Chapter One

Afro-American Literature from Slave Narratives to Recent Fiction

African-American literature has undergone a revolutionary change from Phillies Wheatley, the first African-American poet to publish her works, to Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Walter Mosley, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshall, the contemporary top Black writers. Phillies Wheatley, who was sold as a slave child to America, “the child was a victim of the largest involuntary human migration in history” (Carretta, *Phillies Wheatley Biography* 1), and her works give an impetus to the beginning of Afro-American Literature. Other Afro-American early writers also helpd the Afro-American Black writing move forward. Fredrick Douglass, American reformer, social orator, writer and statesman, is one of them. He escaped from slavery, and became the leader of the abolitionist movement, gaining note for his dazzling oratory and incisive antislavery writing. The issue of slavery and the subjects related to slaves such as adaptation to the new situation, slaves’ objections, and breaking free from captivity have been a dominant theme at the time of slavery. Most of the writings at the time of slavery were autobiographical. Consequently, these autobiographical works written by slaves were named slave narratives. The slave narratives were the outcome of the conflicts between the southern Whites who supported slavery and the northern slaves who were seeking
freedom from the oppression of slavery in the middle of the nineteenth century. A review of Afro-American literature from slave narratives to the writings of the present modern Black writers will help us to examine the logical links and connections in Afro-American literature. Malcolm X believes that knowing the origin of a thing helps you to understand the cause of the incidents and occurrences:

When you deal with the past, you are dealing with history, you are dealing actually with the origin of a thing. When you know the origin, you know the cause. If you don’t know the origin, you don’t know the cause. And if you don’t know the cause, you don’t know the reason, you’re just cut off, you’re left standing in midair. So the past deals with history or origin of an incident. And when you know the origin, then you get a better understanding of the causes that produce whatever originated there and its reason for originating and its reason for being (12-13).

As Malcolm explains in the above-mentioned words, for a better understanding of the causes that create events, dealing with history and origin of an event will be inevitable. Therefore, understanding the modern Afro-American literature necessitates a perfect knowledge of Afro-American literature from the early periods of its appearance to the modern era. Slave narratives mark the beginning of Afro-American literature in the US.

**Slave Narratives**

The early Afro-American literature dates back to the period when the US got its independence. Slave narratives are the beginning of Afro-American literature. The slaves, who suffered the oppression of White racism, by the help of new printing methods which had made writing career inexpensive, undertook writing their
memories and expressing their own feelings of the racial oppression for the first time.

“Slave narratives are necessarily about escapes from childhood . . . . what slave narrators say about their reactions for writing confirms George Orwell’s claim: “no writer – and certainly no slave autobiographer – can write except as a fugitive from childhood, “never completely escaped” (Fleischener 1). Slave narratives reveal the historical context of the US at the time of slavery. They illustrate the illogical, irrational and unfair relationship between the White slaveholders and the oppressed Black slaves. “The narratives written by former, sometimes fugitive slaves, present individual and group history as well as arguments against slavery itself” (Dixon 11).

Depriving the Black community from their economic and social rights stirred the Black individuals to emotion and response. The individual Black individuals found a shared goal among themselves that could be used as a binding factor. Although the search for freedom was a unifying factor among the Afro-American community members, the ways of achieving this freedom was different among the Blacks of diaspora. “From a literary standpoint, the autobiographical narratives of former slaves comprise one of the most extensive and influential traditions in African American literature and culture. Until the Depression era slave narratives outnumbered novels written by African Americans” (Andrews). The profound interest among the free slaves to write their narratives was not only a historical background in Afro-American literature, but also a landmark for American literature. Some of the finest masterpieces of American literature were produced by the direct influences of the slave narratives: “Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, and such prize-winning contemporary novels as William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, bear the direct influence of the slave narrative” (Andrews).
Except Phillis Wheatley, and Fredrick Douglass, there were some other writers who were prominent and distinguished in the sub-genre of slave narratives. Jupiter Hammon was Lloyed’s family slave for four generations. Hammon’s poem “Evening Thought” that has a religious theme shows the effect of religious inspirations on his works. “An Address to the Negros of the State of New York,” (1787) is the final work of Jupiter Hammon in which he advises young Black negroes to be in search for their freedom. His preoccupation to end slavery reverberates through most of his works. Although he persuaded the new generation to begin emancipation and to end slavery, he always insisted on the gradual improvement of slaves.

The three above-mentioned writers are of great importance in the early history of Afro-American poetry. In the field of fiction, William Wells Brown, and Victor Séjour were the first ones who gave prominence to Afro-American literature by writing the earliest fictions of Black literature. Victor Séjour wrote his first novel in French; so his influence on Afro-American fiction has been little. William Wells Brown, on the other hand, had a very dynamic character and tried different genres of writing. Brown shows his dexterity of writing shockingly in the first lines of his autobiographical work “Narrative of William Brown, a fugitive Slave Written by Himself”. He writes: “I was born in Lexington, Ky. The man who stole me as soon as I was born, recorded the births of all the infants which he claimed to be born his property, in a book which he kept for that purpose. My mother’s name was Elizabeth. She had seven children . . . No two of us were children of the same father” (Brown 1). William Brown died in 1874. He paved the way for the new Black writers for writing their own narratives.

Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa), is said to be the first Afro-American writer who wrote an autobiography. The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, gives an exact and horrifying account of his
enslavement in the West Indies. Since Equiano was an Ibo, he gives some details of Niger, his native land in Africa. Equiano’s efforts for the abolishment of slavery cannot be ignored. “Equiano knew what the anti-slave trade movement needed most in 1789 to continue increasing its momentum was precisely the kind of account he supplied, a story that corroborated and even explicitly drew on earlier reports of Africa and the trade by some white observers and challenged those of others” (Carretta, *Equiano* 4). Equiano not only was an active supporter of the abolitionist movement, but also a skilful writer of narratives that changed the points of view of common White people about Africa. Vincent Carretta writes of Equiano’s representation of Africa:

> All that we know of Olaudah Equiano’s existence in Africa Comes from his own account, and that account was clearly intended to be part of the dialogue about the African slave trade. His representation of Igboland challenged the images of Africa as a land of savagery, idolatry, cannibalism, indolence, and social disorder. Proponents of the slave trade argued that enslavement by Europeans saved Africans from such evils and introduced them to civilization, culture, industry, and Christianity (*Equiano* 5).

Although Equiano introduces Africa as the land of his origin, most of critics doubt the issue and believe that he was African-American by birth. Vincent Carretta also doubts the African origin of Equiano: “Equiano was certainly African by descent. The circumstantial evidence that Equiano was also African American by birth and African British by choice is compelling but not absolutely conclusive. Although the circumstantial evidence is not equivalent to proof, anyone dealing with Equiano’s life and art must consider it” (Carretta, *Equiano* xvi). Contrary to the stand of these
sceptic scholars, some critics believe that the credibility of Equiano’s evidences can be trusted due to the explanations that turns out to be realistic. Adam Hochschild rejects the idea that Equiano fabricated the story of his African origin: “It seems somewhat improbable that he invented the first part of his life story....there is the long and fascinating history of autobiographies that distort or exaggerate the truth. ...Seldom is one crucial portion of a memoir totally fabricated and the remainder scrupulously accurate; among autobiographers... both dissemblers and truth-tellers tend to be consistent” (Hochschild 372). After a long period of fighting against slavery finally Equiano died in 1797 in London.

Lucy Terry, is the author of “Bars Fight”, the oldest poem of Afro-American Literature. “Bars Fight” is a piece of poem about two White families attacked by Native Americans. “After more than two decades of relative peace, another Indian attack on a group of Deerfield farmers and their children brought death and terror to the village. In its aftermath, Lucy composed her only surviving poem, a singsongy ballad commemorating this Bars Fight” (Gerzina 3). It is one of the rare cases in American Literature that a Black woman gets inspiration upon the slaughtering of two White families by native Indians.

Harriet Jacobs, a Black woman writer, published *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. This biography is considered to be one of the most inclusive biographies written by a Black woman.

**Post-slavery Era**

When American Civil War put an end to slavery in the US, some Black writers started producing nonfiction works about the situation of African-Americans after slavery. Post-slavery era introduced several great writers to Afro-American literature. W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington autobiographer, essayist, educator,
James Weldon Johnson poet, essayist, editor, educator and Paul Laurence Dunbar poet, are some of the prominent writers.

W.E.B. DuBois published *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903. DuBois was not only prominent in narrative writing, but also famous as an essayist and a novelist. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois explains the reasons for Negro’s disappointment for achieving freedom: “The nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedom has not yet found in freedom his promised land. Whatever of good may have come in these years of change, the shadow of a deep disappointment rests upon the Negro people, a disappointment all the more bitter because the unattained ideal was unbounded save by the simple ignorance of a lowly people” (Du Bois 9). Do Bois’s aim in writing this book was to change the consciousness of Black people in their struggle for freedom. “*The Souls of Black Folk*, investigates the colour line in the US…, the book starts on the perceptive and prophetic observation and examination that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the colour-line.” The most significant theme is the "double consciousness" with which African Americans discuss their identities as Blacks and as individuals.

Booker T. Washington was the founder of the Tuskegee Institute, a Black college in Alabama. He was an educator and believed in cultivating Black people before putting an end to slavery. Washington founded Tuskegee Institute to improve Afro-American in different respects. He pacified the aggressive and unsympathetic Whites of Tuskegee with declaration that he was advising his students to put aside political activism in favor of economic improvement and achievement. He also substantiated skeptical legislators that his students would not run away the South after their schooling and training but in its place would be prolific and fruitful contributors to the rural economy. Washington was successful to attract some White benefactors among the Whites of the south and the north for his Institute. Booker T. Washington
published several books. *Up from slavery* (1901), *The future of the American Negro* (1899), *Tuskegee and Its People* (1905) and *My Larger Education* (1911) are his well-known works. Washington died on November 14, 1915; however, his institute continued to be flourishing.

James Weldon Johnson wrote several books. Among his published works the most famous one was *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), which was published anonymously. The other works which have received significant attention in Afro-American Literature are *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1925), *Black Manhattan* (1930), and *Negro Americans, What Now?* (1934).

Marcus Garvey, was the founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). This Association persuaded Black community to be loyal to the Black racial pride and to be self-determined and self-reliant.

Garvey's ideas particularly resonated with African Americans during the post war period. At the core of Garvey's program was an emphasis on black economic self-reliance, black people's rights to political self-determination, and the founding of a black nation on the continent of Africa. Garvey's charismatic style, and the magnificent UNIA parades of uniformed corps of UNIA Black Cross nurses, legions, and other divisions, celebrated blackness and racial pride. Garvey urged black people to take control of their destiny: "There shall be no solution to this race problem until you yourselves strike the blow for liberty" (King).

The above-mentioned writers of post-slavery era paved the way for the new generation of Afro-American writers, especially Black women writers, who suffered more severe oppression. The publication of the post-slavery era writers became the
cornerstone of Afro-American literature that gave structure to the new-born literature in the US. Although most of the notable writers of Black movement of writing in post-slavery era have been Black men, Afro-American women continued the movement more seriously and it resulted in the appearance of numerous famous Afro-American women writers such as Toni Morrison, Paul Marshall, Alice Walker, and many others. Black women writers not only have achieved fame in American literature, but they have won the universal appraisal and judgment of critics for their significant works.

**Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall**

Fifteen years ago we would not be able to call the list of Afro-American women writers that have been published in the last decade: Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, June Jordan, Gloria Naylor, Ntozake Shange, Joyce Carol Thomas, Toni Cade Bambara, etc. (qtd. in Holt 14)

The above-mentioned statement by Barbara Christian in her book, *Black Women Novelists*, shows the development of a tradition as Christian names it. The appreciation earned by Black women writers is due to the collective effort by a large number of Afro-American women. The theme of most of the novels written by Black women writers in recent years have been the individual and collective identity among Afro-American Women. The mutual influences of sexism and racism have also been the main focus of the contemporary Black women writers. Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall are the two major writers of the Black development tradition. Although their style of writing and their presentation of Afro-American women are different, their skill in foregrounding the controversial subjects of their Black female community
deserve to be admired. The criteria that resulted in choosing Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall for the current study within the framework of Black feminist thought are as follows:

1. The significance of the concept of identity and self in their novels
2. Illustrating sexism and racism as two major sources of oppression for Black women
3. Introducing resistance as a means of empowerment for Afro-American women

The above-mentioned criteria have also been observed in selecting the novels. The novels of Marshall selected for the current study are, *Brown Girl, Brownstones, The Chosen Place, the Timeless People, Praisesong for the Widow,* and *Daughters.* Although some critics believe that Marshall displays sexism more oppressive than racism in her novels, the four mentioned novels do not show such a preference. The four novels of Gloria Naylor selected for study are, *The Women of Brewster Place, Bailey's Café, Linden Hills,* and *Mama Day.*

The current study aims at examining the concept of self and identity among Afro-American women in the selected novels of Gloria Naylor and Paul Marshall. The methodology applied to this study i.e. Black feminist approach, and the subjects to be studied i.e. self and identity makes the purpose of the study more visible for any reader.

The most significant purpose of the thesis involves an examination of the selected novels for finding a relationship between individual and group identity among Afro-American women. This scrutinized examination discusses the relationship between the Black female individuals and their collective Black identity. The second purpose of this study will determine if gender relations and racism affect the psyche and mind of Afro-American women in defining a new Black female
collective identity. This analysis will serve to show that racist and sexist oppression creates a collective Black unconsciousness among Afro-American women to resist such oppression and to become a self-actualised character. The last, but not the least purpose of the current study involves the examinations of the ways that results in the empowerment of Afro-American women.

The methodology applied to the current study is Black feminism. The mainstream feminism justifies only the rights of the White women in such a way that not only does it fail to specify any rights for colored women, but it may result in the further depression of colored women too. "The ‘white lady’ who participates in this version of feminism has not stopped to question whether all women are oppressed in the same way and to the same degree, whether her liberation is purchased at the cost of the further oppression of other women” (Elam 31). Except for the conflicts that Black feminism finds with the mainstream feminism, the patriarchal Black community like the majority of male-dominated societies deprives Black women from equal rights.

There’s a false power which masculine society offers to a few women who “think like men” on condition that they use it to maintain things as they are. This is the meaning of female tokenism; that power withheld from the vast majority of women is offered to few, so that it may appear that truly qualified women can gain access to leadership, recognition, and reward; hence that justice based on merits actually prevails. The token woman is encouraged to see herself as different from most other women, as exceptionally talented and deserving; and to separate herself from the wider female condition; and she is perceived by “ordinary” women as separate also: perhaps even as stronger than themselves (Spivak 106-107).
Afro-American women have always suffered the double oppression of sex and race. “The argument that African American women confront both a woman question and a race problem captures the essence of black feminist thought” (Guy-Sheftall 1). Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall belong to the female African-American Writing Movement which has also been called Black Feminist Movement. To this movement belong many Black women who have been dynamically and passionately active in reclaiming and constructing black women’s knowledge and have managed to do intellectual work despite the politics of suppression that relentlessly deters them from doing so. Consequently, they have used their voices to raise important issues that modify and influence Afro-American women. Thus, what formally establishes the politics and principles of the US Black feminist thought is this dialectic of oppression and activism, the strain and tension between the censorship and restriction on Black American women’s ideas and their intellectual and rational activism in the face of that repression and censorship (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 3).

Although Black women have always been suffering the double oppression of racism and sexism, “yet the historical record tells us that for some women, in particular Black women, and gender oppression has not placed high in their list of priorities” (Bolles 25). African-American women’s oppression includes three interdependent and self-determining components. First and foremost, there is the exploitation and mistreatment of black women’s manual labor vital and crucial to U.S. economic system and this represents the economic aspect of oppression. Secondly, there is the political-related aspect of oppression which denigrates Black women and deprives, sometimes openly and sometimes underhandedly, the African-American women the rights and privileges routinely offered to White citizens thus withholding impartial and unbiased conduct in the judicial system. Finally, within the U.S. social structure racist and sexist ideologies permeate to such a degree that they become
hegemonic and yet are seen as ordinary, regular, and predictable in order to justify oppression (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 4-5). These barriers force the Black women of the US to be silent. However, this silence sometimes resonates the bitter truth more than words. Philip Brian Harper names this kind of resistance as “the sound of silence” (4). All put together, the spiteful and malicious web of economy, political entity, and ideology operate as an exceedingly effectual system of social control and domination to keep African-American women in an assigned, subservient and inferior place. This larger system of oppression works to suppress the ideas of Black women intellectuals and to protect elite White male interests and worldviews (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 5). The dominant racist White society has defined a monolethic economic and political structure that its only members are Whites. The White hegemony ideology prevents colored people to enter this global economy system. “people of African descent and those who are socially constructed as “Black” within their societies are routinely disadvantaged in this global economy” (Collins, *From Black Power* 7). This globalization helps the racist Whites to maintain their dominance over the subordinate communities. Although the age of slavery is over, globalization helps them expand their economic emperialism by neo-colonization. “As any traveler of contemporary academic scene will tell you, globalization is everywhere these days, seized by many as an accurate descriptor of contemporary politics, economics, and culture, and disparaged by stalwart few as a kind of planetary white noise, global babble, or globaloney globalization (like money) nevertheless talks” (Cooppan 80).

**Black Feminism**

Black feminist thought does not have a single definition and most of the times it includes in itself a diversity of ideas and contradictory conceptions. Black feminism
underscores masculinity bias and racism as the two major roots nurturing the oppression of the Black female community. The duel oppression of race and gender affected the unconscious of the Black women along the lengthy period of Slavery, Middle Passages, and the recent modern period. The subjects studied under the title of Black feminism are those which have affected the life of African-American people during the ages of enslavement. Work, family and black women’s oppression are the basics of this movement. Other subjects as the sexual politics of Black womanhood, Black women and motherhood, Black women’s love relationship and Black women’s activism are considered to be the core themes in Black feminist thought.

The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought

The forced migration of African people from the West coast of Africa to the US indicates a significant change in the history of the US. The history of Black women in the US also begins with the settlement of African women in the West Indies, as slaves to European colonies. The history of female Black slavery is replete with the stories of exploitation and unfair treatment of Black women by their White owners. African women not only were exploited productively on plantations, but also they were exploited reproductively to bear children who would be the future slaves to their White owners. The reproductive exploitation was due to the Abolition ending of slave trade in the US in 1807. Although the abolition of slave trade put an end to the transatlantic importations of slaves, it worsened the situation of African women in the US. Slave holders business depended on reproduction to be profitable. They forced Black women to have as many children as possible. Bearing children early and frequently without appropriate medical care, made the oppression more intensive for Black women than for White women in the US. The ill-treatment of African women that sometimes were accompanied with physical punishment like whipping, along
with the productive exploitation on plantations, resulted in dehumanizing them and taking away the Black women individuality.

The Black women of the US could not find any support from their male partners because the Western hegemony had also made the slaved men as powerless as women. Having been disappointed to rely on Black men for protection against the racist Whites, the Black women of the US were forced to keep themselves safe from being harmed by Whites. The Black women’s resistance appeared in many different ways, from rebellion against slave holders, to creating a collective web of consciousness for resisting the White hegemony in an effective way. Their resistance focused on “creating a sense of community, preserving and transmitting to their children African based cultural practices and beliefs as revealed in music making, quilting, storytelling, naming of children and sustaining traditional marriage practices. Even as slaves, African women attempted to shape the peculiar institutions in ways that allowed them preserve their dignity.” (Hine 12). The community formed by these women provided help for the individual Black women to share their responsibilities and help each other. Afro-American women resisted the diverse oppression of racism, displacement, and patriarchy individually and by forming a communal system. Although this communal system involved many different ethnicities of African-origin women, the communal motherhood at the time of slavery, and the situation of women in the post-slavery era, united Afro-American women in forming a sense of community. Another major reason that helped the union of Afro-American women was the frustration that Black women felt from organizations, clubs, and movements that came into existence for putting an end to the oppression of the black community, especially Black women, by the end of the nineteenth century. Although these organizations and movements founded their basis on the liberation of Black women, the final outcome of such movements was the release and liberation of Black
men from social restrictions and Black women’s situation was left unchanged by such movements. One of these major movements, that was started by Martin Luther King, was the Civil Rights Movement, which claimed the liberation of the whole Black community by revolting against racism. However, it merely ended in the dominance of the male community. Black women’s frustration about the organization founded by Black men, and for granting suffrage to women all over the world by 1928 provoked Black women of the US to form the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) in New York. The intended outcome of Black feminism was to speculate the experiences of Black women to empower them against the racist, sexist, and classist oppression. The Black Feminist Movement came to a steady progression around 1970’s. Barbara Smith as a socialist Black feminist organizer “underscored the intersectionality of racial, gender, heterosexist, and class oppression among Afro-American women and other colored women in the US. The Black Feminist Movement’s aim, from its appearance in 1970’s to the modern era, has been at empowering Black women to resist oppression. Although the movement emphasized on empowering Afro-American women mentally and spiritually to get their self-confidence in the face of diverse oppression, empowering Black women materialistically has never been ignored. Establishing numerous economic and cultural associations by Afro-American women activists during these years endorses the Black Feminist Movement’s emphasis on material improvement alongside the spiritual and intellectual improvements. Black feminism has been following one fixed and stable line to empower Afro-American women. This never-change rule and fixed principle is to care for Black women’s activism and to provoke them for acquiring a self-actualised personality.
The Politics of Black Feminist Thought

The politics of Black feminist thought is based on the active response of Afro-American women to the suppression imposed on them by racist and sexist forces. The intellectual activism of Black women is fundamental in determining the principles of Black Feminist thought. The intellectual Activism of Afro-American Women writers have always been a support for the whole community. “African women writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, and Ellen Kuzwayo have used their voices to raise important issues that affect Black African women. Like the work of Maria W. Stewart and that of Black women transnationally, African-American women's intellectual work has aimed to foster Black women's activism” (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 3). Maria Stewart was one of the first US Black feminists to introduce race, gender, and class oppression as the major cause of Afro-American women’s suffering. Stewart, as the first American woman giving lecture on Black women’s rights, challenged the injustice of the situation for Black women in the US that gives the upper hand to Whites to control and exploit the situation. "We have pursued the shadow, they have obtained the substance; we have performed the labor, they have received the profits; we have planted the vines, they have eaten the fruits of them" (Richardson 59). Maria Stewart in her lectures emphasized strongly on self-definition and self-reliance as the two major factors helping Black women to be independent and to resist the racist and sexist oppression. “It is useless for us any longer to sit with our hands folded, reproaching the whites; for that will never elevate us,’ she exhorted. ‘Possess the spirit of independence. . . . Possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted’” (Richardson 53). The two major principles that Stewart introduces for the empowerment of Black women are those emphasized by the Black Feminist Movement: Black women should improve materialistically and spiritually. Stewart persuades Black women to define themselves
and to be independent like men. These are the two key terms that enables Afro-American women to be released from the bondage of racist and sexist oppression.

Afro-American women’s intellectual traditions which have been transmitted to the modern era from the time of slavery have always helped the intellectual activism move forward. Black women’s intellectual traditions have been transmitted to the contemporary period through different genres whether orally or in writing. Most of the intellectual traditions passed from older generations to new generations through the everyday activity of common people. Religious principles and beliefs also were another way of transmitting the traditions. Poetry and oral songs were the most important ones in spreading and conveying the intellectual traditions among Afro-American women. Most of the poems recited by Black women of diaspora contain features of resistance and empowerment. Blues are the best examples of oral traditions relating the sufferings and oppression of the Black community from the earliest time of slavery to the modern era. These traditions function as the theory of survival for Afro-American women. These theories also appear in different procedures as Christian notes:

The complex traditions of Black feminism emerge from the essays of Maria W. Stewart, Fredrick Douglass, and Anna Julia Cooper, the preaching of Soujourner Truth, the lectures of Ida B. Wells, the novels of Frances E. W. Harper and Pauline Hopkins, and many other sources. Some work comes in the form of the hieroglyph; much of it benefits from interpretations and amplifications. As with all social, political, and literary theory, interpretative works such as the ones in this volume can expose systematic thought trace the outlines, uncover the formal structures and themes, develop and build upon the original material
until a body of work emerges that carries force and power in contemporary argument (qtd. in Conaway 2).

As Christian explains in the above-mentioned paragraph Black feminism originated from different sources in different periods however, all these sources form a systematic thought that carries force and power in the contemporary argument. All the intellectuals that Christian names here, believe that Black feminism is the shared experiences of Afro-American women in the face of racist and sexist oppression which has been transmitted to the new generations orally or written, to empower them for forming a self-actualized character who is able to resist these oppression.

**Core Themes in Black Feminist Thought**

Having considered the concepts conveyed via Black feministic thought, it would be difficult to give a single definition for such a broad concept. The area under discussion in Black Feminism is as limitless as the problem of Black women around the world, especially in the segregated society of the US. Due to the polar situation of Black and White and the opposing and clashing backgrounds of the two cultures, US Black feminism not only gives importance to gender relations, but also emphasizes on racist oppression. The essential and core themes of Black Feminist Thought cover a range of different issues from work, family, and Black women's oppression, to mammies, matriarchs, and other controlling images. The power of self-definition; the sexual politics of Black womanhood; Black women's love relationships; Black women and motherhood; and rethinking Black women's activism are other fundamental and underlying themes of Black feminism. Although the above-mentioned principal themes are significant in comprehending Black Feminism as a critical theory, the current study will discuss the themes that are related to the quest
for self and identity among Afro-American women. Black women’s oppression of race, class and gender; Black women’s identity and self, the power of self-definition, and Black women and motherhood are among the major themes which are associated directly with Black women’s identity and self.

**Black Women’s Oppression: Race, Class and Gender**

Honey, de white man is the de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his women folks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see (Hurston 16).

This is the plight and unfortunate condition of Black women which an elderly Black woman describes to her granddaughter in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The old woman expresses in her own words how the oppression of race and gender are transmitted to Black women. Black women’s oppression shows its diverse faces in work, housing, neighbourhood, schooling, and any other situation that Black women want to improve themselves and their families. In the above-mentioned words Nanny, the elderly Black woman, describes Black woman as a “mule” which is exploited both by the racist Whites and the sexist Blacks. Dehumanizing Black women to the level of a mule exhibits the extent which they are exploited in family and work. As a mill worker, Corine Cannon notices, "Your work, and this goes for white people and black, is what you are . . . your work is your life" (qtd. in Byerly 156).
The word race is used to categorize people according to their physical differences whether in the color of their skin as African people, or in phenotypical differences as the Jewish people. Race like gender and class are abstract concepts and do not exist in the real world, consequently the connection and link that race makes with other concepts and objects creates in the mind a systematic thought. Race as a systematic thought that can be helpful in classifying human beings for a better understanding, has been distorted by political systems to exploit other nations and groups who are different in appearance but are helpful to turn the wheel of their economy. Although racism may involve different nations and races which have been dominated by the imperialist Whites, the recent concept of racism mostly complies with Black communities. “A construction of an anti-racist politics which excludes black voices is unlikely to be effective, either in defining the issues to be addressed, or in mobilising the political will to address them. The issue of black representation has dominated labour race politics since 1983, and remains unresolved” (Knowles 141).

Racism has affected the life of Afro-American women in two different major ways. One type of racism challenges Black people directly for their skin color. This type of racism is called overt racism. “Overt racism is the most easily recognized. It operates on a personal level, whereby one individual hates another individual because of his or her racial origins or a group of individuals despises another group simply because of who they are. Sometime in the past, one group decided those members (individuals) of the second group are somehow inferior” (Wilson xi). This type of racism is personal, and the individuals of one group or community consider other community members inferior due to their racial origin. The individuals of the assumed superior group attribute some negative characteristics to the inferior group which are not real. In the society of the US, in which Black and White conflicts have
always existed, these stereotypical beliefs function as controlling images for Afro-American community, especially Black women. The prejudiced Whites of the US have extended the negative behavior of an individual to the whole community to create such stereotypes and controlling images. The best examples of such a stereotype fashion is naming Black women as mammies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, lazy folks and etc. the slavery period is also a true example of overt racism.

Another form of racism that exists in the US and is the feature of contemporary epoch is institutional racism. This type of racism includes all forms of injustice that Afro-American women come across in their everyday life. ‘Perhaps institutional racism is more easily clarified by the concept of the ‘glass ceiling.’ Oftentimes, in the work force minority persons complain that they cannot advance up the corporate ladder because of institutional barriers that are not as easily identified. Such barriers are ‘transparent’ like glass’ (Wilson xii). Institutional racism is an invisible and hidden barrier that blocks Black women’s progress in the US. Afro-American women have always complained about the problems they encounter in finding a job or losing the opportunity of getting a job in an unfair competition with White women. Although other groups also suffer from institutional racism, Black women are the most vulnerable people in the face of institutional racism. Black feminist thought considers the institutional racism a means of weakening Black women’s resistance:

Realizing that Black feminist demands for social justice threaten existing power hierarchies, organizations must find ways of appearing to include African-American women-reversing historical patterns of social exclusion associated with institutional discrimination-while disempowering us. Ideas become critical within this effort to absorb and weaken Black women’s resistance (Collins, Black Feminist Thought
Most of the Black feminist critics believe that institutional racism originates in cultural differences. The White hegemony in the US strives to weaken or even ignore the Afro-American culture. Although the institutional power may have been to influence the surface structure of Black culture, the deep structure of African culture has remained intact since the time of slavery. This cultural background has created a group identity in the collective unconsciousness of Afro-American community that enables them to resist the institutional oppression. Sara Brooks believes that: “Historically African-Americans’ resistance to racial and class oppression could not have occurred without an accompanying struggle for group survival (Collins, Black Feminist Thought 201). Sara Brooks states this fact that the “popular perspectives on Black political activism often fail to see how struggles for group survival are just as important as confrontations with institutional power (202).

Race, gender, and class are key terms and significant concepts in Black feminist thought. These three concepts have functioned as three distinct oppression for Black women of the US from the time of slavery to the recent modern era. Although race and gender are two major factors determining the social identity of Black women, class struggle is also significant in social division of labour as much as gender and race are. Randolph B. Persaud in his essay “Situating Race in International Relations: the Dialectics of Civilizational Security in American Immigration” explains the influence of generative essence of race, gender, and class on social division labour:

It is especially important also from a point of view of counter-hegemonic struggle. Attempts that privilege class exploitation as the fount of consciousness and resistance tend to miss the fact that race and gender are actually generative in the structuration of the social
division of labor. The articulation of a project of liberation may therefore be conducted in terms of cultural liberation. Following Stuart Hall it is possible to posit that the race-class-color configuration is an over determined complexity (Persaud 65).

Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* defines three interdependent features for Black women of the US. The first dimension that Black women’s oppression has comprised is taking advantage of Black women’s free labor which has been essential for the capitalist economy of Western hegemony since the time of slavery. The enslaved Black women had to pay a very high cost for their survival at the time of the slavery. Although in the post-slavery era, the situation had changed a little and Black women were released from the bondage of slavery, the economic exploitation of Afro-American women’s labor remained unchanged. The millions of destitute Black women were segregated as a minority group in Philadelphia, Birmingham, Oakland, Detroit, and other US cities. This ghettoization shows convincingly the persistence of these earlier forms of Afro-American women’s economic exploitation. The second dimension that Afro-American women’s oppression has encompassed according to Collins is the political aspect of oppression which has rejected Black women the rights applicable to White males. The political subordination of Black women has influenced all organizations, institutes, judicial and educational system and many other facilities that privileges White people. The political dimension of oppression is more evident in the educational system of the US where the White hegemony has obstructed the literacy expansion and growth among Black women. Collins names the third dimension of Black women’s oppression as an ideological dimension. The ideological dimension of US Black women’s oppression attributes some negative features to Black women to justify the oppression and exploitation both by racist and sexist forces. The use of controlling images for Black
women is the best example of such exploitation. Some examples of such controlling images that justify Black women’s oppression are mammies, matriarchs, jezebels, breeder women of slavery, the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers. Collins emphasizes that applying negative qualifications to Black women has been fundamental to Black women’s oppression (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 5). Presenting an oversimplified conception out of Afro-American women has made an unrealistic history for Black women from the slavery period to the present time. This unrealistic history illustrates Black women as down-to-earth stereotypes who are not worthy of being studied at all. Zora Neale Hurston says of her imaginary edifice, on the "folk belief" that all "non-Anglo-Saxons are uncomplicated stereotypes" (qtd. in Posnock 4). Although the undesirable and destructive impression and influence constructed on the mentality and psyche of Afro-American women by racism has always been assertive and forceful among all other oppression imposed on them, gender inequality and disparity has also been influential on Black women’s social life and has found its way amongst the uppermost oppression of the Afro-American community since 1970. Although the racial and sexual oppression originate from different cultural sources, the dominant forces in both of these groups dictate their ideology upon the oppressed Black women. “While ‘sex’ and ‘female’ have come to be used to designate fundamental biological facts, the terms ‘gender’ and ‘women’ have come to be used to designate the culturally variable ways in which that biology can be expressed” (Warnke 3). The patriarchal forces take advantage of Black Nationalism to impose their superiority over Black women and control their behaviour. On the other hand, the racist ideology has constructed sufficient controlling images for Black women to prevent them from forming an independent and self-reliant identity. The hegemonic domain of power whether Black or White has always struggled to maintain their
dominant power. “To maintain their power, dominant groups create and maintain a popular system of ‘commonsense’ ideas that support their right to rule. In the US, hegemonic ideologies concerning race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation are often so pervasive that it is difficult to conceptualize alternatives to them, let alone ways of resisting the social practices that they justify” (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 284). As Collins writes in the above-mentioned words, the dominant groups whether racist or sexist have always tried to maintain their dominance over Black women and exploit them. Although both racism and sexism exploit Afro-American women, these oppressive forces are not united and follow their own rules to exploit Black women.

**Black Women’s Identity and Self**

I have my identity and I have my sex: I am not new yet...

Our only chance is to explore the idea of resisting the self …

(qtd. in Fraser VIII)

The quest for self and identity exists as an enigma that is never easily explained or understood. Nearly every individual in any society without considering the differences of race, culture, and milieu comes across the crucial question of identity in his/her life. To answer this identity question of “Who am I,” people need to explore their behaviour, their viewpoints, and their aims. The problem of identity in the Afro-American community of the US becomes more complicated due to the displacement and racial oppression. The quest for self-definition and identity are the most important themes recurrently foregrounded in African-American literature. As in the case of Black women the most important question that comes into the mind is what particular properties in a Black woman’s character represent her genuine identity. David Copp answers this question. He proposes that “a person’s identity
consists in the set of propositions that a person believes of him or herself and that
ground his or her negative or positive emotions of self-esteem” (qtd. in Warnke 1).
The definition that Copp gives of identity seems to be a general and comprehensive
description of identity, however, the set of these propositions that Copp proposes must
be classified according to their significance. Some female characteristics may be
transient feelings that cannot be grounded as a determining factor for identity. To
make his definition of identity more conclusive and plausible, Copp includes the
element of stability to his definition of identity. He writes: “if a set of propositions is
to compose an identity, the emotions it grounds must be relatively stable. One might
weep at a missed opportunity and the fact that one wept might cause one to feel
ashamed. Yet, unless this shame endures, it does not positively or negatively affect
one’s self-esteem and hence does not ground an identity as a weeper” (qtd. in Warnke
2). These are the personal factors that Copp enumerates for an individual identity
however, an individual lives in community and the mutual interactions of community
and the individual are also influential in giving rise to a particular identity. The Afro-
American community of the US can be mentioned as the best example of the cultural
influences on appearing a typical identity. If it had not been for the racial oppression
in the US, the Afro-American identity would have never come to existence. “identities
are affected by particular cultures and histories so that ‘were it not for racism and the
history of slavery, for example, it is unlikely that such a high proportion of African
Americans would have the fact that they are black as part of their identity’” (Warnke
2). Most of Afro-American women writers have mentioned the history and cultural
backgrounds of identity in their works. Michelle Cliff the Jamaican-American author
and one of the supporters of Black feminist thought also believes that there is
continuity:
In the written work of many African American Women, you can draw a line from the slave narrative of Linda Brent to Elizabeth Keckley's life, to *Their Eyes were Watching God* (by Zora Neale Hurston) to *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (Anne Moody) to *Sula* (by Toni Morrison), to *The Salt Eaters* (by Toni Cade Bambara) to *Praise Song for the Widow* (by Paule Marshall). (Cliff)

The search for identity or the “I” that Michelle Cliff replaces for identity is a major theme in the works of both Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall. This search for identity is illustrated in the portrayal of women in their novels. The portrayal of a woman oppressed by the interlinked problems of racism, poverty, and sexual discrimination is the distinctive feature in most of the novels written by Black women writers. These two writers have their own way of illustrating the oppression, as Black women just as other historically oppressed groups find ways to escape from or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice. Marshall and Naylor like other Black writers strongly insist on Black identity, “hence there is greater awareness of the contradiction we are caught in whenever we claim an identity … that we reaffirm the differences we are seeking to challenge” (Posnock 25). Marshall and Naylor use writing as a means of achieving their own Black identities. “The link between writing and the search for identity has been underlying feminist thought and practice for a long time, and during the sixties and seventies it was seen surfacing in the prevalence of diaries and memories, or at least of a diaristic mode, in female writing” (Curti 108). The search for identity in writing and immaterial world is due to the supremacy and domination of the White hegemony in the material world. The immaterial world of Blacks and the material world of Whites are on extremes in a way that they are not able to understand each other. Toni Morrison believes that the “insensitive white
people cannot deal with black writing, but then they cannot deal with their own literature either” (qtd. in Duvall 1).

Identity has always been a controversial area under discussion. The challenging concept of identity is due to its connectedness to cultural issues and for this reason identity cannot be studied in isolation. Class and ideology are two basic concepts, in which identity is not understandable without them. In a Black community in which racial oppression influences the individual life of the members, race and ethnicity become determining factors in defining the identity:

Class remains a key ingredient of subjectivity and identity. If people often do not positively acknowledge the social class to which social theories assign them, they certainly know the classes with which they do not identify. Whereas in the twentieth century the Labour Movement in the UK and other industrial societies appealed to ‘class’ as if it were something obvious, identifiable and the source of positive forms of identity, in contemporary society such appeals have become less convincing. In cultural analysis in recent years, class has become the poor relation of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity (Weedon 10).

Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall have also produced social thought intended to oppose oppression. Their novels have something in common that provokes us to study their works relatedly and that element is the search for identity and realization, which is seen nearly in all of their novels. The quest for self and identity has been presented differently in different novels by these two writers, because identity and self are related to consciousness. Black feminism defines the Black identity within the framework of a cultural context and in connection with consciousness. Consequently,
the distinguishing features of individual and collective identity in spite of their
closeness are easily noticeable.

For de Lauretis (1986), 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”.

It is important to distinguish between individual and group
consciousness (Collins, Black Feminist Thought 292).

Although consciousness is in connection with identity and self and these two
are only understandable in a cultural context, “however, black feminist consciousness
is empirically distinct from race consciousness and gender consciousness. Black
feminist consciousness is a complex concept that includes several interrelated
attitudes and beliefs derived from the ideas and experiences of black women” (Simien
98). It is true that racism and sexism are two major sources of Black women’s
oppression; however, the identity that Black feminism defines for Black women of the
US is a more complicated concept than skin colour. The Western hegemony’s
definition of White does not consider skin colour as the only factor for racial
identification. Their definition is a complex set of rules that excludes many races even
those who have a white skin. Consequently, White is a theory to be practiced by the
dominant power to specify certain privileges to racial-defined ideology. “From 1790
until 1952, the US restricted naturalized citizenship to ‘whites,’ amending the law in
1870 to include ‘persons of African nativity and African descent’” (Warnke 56).

According to this law the colour of skin does not qualify an individual to become a
member of the White hegemony. This law does not mean that the Western hegemony regrets its racial behaviours and wants to compensate for the racial segregation they have imposed on the society of the US. This law not only guarantees the superiority of the White hegemony in the US, but it excludes other races that have a white skin from the privileges specified only to the Western hegemony. Therefore the racist White ideology does not limit its dominance over Afro-American community merely. Other White races, that are not Caucasian Whites or Europeans, are not considered as White race. In 1922, the case of Takao Osawa, a native of Japan, serves as a good example for such a definition from White ideology. Takao Osawa, provided the US Supreme Court the white color of his skin as his eligibility for citizenship. However, the US Supreme Court rejected his claim and stated that the “White person” does not refer to skin colour:

... are they any the less free negroes in the fifth than they were in the first generation from their negro ancestors? They still have half negro blood in their veins, and that is all they had in the first generation. In the fourth generation they were unquestionably free negroes, but they certainly had no more negro blood than their children. . . . Can it be that a remove by one generation has the effect, in law, of turning a half negro into free white man in spite of the color of his skin or the kinking of his hair? It seems to me both unreasonable and absurd . . . No person in the fifth generation from a negro ancestor becomes a free white person, unless one ancestor in each generation was a white person . . . and unless there is such purification it makes no difference how many generations you should have to go back to find a pure negro ancestor; even though it should be a hundred, still the person is a free negro (qtd. in Warnke 56).
Although the White people of the US have narrowed the definition of White race to the White Caucasians, the Black community of the US has always been the target of their imperialist and neo-colonialist policies. The Afro-American community in the US cannot help the racial, ethnic, and cultural divisions because of the supreme power of authority of the dominant Whites. Black women have been more vulnerable to the racist oppression and this vulnerability has persuaded them to create a Black female group identity to resist such oppression. Creating a group identity has improved Black women’s self-confidence in the face of racist and sexist oppression. It can be claimed that it is group identity, which gives Black women the self-confidence to resist the institutional power.

The Power of Self-Definition

One of the subjects that is conspicuous and influential in Black feminist policy is the notion and perception of self-definition in constructing a new Black identity and forming a disciplined sociological structure out of the Afro-American community’s disorder and chaos. Another feature that underwrites the Black feminist thought and is basic and essential to the empowerment, liberation, and emancipation of the female Black community, is the factor of endurance, and resistance. It is arduous and difficult to underrate and miscalculate the considerable and substantial importance of self-definition and resistance, in giving rise to a persuasive black identity, which is able to bring forth a fortified and high-proof result on Black people’s individual and collective identity as a coloured minority in a White dominant society. The importance of such a resistance is more noticeable in the life of Black women. Although Afro-American community and especially the Black female community in the US defines a new identity to release the Black self from the oppression of racism, inside the community they block any new-definition from the individual-self. The best
example of such oppression inside the Black community is the rejection of the lesbians and gays.

On the one hand, the acknowledgment that homosexuality is not an aberration, that it expresses an interior dimension of the individual's identity that is integrated with his or her past and his or her childhood can be seen as a gesture of (or at least forming circumstances conducive to) increased empathy, understanding, and respect. This indeed can be seen not merely as a top-down trend, a definition imposed on gays and lesbians by the societies in which they live, but as an interplay between shifting societal awareness and gay and lesbian individuals' own insistence on a more encompassing self-definition. On the other hand, once an individual ceases to be viewed as a temporary aberration, it is equally possible that he or she will now come to be viewed as a permanent aberration, and the tendency to view the gay or lesbian individual not only as a person but as a "case history," (Halbertal 45).

The reality of achieving a life of survival and existence for Afro-American women, through all the upheavals and disturbances of breathing and surviving in such a racist society, lies in their resistance to the dominant racist ideology. Afro-American women have attained the knowledge of resistance, through learning and instruction, or experience and involvement. Black women have formed and developed their own way of life and attitude that originates in the self-determining and liberated culture of the Blacks. The Black identity for Afro-American women is not achieved by indifference and unconcern, but through practice and struggle. Resistance and self-definition are two all-encompassing assumptions and expectations, that determine and resolve overwhelmingly how a self-regulating Black identity develops from the present
chaos of the Black community. Without these two controlling and basic assumptions i.e. resistance and self-definition, Afro-American women are not able to acquire a self-defined disposition. Resistance has found its way among Afro-American women as an organized self-protective structure. The power of self-definition generates a source of strength and energy among Afro-American women. Patricia Hill Collins compares this source of power with the power of God by giving an example from a self-defined character in Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls* (1975). "'I found God in myself and I loved her fiercely.' These words, expressing her ability to define herself as worthwhile, draw them together" (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 119).

Collins points out that the one thing that is able to commence the presence and reality of such a power in a Black woman is her readiness in achieving such a gigantic source of strength.

To achieve the power of self-definition Black feminism introduces emotional and physical journey as a means of resistance against the racist and sexist oppression. The physical and emotional journey towards self-definition releases Black women’s body and mind from the anxious and perturbed attitude in their relationship and connection with the racist society of the US. Although in their journey towards self-definition Afro-American women get help from different sources, the chief origin of undergoing alteration remains within their own consciousness. “The power to save the self lies within the self. Other Black women may assist a Black woman in this journey toward personal empowerment, but the ultimate responsibility for selfdefinitions and self-valuations lies within the individual woman herself” (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 119). The ability to give meaning to their life in the context and setting of Afro-American community encourages and convinces Black women start a journey beyond past and present. The racist and sexist oppression in the US have changed the healthy consciousness of Black women into a defect consciousness
that needs to be cured. Afro-American women have reached to such an awarness to distinguish the reasons and the roots of such a weakness and disability. The debility to join the larger community by Black female individuals is the main outcome of this illness. A physical and emotional journey towards self-definition can be a cure for such a painful suffering. This journey widens the experiences of Black women in the face of various oppression present in the society of the US and as it was explained earlier in the definition of Black feminism by Collins “the shared experiences of Black women” builds the core basis of Black feminism. Jennifer L. Pals believes that:

the repetition of experiences, themes, or ideas across several causal connections can serve to consolidate an important aspect of self-definition. … If an individual's life story contains several causal connections that describe the influence of work-related past experiences on the self, this pattern may consolidate the significance of the career self within this person's overall sense of identity (180).

“The shared experiences of Black women” are what Pals and Collins introduce as consolidating and strengthening factors in the social life of Afro-American women. The experiences that Black women share with each other act as a significant feature and characteristic of self-definition.

**Black Women and Motherhood**

The concept of motherhood contains contradictions that exist in Afro-American communities, families, and individuals. Some Black women believe that motherhood in Afro-American community is a controlling image invented by the patriarchal forces whether Black or White to take advantage of Black women. “In general, African-American women need a revitalized Black feminist analysis of
motherhood that debunks the image of ‘happy slave,’ whether the White-male-created ‘matriarch’ or the Black-male-perpetuated ‘super strong Black mother’" (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 176). On the other hand, there is the idea that motherhood is a source of empowerment for Afro-American families, due to their lives of sacrifice for family members. Archetypal Black Motherhood in the US has always been synonymous with self-sacrifice, commitment, devotion, and unrestricted love to family members, especially male children. Favouring the needs of everyone else to their own needs has turn out to be a norm for Afro-American mothers. These contrasting ideas illustrate Black motherhood as an edged tool which has become keener with constant use against the existing oppression. Black motherhood can be helpful in creating a self-actualised character and at the same it can be a source of oppression and a danger to their freedom and responsibility.

In contrast, motherhood can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women’s empowerment. These tensions foster a continuum of responses. Some women view motherhood as a truly burdensome condition that stifles their creativity, exploits their labor, and makes them partners in their own oppression. Others see motherhood as providing a base for self-actualization, status in the Black community, and a catalyst for social activism (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 176).

Black motherhood goes beyond blood mother and mother-children relationship. The concept of Black motherhood entails a multi-dimensional relationship that Afro-American women form with each other, with their children and
their families, and most relevantly with their Black community. Black motherhood is an institution for Afro-American women to share their experiences in the face of racist and sexist oppression and transfer these experiences to the new generation of Afro-American women. In the institution of Black motherhood other mothers accept the same responsibility as blood mothers in training the new generation towards self-actualisation. Rosalie Riegle Troester writes that the “other mothers—women who help out blood mothers by giving out mothering responsibilities—traditionally have been dominant and fundamental to the institution of Black motherhood” (Troester 14).

One of the contradictions that Black motherhood struggles to find a solution is mother-daughter relationship. The institution of Black motherhood teaches young girls to follow the sexual politics of Black womanhood however, the educated, self-actualised young girls find it difficult to follow the same principles their mothers have been suffering for a long time. This dilemma makes reconciliation complicated and challenging between mothers and daughters. “Despite the dangers, mothers routinely encourage Black daughters to develop skills to confront oppressive conditions. Learning that they will work and that education is a vehicle for advancement can also be seen as ways of enhancing positive self-definitions and self-valuations in Black girls” (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 184). Although there has always been a challenge in mother-daughter relationship, the matured and experienced daughters finally come to this understanding that acknowledging their mother’s subjectivity is a way to prove their self-actualised character. A daughter’s life cycle more or less is identical to that of her mother’s. It means that a daughter cannot define her gender identity in a new context without considering her mother’s gender identity. The mother-daughter relationship should not be considered as a mutual interaction between mother and daughter. The three-sided collaboration of mother-daughter-father can wholly and exclusively explain the mother-daughter relationship.
When daughters are able to separate from the person, the position and the symbol of the mother they can accept that mother is a situated woman with her own sense of subjectivity and gender identity different from their own subjectivity and gender identity. This means that daughters are able to place ‘mother’ in the social-historical, sexual, racial and ethnic, economic and political context of her life cycle. To gain their own subjectivity and feminine individuality, they need to acknowledge the subjectivity of the person out of whom they are born. …attaining subjectivity means acknowledging the social context of ‘the womanness in the mother’ as a third term, which places the mother-daughter relationship in a triangular rather than a dual relationship (Kanter 31).

Mother-daughter relationship does not mean that they should not be detached from each other. Mother daughter detachment helps them move towards a self-actualised character and an independent individual identity. Mother-daughter separation not only upholds the bonds between the two, but it empowers them to resist the sexist oppression too. Therefore the mother-daughter connection is never interrupted. “Writers as diverse as Paula Caplan, Elizabeth de Bold, Miriam Johnson, Carol Gilligan, Virginia Beane Rutter, and Mary Pipher argue that a strong mother-daughter connection is what makes possible a strong female self” (O’reilly 163 ). As O’reilly explains here the development of a strong female self requires a strong daughter-mother relationship. The relationship between mother and daughter is never interrupted due to the necessities they feel in their relationship. A daughter never feels perfection if she is separated spiritually from her mother and can move towards self-actualization more easily with the help of her mother.
Review of Literature

Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall, like many other Afro-American women writers, have been the focus of study among scholars. Numerous articles and thesis have been written on these two writers. Since identity and self have been the themes of most of the novels written by these two writers, these subjects have been the focus of attention among critics and scholars.

Aldrich Jean Pomeroy in his thesis Writing the Wrong: Female Identity and the Postmodern Feminist Novel of Manners in America, studies female identity as a social construct. A close reading of Gloria Naylor’s Linden Hills in chapter three of the thesis scrutinizes the understanding of the social structures and the system of cultural domination. It also studies the ways a community system imposes its dominance to define the existence of women.

Christine G. Berg in Methods of Intersexuality in Gloria Naylor’s “Linden Hills,” analyses the two intersexual strategies in Linden Hills. The first intertextuality in Linden Hills is the allusion Naylor applies to Dante’s Inferno. Naylor compares the four days journey on Linden Hills to the journey of Dante and Virgil down the Hell. Naylor in the second intertextuality quotes from three poems in her novels. “Whoever You are Holding Me Now in Hand” by Walt Whitman, “Cuisine Bourgeoisie” by Wallace Stevens, and “Gerontion” by T. S. Eliot.

Jennifer Thorington Springer in her dissertation, Black Diasporic Connections in Paule Marshall’s Fiction, analyses Paule Marshall’s literary works Brown Girl, Brownstones, and Praisesong for the Widow. Springer explains how these works of Marshall offer important representations of the experiences of diasporic Blacks in the U.S. Springer believes that Marshall’s characters go through identity crises, split and perverted psyches and segregated communities. Having been relocated to America,
and in search of economic advantageous opportunities, Marshall's Afro-Caribbean characters put up with identity crises, and the problem of keeping unto their "native" culture(s) while adjusting to a new one in America. Springer discusses that the identity crisis in Marshall’s characters is more confounded by their complete involvement in the US racial politics: “Marshall's Caribbean immigrants struggle with the question of how and when to identify with African Americans, their diasporic relatives”. By comparing the different origins of Black community, Springer comes to this conclusion that Marshall's African American middle-class characters strive to ascend social ladders without being aware of their ancestral roots and their past. Springer argues that “Marshall! not only exposes the psychological damage her characters undergo, in addition, she suggests that they must reclaim their ancestral ties to Africa in order to heal”.

Lisa Ann Slappey in “Writing Off the Map: The Postcolonial Landscapes of Pynchon, Marshall, Silico, and Vea” examines literary portrayal of postcolonial American places through close readings of novels by four contemporary American writers: Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* and *Mason and Dixon*, Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, and Alfredo Vea, Ir.'s *La Maravilla*. Her study deals with the ecological criticism’s insistence on the affiliation between humans and non-human nature, especially the collaboration between individuals and spaces. Slappey observes that the novelists in her study raise significant questions and problems about America as a philosophical epitome and as a political existence. “Where does this nation fit, historically and currently, within global affairs? To what extent does America have the moral authority it assumes over itself or anyone else?” Slappey sometimes compares these significant problems and questions, both subtle and overt, between the US and other governments more distinguishable for their outstandingly infamous human rights
accounts, such as Spanish Mexico, Nazi Germany, and Dutch South Africa. Slappey then explains how these authors uncover oppression, harassment, and repression at home by accosting the continuing impressions of the systematic killing of native and home grown peoples, the slave trade and the Middle Passage, the post-slavery era and the creation of a racially diverse American underclass. Finally Slappey concludes that “in each case, human oppression is depicted within the highly-contested social space of the physical landscape and is shown to go hand in hand with environmental destruction”.

Karen L. Rose in his thesis titling: *The Evolving Self: Postmodern Coming-of-Age Novels by Women Writing in the US*, examines the developing concept of self in the modern form of the Bildungsroman genre. Instead of concentrating on one individual's progress towards perfection as it was a common feature of the old Bildungsroman genre, Karen Rose scrutinises the remarkable influences of cultural and political forces on Afro-American young women. Rose emphasis on group rather than on individual self is to show the necessity of social change. Rose discusses that “In their depiction of young women who struggle with and are resistant to oppressive histories; the stifling expectations of society and family; and/or limitations due to class, race, gender, the novels included in this study may be viewed as political oppositional texts”. In chapter two Rose discusses Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, by focusing on the mother-daughter relationship and the significance of creating a group Black identity for resisting the racist and sexist oppression. Rose examines the evolving self among Afro-American matured young women in the shadow of post-colonialism and cultural displacement. Karen Rose finally concludes that the open-ended and anti-conclusion which is the shared feature of most of these Afro-American women writers demonstrates that identity for Black community is not a fixed concept and it is an ongoing process.

Marie-Josee Chapleau in “The Battle for Selfhood by Gloria Naylor's Female and Cross-Dressing Characters” examines the concepts of self-reliance, self-confidence, and self-actualization among Black female individuals and the degree in which the female characters in Gloria Naylor's novels expose the efforts and struggles by Afro-American women to survive in post-emancipation America. Chapleau in chapters one and two focuses on *The Women of Brewster Place*. In the first chapter, he analyzes Mattie Michael, specifically the evolution of her role as matriarch and her role in creating a collective Black consciousness. Chapleau introduces Mattie Michael as a griot for the hopeless Black women of Brewster Place to find their self-confidence and form a Black group identity. In the second chapter he studies Theresa and Lorraine, the lesbian couple, who have been rejected by Black community individuals in any place they settle. Chapleau then discusses how Afro-American culture categorises the couple as outsiders in their own community. In chapter three Chapleau focuses on Nedeed wives in *Linden Hills*: Luwana, Evelyn, Priscilla and Willa, four characters, three of whom are dead however, the left records of the dead wives makes vital helps to set free the fourth, living wife. In chapter four Chapleau examines Eve and Miss Maple: the holder of the boarding house and the cross-dressing man in *Bailey's Cafe*.

Sandra W. Holt in his thesis “A Rhetorical Analysis of Three Feminist Themes Found in the Novels of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor” explores three feminist themes found in the novels of three famous Afro-American women
writers. Holt in this study claims that novelists can be rhetors and that their novels may have an extensive pleading and desirable persuasive structures.

Jarrod Hayes in his article, “Defining Caribbean Identity”, examines two writers who have written on the identity of Afro-American women: the first one is H. Adlai Murdoch, *Creole Identity in the French Caribbean Novel*, and the second one is Simone A. James Alexander, *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women*. In this article Hayes writes that Murdoch's study investigates the various articulations of Creole identity in literature. He then explains that the word Creole finds a lot of meaning in literature and a Creole can be a Black individual or a White person even, colonizer or colonized. Hays writes that as a "shifting signifier" Creole can stand for various origins and for this reason it can be a perfect example for speculating what Murdoch calls a "Creole postcoloniality."

In the second part of his article Jarrod Hayes examines the ideas and theories of Simone A. James Alexander on Mother Imagery and its influence on the articulation of Afro-American female identity. Alexander examines, “all daughters have Caribbean mothers, but the Caribbean is not motherhood's only geographical association. Alexander uses the term "motherland" or "mother(s)land" to describe the Caribbean, while the capitalized "Motherland" refers to Africa”. Alexander emphasizes strongly on the significance of the African origins of Caribbean identity.

Chapterization

The current study has five chapters. The first chapter or introduction provides a brief history of development in Afro-American literature from slave narratives to the present fictional works. The purpose of the study and the method applied which is the Black feminist approach are also included in the introduction. The last part of chapter one includes the review of Literature.
Chapter II. Individual and Group Identity among Afro-American Women

Chapter two interrogates the problem of self and identity in Marshall’s and Naylor’s novels, the significance of identity in the two writers’ works, and the relationship between individual and collective Black identity among Afro-American women. To achieve the above-mentioned goals, four novels of the two writers are examined to reveal the quest for the Black identity among African-American women. *Brown Girl, Brownstones, Daughters, The Women of Brewster Place,* and *Mama Day* are the novels that have been scrutinized to explain that: 1. The quest for the self and Black identity is inevitable for Black women and 2. This identity and the self, presented in these novels, are not only in contrast with others but are in connection with family and the Black community.

In this chapter, the relationship between Black female individuals and the Black community is examined to discover the facts about the influences of racial and ethnic oppression on creating a group identity among the female Black community. The Black community in the US has to tolerate the racial, ethnic, and cultural divisions due to the supremacy of the dominant Whites. These divisions are imposed on them by the society and the active response of the Black community to this oppression is resistance against the institutional power. Along with challenging the institutional power, creating a group identity and showing resistance by means of this collective identity has been developing among the female Black community of the US. It can be claimed that it is group identity, which gives them self-confidence to cope with the problem of racial segregation.

Chapter III. The Effects of Gender Relations, and Racist Ideology on Female Black Identity

In this chapter the two novels of Gloria Naylor, *Linden Hills* and *Bailey’s Cafe* and one novel by Marshall, *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* are examined to
reveal the effects of gender relations, and racism on female Black identity. In most of
her novels, Marshall shows her focus on racial matters by illustrating American and
African cultural differences. The protagonist of the novel is also a woman who suffers
racial segregation in every respect. In The Chosen Place, the Timeless People Merle,
the protagonist of the novel, reflects the effects of racist oppression on Afro-American
women. Race, class, and gender play an important role in forming Merle’s character.
Although it is completely clear that no Black woman writer can create a work of art
without considering race and gender, the extent of resistance that female characters
show at the time of confronting oppression, makes Marshall’s works higher in rank in
this respect.

Paule Marshall places her female characters in the midst of racial oppression,
Gloria Naylor, on the other hand, isolates her Black community to highlight the
effects of racial and patriarchal oppression on Black women. In this chapter the
isolated Black community of Linden Hills is studied by comparing it to two great
classical works: Milton’s Paradise Lost and Dante’s Inferno. Linden Hills is the story
of a journey of four days by the two protagonists of the novel Willie Mason and Willa
Prescon Nedeed. Willie ventures on a physical journey moving down the hill,
communicating with different peoples, a journey that begins for finding a job but ends
in his maturity and his awareness of Afro-American community. Willa’s journey is an
emotional and mental journey to the past. This journey also results in self-
actualization and resisting the dominance and oppression of the Black patriarchy.

Gloria Naylor’s Bailey’s Cafe creates an atmosphere for all Black female
characters to expose their thoughts, feelings, and consciousness and be in the search
for answers for their problems. The Cafe becomes the setting for the whole novel, in
which Black women from different origins and backgrounds, enter to voice their
sufferings. The Cafe not only becomes the setting of the novel, but a collective
consciousness for those young Black women that the whole universe is in war with them. The Cafe becomes a temporary shelter for these women and after sometime they leave the Cafe and sometimes the city.

Chapter IV. Journey, Dance, and House: Means of Self-definition and Resistance

In this chapter, the focus is on the separate and identifiable influences that bring resistance and self-definition into existence, for the female Black community of Marshall and Naylor. These influences, namely, the means of self-definition and resistance are journey, dance, and house. *Praisesong for the Widow*, and *Brown Girl, Brownstones* are the main focus of this chapter however, other works of Marshall and Naylor are also incorporated.

In most of the novels written by Afro-American writers, journey becomes a reaction which Black female characters commence out of pain, misery, fear, or any other oppression, whether by their patriarchal community, or by the White racist society. In *Praisesong for the Widow*, Marshall puts Avey into a sleeplike condition and makes her ready for the journey back to the past of not only Avey, but the whole past of the Black community. Along the journey to her past, Avey becomes a communication medium for the suffering of the Black community from the time of the slavery to the present time. The journey also introduces the revivification of the cultural inheritance as a healing cure for the defections of the Afro-American community. This journey towards the search for the Black identity is a typical journey. Therefore, the qualifications acquired by Avey can be shared by all Afro-American women who are in the search for a new self-defined identity.

*Praisesong for the Widow* in a perfect way exhibits the effects of trances and dances on the life of Black women. Although trances, dances, and
vociferations have been helpful to both male and female members of the Afro-American community, the double oppression of racism and patriarchy has provoked Black women, since the time of slavery, to take advantage of these rituals for easing the burdens of everyday life. The word “dance” conjures up the erotic images into the mind of any listener however, the implied additional meanings, senses and feelings to the word dance has changed the function of dance for Afro-American women. The extra meanings and concepts that post-slavery era added to the word dance all imply the concept of freedom and liberty. Afro-American women learnt how to control their body, and mind and consequently control their own fate.

Black women’s outlook toward house, originates from the ideology they have about their ethnicity and their Black identity. If they have given up to racism and have accepted the superiority of the Western Hegemony, their concept of house will be only the physical aspect of it. For these women having a prestigious house in a decent area determines their identity. They do not have a self-made character and their only goal in their life is to succeed materialistically. The other category of Black women is the one who have embraced their Black identity, and their individuality finds meaning only in connection with community. For such people, house means the spiritual environment of their living place. Most of Black women belong to the second group. The racial discrimination in the Western world and their displacement has provoked them to create a spiritual place in their consciousness.

Chapter V. Conclusion

This chapter is a summing up of the previous chapters and the conclusion of the research. Based on the previous chapter’s discussions, this chapter compares the concepts of identity and self, illustrated by Marshall and Naylor. This chapter
with an inclusive outlook examines the means of resistance that the two writers suggest to their female Black characters against the sexist and racist oppression.


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