminist critics, stating both the principles and the conditions of their work. Smith also asserted that a black feminist, critic should “work from the assumption that Black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition” (174). A second principle that Smith proposed to govern black feminist critical practice was the establishment of precedents and insights in interpretation within the works of other black women. The critic should write and think “out of her own identity” asserted Smith.

The most important contribution of Smith is the inclusion of lesbians in black feminist literature. Although black lesbians had been ardent activists in the black feminist movement, black feminist theorizations failed to include them. It was the Combahee River Collective Organization that declared in “A Black Feminist Statement” black feminists were argued to acknowledge black lesbians’ participation in the movement and to interrogate their own
heterosexism. The Combahee River Collective’s attention to lesbianism extended the notion of double jeopardy, well before King’s essay, perhaps making King’s notion of triple jeopardy “quadruple” jeopardy. Smith inserted black lesbians into the historical narrative, forcing black feminist literary and political theory to actualize its emancipatory goal for, and inclusive of, all black women and not just heterosexual ones.

Smith and the Combahee River Collective have been credited with coining the term identity politics, which they defined as “a politics that grew out of our objective material experiences as Black women” (2). To those who would criticize her commitment to understanding and continuing discussion around identity, Smith noted in an interview in off our backs, a feminist magazine, that “I have been called an essentialist. By ‘essentialist’ [people] mean that when I look in the mirror and see a Black woman, I think it means something. It’s not just a representation. I share a political status with other Black women although my history is unique” (2).

As a critical manifesto, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” represented a radical departure from the earlier work of Mary Helen Washington, who had edited the first contemporary anthology of black women’s fiction, Black-Eyed Susans, two years earlier. Washington did not attempt to define, explicitly, a black feminist critical perspective but concentrated on recovering and situating the neglected fiction of black women writers and establishing the major themes and images for use in a teaching situation. Washington called the period 1970s the period of renaissance. This renaissance allowed black feminist critics to identify black women’s writing traditions and canonize under-taught black women writers.

An alternative approach to black feminist politics is embodied in Deborah McDowell’s essay, “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism” (1980) and in Barbara Christian’s Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers (1985). McDowell, like Smith, showed that white female critics continued to perpetrate against black women the exclusive practices they condemned in white male scholarship by establishing the
experience of white middle-class women as normative within the feminist area. She also attacked male critics for the way in which their masculine centered values dominated their criticism of the work of black women writers. However, the main concern of Mc Dowell’s essay was to look back at “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism.” Mc Dowell argued that “the theories developed thus for have often lacked sophistication and have been marred by slogans, rhetoric, and idealism”(188). While agreeing with Smith that feminist criticism is “a mild and necessary cultural and political enterprise”, Mc Dowell questions the impreciseness of current definitions of lesbianism by black feminists, the possible seductiveness of a lesbian aesthetic, and the vagueness of Smith’s analysis in “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism.” Mc Dowell advocates that black feminist critics combine a contextual approach with rigorous textual analysis, including a concern for the use of gender-specific uses of language.

Mc Dowell’s project was to establish the parameters for a clear definition of black feminist criticism. Like Smith Mc Dowell applied the term to “Black female critics who analyse the works of Black female writers from a feminist or political perspective” (190) but also departed from Smith’s definitions when she extended her argument to state that the term can also apply to any criticism written by Black women regardless of her subject or perspective. Like Washington, Mc Dowell stressed that the “immediate concern of Black feminist critics must be to develop a fuller, understanding of Black women writers” but did not support a “separatist position.”

Barbara Christian wrote Black Feminist Criticism, a collection of essays written between 1975 and 1984. The introduction, “Black Feminist Process: In the Midst of ...” reflects the structure of the collection as a whole as the essays cover the period of contemporary black feminist criticism. However, the book does not exemplify the history of the development of contemporary black feminist criticism but rather concentrates on situating the contributions of an individual critic over the period of a decade. Christian’s work has been concerned with establishing a literary history of black
women’s writing and has depended very heavily on the conceptual apparatus of stereotypes and images. However, it is necessary to confront Christian’s assertions that the prime motivation for nineteenth and early twentieth century black writers was to confront the negative images of blacks held by whites and to dispute the simplistic model of the literary development of black women writers indicated by such titles as “From Stereotype to Character.”

In her 1989 essay “But What Do We Think We’re Doing Anyway: The State of Black Feminist Criticism or My Version of a Little Bit of History”, Christian outlined the development of black feminist criticism and a contemporary moment of debate about how black feminist criticism ought to be defined. Beginning with the appearance of Washington’s “Black Women Image Makers” in the August 1974 issue of Black World and ending with Hazel Carby’s intellectual history of black women in Reconstructing Womanhood (1987), Christian described the tradition of black feminist criticism as concerned not only with developing a political theory of black women’s writing but also an open-ended process of prescribing a critical practice. Reflecting on her 1984 collection of essays Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers, Christian explained that the form of the book “was based on the idea of process as a critical aspect of an evolving feminist approach – that is, a resistance to art as artifact, to ideas as fixed, and a commitment to open-endedness, possibility, fluidity– to change” (9), which she felt reflected the work of the writers she studied.

In the introduction to Black Feminist Criticism, Christian herself raises some of the questions that are left unanswered in the body of her work. Christian, unlike many feminist critics, divorces what she considers to be sound critical practice from political practice when she states that what irks her about “much literary criticism today” is that “so often the text is but an occasion for espousing [the critic’s] philosophical point of view–revolutionary black, feminist or socialist programme” (9).

One other essentialist aspect of black feminist criticism should be considered: the search for or assumption of the existence of a black female
language. Language is accented differently by competing groups, and therefore the terrain of language is a terrain of power relations. This struggle within and over language reveals the nature of the structure of social relations and the hierarchy of power, not the nature of one particular group.

Feminist theorists attempt to reclaim and redefine women through re-structuring language. For example, feminist theorists have used the term “Womyn” instead of “women”. Some feminist theorists find solace in changing titles of unisex jobs (for example, police officer versus policeman or mail carrier versus mailman). Some feminist theorists have reclaimed and redefined such words as “dyke” or “bitch” – and other have invested redefining knowledge into feminist dictionaries. Black feminist critics like Mc Dowell, Mary Helen Washington, Toni Cade Bambara, to name a few, desire to have a separate language and also to have a different tradition. Many black women writers, including feminists who acknowledge the influence of male as well as female literary foreparents underscore the problematics of a separate black female literary tradition. As Bambara says:

Women are less likely to skirt the feeling place, to finesse with language, to camouflage emotions. But a lot of male writers knock that argument out .... One of the crucial differences that strikes me immediately among poets, dramatists, novelists, story tellers, is in the handling of children. I can’t nail it down, but the attachment to children and to two-plus two reality is simply stronger in women’s writings; but there are exceptions. And finally, there isn’t nearly as large a bulk of gynocentric writings as there is phallic-obsessive writings. I’d love to read/ hear a really good discussion of just this issue by someone who’s at home with close textual reading – cups, bowls and other motifs in women’s writings. We’ve only just begun... to fashion a woman’s vocabulary to deal with the “silences” of our lives. (Bell 243)

Mary Helen Washington agrees, as she argues for a black female literary tradition in her introduction to Midnight Birds: 
Black women are searching for a specific language, specific symbols, specific images with which to record their lives, and even though they can claim a rightful place in the Afro-American tradition and the feminist tradition of women writers, it is also clear that, for the purposes of liberation, black women writers will first insist on their own name, their own space. (243)

Kimberle Crenshaw in her essay, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of ‘Race and Sex : A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist politics” points out certain limitations of black feminist theory. According to her, the value of feminist theory to Black women is diminished because it evolves from a white racial context that is seldom acknowledged. Not only are women of color in fact overlooked, but their exclusion is reinforced when white women speak for and as women. The authoritative universal voice ... is merely transferred to those who, but for gender, share many of the same cultural, economic and social characteristics. When feminist theory attempts to describe women’s experiences through analysing patriarchy, sexuality or separate spheres ideology, it often overlooks the role of race. Feminists thus ignore how their own race functions to mitigate some aspects of sexism, and, moreover, how it often privileges them over and contributes to the domination of other women. Consequently, feminist theory remains white, and its potential to broaden and deepen its analysis by addressing non-privileged women remains unrealized. Feminists have attempted to expose and dismantle separate spheres ideology by identifying and criticizing the stereotypes that traditionally have justified the disparate societal roles assigned to men and women. Yet this attempt to debunk ideological justifications for women’s subordination offers little insight into the domination of Black women.

Black women are burdened not only because they often have to take on responsibilities that are not traditionally feminine but, moreover their assumption of these roles is sometimes interpreted within the Black community as either Black women’s failure to live up to such norms or as
another manifestation of racism’s scourge upon the Black community. This is one of the many aspects of intersectionality that cannot be understood through an analysis of patriarchy rooted in white experience. Sexist expectations ... and racist assumptions ... combined to create a distinct set of issues confronting Black women. These issues have seldom been explored in feminist literature nor are they prominent in antiracist politics.

By the late 1980s critics like Aijaz 1992; Spillers 1984; Spivak 1987, began to challenge the Black feminist emphasis on identity politics. And recently, a debate concerning the relation of Black feminism to Postmodernism has emerged. bell hooks “comments on black women’s apparent lack of interest in postmodernism arguing that it has failed to speak to them” (23). In fact there is a postmodern practice amongst Black and post-colonial theorists.

Despite the limitations of Black feminist theory, the transformative effect of Black feminist theory on Black feminism cannot be underestimated. Black feminist theory, says Powell, “is not about reforms of the present system that will benefit only the few who can fight their way to the top over the bodies of others, but about the creation of a system that allows full participation by all. Feminism, in all of its diversity, can enlighten, enlarge, and empower everyone” (Powell 8). Since 1990s, the role of Women’s studies is worthy to be noted.

At the conclusion of twentieth century, black feminist literary criticism and black feminist political theory undoubtedly worked coextensively to excavate black women’s literary and cultural texts that had not been published, were out of print, or otherwise absent. In so doing, both projects established the fact that black women’s writing, from its inception, consciously considered what it meant for African-American women be “raced”, “sexed”, “gendered” to name three subject positions in American society. While talking on advancement of Black feminist criticism and Black feminist theory, in twenty-first century, Patterson observes:
As black feminist literary theory advances in the twenty-first century, it must continue to grapple with the ways in which the vectors of race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect, and also consider the ways in which other socializing institutions, such as religion for example, inflect representations of the traditional categories of identity. While critiques of religion and Christianity persist throughout African-American women’s writing and the advent of womanist theology has provided us with a heuristic to interrogate such critiques, more attention might be paid to how other religious traditions, e.g. Islam, might challenge existing formulations about religion, gender, and race. Both Black feminist political theory and literary criticism possess many directions and possibilities for the future. That they might one day eradicate cultural and structural oppression for everyone makes the future look brighter. (18)

To conclude, in her article “The Race for Theory” (1987), Barbara Christian expresses her dissent for critical theory. She argues that minority critics should not succumb to the glamour of high theory as the theoretical assumptions of minority culture are contained within its literary texts which need explication and articulation. The minority texts, she believes, should be liberated from the critical assumptions of the dominant culture. She has demonstrated this in Black Women Novelists (1980) where she attempts to establish a female tradition among Afro-American women novelists from 1892 to 1976.

3.1 BLACK FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS

I

Black women in America are triply burdened. They suffered from racial, sexual and class prejudices and are forced to occupy a very marginal place in male dominated America. As a result, their humanity and the black female self are denied by white men and also by their own people, particularly black men. This made them feel insignificant, faceless, subservient and devoid of identity. The responsibility of giving them back their rejected
humanity and their womanhood falls on the shoulders of black women writers. These writers can be labelled as black feminist/womanist writers.

The feminists, the theorists, and the black women writers made use of a number of means to make society aware about injustice, oppression, secondary status, gender construction, women’s subordination, economic status, inequality of sexes. The “Black is Beautiful” is one of the cultural movements aimed to dispel the notion that black people’s natural features such as skin color, facial features, and hair are inherently ugly. John Sweat Rock was the first to coin the phrase “Black is Beautiful”, in the slavery era. The movement asked that men and women stop straightening their hair and attempting to lighten or bleach their skin. The prevailing idea in American culture was that black features are less attractive or desirable than white features. The movement gave a generation of Afro-Americans the courage to feel good about who they are and how they look.

The phrase “Black is Beautiful” summarises the cultivation of pride in the African-American race. Though the phrase is obsolete now, yet the message remains contemporary. Nowadays, the children feel that they know they are black, yet they are beautiful. The outward manifestations of an appreciation and celebration of blackness abound: black dolls, natural hair, black santas, models and celebrities that were once rare and symbolic have become commonplace. With this perspective at the back of mind, let us see the title of the dissertation – “Black Feminist consciousness in the works of Toni Cade Bambara.” The central concepts in the title may now be explained.

II

The concept “Black” has attracted many men and women of the society. Sociological research has focused a great deal on who is black, but has neglected to investigate what the concept “black” means. Brunsma and Rockquemore, the scholars of race and ethnicity, assert that social scientists should move beyond the question of who is black, and “towards an analysis of how closely individuals’ racial self-understandings correspond to the
unquestioned, all-encompassing, construct “black” frequently used by social scientists. In other words, because social scientists use “black” or “African-American” as a variable so frequently, we should seek to answer the question ‘What does black mean?’” (19)

In the English language white is always used to depict the positive while black virtually always denotes the negative. Dr. Martin Luther King once pointed this out in one of his speeches. You have references like the “black sheep of the family” or “behind the eight ball”, “whiteness” is a sign of purity and good. ‘Darkness” is a sign of impurity and evil. The Angels and good people are white while one imagines the devil, villains and bad people draped in black. A “little white lie” is okay. Put the adjective “black” before anything and it intensifies the sense of the ominous, disastrous or catastrophic. Not even the food we eat escapes the black/ white, positive/ negative, superior/ inferior dichotomy – there is “angel food cake” and “devil’s food cake!” (1).

Over the last twenty years or so, the question which often comes in the white individuals’ mind is “Why do you people keep changing, your name? First you were ‘colored’ then ‘Negro’, then ‘Black’, then ‘Afro-American’, and now ‘African-American’. How can we figure out what to call you when you can not find a name and stick with it?” (2) In other words, what is in a name? Majority group members’ confusion about racial naming is understandable, but there are good reasons why racial names have changed over the years. Names matter. It is a positive development that more individuals are sensitive to these issues. African Americans have a history of being disrespected by the names they have been called. The terms colored, and Negro were designations assigned by the majority culture. For years these terms were associated with second-class citizenship, segregation, and other symbols of repression. Whites have often forgotten that it was only one generation ago that many Black individuals were legally restricted to
“Coloreds Only” entrances, bathrooms, water fountains, schools, and services that were consistently inferior to the resources available to White Americans.

The recent research on racial identity shows the common sentiment among the African-Americans community that “no matter how high a Negro gets he is still just a negro” (723). Another important research is by Queen Mother Moore who notes that slave masters had free rein with African women. The consequence of this cohabitation was off-spring who were sometimes “light, bright, and damn near white” (1). Mullatoes in the race contributed to the debate among our forebears as to whether we were Africans, colored, or Negro. With this perspective at the back of mind, let us see what does the term “Black” connote? And what is the connotation of “Black is Beautiful?”

The concept ‘Black’ is not only fascinating but also thought-provoking. Fascinating in the sense that it has invited all types of intellectuals to define; thought-provoking in the sense that it has invited articulations from both men and women alike. A layman, without considering the seriousness of the term, associates black with men and women who inhabit in central and south part of Africa. Generally, the term black refers to a person with African ancestral origins. In some circumstances, usually in politics or power struggles, the term ‘Black’ signifies all non-white minority populations. The term ‘Black’ has a long service in social, political and everyday life and in its use to denote African ancestry is entrenched in epidemiological and public health language. Webster Dictionary defines the word ‘black’ as “belonging to a dark-skinned ethnic group; especially, Negroid” (74). “Negroid”, defines Webster Dictionary, “pertains to the so-called black race, including the peoples originally inhabiting central and South Africa” (485).

The term ‘black’ became so popular that it was simply associated with ‘color’. Gerda Lerner, in her book Black Women in White America (1972) explicitly states the word ‘black’, its multifarious use. To quote her at random: “We are neither ladies, nor gents, but colored.” “Everything is forgiven in
the South but color”; “the assigning if single toilet facilities to both sexes of Black” (164, 167). Lerner’s book is full of such examples. It is seen that the term, in the beginning, is associated with ‘color’. As time passed, the term ‘black’ underwent a number of changes. This is also largely due to political, social, cultural and economical changes. All too often ‘black was equated with black men and “woman” was equated with white women. As a result, black women were an invisible group whose existence and needs were ignored.

The term ‘black’ left its deep wounds in the black men and women. Roderick J. Watts of De Paul University, Chicago, an assistant professor of psychology, observes: “Aside from skin-color, there is something to being ethnically black in terms of outlook on life, values and beliefs” (1). The term ‘black’ is taken into ethnic sense as to what it means to be black culturally and psychologically. Some valid questions crop up – What is Black? Who is Black? Black like who? Numberless books, articles and national forums appear in the market depicting racial conflict and contradiction among blacks and whites.

Another term associated with ‘black’ is ‘slavery’. Since the days of slavery, the “race question” has deeply troubled blacks. It has been forcefully argued that whites were able to enslave blacks because blacks were not considered citizens or humans; they were thought of as cattle or property. The blacks are known by different images such as the Fool, Sambo, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, Bad Bucks etc. The blacks had neither full rights nor privileges of American citizens. The whites kept blacks in inferior positions. Ed Guerrero in Framing Blackness observes: “For blacks have been subordinate, marginalized, positioned, and devalued in every possible manner to glorify and relentlessly hold in place the white dominated symbolic order and racial hierarchy of American society” (28).

The concept of black did not remain the same. The blacks were humiliated with a number of terms such as Negro, Nigger/ Nigga and
negritude. These terms are grotesque because of the grotesque nature of the circumstances surrounding its use. Blacks look down on other Blacks for use of “nigger/ nigga”. Class struggles within the black community become very apparent. The use of “nigger/ nigga” has been fairly innocuous in Black hands. The term Negro means the color black in Spanish. The term Negro was widely used by White Europeans as a shortened form of the racial classification Negroid to describe people of sub-Saharan African heritage. Until the mid – 20th century the term Negro was widely used for African Americans, but fell out of favour in the late 20th century. Today it is universally considered inappropriate and derogatory although it is used occasionally in some research reports. Another term “negritude” was being used. The fullest and deepest exploration into the meaning of “negritude” is given by Jean Paul Sartre in his essay “Orphee Noir”. Berrian F. B. and Long R. A., in their book Negritude : Essay and Studies (1967), see negritude as a powerful drive toward self-fulfilment by ethnic groups that admit to an African (black) heritage. The Black Power Movement attempted to translate the concept of “negritude” into meaningful action for the black man in the street. Le Roi Jones (The Black Power Revolt, 1968) states, “Black Power is the power first to be black” (422). A “single drop of black blood” classified a person as Negro. Today, increasing efforts to define blackness and what many blacks view as internal pressure to ‘choose sides’ dramatize the persistence of the conflict and the confusion over racial identity.

What is meant by black in 1960s, 1970s and 1980s is not the same what is meant by black in 1990s. The ever-changing black experience in America is being assessed with a new intensity. Skin color, how you talk, more specifically what you say and how you live your life are examples of the tests being used to determine what it means to be black in the 1990s. The term ‘black’ invited a lot of research. The research reveals certain findings. Some blacks felt that he used his race selectively and played down the importance of race itself until he was accused of sexual harassment; then he made it an issue. Many blacks questioned the “blackness” of a man who
embraces a conservative philosophy and is married to a white woman. Some blacks say that black Americans cannot afford to waste time on such issues when so many blacks face a multitude of problems like drug abuse, unemployment, prejudice and the disproportion of blacks among crime victims. The search for identity is, of course, hardly limited to blacks. A similar self-examination occurs among feminists on whether women should receive equal treatment with men or need special protection because of biological and cultural differences. Many Jews have taken personal odysseys to find their Jewish roots and the meaning of religion in their lives.

The debates were organized within the black community to trace and explore the black identity theory. Each black person responds differently to their socialization and experience in terms of being black. The theory of racial identity development was promulgated in 1978 by William Cross, a professor of Psychology at Cornell University. He held that racial identity evolved in five stages, each marked by different attitudes and psychological functioning. The first stage is “Preencounter”. The individual attempts to deny membership in a race. Then an experience challenges this individual’s anti-black attitudes, causing psychological and emotional turmoil. The second stage is “Encounter”. Attempts to resolve the conflict are made when a person discovers his or her cultural heritage. The third stage is “immersion”. The person may develop new, idealized images and intense emotions about being black, and feel hostile toward whites. The fourth stage is “internalization”. In the fourth stage, the person assumes a positive black identity and begins to accept a bicultural identity. The final stage is “commitment”. The individual becomes committed to others to help them develop their identity. The Nigrescence theory of Cross is still debatable, as to the measurement of each stage. The issue is whether racial identity is composed of separate, distinct stages or is a process. After Cross, there are a number of theorists like Phinney, Parham, Munford, Parham and Helnus who commented on the theory of Cross and who formulated their own theories of
racial identity. The researcher cannot make a comprehensive study of these theories for want of space.

Today, Black and African identity is taken for granted. Black/African identity was the result of intense and painful internal struggles. No other ethnic group/nationality had to endure a systematic effort to wipe out their history, culture and identity. These early terms – black, nigger, Negro, black American etc. – are replaced by the current and most accepted term Afro-American.

Having established their identity, the blacks realise that complete cultural assimilation would mean destruction of self-image and psychological annihilation for all black people. In the 1940s the black African community in Paris was the first to realise the need to retain identity as black individuals.

Faced with real threat to his identity, the black man has attempted to defend himself. Some means chosen have been destructive, others constructive. He is protesting in social, psychological, economic and cultural areas. In the 1970s the progress of the civil rights movement led to the rise of the sentiment “Black is beautiful”. This was a remarkable development, because Black people chose to call themselves Black as a sign of pride. The racial pride inherent in the use of the term Black led to a greater feeling of kinship with other people of African descent, and so the next popular term of self-identity was Afro-American. Most recently, the term African-American is the preferred term for many Black individuals in the United States.

The present young black youth does not accept the distortion of his image. He says black is beautiful. Black is the color of rich; black is the color of fertile earth; black is the color of precious oil; black is the color of valued ebony. Further, blacks insist that because dark-skinned people are fully human they are by definition beautiful – like all human beings they are the “chosen ones”. Further, the present youth does not concern himself with white looks, that is the white man’s problem. “Just don’t ask us to whiten
ourselves”, he retorts (423). John S. Rock, one of the earliest advocates of the black is beautiful concept, made some of his good advice to black people:

When I contrast the fine, tough muscular system, the beautiful rich color, the full broad features and the gracefully frizzled hair of the Negro with the delicate physical organization, wan color, sharp features, and lank hair of the Caucasian, I am inclined to believe that when the white man was created nature was pretty well exhausted – but determined to keep up appearances. She pinched up his features and did the best she could under the circumstances. (Jenkins 423)

The professional, the doctors or teachers or community psychiatrists should support every ethnic group’s effort to view its physical characteristics with respect. Blatant racism does not heal the wounds of self-deprecation. Equal role is the role of mothers who forbid their daughters to enter swimming pools because the straightened raven tresses of their “black white” child would “go back” i.e. return to its natural state. A girl with African features forms a beautiful gestalt when these features are highlighted by appropriate make up and accessories. Distortion of either racial image, white or black, to glorify an artificial form should be discouraged. Every group in the society should abstain from the distortion of the image of the black.

What irks to the eyes of the community is the physical body of the black. Frantz Fanon observes on the physical body of the black:

In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty. (423-24)

The Negro youth is crying for certainty. Black is real. Black is acceptable. Black is beautiful. The black man now lashes out at his environment. He curses the white man with four-letter words. He riots. He commandeers buildings. What does this do to his image? What image? What is the overall
character of the black man, the docile pet or the ferocious rapist or the heartless mugger, or the super-athlete?

An attack on the environment produces predictable results – retaliation. Free access to competition of the business and intellectually creative fields will allow the black man to discharge much of the pent-up aggression that he can now only channelize into athletic performances. To a larger extent, the present youth suffers from the fragmented black family and community. The black family must have a definite structure so that the growing young boys and girls develop their personalities. The present youth looks for an African philosophy, African ethics, and an African personality which can be incorporated into his being. Some of these traditional characteristics do survive in the Afro-American.

To sum up, African Americans have for generations been dispossessed, wanderers, outsiders in mainstream white society. They have continued to turn much of their energy into efforts at more effective expression of assertion and competence strivings. In the words of a song: “I’ve been treated like a mule and I’ve turned [myself] into a human being? (Jenkins 137). And the “continuing set of unending ... mutually modifying long-range enterprises that Chein attributes to the human being has involved for blacks an increasingly self-conscious effort to assert both individual and group pride” (137).

III

Having seen the concept ‘black’, let us see now the second concept of the title ‘feminist’. The word feminism is derived from the Latin word ‘femina’ which describes women’s issues. Webster’s Dictionary defines feminism as “the doctrine which declares that social, political and economic rights for women be the same as those for men” (260). Feminism is a movement advocating this doctrine. A feminist is one who advocates social, political, and economic rights for women. The black feminism is a movement that advocates black women’s issues such as racism, classism, sexism and gender. Several authors have put forth definitions of the Black Feminist Movement. Among the most notable are Alice Walker’s definition and the
Cambahee River Collective Statement. A number of black women writers such as Francis Harper, Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, Gloria Naylor, to name a few, who articulated their anger, jealousy, rage and disappointment through books, articles and anthologies in their own way. These writers focus on the themes of women’s oppression and women’s resistance. Deborah Rosenfelt says:

Their characteristic structure encompasses mythic progress from oppression, suffering, victimization, through various stages of awakening consciousness to active resistance and finally some form of victory, transformation or transcendence of despair. Feminist novels privilege woman’s bonding and female friendships, reject, marginalize or subvert heterosexual love and passion, and interrogate family and motherhood. Their characteristic modalities are the bildungsroman and the utopia. Their characteristic tone compounds rage at women’s oppression and revolutionary optimism about the possibility of change. (269)

Chikwenye Ogunyemi is another feminist critic who points out the underlying themes in black women writers. In her article, “Womanism : The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English”, she defines the feminist novel as an openly propagandist protest against sexism and the patriarchal power structure. She writes:

A reader can expect to find in it some combination of the following themes : a critical perception of and reaction to patriarchy, often articulated through the struggle of a victim or rebel, who must face the patriarchal institution; sensitivity to the iniquities of sexism allied with an acceptance of women and understanding of the choices open to them; a metamorphosis leading to female victory in a feminist utopia or a stasis, signifying the failure to eliminate sexism; a style spiced with the acrimony of feminist discourse. (Sinha 31)
However, according to her, the womanist writer may include some of these characteristics, but she will also “incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic and political considerations” (Sinha, 31). A number of black feminist critics such as Gloria Steinem, Martha J. Mc Gowan, Thadious M. Davis, W. Lawrence Hogue, Barbara Christian, to name a few, echo the similar opinions when they talk and write about the themes of black women writers.

The black feminist critics formulated their own feminist theories. The theorists focus on black women’s writings and history, in the United States and in other countries. Their main volition is to analyse the way race, class, sexuality as well as gender influence women’s lives. A host of black feminists came forward and advocate their tenets. Frances Beal in her essay “Double Jeopardy : To Be Black and Female” (1970) is one of the many black feminists who has criticised the women’s movement for its limited focus. She says, “Any white group that does not have an anti-imperialist and anti racist ideology has absolutely nothing in common with the Black Women’s struggle” (2). Black men and women, along with other minority groups, understand that equal opportunity with white male power elites is not only out of reach for the majority of the population but also is not going to alter an oppressive system in any significant way.

bell hooks, one of the most eminent and articulate spokespersons of black feminist thought, has pointed out that black feminists are concerned about economic survival and ethnic and racial discrimination as well as sexism, and she faults the mainstream white women’s movement for failing to speak to these issues. Speaking of the movement as it took shape in the sixties and as espoused by feminists such as Betty Friedan, hooks says,

White women who dominate feminist discourse, who for the most part make and articulate feminist theory, have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politic, of the psychological impact of class, of their political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state. (2)
Angela Davis, in her book *Women, Race and Class* (1971) contends that in the US there have been women, black and white, who have objected to the limited focus on sexism and patriarchy as the cause of women’s position in society. Davis further points out various kinds of oppression and how they affect women. In addition, working women of all races and ethnic backgrounds felt the effects of classism. Various studies have shown that class differences are greater than differences between the sexes within the same class. As time passed, it is seen that when black feminism was marching ahead, certain factors such as ideology of individualism, American Dream, the myth of the amazonic black women – strong, nurturing, uncomplaining and all accepting– influenced American black feminist thought. Phyllis Palmer, Barbara Smith and bell hooks wrote in their respective articles the change of the attitude of black women. Both white and black women struggled for a new society based on new values of mutual respect, co-operation and social responsibilities.

With the publication of Daniel Moynihan’s (1960) report on the black family as matriarchal and the counter-arguments of African-American feminists, it is noticed that many blamed black women for their problems which exacerbated the conflict between black men and women. This was a prime example of blaming the victim. Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Black Woman : An Anthology* (1970) explicitly mirrors through the counter-arguments of the feminists the society in which the black families are breaking due to the high rate of unemployment problems. The worst result is that the black families lack the opportunity of marriage between black men and women, and moreover the blacks do not form family units. Bambara’s *The Black Woman : An Anthology* demonstrates the courage of Black Power Activists, Feminists, academics, housewives, and poets, African-Americans women who not only struggled vigorously for racial equality, but also worked to balance the scale that weighed heavily against women in a male-dominated society. These extraordinary women defeated the odds and transcended the past in order to lay the ground work for the future. Bambara, Nikki Giovanni,
Paule Marshall and Alice Walker, in their essays, discussed issues that are prevalent in today’s society: motherhood, politics, racism or the “Double Jeopardy’s dilemma of being black and female (and poor and urban) in America. Bambara goes further to explore the essence of gender inequality and the myths associated with a black male patriarchy.

It is seen in 1960s, as Moynihan points out, the black family had female heads – Robert Staples, the sociologist, in his article ‘The Political Economy of Black Family Life” (1986) points out that the rate of poverty of black families increased. This had worst effect on the female-headed households. The same situation is pointed out by Judy Claude in her article “feminization of poverty”. According to her, two out of three black women living in female-headed households were already poor before a change put them into a female-headed household.

Many black men of Third World have felt threatened by women’s organizations and have tried to maintain what positions of power they had by reinforcing fears and myths about the women’s movement. Barbara Smith, in her article “Some Home Truths on the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement” (1985) has listed five myths that have been used by Third World men to “divert black women from our own freedom:

1. the myth that black women are already liberated;
2. the myth that racism is the primary (or only) oppression black women have to confront;
3. the myth that feminism is nothing but man-hating;
4. the myth that women’s issues are narrow, apolitical concerns and people of color need to deal with the “larger struggle”;
5. the myth that “those feminists are nothing but lesbians.”

Regarding the myth of the liberated black woman, it is to be noted that the black woman in American society is the victim of racism, classism and sexism. To the charge that racism should be her only concern, Smith says, “A Black feminist perspective has no use for ranking oppressions, but instead
demonstrates the simultaneity of oppressions as they affect Third World women’s lives” (6). Waiting until racism is ended before tackling sexism which cuts across all racial, national, age, religions, ethnic, and class groups would mean waiting a ‘long, long time’ (8).

To the accusation that feminism implies man-hating, Smith and others have repeatedly denounced this claim. “It is only sane”, she counters, ‘for us to try to change that treatment by every means possible”(9). With all of the violence against women in society, the problem seems much more to be one of woman-hating. For example, one in three American women will be raped in her life time, if the current trend continues.

As far as women’s issues being narrow and apolitical, Smith asks how a movement committed to fighting sexual, racial, economic, heterosexual oppression as well as imperialism, anti-semitism, militarism and all other kinds of oppression – against the young, the old, the physically handicapped, etc., can be called “narrow?” and, to the charge that feminism implies lesbianism, this fear merely exposes the homophobia in society and the ignorance of both feminism and lesbianism. “Feminism is a political movement, and many lesbians are not feminists while some are” (10).

In addition to the myths perpetrated about black women that have sought to undermine their participation in a woman’s movement and the white feminists’ rejection of issues of paramount concern to minority and working class women, the Civil Rights movement also highlighted sexist discrimination as it affected black women. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 guaranteed equal rights to citizens of all races and ethnic backgrounds. The 1950s through the 1970s saw the African American community troubled with problems of gender inequality. Black women had to fight to gain equal footing with black men. Even the right to vote was extended to black men long before it had been extended to black women. Black women were discriminated. Black women faced constant sexism in the Black Liberation Movement. Black women who participated in the Black Liberation Movement
and the Women’s Movement were often discriminated against sexually and racially. Since these movements were unable to meet the needs of black women, Black Feminist Movement was formed. Black Feminist Movement marked its “birth” with the 1973 founding of the National Feminist Organization in New York. The purpose of the movement was to develop theory which could adequately address the way race, gender, and class were interconnected in their lives and to take action to stop racist, sexist, and classist discrimination.

Having decided to form a movement of their own, black women needed to define the goals of the Black Feminist Movement and to determine its focus. There are a number of authors, critics and movements have put forth definitions of the Black Feminist Movement. Among the most notable are Alice Walker’s definition and the Combahee River Collective Statement.

Walker coined the term ‘Womanist’ to describe the Black Feminist Movement. She writes:

A black feminist or feminist of color ... A woman who loves other women, sexually and/ or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counter balance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and or non-sexually committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health. Traditionally universalist ... loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless; womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (xi-xii)

Alternatively, according to Julia Hare as quoted by Hudson Weems “Women who are calling themselves black feminists need another word to describe what their concerns are” (1). Thus Weems similarly asserts that women of African descent who embrace feminism do so because of the absence of a
suitable existing framework for their individual needs as African women, therefore, she suggests and defines Africana womanism as:

... an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is for grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, need and desires of African women. It critically addresses the dynamics of the conflict between mainstream feminist, the black feminist, the African feminist and the African a womanist. (24)

Overarching, Womanism as an alternative theory is distinguished by its focus on the Black female experience with writings detailing racial issues, classist issues and sexist issues with as cautionary notice via bell hooks who insists that:

Racism abounds in the writings of white feminists; reinforcing white supremacy and negating the possibility that women will bond politically across ethnic and racial boundaries. To womanist writers, racial and classist oppression are inseparable from sexist oppression. Many womanist writers even portray racial and classist oppression as having precedence over sexist oppression. This is because the womanists believe that the emancipation of Black women folk can not be achieved apart from the emancipation of the whole race. Womanists therefore believe in partnership with their men folk. This characteristic distinguishes womanism from feminism which is mainly a separatist ideology. (845)

Therefore Womanism differs from feminism because it recognizes the triple oppression of Black women wherein racial, classist, and sexist oppression is identified and fought against by womanists, as opposed to the feminism main concern with sexist oppression. Womanism thus makes it clear that the needs of the Black women differ from those of their white counterparts, and by recognizing and accepting male participation in the struggle for emancipation it again differs from feminism in its methodology of ending female
oppression. And unquestionably, Womanism is rooted in Black culture which accounts for the centrality of family, community and motherhood in its discourse and as an ideology has extending beyond the frontiers of Black America to being embraced by many women in and from Africa, and in other parts of the world.

The definition of Walker is both affirming and challenging for it commends a woman’s stretching of her personal boundaries while at the same time calls on women to maintain their connections to the rest of humanity. The entire self, which is connected to others in the community, is valued in womanism.

The Combahee River Collective Statement, one of the organizations established during the late 1974, sets forth a more specific, political definition:

The organization committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression. The major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppression that all women of color face. It was important for black feminism to address the ways that racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism all worked to perpetuate each other. (6)

In these two definitions of black feminism/womanism, one can see the complementary nature of one’s personal life in relation to one’s political life. From the personal, the striving toward wholeness individually and within the community, comes the political, the struggle against those forces that render individuals and communities unwhole. The personal is political, especially for black women.

The Black Feminist Movement, having gathered its strength, began to work on specific issues. These issues, according to Barbara Smith, are: reproductive rights, sterilization abuse, equal access to abortion, health care,
child care, the rights of the disabled, violence against women, rape, battering, sexual harassment, welfare rights, lesbian and gay rights, aging, police brutality, labour organizing, anti-imperialist struggles, anti-racist organizing, nuclear disarmament, and preserving the environment.

With a view to fulfill these specific issues, several organizations were established during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Some of the noteworthy organizations are: Founding of the National Black feminist organization in New York (1973), The Combahee River Collective protest of the murders of twelve black women in Boston (1979), National Black Feminist Organization, Black women Organized for Action, and a number of others.

Black feminist movement continues to wage war against racism, classism, and sexism which influence the lives of black women. A host of black feminist writers and critics propound their thoughts on the issues of black women such as sexism, racism and classism. For want of space, the researcher is going to list these articles that focus on race, class, sexuality, as well as gender that influence women’s lives. These articles are: Sotunsa Mobolanle Ebunolawa (“Femism : The Quest for an African Variant”), Dale B. Vierregge (“From” Double Jeopardy” to “Multiple Consciousness” : Three Decades of Radical Black Feminist Thought”), Patricia Hill Collins (“Defining Black Feminist Thought”), Patricia Hill Collins (“Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination”), Kimberly Springer (“Good Times For Florida and Black Feminism”), Deborah K. King (“Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness : The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology”), Kimberle Crenshaw (“All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men Some of Us are Brave”), Frances Beal (“Double Jeopardy : To Be Black and Female”), Phyllis Palmer (“White Women/ Black Women : the Dualism of Female Identity and Experience in the United States”), Rosalind Coward (“Are Women’s Novels Feminist Novels?”), and a number of others. Mary Ann Weathers, Gayle Linch, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Marie Williams, Frances M. Beale, Linda La Rue, Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott Deborah
Resenfelt have individually contributed to Black feminism. The names are legion. More and more articles, books and anthologies are expected in this regard.

The Black Feminist Movement toiled and moilled to fulfil its objectives. However, it had to face several challenges. Most importantly, the movement must find a way to broaden support among black and Third World women. The aims and objectives of the movement must reach to all. There is a need for the development of mentor relationships between black women scholar/activists and young black students, both female and male. Individual struggle must be connected with a larger feminist movement to effect change, and so that new black feminists need not reinvent theory or search again for history that was never recorded. Black women should be inculcated and imbied the theoretical and critical aspects of black feminism. Black women and men need to develop a critical style which encourages further dialogue and development of ideas rather than merely “trashing” and silencing new black feminist voices. Respect for fellow black women must be developed and guarded in spite of the sexist, racist, and classist “cultural baggage” with which all Americans are weighed down. Differences among black women must be acknowledged and affirmed, rather than ignored. Finally, alliances must be strengthened between the black feminist movement and its parent movements. The power and influence that each of these groups has cannot be ignored. As one NBFO (National Black Feminist Organization) member has said, “White women are our natural allies; we cannot take down the system alone” (Internet 9).

To sum up, one of the major contributions black feminists have made to feminist theory is to provide the historical and cultural analysis that weaves the various forms of oppression into a coherent theory for action. As racism is not just an issue for African-Americans, feminism is not just a woman’s issue. Black feminist theory is not about reforms of the present system that will benefit only the few who can fight their way to the top over the bodies of others, but about the creation of a system that allows full participation by all.
Feminism, in all of its diversity, can enlighten, enlarge and empower everyone.

IV


For the first time in the history of psychology, Freud gave a three-fold structure of the human mind and its working. The human mind, according to him, has three regions : conscious, subconscious or preconscious and unconscious and the three functioning agents : Id, Ego and Superego. Of these three energy levels, he gives prime importance to the ego as the organizer and the chief executive of the human personality.

Another Freudian personologist who put forth his ‘psycho-social theory’ of the personality development, by extending and elaborating Freud’s four stages into eight subsequent stages and embracing the whole life-span of man, is Erik H. Erikson.
Unlike Freud, he is of the opinion that the human personality development, to a large extent, is a life-long process, and it gives many golden changes for the development of Ego. While trying to achieve a delicate balance between the Id and the Superego, in Freud’s opinion, the Ego is always entrapped in the defense-mechanisms, whereas Erikson thinks that every stage of the psycho-social theory involves a conflict that gives Ego a chance to develop. He believes that the Ego thrives on the conflicts and crises, because it is capable of overcoming the conflicts positively, the result of which is the enrichment of personality. Erikson’s theory gives much importance to the socio-cultural environment, and its agents, and the person’s interactions with them. It paints the strong Ego that is responsible for a healthy and happy life. Erikson, though gave much stress on the ‘identity crisis’ that a young man faces in his adolescence, like Freud did not talk much of the human life.

The credit of introducing the concept of self goes to Carl Gustav Jung whose analytical theory of personality is different from that of Freud. He believes the human being as an aspiring, goal directed person capable of striving for perfection or self-realization. His is also a three-fold structure of the human psyche; personal conscious, personal unconscious and collective unconscious. He traces the overdominance of the collective unconscious mind in the life-activities.

Jung groups consciousness roughly into five elements: life aims, (the overriding aim most people have in life to become a doctor, a pilot etc.) desires, (aims for specific things likes good for or pretty women) instincts, (the way we eat food not because we are hungry but because it is meal time) habits, (the things we do without thinking, like smoking) and principles, (social moral or conventional rules which are in our mind all the time within which we perform). Most people will have these elements in their mind and usually they are able to maintain a balance between them. A person often sacrifices one for another. For example, for the sake of his life aim to become
a doctor he may sacrifice his desire for a luxurious life. All these elements are part of the consciousness, what Kierkegaard called “immanence”.

Jung distinguished between the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. The personal unconscious consists of all those psychic contents that become unconscious, either because they lost their intensity and were forgotten, or because consciousness was withdrawn from them which is called repression. It also includes sense impressions which never had sufficient intensity to reach consciousness but have somehow entered the psyche.

The ‘collective unconscious’ is the third system of mind, that is inherited from our ancestors, even from the pre-human periods. It is the psychic-residue of our ancestral past that has been carried by the countless generations and is continuously passed on to every new generation. And it is with us, with its tremendous pressure, from which there is no escape.

In other words, a person is born with some predispositions for thinking, feeling and perceiving. These inherited thought forms are called archetypes. The archetypes work as the highly charged, autonomous energy centres of personality. Besides, having been associated with myths, rituals, dreams, visions and the works of art, they can easily penetrate into the personal consciousness.

The persona, the shadow, the anima and the animus are some of the important archetypes from the cluster of many like birth, death, power, unity, the hero, God, the demon, the wise old man and so on.

Unlike Freud, Jung strongly believes both in the healthy personality development and in the process of the psychological maturity – individuation. He says: “By it, I mean the psychological process that makes a human being an ‘individual, a unique, individuated unit or ‘whole man’” (3).

The emergence of the self is the output of the individuation. The self, according to him, stands for the psychic totality: “a union of conscious and
unconscious” (268). The self has three aspects, the physical, the mental and the self-revelatory action. Jung comments on the nature of the self as follows:

This (self) would be the point of a new equilibrium, a new centering of the total personality, a vital centre which, on account of its focal position between the conscious and unconscious, insures for personality a new and more solid foundation. (219)

Once the self is evolved, the ego becomes its satellite. The self, thus, serves as a unifying force that has a transcendent function – which provides stability and balance to the various aspects of personality. In other words, the person knows more about his unconscious aspects of the psychic life and about their respective roles. This awareness lands him on a new ground of understanding – where he overcomes the conflicts and begins to live harmoniously within himself and with others.

The self-realization, the realization of the fulness of our being, according to him, is an unattainable ideal, however, every person must strive for it. Jung believes that the self generally emerges very late, almost during the middle age of a person.

Alfred Adler, a pioneering psychologist in the field of ‘Individual Psychology’, focuses on the human personality with its social relationships. The major contribution of Adler seems to be the description of the human self. It is the creative and active principle of the human life, because it creates not only the goals but the means to achieve them.

Abraham Maslow propounds the ‘motivational theory’ and Gordon Allport enunciates the ‘trait theory’ of personality. Maslow’s motivational theory throws light on a typical aspect of the self: that, it never remains hidden or it cannot be concealed, because, by all means, it expresses itself through the activities. Allport classifies traits into two types: the first, the common or universal traits which are shared by many, and the second the individual traits or personal dispositions that are found in specific person. According to him, it is the human self, with its functional autonomy, that
keeps him active and consistent in what he likes or aspires for. However, Allport does not treat the self as a separate entity.

Carl Rogers’ person centered theory of personality has two basic concepts: organism and self. The organism, a living, growing system, is the basic psychological reality. It is the locus of all experiences. The self is a part of organism, and it is ‘a fluid and changing gestalt, a process, but at any given moment it is a specific entity” (Rogers 200). The self is a central construct in Rogers’ theory.

Rogers is of the opinion that, as the success or the failure of a person largely depends upon the self, the proper development of it is the most important thing in human life.

While elaborating the concept of the self, Ross Stagner in his book *Psychology of Personality* (1984) mentions that any given individual may be described in terms of his characteristic temperament or feeling reactions, particularly such generalised tendencies as optimism, pessimism, depression or excitability. According to him, the self-concept is that which unifies one’s temperament, one’s complexes political attitudes and habits in social interaction. “It is the awareness of myself as a continuing entity within these varying situations and action patterns” (Stagner 166).

Pillsbury defined the self as a group of concepts originally developed to represent the different lines of division “between the man and others, between the mental and physical processes and between the more mechanical and the more spontaneous forms of action” (57). The self has three aspects, the physical, the mental and the self-revelatory action.

From the preceding theoretical information, it is clear that, the self is primarily a psychological concept, a construct about the human mind. And in a fully functioning person the self is personality.

The term “personality derives from the Latin word persona, which refers to the masks used by actors in the green theatre” (Duane Schultz 8). Duane Schultz, Gordon Allport, Elizabeth B. Hurlock and a number of others
have defined in their own ways. Duane Schultz is of the opinion that “there is no neat and simple answer, at least not yet; to the question what is personality, it is a complex thing which can be represented only by means of a complete set of concepts and principles” (2-3). Gordon Allport defines it as: “Personality is the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychological systems that determine his unique adjustments to his environment” (48). It is according to Elizabeth B. Hurlock, “the quality of a person’s behavior in any situation; and to express in her metaphoric language, the self is the hub of the wheel of personality” (225).

Almost anything a person does, since childhood, is related to his/her concept of self, which grows and develops, like any other living organism, in the social environment. It is almost phenomenal and dynamic. This change in the self is gradual, within and without, and also, visible and invisible.

A peculiar concept of the self formed by the black Americans is the black self. Martin D. Wyne and others observe on the black self as:

There is a unique blend of biological, psychological and sociological conditions which combine to form the black self concept ... blacks develop self-images which are peculiar to the conditions associated with their culture in twentieth century America. (4)

The black consciousness that springs from the black American culture provides the broad base for the rise of the black self, which is black first, and anything else afterwards. Although it shares some similarities with the white self, it is not and will never be identical with the white.

The monumental works of Freud, Jung, Adler, to name a few, played vital role in different forms of literature and literary criticism. Critics like T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, Northrop Frye, Leslie Fielder and a host of others studied literature and tried to reveal its psychological foundation. Psychology, the science of the psychic process and the human behaviour, entered into the realms of literary criticism. For example, the myth criticism or the archetypal criticism is based on Jung’s
theory of the collective unconscious. These theories also helped to analyse
the multiple interpretations of the literary works. David Daiches has properly
put it:

Psychology, therefore, comes into literary criticism in several ways. It
can help to explain the creative process in general, it can provide a
means of illuminating a writer’s work with reference to his life and vice
versa, and it can help to elucidate the true meaning of a given text. (344)

C. G. Jung, Duane Scultz, M. D. Wyne echo the similar opinions. Rene
Wellek and Austin Waren have explicitly stated that “the most obvious cause
of a work of art is its creator, the author, and hence an explanation in terms of
the personality and the life of the author has been one of the oldest and best
established methods of literary study” (60).

To sum up, an individual is the best source of information about his/her
own feelings, thoughts, beliefs and attitudes. And a person is revealed in
what he/she says both about himself/herself and about others.

Two things are cleared from the psychological discourse and what the
critics like David Daiches and Rene Wellek and Austin Waren have said
about the work of art and its creator. The concept consciousness needs still
further to be defined. According to Patricia Bell Scott, consciousness is
defined ‘as the symbols, norms and ideological forms people create to give
meaning to their acts” (15). For de Lauretis, consciousness is a process, a
“particular configuration of subjectivity... produced at the intersection of
meaning with experience.... Consciousness is grounded in personal history,
and self and identity are understood within particular cultural contexts.
Consciousness ... is never fixed, never attained once and for all, because
discursive boundaries change with historical conditions”(15). John Locke
“considered personal identity (or the self) to be founded on consciousness
(viz. Memory) and not on the substance of either the soul or the body”
(Internet, 11). Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines
Consciousness as “the waking state of mind” (224). It denotes “the state of
being awake, thinking and knowing what is happening around you” (224).
Consciousness can be ‘aesthetic’, ‘visionary’, and ‘mystical’, though all these are linked together. Normal consciousness arose with the struggle for existence, and the survival of the fittest, the weak being conscious of having to save themselves from the clutches of the strong. Normal consciousness progressively widens to embrace the well-being of the members in the vicinity. Consciousness is thus a state of awareness of one’s own existence, position and surroundings. Therefore, Black consciousness means the awareness among a group of people of their own Black identity, inheritance, heredity, and so on. Black consciousness is explained by Mance Williams as follows:

It is the result of alienation between two groups, or races, of individuals that find themselves locked in a conflict of wills. Black consciousness is a produce of conflict, a conflict that mainly has to do with sharp disagreement over what constitutes reality and the conditions for individual freedom. The attempt by Western Whites to impose a system of thinking and acting onto Blacks has created conditions necessitating the militant development of a Black Consciousness. (32)

Black consciousness eventually meant accepting a Black identity rather than transcending it. Black consciousness allows the Black person to be ‘Black’ both as a member of a collective group and as an individual.

While attempting the study of black feminist consciousness or black identity in the works of Toni Cade Bambara, it is necessary to review the various social and political movements which developed feminist consciousness and ultimately made an impact on the African American literature as a whole. The process of feminist consciousness, stimulated by these movements, brought a special intensity to the expression of Black writers. The awareness of being Black is the most forceful and the most productive single inspiration for African American writers in America. The study of Black feminist literature is incomplete without taking note of American Black’s history of Civil Rights.
American Black’s history of Civil Rights can be divided into four parts:

1. From 1619 to 1863
2. 1863 to 1896
3. 1896 to 1954
4. 1954 to till date

The main purpose of this compartmentalization is to give an outline of the American Black’s struggle for freedom and Civil Rights.

Brought to the American continent as slaves in the 17th century, African women were deprived of every basic human right in order to serve the plantation economy of the American south. As Orlando Patterson writes, “A slave is a dead man” (21). She is thus incapable of any kind of social or cultural production. During this long span of slavery, American Blacks lost their self-identity, and experienced a rootless wandering life as they had to forget their language, religion, customs and culture after coming to America. They became so alienated from their native land, culture and history that they were not able to find out the answer of the question, ‘who am I?’ To live just like animals was a part of their lives. Sometimes they tried to revolt but could not succeed. They lost their family system, and the institution of marriage almost became extinct for them. A husband, a wife and children could not stay together with one owner. The owner as per her/his wish would sell any member of the family to any one and anywhere. In 1843, Henry Garnet comments on the passivity of the black brothers by saying: “But you are a patient people, you act as though you were made for the special use of these devils. You act as though your daughters were born to pamper the lust of your masters and overseers” (424). The black man has been presented with two alternatives: submit or die fighting. The conditions of Black women were still worst. Since times of slavery, black womanhood has been destroyed, distorted, dismantled and abused with racial, sexual and inhuman practices by black men and white men and also white women. In the process they have lost their genuine “self” and have developed a triple consciousness – white, black, and female. They see themselves with the eyes of whitemen
and women and black men. This has ultimately been responsible for the destruction of their self-confidence and the feeling of being human. They looked upon themselves as chattel. The early novels, poetry, and short stories considered racial problems as an unavoidable social problem faced by every African-American in American society, for which there was no easy way out. It does not mean that it remained completely unaware of major currents of Black thought of the period. Early Black novels did not convey the wider implications of racial discrimination. The historical, and sociological aspects of racism and sexism get fictionalised in Afro-American novels by women.

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy, Shadows Uplifted* (1892), Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928), Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946), Gwendolyn Brooks’ *Maud Martha* (1953) and a number of others. These novels reflect upon the plights of black women. Bharati A. Parikh observes: “For a long time, black women were treated as beasts of burden in white patriarchal society. They were derided as Mammy, aunt Jemima, Matriarch, Sister, Black Bitch Girl” (55). 250 years of slavery means destruction of self-image and psychological annihilation for all black people.

A period from 1863 to 1896 is considered as a period of Reconstruction. In 1863, the Proclamation of Emancipation declared freedom to the Blacks. Freedom was meaningless since it did not provide any kind of social or economic or educational safeguards. More than these, freedom did not provide citizenship to the Blacks. Later we have amendment in the constitution and in 1896 the Supreme Court declared that in the public life if the new principle is promoted then any kind of injustice would not prevail in the society. This social discrimination consented by the law continued till 1954. During this phase, it is seen that the Blacks neither got rid of slavery nor they were given political rights. The psychological slavery was strengthening.
The third phase, from 1896 to 1954 is called as a period of segregation. During this phase, one notices that the Whites and the Blacks were separated from all walks of life – separate schools, separation was observed in hotels, trains and buses, separate dwellings etc. The real battle began on December 1, 1955, when Rosa Parks, a black woman, being tired after a day’s full hard work that involved standing on feet, refused to change her seat in the segregated Jim Crowed bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Her arrest by the whites, simply for having mistakenly sat in the ‘white seat’ in the bus, provoked ‘the black rage’; and its immediate effect was the ‘Jim Crowed bus-boycott’, on the part of all the black Americans from Montgomery, which lasted for one full year. This phase is significant for the following points:

1. American social life was divided into two parts: the White life and the Black life.
3. The Movement of Civil Liberties gained momentum.
4. In the 1940’s the black African Community in Paris was the first to realise the need to retain identity as black individuals.
5. Dubois’s concept of Pan-Africanism (the Niagara Movement).
7. The decision of the Supreme Court passed in 1896 was revised in 1954. That is, the process of desegregation was started.
8. The rise of Harlem Renaissance during the 1920s and 1930s.
9. The concept of Negritude (Blackness), as first formulated by Aime Cesaire and Leopald Senghor in the 1930s.
10. The rise and growth of the Black cultural consciousness.
11. Black consciousness, developed by the various social and political movements started reflecting in Black literature.

Since the Harlem Renaissance, the canon of Black American novel exhibits a progression of consciousness which reaches its peak in the 1960s, the ‘decade of the New Black Consciousness’.

The fourth and the last phase, that is, 1954 to till date, is vital period. Black and white voices were raised in protest against racism, poverty, war,
corruption and sexism. Americans were deeply disillusioned by the moral bankruptcy of their political and economic system and took radical action to correct or to escape the social injustice of the decade in myriad forms of movements and cults.

The cultural revolutions of the 1960s included two of the most important social movements in American history: the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. Both movements had the same goal—achievement of equal rights for African Americans. Aimed at integration, the Civil Rights movement sought to achieve equality for African Americans so they might stand side by side with their white counterparts. Negroes were looking for equal accession to education, housing, employment, and affluent lifestyles. The leaders like Martin Luther King, Rev. Ralph Abernathy used non-violent demonstrations and marches to accomplish their goals. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the result of their efforts. This Act guaranteed equal rights to citizens of all races and ethnic backgrounds.

The Black Power Movement, on the other hand, was a separatist or a nationalist enterprise. It advocated “separate but equal” representation. It made no presumptions of seeking entry to mainstream culture; its advocates and followers did not want to be part of white America. Leaders of this movement held that black consciousness and black superiority would ultimately lead to revolution. Thus, the methods of this movement included physical resistance, violence in the form of riots and demonstrations. The Black Panther party, the Revolutionary Action Movement, the Republic of New Africa, and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and many more adopted the ideology and strategy of the Black Power Movement.

The proponent of the Black Arts Movement was Larry Neal who writes “Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept” (1). Neal further adds “As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural
aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique and iconology” (2). The movement was launched in the spring of 1964 when Le Roi (Amiri Baraka), whose play Dutchman had stunned the theatre world, and other Black artists opened the Black Arts Repertory Theatre – School in Harlem and took their plays, poetry readings, and concerts into the streets of the black community. Harlem Writers Guild, Black Studies (1960), the Revolutionary Action Movement are the three formations that provided both style and ideological direction for Black Arts artists. The Black Arts Movement played a vital role and paved the way for a number of writers like H. E. Gates, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and a number of others. The movement not only published the journals like Negro Digest/ Black World but also prepared the ground for Harlem Renaissance. A number of anthologies were published. The Black Woman : An Anthology (1970), edited by Toni Cade Bambara, is the first major Black feminist anthology and features work by Jean Bond, Nikki Giovanni, Abney Lincoln, Andre Lorde, Paule Marshall, Gwen Patton, Pat Robinson, Alice Walker, Shirley Williams, and others. Mention must be made of other anthologies like Black Fire (1968) edited by Baraka and Neal, For Malcolm X, Poems on the Life and the Death of Malcolm X (1969) edited by Dudley Randall and Margaret Taylor Goss Burroughs, The Black Aesthetic (1971) edited by Addison Gayle, Jr., Stephen Henderson’s Understanding the New Black Poetry (1972), New Black Voices (1972), edited by Abraham Chapman, Eugene Redmond’s Drumvoices, The Mission of Afro-American Poetry : A Critical History (1976) and a number of others.

Although the movement began to decline and disrupt in 1974, it should not be forgotten that the Black Arts Movement rejected the term “Negro” and adopted “Black”. “African” is another enduring legacy of the Black Arts Movement.

What are the effects of the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement and Voting Act of 1965 on the blacks in particular and the social, economic and political conditions in general?
From the first two movements, the Civil Rights and the Black Power Movement, the blacks gained the social, economic and political powers with a view to control the public image. In his book, *Race Relations*, H. H. L. Kitano points out the impact of these movements on the blacks. As he observes that “slavery stamped both slave and slave owner with an indelible mark that has been difficult to erase even though the Emancipation Proclamation is well over 100 years old” (46). It means that the blacks were denied power and identity. In particularly, it emasculated the black male. This process of emasculation has prevented the black male from achieving autonomy and gaining social mobility. As a result, he is generally looked down upon by mainstream society as a poor father and husband. The system of slavery imposed responsibilities on black men that were contrary to the conventional feminine role, granting them a perceived dominance over black men. Moreover, by erasing the husband/ father role, the system denied the black male a significant place and function in his family. The position of the black male was further complicated by the separation between fathers and sons. As Huey Guagliardo stated recently “Ernest Gaines offered the profound observation that the black father and son were separated at the auction block, and they have been trying to reconnect ever since” (48). Not only is this father physically absent from the family; he is emotionally absent as well. Hence, black males, seeking autonomy in their lives, dominated these social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, trying to reclaim their manhood and, in turn, control their own male images. Thus, the Black Power Movement provided an opportunity for the black male to reclaim identity through the raising of black consciousness.

Like The Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement was male-dominated. Two men, Le Roi Jones and Ed Bullins, were its principal playwrights. The Black Arts Movement flourished in all of the various arts – writing, music, painting and dance. The researcher would not go in detail for want of space. It is to be noted that the social and economic conditions for blacks had begun to change at last. Civil Rights became the issue of the day.
Political and social power would give blacks artistic power as well. The Black Arts Movement, having grown out of the Black Power Movement, became the chief artistic voice and expression of the black race, giving rise to black novels all over the country.

The next movement which is equally significant like the Black Power Movement is the Women’s Rights Movement. The novels written from 1963 to 1983 bear witness to this. Just as the nineteenth century struggle for equal rights for women was fired by the struggle to free the slaves, the women’s rights movements of the 1960s were fired by the civil rights and black power movements. Although there were several different movements for black liberation (the Civil Rights Movement, Black Nationalism, the Black Panthers, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and others) they are all considered under the title Black Liberation Movement. The Black Feminist Movement grew out of the Black Liberation Movement and the Women’s Movement. In an effort to meet the needs of black women who felt they were being racially oppressed in Women’s Movement and sexually oppressed in the Black Liberation Movement, the Black Feminist Movement was formed.

Before going in detail of the Feminist Movement, let us see what Betty Friedan speaks about women. As she explains “The call to that first Woman’s Rights Convention came about because an educated woman, who had already participated in shaping society as an abolitionist, came face to face with the realities of a housewife’s drudgery and isolation in a small town” (Bell, 229). Participation in Civil Rights Movement, the male-domination in the Black Power Movement, housewife working like a machine at home, strengthened American women a century later to fully activate in women’s rights. Bernard W. Bell raises an important question when he read about Betty Friedan who is a white woman : “How relevant are the experiences, truths, and priorities of white women to black women?” (239). The black woman is for many people “demule uh de world” (239). The economic exploitation and alienation of the slaves was particularly uncharitable to the women slaves. They were sexually
violated and exploited by the white plantation owners. As were property in the plantation economic configuration, the sexual exploitation and alienation of the women slaves remained unchallenged by their men folk who were incapacitated by their suppressed and submerged condition as slaves. Hazel V. Carby argues that as a slave, the black woman was in a decidedly lopsided and unequal relationship with the white plantation patriarch. She was structured as the marginal other. Her relevance and significance within the ideology of slavery was her productive destiny which was inextricably bound up with capital accumulation. To Carby, “the black women gave birth to property, and directly to capital itself in the form of slaves, and all slaves inherited their status from their mothers” (603). They also suffered social quarantine as they were insulated from their children and families because family cohesion was a major casualty of plantation slavery. Jean Francois Gounard comments on the wilful supplantation of the black family as:

... the black family as a family unit, did not exist. Since Southern whites had seen in blacks only a source of profits, they had not hesitated to separate parents from children. The father or the husband had no right to speak and had been, himself, separated from his family.... This same situation on the other hand, cosigned the black woman to a primordial place within the black family and in American society. (603)

The family did not exist. The community was not composed of families with a cultural heritage. Moreover, the community was not economically viable. Complete cultural assimilation would mean destruction of self-image and psychological annihilation for all black people. A number of articles and books were written describing the dark and dismal picture of women. In 1904, Mary Church Terrell, the first President of the National Association of Colored women wrote “Not only are colored women ... handicapped on account of their sex, but they are almost everywhere baffled and mocked because of their race. Not only because they are women, but because they are colored women” (292). Gerda Lerner (Black Women in
White America, 1972), Doris Wilkinson and Ronald Taylor (The Black Male in America), Michele Wallace (Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman, 1978), to name a few, are the writers who have thrown a flood of light on the prevalent conditions of the black men and women.

Despite her ill-treatment and ill-painting, yet she prevails with her compassion and pity. Gerda Lerner rightly points out that “black women, speaking with many voices and expressing many individual opinions, have been nearly unanimous in their insistence that their own emancipation cannot be separated from the emancipation of their men. Their liberation depends on the liberation of the race and the improvement of the life of the black community” (xxv). When the situation was changed from the rights of blacks to the rights of women, a number of novelists like Margaret Walker, Rosa Guy, Mary Vroman, Louise Meriwether, Paule Marshall, Kristin Hunter, Caroline Polite, Sarah Wright, Alice Walker, Alice Childress, Ellease Southerland, Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, Gay Jones, and Toni Cade Bambara, among the better known, wrote novels and published before the end of 1983.

These Black women novelists regard black women as individuals endowed with strengths and weaknesses. When Toni Cade Bambara began to think of writing on black men and women, she confronted two problems. The first problem was that of models to be adopted. Bambara in her work The Black Woman: An Anthology (1970) speaks of this problem: “perhaps we need to face the terrifying and overwhelming possibility that there are no models, that we shall have to create from scratch” (109). She proposes a way out of this problem by the attempt “to reclaim the old relationships with Africa” (109). However, Afro-centric constructions of images of women also have been problematized since no single perception is available about the image of the African woman. Bambara herself offers a double version of the writings on African womanhood because she does not ‘trust’ (101) the readings given by others. This is because of the ‘slant’ she finds in those works where the argument goes that man is the breadwinner and subject, the
woman ‘the helpmate’ (126). But her own reading deconstructs such a notion of primitive societies: “And I am convinced at least in my readings of African societies ... the woman was neither subordinate nor dominant, but shares in policy making and privileges ...” (126). Bambara further reminds us like a political analyst:

There is nothing to indicate that the African woman, who ran the marketplace, who built dams, who engaged in international commerce and diplomacy, who sat on thrones, who donned armor to wage battle against the European invaders and the corrupt chieftains who engaged in the slave trade, who were consulted as equals in the affairs of state—nothing to indicate that they were turning their men into faggots, were victims of penis envy, or any such nonsense. There is nothing to indicate that the Sioux, Seminole, Iroquois or other “Indian nations felt oppressed or threatened by their women, who had mobility, privileges, a voice in the governing of the commune. There is evidence, however, that the European White was confused and alarmed by the equalitarian system of these societies and did much to wreck it, creating wedges between the men and women. (126-127)

In the late sixties, therefore, many Afro-Americans were encouraged by historical circumstances to continue resisting or rejecting Eurocentric models and interpretations of manhood and womanhood.

Black Feminism is a political/social movement that grew out of Black women’s feelings of discontent with both the Civil Rights Movement and the Feminist Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. It was Mary Ann Weathers who published in 1969 An Argument for Black Women’s Liberation as a Revolutionary Force in No More Fun and Games: A Journal of Female Liberation, Cell 16’s radical feminist magazine. Weathers states her belief that “Women’s Liberation should be considered as a strategy for an eventual tie-up with the entire revolutionary movement consisting of women, men and children”, (20) but she posits that we women must start this thing rolling because
All women suffer oppression, even white women, particularly poor white women, and especially Indian, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Oriental and Black American women whose oppression is tripled by any of the above mentioned. But we do have females’ oppression in common. This means that we can begin to talk to other women with this common factor and start building links with them and thereby build and transform the revolutionary force we are now beginning to amass. (Internet 20)

The following year, in 1970, the Third world Women’s Alliance published the Black Women’s Manifesto. Like An Argument for Black Women’s Liberation as a Revolutionary Force, Black Women’s Manifesto throws light on the oppression against Black women. Co-signed by Gayle Linch, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Maxine Williams, Frances M. Beale and Linda La Rue, the manifesto, opposing both racism and capitalism, stated that:

The black woman is demanding a new set of female definitions and a recognition of herself of a citizen, companion and confidant, not a matriarchal villain or a step stool baby-maker. Role integration advocates the complementary recognition of man and woman, not the competitive recognition of same. (Internet 20)

In addition to these, there are a number of Black feminists who were active in advocating the ideology of Black feminism. Activist and Cultural Critic Angela Davis was one of the first people to articulate a written argument centered on intersectionality in Women, Race and Class. Kimberle Crenshaw prominent feminist law theorist, gave the idea a name while discussing Identity politics in her essay, “Mapping the Margins : Intersectionality Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color.” The Autumn 1979 issue of Conditions was edited by Barbara Smith and Lorraine Bethel. Conditions 5 was “the first widely distributed collection of Black feminist writing in the U.S.” (Internet, 23). Articles from the magazine were later released in Home Girls, an anthology of Black lesbian and feminist writing published in 1983 by Kitchen Table : Women of color press, a publisher owned and operated by Women of Color. Floryance Kennedy, the Civil
Rights lawyer, wrote a book on abortion. In 1971, Kennedy published *Abortion Rap*. Other feminists like Cellestine Ware and Patricia Robinson ‘tried to show the connections between racism and male dominance in society” (Internet, 21). Audre Lorde is the most outstanding poet and a black feminist. As a feminist, Lorde says: “When I say I am a Black feminist, I mean I recognize that my power as well as my primary oppressions come as a result of my Blackness as well as my womanness, and therefore my struggles on both these fronts are inseparable” (Internet, 2). Lorde criticised feminists of the 1960s, from the National Organization for Women to Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* for focusing on the particular experiences and values of white middle-class women. Lorde identified issues of class, race, age, gender and even health as being fundamental to the female experience. Lorde campaigned for a feminist movement conscious of both race and class. Lorde asserts that the black women’s experiences are different from those of white women. The experience of the white is considered normative, the black woman’s experiences are marginalised. Lorde further says that the experiences of the lesbian are considered aberrational. Lorde stunned white feminists with her claim that racism, sexism, and homophobia were linked, all coming from the failure to recognize or inability to tolerate difference.

V

Among the earliest and most often cited examples of contemporary black feminist writing was Frances M. Beale’s “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female” Writing in 1969, Beale was a leading member of the Black Women’s Liberation Committee, a division of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee that was, during this same period, establishing itself as an autonomous organization that would become known as the Black Women’s Alliance. Beale desires to rewrite the traditional roles. She proposes a strategy to achieve this: “We must begin to rewrite or understanding of traditional personal relationships between Black men and women” (110). The Afro-centric construct is problematized with multiple
centres being created with differing ideologies at every juncture of the changing socio-historical process.

In rewriting the traditional role, black women seem to be concerned not only with black models but also with realities of the times. The white American mainstream lady image, according to Beale, exerts an influence on black women: “America has defined the roles to which each individual should subscribe. ... The ideal model that is projected for a woman is to be surrounded by hypocritical homage and estranged from all real work ...” (110). The ‘confining role’ (113) as Beale prefers to call it seems to be non-acceptable to many black women. She categorically asserts “we unqualitatively reject these respective models” (110). Erasing the mainstream American model seems to be the programme for black women in the 1970s. Beale’s use of the pronoun ‘we’ gets problematized by Toni Cade’s different perception on the condition of black women. She says: “We are so turned around about Western models, we do not even know how to raise the correct questions” (Toni Cade 128-129). Interestingly, Beale brings in the aspect of mass struggle into the women’s question and problematizes any single role model or definitive construct to black women. She says: “We as black women have got to deal with the problems that the black masses deal with, for our problems in reality are one and the same” (120). But she undermines her own statement by raising the specific problem of Black women that separates them from black men. She deconstructs the category ‘Black Masses’ by her phrase: “The Double Jeopardy; to be Black and Female” (1970).

To conclude, Beale is only one of the many black feminists who has criticized the women’s movement for its limited focus. She says: “Any white group that does not have an anti-imperialist and anti-racist ideology has absolutely nothing in common with the Black women’s struggle”(120). Black women and men along with other minority groups, understand that equal opportunity with white male power elites is not only out of reach for the majority of the population but also is not going to alter an oppressive system in any significant way.” Beale opposes the “role of housekeeper and
mother” (113) for black women and proposes struggle, in the revolution with a ‘political consciousness’. In response to charges from black men that black women had executed a social and economic castration of black men via their tendency to lead single parent households and to accept positions traditionally held by men, Beale asserts, “It is fallacious reasoning that in order for the Black man, to be strong, the black woman has to be weak” (113). She challenges black nationalists to recognize that the rise of the race as a group requires the raising of each of its members.

Toni Cade’s view of who oppresses whom or at least who starts the oppression problematizes Beale’s term ‘Double Jeopardy’. According to Toni, it is the black woman who sets the ‘enemy camp’ in the black household: “The mother, daughter, aunt, and grandma tend to line up against the man and his buddies from the pool hall, the bar on wherever. ... Mamma tells daughter that men ain’t no damn good and raises such suspicions and fears and paranoia in her heart that she is nasty as hell to men she meets and elicits equally a rousy behavior” (129). In this context Beale’s term ‘Double Jeopardy’ can be reversed and applied to black men. Further Beale herself seems to be aware of this perception: “Certain black men are maintaining that they have been castrated by society but that Black women somehow escaped this persecution and even contributed to this emasculation” (112). In this context the ‘double Jeopardy’ applied to men would warrant for a rephrasing of Beale’s term so as to read “The Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Male” (112).

Linda LaRue, writing in the same year (1970), employs a similar rhetoric of gendered capitalism in her examination of private relations between men and women. In her essay on “The Black Movement and Women’s Liberation” (1970), LaRue argues that the “exclusive competition” that pervades American relationships pits men and women against each other in a battle for scarce resources. This “exclusive competition” has destroyed our interpersonal relations. She asserts that only by rejecting or modifying such competitive definitions and embracing role integration “can we hope to
rise above the petty demarcations of human freedom, both racial and
gendered” (169). Like Beale, LaRue asserts that the complete liberation of
this conceived individual from a person enslaved by racism, sexism, and
capitalism to a free human being would mark the full liberation of all people.
To liberate black women is the process not of an economic but of the product
of cultural. That is to say, black women have to be liberated from the cultural
context. Like Beale, LaRue called upon white women to join her in an open
assault upon the capitalist system’s gender oppression.

“The Liberation of Black Women” (1970) is another essay by Pauli
Murray who believes the experience of sexism to be common to all women,
across racial and class-based lines of American society. According to
Murray’s strategic vision, gender and racial liberation can be achieved only
by the hands of interracial coalition of women. She acknowledges, however,
that major obstacles have prevented the formation of such a powerful alliance.
Distinct among these is the black women’s “dilemma of competing identities
and priorities” (191). Middle class black women, according to Murray, are
capable of overcoming these hostilities and of traversing the divide.

The Combahee River Collective, as the most radical collection of black
women working for change on these various dimensions provides an
illustrative example of this developing discourse. The Collective’s “Black
Feminist Statement” details the history of progress towards intersectional
theory. For these women, race, gender, and class-based oppressive forces
cannot be separated from each other because they are experienced,
particularly by working class black women, simultaneously. The Combahee
River Collective Statement sets forth a more specific, political definition:
“Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black
women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an
adjunct to somebody else’s but because of our need as human persons for
autonomy” (Bell 241). Although drafted in 1977 by a radical group of
primarily New York black feminists and lesbians, this statement crystallizes
the alienation of many black women from the Euro-American feminist movement:

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women’s lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g. the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression. (Bell 242)

Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexisms. (Bell 241)

Another distinction that the collective draws between its own philosophy and that of Beale and LaRue is their belief that the fall of capitalism alone will not bring about the fall of class, race, and sex oppressions. Whereas previous radical feminists writings emphasized the subjugation and subordination of women and people of color as a byproduct of capitalist ideology and function, the women of the collective assert that the racial and gender oppression now possess a life of their own and can longer be considered mere derivatives of capitalist competition. They challenge critics of capitalism to consider the deterministic role of race and sex upon the economic life of individuals and groups in American society rather than employing a narrow, class-based rhetorical objection to capitalism. The Combahee River Collective Statement is a key document in the history of contemporary black feminism and the development of the concept of identity.
In their mission statement, the National Black Feminist Organization encapsulated the feelings of black women:

Black women want to be proud, dignified, and free from all those definitions of beauty and womanhood that are unrealistic and unnatural. We, not white women or black men, must define our own self-image as black women and not fall into the mistake of being placed upon the pedestal which is even being rejected by white women. It has been hard for black women to emerge from the myriad of distorted images that have portrayed us as grinning Beulahs, castrating Sapphires, and pancake-box Jemimas. As black feminist, we realized the need to establish ourselves as an important black feminist organizations. (124)

A number of organizations emerged as a direct result of the Civil Rights and black liberation movements of the 60s and 70s. The researcher cannot make a list of the organizations, nor does record noteworthy events of these organizations for want of space. The power and influence that, each of these organizations has cannot be ignored. As one NBFO member has said, “White women are our natural allies; we cannot take down the system alone” (Internet 9).

The Combahee River Collective is enforced to include the fourth dimension of oppression, that is, heterosexism and homophobia within the statement of the lesbian participants. But little attention was paid to the issue because of the stigma attached to feelings and behaviours not attached to heterosexual norms. In 1982 Cheryl Clarke wrote an essay on “The Failure to Transform : Homophobia in the Black Community”. Clarke begins by indicating “black macho intellectuals and Politicos” with “consciously or unwittingly” absorbing “the homophobia of their patriarchal slave masters” (Vieregge 7). Clarke notes the contradiction of a racial group ideology that rejects assimilationist and integrationist ideals but admits the values of heterosexuality that govern white society. In embracing heterosexual norms,
Clarke charges, the black nationalist is consenting to the Western model of family life, which she defines as insular, privatized and nuclear in structure. She argues further that “dogmatic, doctrinaire black men” have embraced Christian fundamentalist notions of sexuality that are in and of themselves incompatible with revolutionary goals.

Fifteen years after Clarke penned her essay, “The Failure to Transform”, Cathy J. Cohen and Tamara Jones wrote “Fighting Hemophobia versus Challenging Heterosexism: ‘The Failure to Transform’ Revisited” (1999). Both expanded upon Clarke’s critique of internalized norms of family structure and interpersonal relationship. Heterosexism, by privileging the family forms described in Clarke’s writing, devalues not only lesbian and gay definitions of family but also the black woman as a single head of household. Class oppression, or capitalism generally, is also linked to heterosexism and homophobia within Cohen and Jones analysis they observe three powerful characteristics that these systems hold in common:

1. the maintenance of clearly defined roles and relationships
2. both heterosexism and capitalism share a distribution scheme which links institutional power to resource ownership
3. both systems require continuous surveillance to ensure that the prescribed roles and relationships are being fulfilled.

Both argue at the end that the fate of all black people will be achieved through the realization and maintenance of a coalition of black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people with heterosexual black men and women.

Dartmouth sociologist Deborah K. King did not appreciate the feminist critics who analysed and treated race, gender, and class discrimination as additive factors. She criticizes this incremental approach for examining each factor independently and assuming its effect to be direct and apparent. In her conceptions of multiple jeopardy and multiple consciousness, King articulates an intersectional approach that advances the black feminist agenda and challenges current theoretical and empirical research into questions of race, class, gender and sexuality.
By multiple she means not only simultaneity but also the multiplicative relationship among the various factors impeding sustaining on individual’s life. As she puts: “The importance of any one factor in explaining black women’s circumstances thus varies depending on the particular aspects of our lives under consideration and the reference groups to whom we are compared” (Vieregge 9).

To examine the social and economic situation of a working class black lesbian is not to understand her class status as separate from her racial or sexual identity but to understand them as a complete function of her definition of self and of others’ conception of her. Holding all but one variable constant in her life and then exploring the implications of an adjustment to that single variable does not capture the unique position of this woman relative to say the Asian middle class bisexual male. She admonishes them to reject the notion that a single form of oppression is fundamental and to give up its insistence upon separatist organizational forms. Although she does not call it by name or even describe it completely, King is calling for a coalition politics rooted in this “multiplicity of oppressions” that will encourage a dialogue between nationalist, feminist, and gay liberationists and their eventual realization of a shared multiple consciousness.

Radical black feminist thought has undergone considerable development in the past three decades. Common themes, however, tie these literatures and their authors together. Included among these are an often bitter criticism of capitalism and its effects within the traditional economy and the economy of culture, the rejection of ranking oppressions and an embrace of intersectional theory, and the advocacy of a coalitional politics that transcends the racial, economic, gender, and sexual barriers to confront the complex of oppressions facing all people at varying degrees.

Starting around 50s, the “first wave” of Black Feminism in American took interest in the relations between racism and classism, with a certain amount of studies dedicated to the problems of black men and women. The
period from 1960 to 1980 happens to be the period of all kinds of women’s movements and inculcating the Black Feminist consciousness. Toni Cade Bambara, a feminist, told an interviewer:

What has changed about the women’s movement is the way we perceive it, the way black women define the term, the phenomena and our participation in it. White bourgeois feminist organizations captured the arena, media attention, and the country’s imagination. ... Black women and other women of color have come around to recognizing that the movement is much more than a few organizations. The movement is exactly what the word suggests, a motion of the mind. ... We’re more inclined now, women of color, to speak of black midwives and the medicine women of the various communities when we talk of health care rather than assume we have to set up women’s health collectives on the same order as non-colored women have. In organizing, collectivizing, researching, strategizing, we’re much less antsy than we were a decade ago. We are more inclined to trust our own traditions, whatever name we gave and now give those impulses those groups, those agendas, and are less inclined to think we have to sound like build like, non-colored groups that identify themselves as feminist or as women’s rights groups, or so it seems to me. (Tate 34)

The early period is the period of the rise of a number of movements, the black liberation movement, the anti-lynching movement, the anti-slavery movement, the black conscious movement, the Black Muslim movement, the Black Power movement, the Black Arts movement, the rise of Harlem Renaissance, The Black Rights movement and a number of others that have played a vital role in the lives of the blacks. The literature of the period reflects upon the plights of these people. As for women are concerned, Lorde observes: “As if we have made a secret pact between ourselves not to speak” (Lorde 170). Subsequently, they co-operated in their own enslavement. They lived in “mate agreement”. They never grasped to grasp that translation of silence into speech for the oppressed is a gesture of defiance which makes
new life and new growth possible. Lorde warns black women not only to break the “secret pact between ourselves not to speak” (170) but also to define themselves as authentic beings for the obvious reason that “For Black women ... it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others – for their use and to our detriment” (45). According to Barbara Christian, the novels written “until the 1940s, black women in both Anglo and Afro-American Literature have been usually assigned stereotyped roles ...” (2). Christian further adds: “Throughout the novels of slavery and reconstruction periods, Anglo-American literature, particularly southern white literature, fashioned an image of the black woman intended to further create submission, conflict between the black man and woman, and importantly, a dumping ground for those female functions a basically Puritan society could not confront” (2). Calvin Hernton, a black male feminist, writes in his article “The Sexual Mountain and Black women Writers” that no women write of this period nor female protagonist get depicted in novel. To quote his words: “Except for Gwendolyn Brooks, and perhaps Margaret Walker ... the name of not one black woman writer and not one female protagonist was accorded a worthy status in the black literary world prior to the 1970’s” (Bell 242). Though equally brutalized tormented, dehumanized and humiliated, the black men still continued to feel encouraged to channelize their frustrated aggression, their suppressed anguish in the direction of those without any power, those triply jeopardized creatures, the slaves of slaves – Black women. One interesting thing is to be noted that the different racial stereotypes – the Toms, the Coons, the mulattos, the Mammies, the Bad Bucks, a subhuman, the image of “impure” and “lewd”, the Sapphire image, etc. have different names in 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Images of Black women have been controlled and distorted not only by the capitalistic, racist white society but also by black men. During the sixties, it is seen that even the smallest man woman in the street was in rebellion against a system which denied him/ her dignity and self-respect. Sixties was the time of mass awareness. Each oppressed group is strengthened by this realization. The cause of black
feminist consciousness takes a wider meaning and importance. The massive change in the society begins to appear in books, articles and essays. In her essays Andrea Benton Rushing (like “Images of Black Women in Afro-American Poetry” 1978, Images of Black Women in Modern African Poetry: An Overview” 1979, “Family Resemblances: A Comparative Study of Women Protagonists in Contemporary African-American and Anglophone-American Novels”, 1983) convincingly illustrates that Eurocentric qualities and categories of stereotypic white women such as passivity, compliancy, the submissive wife, and the woman on a pedestal are inappropriately applied in analyses of black women characters, whose historical experiences and cultural imperatives are different from white women” (Bell 242). Black feminist critics like Mary Helen Washington (Introduction to Black-Eyed Susans, 1977) and Barbara Christian (Black Women Novelists) applaud the displacement of stereotypic with realistic images by black women writers like Morrison, Meriwether, Marshall and Bambara.

During 1960s to 1970s phase, the creative writers, and Black Feminist critics do contribute “the raising of consciousness” of women about their subservient opposition. The issues such as the class, the gender, and race become very significant in the next phase. These issues, combined with economic deprivation, have far reaching consequences for these women. The racial bias of the whites sees the blacks as animalistic people lacking rationality and a sense of morality. Frantz Fanon in Black Skin White Masks aptly observes about racial, social discrimination that:

In Europe, the black man is the symbol of evil ... in every civilised and civilising country, the Negro the symbol of sin .... In Europe the Negro has one function: that of symbolising the lower emotions, the baser inclinations the dark side of the soul. (Neerja Chaand 55-56)

Thus for the whites-black symbolises evil, sin, wretchedness, death, war, and famine. The black women have to carry the burden of these negative aspects appended to their image and have to suffer greater degradation.
The realisation of this degradation and neglect, infuriated the black women who in the seventies preferred to describe their struggle for equality as Womanism, a term coined by the black American novelist Alice Walker and defined in part as: “a black feminist or a feminist of color committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female ... (but who) loves herself, regardless” (56).

Chickwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, the African Black feminist, however, claims to have arrived at the term Womanism independently of Walker’s use of it and defines it as: “a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black woman, its aim is the dynamism of wholeness and self-healing that one sees in the positive integrative endings of womanist novels” (56).

What is more, the women of the third world were not happy with the white woman’s Feminism. These women propounded their own brand of feminism, known as Women of Colour. According to Sue Allen, Women of Colour includes not only the Black Feminism of the African Women but also of other non-white women. The women of this group believe that the feminist movement of the first world focuses on the white, literate upper middle class women and not of the non-white, illiterate, poor women of the rest of the world. The women of the underdeveloped countries have to bear the burden not only of gender oppression, but also of racial and economic oppression. They vehemently voice their protest by saying, in the words of Gemma Tang Nain, that “there has got to be a possibility (which) is anti-racist/ Socialist Feminism to reflect its concern with sex, race and class oppression” (Neerja 57).

VI

The Afro-American women writers and feminist critics who have come to dominate the Afro-American literature of 1980s have to be placed against the cultural ferment of the 1960s for a comprehensive estimate of their contribution. The 1960s in American were characterized by an over-riding impulsive towards self-assertion which manifested itself as much in urban
riots and group insurgencies as in the autobiographical writings of the period. The ‘60s woke to the essential vulnerability of the American cultural fabric. Dissent came to be accepted as the dominant artistic mode. The anger, pride, and arrogance of Afro-American writers gained a new urgency and legitimacy.

Feminist movement added momentum from the politics of confrontation precipitated by the cultural ethos of the ‘60s. Feminist writings laboured to recover and restore women’s roles to historical and social events in an attempt to redefine social processes by liberating them from gender systems. The Afro-American woman writer in the 1970s thus found herself in a unique context where her Afro-American identity as well as her womanhood could be turned into assets and sources of strength. This meant a qualitative change in their psychological environment because they had been used to a subsidiary role in a male-dominated society where the cultural perspective was heavily slanted in favour of Whites. Hitherto they had constituted the darkest side of the other America which never found expression even in the writings of Black male writers. The large number of autobiographies by Black women published in the ‘70s highlight the fact that their version of American experience was excluded from Black male writings. The astonishing variety of narrative modes employed by Afro-American women writers in their works of the 1980s should be seen as an index of their resistance to cultural oppression. Black women writers can be said to have invented the novel for this purpose through their own experimentations in the genre of autobiographical writings.

While Black male writers are fascinated by power and plagued by thoughts of their invisibility, Black women authors try to create the identity of mother and protectoress in their autobiographical writings. By 1983, a large number of Black women writers like Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn, Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara and Gloria Naylor emerged who articulated inner and other realities of women’s existence in their works. The depiction of women in the novels of the twentieth century have varied tremendously
depending upon who has been writing about them. When famous black male writers, like Richard Wright or Ralph Ellison have portrayed women characters, they have been extremely derogatory. Only James Baldwin has depicted women as having some intrinsic worth. The researcher cannot survey them all for want of space. A few novels are selected just to show how the black women are treated differently from that of 1960s and 1970s. Gloria Naylor wrote *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) and *Linden Hills* (1985). Both novels address themselves to the issues of human relations in a racial context in advanced capitalism. The double consciousness which W.E.B. DuBois diagnosed as the root cause of black suffering is internalized in the very structure of her novels. Smith comments on *The Women of Brewster Place* by saying “The black woman has found the freedom to love her race, her family, and herself” (Smith 164). The novel is a long journey in the saga of Black womanhood. Naylor summed up her view in these words in an interview:

> How do you keep your soul and still succeed in America? For the Afro-American, regardless of where you climb on the ladder of success there will be racism. Under these conditions, if you give up what centres you, what is unique in you – then you are lost. The greatness of this country is the uniqueness of its people. But there is pressure to amalgamate. And that is suicidal when it happens to the Afro-American. (Ramakrishnan 53)

Celie in *The Color Purple* (1982) is able to celebrate her own genuine and real black woman self. The preoccupations of Walker – “the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women” – are evident in *Meridian* (1986). Zora Neale Hurston, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara and a host of others celebrate blackness in various tones. In his book *The Spirit of American Literature* (1988) Darshan Singh Maini describes the upsurge of these black writers who rose in unison to create a literary awareness. If one can make a careful study
of these writers, one notices that the black woman in America was no more a mule of the world, carrying the burden heaped on her back but a radiant female hero. By casting off from her imprisoned psyche the dragon of Thanatotic self-loathing conditions, she marched straight into the world of Eros – a state of self assured Paradise from where she could proclaim to the world in a voice so heroic, and so articulate that they are now the crea toress of a new world where “we build our own temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. The ebony phoenix, the avatar of wholeness, feels herself elevated to the status of divinity of ontological power. “i found god in myself/ and i loved her fiercely” (Kulkarni 28).

Bambara, being a staunch crusader of black women folk, asserted : Let us “keep the big guns on the real enemy ... and submerge all breezy definitions of manhood/ womanhood ... until realistic definitions emerge through a commitment to Blackhood” (Cade 109). Fission and fragmentation distort the beauty of black culture. Hence, says Met Watkins: “Let us create a world of homogeneity, synthesis, balance and androgyny. Let this be the idiom of our literature too. Only through wisdom and solidarity can Black American literature achieve the across – the board renaissance, a third Harlem renaissance, not only for men or women but for all the souls of Black folk”(33).

In addition to these novels, several books, articles, essays and reviews, concerning the liberation of women, the socio-cultural positions and the economic-political conditions of black women, appear in circulation. The feminist, the psychoanalytic and sociological perspectives have proved most useful in analysing the representations of Black women. If psychoanalytic theorists have examined the Black woman’s unconscious actions, then sociologists have attempted to trace the experience of young black boys and girls. The psychiatrists focus on mental and emotional disorders of black women. Likewise, the feminists have been concerned with the issue of subordination that black women entail. Many black women look for an
African philosophy, African ethics, and an African personality which can be incorporated into her/his being. Some of these traditional characteristics do survive in the Afro-American. La Frances has rightly observed: “Black women were beginning to consider, reflect, and evaluate their existence in this country from a perspective of their African past and slave history” (11). Black women’s writing of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s is one tradition among the various feminisms where the Black woman is prominently featured in complex and multiple ways.

With the publication of *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979), Michele Wallace created a furore in Afro-American society. She states:

Perhaps the single most important reason the Black Movement did not work was that black men did not realize they could not wage struggle without the full involvement of women. And in that sense they made a mistake that the blacks of the post-slavery period would have been least likely to have made. Women, traditionally, want more than anything to keep things together. Women are hard workers and they require little compensation. Women are sometimes willing to die much more quickly than men. Women vote, women march. Women perform tedious tasks. And women cannot be paid off for the death and the suffering of their children. Look at how important women have been to the liberation struggles in Africa. By negating the importance of their role, the efficiency of the Black Movement was obliterated. (81)

According to Wallace, the Black Arts Movement did not get success on account of the conflict between black men and black women. What she meant was that the involvement of women would have made the struggle more unified. La Frances Rodgers–Rose writes in preface to her book: [the book] “is destroying the revisional work that the previously mentioned scholars have done on Black women and the Black family” (11). However, June Jordan proclaims “The book that will shape the 1980” (11). La Frances
further states that “The overall opinion of the book is that it is shallow and devoid of any knowledge of what it has meant to be a Black woman or man in American society” (11). The book of Wallace neither discouraged the Black woman nor destroyed her spirit. Black women writers articulated their anger, jealousy, rage, and disappointment through books, articles, and anthologies in their own way.

Barbara Smith in her essay – “The Truth That Never Hurts : Black Lesbians in Fiction in the 1980s” states :

... Black Feminist writing provides an incisive critical perspective on sexual political issues that affect Black women, for example, the issue of sexual violence. It generally depicts the significance of Black women’s relationships with each other as a primary source of support. Black feminist writing may also be classified as such because the author identifies herself as a feminist and has demonstrated commitment to women’s issues and related political concerns. An openness in discussing Lesbian subject matter is perhaps the most obvious earmark of Black feminist writing. (Sinha 26)

bell hooks, who tries to comprehend about African-American feminist issues such as classism and sexism is a new way from a different perspective and attempt to find new ways of putting this understanding into action, would like to educate their white sisters over and over again about the oppression of racism and classism. Through her works like Ain’t I a Woman? “Black Women and Feminism (1981), Feminist Theory : From Margin to Centre (1984), hooks tries to imbibe certain values of life. She touches the subjects like economic, and ethnic problems. Many blacks were raised in families where members spoke loudly to one another. In some cultures, it is silence and quietness that are interpreted as signs of hostility and aggression. hooks tries to inculcate : [black] women can develop a sense of community and ‘sisterhood”. Respecting diversity does not mean uniformity or sameness” (Faye Powell 7).
Phyllis Palmer takes us to another area of feminism. Palmer wrote an article “White Women/ Black Women: The Dualism of Female Identity and Experience” (1983), that focuses on the attraction of white feminists like Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. Basically, she says that the strong black female figure corresponds neatly with the racist-inspired image of the “black mammy”, disguising the fact that, as Barbara Smith and others have pointed out, black women have been the recipients of the lowest pay, the worst poverty, the least access to child care and the most frequent victims of all kinds of violence, including battering, rape and involuntary sterilization.

Charlotte Bunch, unlike bell hooks, Phyllis Palmer and Barbara Smith, gives in *Passionate Politics: Feminist Theory in Action* (1987) concrete examples of how middle class women need to examine their own class biases and behaviours in order to understand how they contribute to inter-class fiction.


Smith’s article “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” (1982) is frequently cited as the breakthrough article in opening the field of Black women’s literature and Black lesbian discussion. She suggests that it is Black
women who are in the best position to create an effective criticism that provides an integrated consideration of the roles played by race, gender, class, and sexuality in literature. She argues that this critical move is necessary not only for the impact it will have on literary criticism generally, but also to offer a deeper understanding of the literature of Black women specifically. While commenting on the radicals who deal with race and sex and class and sexual identity all at one time, Smith observes: “What I really feel is radical is trying to make coalitions with people who are different from you. I feel it is radical to be dealing with race and sex and class and sexual identity all at one time. I think that is really radical because it has never been done before” (6). When black women’s books are dealt with at all, it is usually in the context of black literature which largely ignores the implications of sexual politics. When white women look at black women’s works they are of course ill-equipped to deal with the subtleties of racial politics. A black feminist to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of black women writers is an absolute necessity. She wraps up her essay by doing a “Black feminist” reading of Toni Morrison’s novel *Sula*.

Smith’s main point in this essay lays a foundation for the explosion of both Black feminist critical theory and the creative writings of Black women in the 1970s and 1980s. Her argument exposes the flaws of considering literature through either the exclusive lens of race, as Black literary criticism tends to do, or the exclusive lens of gender, as predominantly White feminist criticism tends to do.

Christian wrote *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (1980). In this book, she discusses this issue:

... the black woman was valued for her reproductive capacity ... the black woman was also seen as different from the white woman in her capacity to do man’s work. (7)
The Afro-American woman bore a double-edged persecution: one, as a worker, both in the house as well as in the fields; two, as an object of sexual exploitation. She was seen as an over-sexed, immoral, loose woman who was always available for instant sexual gratification, as well as for the procreation of the race, thereby ensuring an unfailing supply of human beings for the ever-increasing needs of a capitalist machinery. A host of feminist critics such as Gloria Steinem (Outrageous Acts and Everybody Rebellions, 1984), Gloria Wade Gayles (No Crystal Stair: Visions of Race and Sex in Black Women’s Fiction, 1984), Paula Giddings (When and Where I enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America, 1984), Diana Lewis (A Response to Inequality: Black Women, Racism and Sexism, 1977) echo the similar opinions when they deal with the themes of racism and sexism that have a parallel existence. Both the themes are mutually interdependent and hence they arise from the same set of circumstances.

Then, we have a host of black womanist writers. Fran Sanders (“Dear Black Man”, 1970), Alice Walker (“In Search of Our Mother’s Garden, 1983), Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (“Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English”, 1985), Sherley Anne Williams (“Some Implications of Womanist Theory”, 1986), to name a few. Ogunyemi thinks that the black womanist will recognize “along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations ...” (Ranveer 45). Fran Sanders, Sherley Anne Williams and others echo the same opinions when they think of their volition of writing on womanism. The task of the black womanist writers is to give back to black women their own black woman self, their beauty, physical and sexual strength, motherhood, sisterhood, wifehood, etc. At the same time, they need to be educated and made aware of the need to recover from psychological and mental traumas of inferiority. This is possible only if their wholeness and roundness as women are restored.

Many black men writers like W.E.B. Dubois (Souls of the Black Folk, 1961), Hernton Calvin C. (Sex and Racism in American Literature, 1965),
Ldner Joyce (*Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman*, 1972), Dance, Darl C (“Black Eve or Madonna? A Study of the antithetical views of the Mother in Black American Literature”, 1979), Le Roi Jones, James Baldwin, John Oliver Killens, to name a few, have expressed the black woman caught in dilemma of the double jeopardy of caste/race and sex. There are many women writers, like Maya Angelou (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 1978), Zora Neale Hurston (*Dust Tracks on the Road: An Autobiography*, 1984), Toni Morrison (*Sula*, 1975), Louise Meriwether (*Daddy was a Number Runner*, 1977), Alice Walker (*The Purple Color*, 1982), Rodgers Carolyn M. (*How I Got Oah: New Selected Poems*, 1975), La Frances Rodgers – Rose (*The Black Woman*, 1972), to name a few, have given us a poignant account of black woman as a mother, as a wife, and as a maid. From both the perspectives of male and female writers it is seen that even after the abolition of slavery, white America has continued to hold the black woman in “enslavement”, by keeping alive a series of distorted psychological images of black womanhood. These popular stereotypes are those of the “tragic mulatto”, the “hot-blooded exotic whore”, and the “matriarch”. For the black woman, “double consciousness tends to foster an image of ugliness in contrast to the images of “purity”, “chastity” and “beauty” associated with southern white womanhood.

Unlike the black male writer, the black female writer has traditionally written about what goes on within the Black community, and it is the exposure of this intimate life to the public eye that has evoked many harsh reactions. The black woman writer is regarded as the individualist personified and therefore a witch. But the black woman writer has not stopped trying to understand her identity as well as the identity of her people. Commenting on the writings of black women, Houston Baker critically observes “To understand our origins we must journey through different straits and in the end we may only find confusion” (Baker 1).

Women writers like Morrison have found a sense of order and have shown it clearly in their works. Along with women writers, the psychiatrist
have also played a vital role in pointing out the crippling effects of double consciousness on the black women. Journal of the National Medical Association (September, 1969), published an article by name “The Impact of the Black Identity Crisis on Community Psychiatry”. In this article, Sidney B. Jenkins notes a number of examples of black girls and women who have become the victims of black consciousness and the unique qualities of blackness. For example, Bertha, a woman suffering from neurotic guilt and self-degradation, stated “She thought it a fundamental truth that black woman with thick lips and short, kinkey hair were ugly” (423). Fanon F. further elaborates this ugliness of the black woman: “In the white world, the man (woman) of color encounters difficulties in the development of his (her) bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty” (423).

We have a number of black feminists who have brought out the crippling effects of double consciousness of the black women in their books or scholarly articles. In the eyes or in the imagination of the black man, the Afro-American wife is often reduced to a loose woman. In Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1980) the wife is constantly reminded by the husband: “You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman, Goddam, you nothing at all” (176). June Jordan (*Some Changes*, 1971) articulates the special paradox of black womanhood: “To be black and to be a woman. To be a double dealer, to be twice oppressed, to be more than invisible. That’s a triple vision” (Meer Manvi, 81). Washington Mary Helen (“Black Women Image Markers”, 1974), Schultz Elizabeth (“Free In Fact and At Last : The Image of the Black Woman in Black American Literature”, 1977), Bogin Ruth and Bert Loewenberg (*Black Women in Nineteenth Century American Life*, 1977) and a host of others who throw light on the impact of “double consciousness” on the black women. For example, Washington observes: [For the black woman] “double consciousness tends to foster an image of ugliness in contrast to the
images of “purity”, “chastity” and “beauty” associated with southern white womanhood” (81).

Acknowledging the inner complexity of a black mother, Afro-American women writers and the black feminist critics have felt a compelling need to voice her travails in their fiction, poetry, essays etc. Writers in the black female literary tradition do not deny the “strength” of black mothers. Black mothers suffer violence and degradation and make supreme sacrifices for their children – thus the strength and endurance of womanhood are to be most readily seen in the images of the mother. And these images, it must be said, draw their force from the fact that the role of mother had to be played in such adverse circumstances – most common among these being desertion by the black man. Sojourne Truth, who challenged racist/sexist ideology, happens to be the first black woman on her own role as mother. Truth said: “Why I feel so tall within – I feel as if the power of a nation is within me” (85).

These various feminist critics and women writers are compelled to assume responsibility for transforming the consciousness of black women and society as a whole. It is also their responsibility to recover literary texts which had hitherto been obscured by patriarchal prejudices. However, Michelle Wallace, who was a famous Black Feminist who also was a member of the Combahee River Collective, states in a certain excerpt that:

We exist as women who are Black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle – because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world. (Internet 11)

**VII**

Having seen the development of the Black Feminism in the “first” and “second wave”, let us see the “third wave” of Black Feminism, and its vital role in raising the consciousness of the black women. Both the Black Feminist Critics and Black women novelists have played their vital roles to inculcate the black feminist consciousness.
Starting around 2000, the “third wave” of Feminism in France took interest in the relations between sexism and racism with a certain amount of studies dedicated to Black Feminism. This new focus was displayed by the translation in 2007, of the first anthology of U.S. Black feminism texts.

Angela Davis who was an activist and Cultural Critic, wrote *Women, Race and Class* (1981). She was one of the first people to articulate a written argument centered on intersectionality, in *Women, Race and Class*. Black women are the victims of triple jeopardy – racism, sexism and classism. Each discrimination has a single, direct and independent effect on the status. For example, class oppression is the largest component of black women’s subordinate status, therefore, the exclusive focus should be on economics. Such assertions ignore the fact that racism, sexism, and classism constitute three interdependent control systems. Quoting Mary Church Terrell, the first president of the National Association of Colored Women, Deborah K. King observes: “Not only are colored women ... handicapped on account of their sex, but they are almost everywhere baffled and mocked because of their race. Not only because they are women but because they are colored women” (2). Angela Davis, in *Women, Race and Class*, notes “If the most violent punishments of men consisted in floggings and mutilations, Women were flogged and mutilated, as well as raped” (47).

Kimberle Crenshaw who was a prominent feminist law theorist published a number of articles such as “Race, Reform and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Anti Discrimination Law” (1988), “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (1989), and “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color” (1989). These articles are scholarly and thought-provoking.

The latter article has presented intersectionality as a way of framing the various interactions of race and gender in the context of violence against
women of color. As Crenshaw observes: “I have used intersectionality as a way to articulate the interaction of racism and patriarchy generally. I have also used intersectionality to describe the location of women of color both within overlapping systems of subordination and at the margins of feminism and anti-racism” (11).

... Intersectionality provides a basis for re-conceptualizing race as a coalition between men and women of color. Intersectionality may provide the means for dealing with other marginalizations as well. She goes a step further and tries to trace the category ‘woman’. According to her, “since all categories are socially constructed, there is no such thing as, say, “Blacks” or “Women” (11). We all can recognize the distinction between the claims “I am Black” and the claim “I am a person who happens to be Black”. “I am Black” takes the socially imposed identity and empowers it as an anchor of subjectivity. “I am Black” becomes not simply a statement of resistance, but also a positive discourse of self-identification, intimately linked to celebratory statements like the Black nationalist “Black is beautiful”. “I am a person who happens to be Black”, on the other hand, achieves self-identification by straining for a certain universality effect, “I am first a person” and for a concomitant dismissal of the imposed category (“Black”) as contingent, circumstantial, non-determinant.

Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics.

Crenshaw gave the idea a name while discussing Identity Politics in her essay, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color.”

Patricia Hill Collins, a feminist theorist, introduced the sociological theory of Matrix Domination. Much of her work concerns the politics of black feminist thought and oppression. Pat Parker’s involvement in the black
feminist movement was reflected in her writings as a poet. Her works inspired other black feminist poets like Hattie Gossett.

Other Black feminist authors who tried to inculcate black feminist consciousness are Jewelle Gomez, June Jordan, Sapphire, Becky Birtha, Donna Hilbert, Cheryl Clarke, Ann Allen Shockley, and Alexis De Veaux and others. Alexis De Veaux’s publications include a child’s story Na Ni (1973), Spirits in the Street (1973), Circles (1973), The Tapestry (1976). De Veaux’s work is characterized by its focus on the psychological inner space in intimate relationships, whether these be lesbian affairs, conflicting forces in a love triangle, or the struggle between a daughter and her parent. Regardless of De Veaux’s specific subjects, her constant concern is love – a love that is always complex and that involves painful reconciliation as the prerequisite for personal growth.

In all of the work, a black woman is at the centre, her trials and tribulations. As she says: “In all of the work I’ve done, there is a certain and deliberate care I have taken with laying out the image of the black woman as I have seen or experienced her, which indicates that there is a clear and conscious desire to address myself to her” (Tate 51).

In her interview with Tate, De Veaux spoke on many aspects such as the contribution of black women writers to women’s movement, the presence of African racial memory, following the traditional language of the Africans, and participation of women in the revolution etc. As regards to involvement of black women in their struggles, De Veaux observes: “We fight the central oppression of all people of color as well as the oppression of women by men. The women’s movement has opened up an area for us to have a more visible collective space, but actually we have been there all the time” (Tate 57).

Jewelle Gomez was connected with women’s organizations and activities. She has written extensively about gay Rights since the 1980s, including articles on equal marriage in Ms. Magazine and has been quoted
extensively during the court case. She wrote the novel *The Gilda Stories*, a black, lesbian vampire novel.

June Jordan was a poet, an activist, a teacher, and an essayist. She was a prolific, passionate and influential voice for liberation. Her publications are *Who Look at Me* (1969), *Directed by Desire* (2005), *Soul Script* (2005), *Some Changes* (1971). Twenty-seven more books followed in her lifetime. Jordan articulates the special paradox of black womanhood: “to be black and to be a woman. To be a double outsider, to be twice oppressed, to be more than invisible. That’s a triple vision” (Meera Manvi 81).

Sapphire was actually Lofton. She took the name “Sapphire” because of its one-time cultural association with the image of a “belligerent black woman” and also because she said she could more easily picture that name on a book over than her birth name. She published two collections of poetry, *Meditations on the Rainbow* (1987), and *American Dreams* (1994). *Push* was her only novel published in 1996. The novel brought Sapphire praise and much controversy for its graphic account of a young woman growing up in a cycle of incest and abuse. A film based on her novel premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2009; it was renamed *Precious* to avoid confusion with the 2009 action film *Push*.

Becky Birtha started her career as a poet. She published “Doors”, *The Forbidden Poems*. *Lucky Beans* was her popular novel. She wrote all about the lesbians. Therefore, she was called a lesbian author.

slotted into a single tradition; she experiments with free-verse lyricism, formalism, and prose poetry. In more recent work, one can find elements of Sardonic allegory, even surrealism.

Ann Allen Shockley is many-sided. She is a critic, a short story writer, a novelist, a librarian and editor. Shockley treats both interracial and lesbian experiences. She is best known for her ground-breaking lesbian fiction: *Loving Her* (1974) is arguably the first novel to offer a black lesbian as its primary character.

Shockley, who has named herself a “social conscious writer”, extends her fictional treatment of interracial and lesbian experiences with her collection of short stories, *The Black and White of It* (1980), which celebrates the gains women have made in the wake of racial and sexual oppression.

Shockley consistently explores possibilities for social transformation across sexual and racial divides. Challenging the homophobia that, according to her 1979 essay “The Black Lesbian in American Literature : An Overview”, pervades the black community, her second novel, *Say Jesus and Come to Me* (1982), situates its lesbian love story amid feminist meetings and religious revivals. Her fiction constitutes a brave contribution to lesbian literature. There are still a number of black feminists in whose work the black woman is at the centre. The researcher cannot make a comprehensive study of all these writers due to lack of space.

Having seen a number of lesbian writers, there are still a number of women novelists who concentrate on multifarious problems of the black women.

The depiction of women in the novels of the twentieth century have varied tremendously depending upon who has been writing about them. When famous black male writers like Richard Wright or Ralph Ellison have portrayed women characters, they have been writing extremely derogatory. For example, in *Native Son*, Wright portrays Bigger Thomas’s mother and sister as bitchy characters. Ellison’s women folk are not much better. Only
Baldwin has depicted women as having some intrinsic worth. There are many women writers like June Jordan, Mari Evans, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, Sonia Sanchez, Jane Cortez, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, to name a few, who have concentrated on the problems of the black women. As illustrated in their fiction, interviews in *Black Women Writers at Work*, and the pioneer essays on black feminist criticism by Barbara Smith and Deborah E. McDowell, many black women novelists employ to a greater or lesser degree, the following signs and structures: (1) motifs of interlocking racist, sexist, and classist oppression; (2) black female protagonists; (3) spiritual journeys from victimization to the realization of personal autonomy or creativity; (4) a centrality of female bonding or networking; (5) a sharp focus on personal relationships in the family and community; (6) deeper, more detailed exploration and validation of the epistemological power of the emotions; (7) iconography of women’s clothing; and (8) black female language. Having analysed critically black women novelists Barbara Christian in her conclusion observes:

...Whether they be primarily political, cultural, historical, philosophical or eclectic in their point of reference, whether they write about the city, country, or suburbs, whether they weave fantasies or tend toward social realism, whether they are experimental or traditional in style, they leave us with the diversity of the black woman’s experience in America, what she has made of it and how she is transforming it. (28)

A close assessment of Black women novelists from its inception to the late 90s bears out the contention that there has been an evolution of Black consciousness and Feminist consciousness in Afro-American novel. Loften Mitchell, black theatre historian, notes the character of Uncle Tom and observes how the present generation negroes have been affected: “Negroes began to resent the character Uncle Tom, and his name became a source of contempt on the lips of black people. An “Uncle Tom”, or “Uncle” is the most inflammatory, insulting thing a black man can be called” (34).
This is an evolution of consciousness from invisibility to the visibility of the Black as a separate and dignified group of people.

**Conclusion:**

Civil Rights Movement and Feminist Movement of the 1960s and 1970s gave rise to Black Feminism which was a political/social movement. One of the foundation texts of Black Feminism was *An Argument for Black Women’s Liberation as a Revolutionary Force*. The text was written by Mary Ann Weathers, and was published in 1969. Weathers states her belief that “Women’s Liberation should be considered as a strategy for an eventual tie-up with the entire revolutionary movement consisting of women, men, and children” (Internet 9). Further, she advocates women to fall out for their cause:

All women suffer oppression, even white women, particularly white women, and especially Indian, Metican, Puerto Rican, Oriental and Black American women whose oppression is tripled by any of the above mentioned. But we do have females’ oppression in common. This means that we can begin to talk to other women with this common factor and start building links with them and thereby build and transform the revolutionary force we are now beginning to amass. (Internet 9)

Later we notice that in the following year that is in 1970, a group of women consisting of Gayle Linch, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Maxine Williams, Frances M. Beale, Linda La Rue and a host of others came forward and organized an alliance known as The Third World Women’s Alliance. With intense feelings of oppression against Black women, these women published the *Black Women’s Manifesto*. The manifesto, opposing both racism and capitalism, stated that: “The black woman is demanding a new set of female definitions and a recognition of herself of a citizen, companion and confidant, not a matriarchal villain or a step stool baby-maker. Role integration advocates the complementary recognition of man and woman, not the competitive recognition of same” (Internet 9).
In the “First Wave” Feminism, one can see the following hallmarks of Black feminist thought:

- impact of slavery system;
- focus on all kinds of oppressions;
- focus on male oppression;
- deal with racism, sexism and classism;
- certain stereotypes attributed to black women-mammy, Sapphire, Whore, bulldagger etc.);
- impact of capitalism;
- all kinds of movements and their effects;
- theoretical knowledge of Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Mary Daly, and Shulamith Firestone.

Black Feminism in the “second wave” was active, and made a rapid progress. The Black feminists began to develop a theory of black feminism. Florynce Kennedy (Abortion Rap, 1971), Patricia Robinson, Cellestine Ware, of New York’s Stanton-Anthony Brigade – “tried to show the connections between racism and male dominance in society” (Internet 9). The Civil Rights Movement primarily focuses on the oppression of black men. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, one of the groups of The Civil Rights Movement, severely charged black women with sexism. The Feminist Movement focused on the problems faced by the white women. Neither movement confronted the issues that concerned black women specifically. Because of their intersectional position, black women were being systematically ignored by both the movements. Organizations like The Combahee River Collective were being established and a host of women like Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, Barbara Smith, Angela Davis, Margaret Sloan-Hunter, Beverly Smith, Cheryl L. Clarke, Gloria Akasha Hull actively participated in the organizations with a view to highlight the problems of the black women.

In the “Second Wave” Feminism, one can see the following hallmarks of Black feminist thought:
• tried to show the connections between racism and male dominance;
• because of intersectionality position black women were being systematically ignored by both the movements, namely, the Civil Rights Movement and The Feminist Movement;
• black women began creating a theory and developing a new movement to face sexism, racism and classism;
• opposed the practice of lesbian separation;
• Black feminists rejected all essentialization or biologization;
• focusing on political and economical analysis of various forms of domination;
• showing that the position of black women was specific and adding a new perspective to Women’s studies, mainly written by white women;
• publications of articles focusing on black women’s problems;
• development of Afro-American novels dealing the problems of black women.

The “third wave” of Black Feminism was started around 2000. Like in the previous periods once again the interest of the black feminist was in the relations between sexism and racism, and studies of black feminism. With the advent of Angela Davis there began a new study of racism, sexism and classism. Women, Race and Class revolutionizes the thoughts of the people in regard to race, sex and class. Each discrimination has been separately dealt. There appeared intersectionality theories of bell hooks and Kimberle Crenshaw. Patricia Hill Collins put forward her theory of “The Matrix of Domination”, based on sociology. With the coming of these theories, new study separately began on race, sex, class and sexual identity. Barbara Smith took strong objections to the statement of the radical feminists who did not separate from race, sex, class and sexual identity. As Smith observes : “What I really feel is radical is trying to make coalitions with people who are different from you. I feel it is radical to be dealing with race and sex and class and sexual identity all at one time. I think that is really radical because it has never been done before” (Collins 1).

Because of the advent of new theories, black feminism became not only strong but also its roots were gone deeper in the society.
Lesbian literature which was not well developed previously began to dominate the society. Many lesbian writers like Jewelle Gomez, Sapphire, Ann Allen Shockley wrote fearlessly poems, short stories and novels. Lesbian literature occupied a dominant place in Afro-American literature.

The movements like The Civil Rights, Black Power, Black Nationalism, Black Consciousness, Uhuru, Black Arts, Harlem Renaissance and a number of others “tilled the soil of thought in which the seeds of midcentury and later liberation struggles over the world sprouted and grew strong” (Traylor xiii). Acts like Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965; the slogans like “Black Pride” and important events like “Segregation” play vital role in the emergence of black feminism. The Black Liberation Movement played dynamic role in the liberation of black women. The Black Liberation Movement was the formation of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Nationalism, the Black Panthers, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. Women’s liberation movements began in 1970s but actually it was in 1973 the National Black Feminist Organization came into existence with a view to articulate the voice and identity of the Black woman. A year later, The Combahee River Collective began to meet, launching its influential manifesto: “A Black Feminist Statement” in 1977. Black feminists like Frances Beale, Bell Hooks, Frances White, Barbara Smith, to name a few, have done a yeomans’ service. To quote Smith “Feminism is the political theory that struggles to free all women: women of color, working class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women—as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism but merely feminist self-aggrandisement” (Sinha 27).

4.1 TONI CADE BAMBARA ON HER “FEMINISM”

Bambare, through her interviews, essays, forewords etc. reveals her inmost feelings about her community and black women. She also reveals her views on feminism. The most oft-quoted observation of Bambara on this issue is from her interview given to Claudia Tate:
... I’m a nationalist; I’m a feminist, at least that. ... My story “Medley” could not have been written by a brother, nor could “A Tender Man” have been written by a white woman. Those two stories are very much cut on the bias, so to speak, by a seamstress on the inside of the cloth. I am about the empowerment and development of our sisters and of our community. That sense of caring and celebration is certainly reflected in the body of my work and has been consistently picked up by other writers, reviewers, critics, teachers, students. ... I do my work and I try not to blunder. (Tate 14-15)

Earlier in an interview with Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Bambara had observed:

... I don’t find any basic contradiction or any tension between being a feminist, being a Pan-Africanist, being a black nationalist, being an internationalist, being a socialist, and being a woman in North America. I’m not sensitive enough to people caught in the “contradiction” to be able to unravel the dilemma and adequately speak to the question at this particular point in time. My head is somewhere else. (Guy-Sheftall 233)

Of critics, she says in her interview: “I don’t know how to chart the evolution of my creative interest. Suffice to say that the lens has widened, the scope broadened, and the demands on myself have increased” (Tate 24).

Bambara is constantly preoccupied with the term Feminism and expresses a recurrent sense of discomfort at being called a feminist. To quote again:

My interests have evolved, but my typing hasn’t gotten any better. I no longer have the patience to sit it out in the solitude of my backroom, all by my lonesome self, knocking out books. I’m much more at home with a crew swapping insights, brilliances, pooling resources, information. My main interest of the moment, then is to make films. (26)
Bambara told Tate in *Black Women Writers at Work*:

Quite frankly, I’ve always considered myself a film person. ... There’s not too much more I want to experiment with in terms of writing. It gives me pleasure, insight, keeps me centered, sane. But, oh, to get my hands on some movie equipment. (26)

Bambara nevertheless remained committed to working within black communities, continuing to address issues of black awareness and feminism in her art.

Bambara tries to focus on the issues of the black communities. The main themes of her novels and short stories are Afro-American society and family. Bambara also takes into consideration the historical, social and political life of the Afro-Americans. She has declared to Tate in an interview for the book *Black Women Writers at Work*, “I am about the empowerment and development of our sisters and the community. That sense of caring and celebration is certainly reflected in the body of my work” (15). Bambara further adds “It’s a tremendous responsibility – responsibility and honour – to be a writer, an artist, a cultural worker...whatever you call this vocation” (15). Bambara related to Tate: “One’s got to see what the factory worker sees, what the prisoner sees, what the welfare children see, what the scholar sees, got to see what the ruling-class mythmakers see as well, in order to tell the truth and not get trapped” (21).
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