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"ALL THE WOMEN ARE WHITE, ALL THE BLACKS ARE MEN": A TYPOLOGY OF BLACK WOMEN'S IMAGES IN THE LITERARY TRADITION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS

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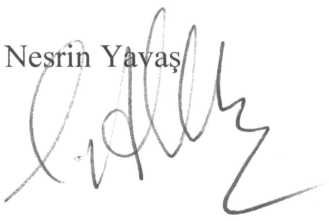

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Doktora tezimi yazarken, kimi zaman içine düştüğüm umutsuzluk duygusundan beni her seferinde çekip çıkaran, yaptığımın değerli ve gerekli olduğunu bana hep hatırlatan, bu tezi yazma sürecinde bana moral veren, ümitlendiren sevgili eşim Mustafa Yavaş'a her şey için çok teşekkür ediyorum. En sıkıntılı anlarımı, varlıklarıyla, sesleriyle, gülüşleriyle neşelendiren biricik çocuklarım oğlum Cem ve kızım Yosun'a çok ama çok teşekkür ederim.

Son teşekkürüm ise yaşamım boyunca, bana destek olan, sevgisiyle beni büyüten ve farklı olmanın ne demek olduğunu bana hep hatırlatan, beni yapabileceğime inandıran canım anneme. Biliyorum ki, bu tez canım anneme sunabileceğim en büyük teşekkür.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Zora Neale Hurston's analogy between black women and mules is a historical signifier of the painful experiences and social inequalities black women have faced since slavery. In fact, Hurston's analogy captures the unique experiences of black women who have been oppressed by both racism and sexism, and who have been denied the right to be humans and women in their own right. African American women's history beginning with slavery in the United States has been marked by incessant struggles to overcome the double burdens of racism and sexism. Facing both a gender and a race question, black women's experiences have been quite different from both white women and black men. True, both black men and women have had their share of the racist ideologies that have constantly represented them via humiliating, objectifying, demeaning stereotypes. Placed somewhere between apes and men on white man's hierarchical race ranking, black people have been depicted as lacking all the psychological, social, cultural, moral and biological attributes necessary to be accounted as white man's equal. In addition to the racist oppression, black women have been, throughout the United States history, the targets of a sexist ideology which has constructed them in ways that have sharply contrasted with elite, white male constructions of white womanhood.

Black women's unique experiences in the United States, as the victims of racist and sexist oppressions, have always been echoed in the writings, speeches and activism of black women which date back to the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement. Nevertheless, black male activists, abolitionists have always equated black liberation with the liberation of black men both in nineteenth-century abolitionist movement and twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement. The question of sex has always had to be sacrificed to the exigencies of the question of race, the answer to which was to be found in the empowerment of black men. The black anti-racist, liberation rhetoric since the

nineteenth century has always fallen on deaf ears on the subject of black women's historical sexist oppression, reasoning that black women's liberation is only possible when black men get their rights to compete with the white man on an equal basis. So, black women have persistently been considered to be appendices to black men's heroic deeds of liberation, passive and invisible objects in the making of American history.

The representation of black women in black history has been a replica of their persistent devaluation and oversight in black liberation movements. They have been either omitted from or inadequately addressed in black history. Historians of the black experience have assumed that the terms "blacks" or "slaves" refer only to black men, which has resulted in the annihilation and erasure of black women from history. A facile assumption held that whatever was about black men applied to black women as well. Consequently, black women have been symbolically omitted both from the political arena and the writings of history despite the fact that they have been the major figures in the making of American history.

Black women have been absentees in women's history as well because "woman" has always meant white woman in the United States. The omission or misrepresentation of black women in women's history has been achieved by a white-supremacist, patriarchal order which has designated white women as the epitome of womanhood since the nineteenth century. The cult of true womanhood, the gender ideology that emerged in nineteenth century America, had placed white women on a pedestal where submissiveness, subservience, chastity, purity, virtue, domesticity, piety were the cardinal tenets of a "true" woman. Ever since slavery, black women have persistently been thought of as having failed the test of true womanhood. Apparently, this has been so not because black women are not women, but because the material circumstances of their lives have always been different from those of white women because of racism. In stark contrast to the designation of white women as pure, sexually abstinent, domestic and virtuous, black women have always been objectified as sexually deviant, castrating bitches unworthy of the respect accorded to white women.

In addition to their omission from women's as well as black history, black women have had to face white women's racism both in nineteenth-century first wave feminism and the twentieth-century second wave feminism. Both waves of feminism

had been marked by the racist ideology because white feminist activists' struggle for social and political equality was intended not for all women but for white middle-class women. In both waves of feminist movements, white women disregarded the reality of racist oppression in the lives of black women. In other words, white women were unable to go beyond their gender interests to comprehend that black women were oppressed by racism as well as the patriarchal ideology.

Actually, as members of two subordinate groups in American society, black women fell between the gaps of black history and women's history. Again, due to their membership in two subordinate groups, black women have consistently been cast as The Other in both nineteenth and twentieth-century abolitionist, anti-racist, black liberation and feminist movements. Black women have shared common interests with each subordinate group, black men (racism) on the one hand and white women (sexism) on the other, yet ironically black women have been invisible in each group because each of these is a member of the dominant group: black men as men, white women as whites, and hence "All the blacks are men, all the women are white."

The 1970s and 1980s saw the irrevocable shattering of black women's centuries-long silence, resulting in the emergence of Black Feminism, Black Women's Studies, and Black Feminist literature, which would attempt to recover and define the substance of African American women's experiences in the racist, sexist America. Black feminist literature, in its various forms, has been the most effective political tool to combat against and to dismantle the silences surrounding black women's experiences in the United States. Black women authors have engaged in reclaiming and reconstructing African American women's struggles and experiences in their works as separate and distinct from both those of black men and white women. Therefore, black women's literature is about black women, and it takes special pains to record what it means to be black and female in white America, and to explore their various experiences at and struggles against the "multiple" oppressions of race, class, and gender.

The simultaneity of the classist, racist, and sexist oppressions in the lives of black women is fundamental to an exploration of African American Women's literary tradition and the uniqueness of black female experience in dominant white male culture. Beginning from this premise, this study argues that such an approach to the study of

black women's literature yields three different, yet interrelated, literary images of black women with respect to the various experiences, realities, and struggles at the nexus of race, gender, and class. It is the contention of this study to demonstrate a typology of black women's images in a selected body of African American women's writing with respect to their battles waged against a white, capitalist, patriarchal system. I would argue that these are the images of *the invisible, shrinking woman, the assimilated woman*, and *the empowered woman*, which recur in black women's literary writing extending from slave narratives to contemporary literary works by African American women. At this moment it is vitally important to note that these images of black women represent three different levels of consciousness that define their stances towards race, sex and gender oppressions.

Under the overall argumentation of these images of black women occur a variety of arguments which are central to and indispensable from my thesis. One of them is the problematic of the theoretical approach. If the central aim of this study is to give a typology of black women's images in African American women's literary writing, then the question of which theory is to be applied to the analysis of black women's experiences from slavery up to the present is charged with central importance. This study invalidates white mainstream feminists' theories of gender due to their reluctance to admit the racist and classist oppressions in the lives of black women. Theorizing from their racially and economically superior positions of influence, white mainstream feminists have failed to realize their own racism and classism in the oppression of black women and other women of color. Therefore, this study employs the "multiple" oppressions theory developed by black feminist criticism as the only viable and effective analytical tool to be applied to a study and an understanding of black female experience in the United States. The simultaneity and the intersectionality of oppressions is the central theoretical approach utilized for the analysis of these three different images of black woman.

Another sub-argument which runs through this study is that these three different images of black women recur in black women's writing since slavery. Although black feminist critics and historians like Mary Helen Washington and Barbara Christian have assumed that images of strong, self-defined black women started to surface in black

feminist writing especially after the 1970s, this study demonstrates that the image of the empowered black woman, as well as the other two images cannot be compartmentalized into specific periods of black women's literary history. All three images have continuously reverberated throughout African American women's literary writing since the time of slavery. To prove the cyclical nature of these images of black woman, this study has utilized a variety of writings by African American women, whether they be short stories, novels, autobiographies or plays selected from a canvas of time extending from slavery up to the present day. What is more, I have included the works of less-studied, less-known African American authors like Dorothy West, Ann Petry and Nella Larsen, and Gloria Naylor alongside such widely acclaimed authors as Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker, to further strengthen and substantiate my point.

Still another sub-argument of this study is that despite divisions along class lines and sexuality (lesbianism), all black women characters representing *the invisible, shrinking woman*, *the assimilated woman,* and *the empowered woman* share racist and sexist oppression. Late black feminist theorizing has shied away from totalizing, monistic representations of black women's experiences. Black feminist critics and scholars have gradually grown to be skeptical of any generalizations concerning black women's experiences in the United States. Such an approach, they have argued, not only obscures the differences of class and sexual preferences among black women but also presents them as a monolithic category of analysis, erasing individual differences. These black woman characters studied under three different chapters in this study come from different geographical, social, economic backgrounds. They may be slaves, domestic workers, upper-class or middle-class professionals, lower-middle class activists, middle-class lesbians, working-class lesbians, poor, rural Southern black women, poor, urban Northern black women or middle-class Southern black women. They may be housewives, political activists, slaves, domestic workers, journalists, mothers, married or single, young, middle-aged, old, lesbian or heterosexual, rich or poor. All these social, economic and sexual markers make their experiences unique and different. Yet, out of this diversity, there arises a unity: the reality of the oppressions of race and gender in the lives of black women. Therefore, this study also contends to demonstrate that despite their differences along class and sexuality lines, for African

American women, racist and sexist oppressions have been the major realities shaping their experiences and lives in the United States.

And finally, historically specific analyses of the literary materials are intended to justify the latest trends in race and gender theorizing. The simultaneity of the "multiple" oppressions circumscribing black female characters at different points in American history are to be given in a culturally, socially and economically specific contexts to demonstrate that race, class and gender intersect differently under given historical circumstances, and to reiterate how important it is to integrate historically specific analyses of race, gender and class to arrive at an understanding of the meanings of black women's lives and experiences within the broader context of American history.

To discuss and elaborate on the issues outlined so far, this study aims in the first place to draw the outlines of the theoretical background central to the overall structure and argument of this study. The impressive shifts underway in race and gender theorizing in post-structuralism point to the social constructiveness of the categories race and gender, refuting any biological, essentialist and genetic explanations. Additionally, in post-structuralist accounts of race and gender, both categories are invalidated as universal, transhistorical, fixed, monolithic concepts. Rather, they are conceptualized as unstable and "decentered" concepts constantly being transformed by shifting political and social struggles. Furthermore, poststructuralism designates race and gender as discourses of difference contrived to produce and maintain relations of power and subordination. In short, race and gender are social constructions predicated upon the recognition and interpretation of difference. More than this, both are highly contested representations of power between social categories (black/white, male/female) by which individuals are defined and identify themselves. Perceived as "natural" and "normative," racial categories and gender stratification are strategically vital for the maintenance of power in various institutional and ideological forms, both explicit and implicit. Their concrete implications and normative meanings are constantly shaped by what Louis Althusser calls "ideological state apparatuses"- the law, the media, school and family.

Post-structuralist conceptualizations of race and gender are quite illuminating and guiding with respect to their emphasis on the non-reductive, non-essentialist, social

nature of the categories of gender and race. However, what is needed is a theory that takes into account the simultaneity of race, class and gender oppressions. Notwithstanding a few notable exceptions, recent feminists have had little to say about race in their theories. Resting upon the unstated premise of racial homogeneity, white feminists have proceeded to universalize woman's oppression, unable to see how gender oppression is colored by racism in the case of black and Third World women. Basically, the theoretical background of this study aims to invalidate any approach to the study of African American women's history and literature which overlooks the simultaneity of racism, sexism and classism, and to set up the parameters of the discussions in the ensuing chapters.

Secondly, this study aims to provide the reader with a historical background of African American women for the purposes of demonstrating the uniqueness of their experiences, starting with slavery, and their major roles in the making of American history. In fact, this is an act of writing black women back into the American and women's history, from which they have been persistently omitted. Besides, it is an act of deconstruction of the racist-sexist constructions of black womanhood that have objectified, silenced and marginalized black women since slavery. Black women's history by its very nature seeks to empower and make visible the lives and the struggles of black women. Therefore, the historical background is intended, on the one hand, to represent black woman as a worthy historical agent and subject. On the other hand, it is intended to advance our understanding of the past and of the nature and complexity of American society. Above all, the historical background aims to demonstrate that the United States history, from its inception, is marked by racism and sexism.

The historical background provides the reader with an overall understanding of the intricate, ideological workings of race, gender and class oppressions, intersecting differently under different historical circumstances to oppress and silence black women. Yet, it also enables us to comprehend the fact that black women have always been aware of the uniqueness of their experiences, and that they have been, since slavery, actively engaged in political activism to counter-attack the white-supremacist, sexist order. Their incessant struggles start with slavery, the "peculiar institution," the bedrock of their centuries-long objectification and marginalization. Economic and sexual

exploitation of black women under slavery was justified by a racist ideology as well as a gender ideology which worked in convoluted ways to designate black women as deviants from traditional gender roles. Known as the Cult of True Womanhood, this gender ideology was a product of elite, white, male order that served to relegate white women to their domestic sphere, to legitimize black women's sexual and economic oppression and usurpation. The Cult of True Womanhood put white woman on a pedestal of purity, chastity, delicacy, fragility, and domesticity, which highly contrasted with the material circumstances of black women. Black female slaves worked as field hands side by side with black men, did the heaviest and dirtiest works, endured the floggings and the lashings, worst of all they were sexually abused. Therefore, black women, according to the cult of womanhood, were not "women" at all.

The ideological designation of black women as deviants from the "normative" gender roles is thoroughly explored in the historical background for it has always been mobilized by the white-supremacist, capitalist order to oppress black women. Throughout the United States history, this ideology has been inserted into racist state policies to account for the problems inflicted on the urban black communities. What is to be discerned here is the fact that ideologies of race and gender have always wielded themselves with great ease to changing political and economic agendas in the United States.

The historical background also aims to demonstrate that black women's feminist activism and consciousness date back to the nineteenth-century America, that their insights into and views of the oppression of black women provide the contemporary black feminist thought and theorizing with a source of inspiration, strength and guidance. Although unacknowledged and unrecognized in Black as well as in women's history, black women have always been on the forefronts of the struggles waged against racism and sexism. The words, thoughts and deeds of early black feminist abolitionist activists which have almost always gone unheard by black men as well as by white women are given voice in this chapter relating to historical background to further emphasize the fact that black women have always been active agents in the making of the American feminist and political history. Their exclusion from both waves of feminism due to white women's reluctance to acknowledge racism, besides sexism, as

another site of oppression in the lives of black women, as well as their marginalization in both the abolitionist and the Black Rights Movement due to black male sexism are historical, political and cultural signifiers of the title of this study: "All the blacks are male, all the women are white."

With its culturally, economically, and politically specific accounts, the historical background provides the reader with the reasons for the emergence of Black Feminism and Black Women's Studies in the 1970s America. This chapter aims in the first place to reveal black feminists', scholars' and historians' attempts to construct a separate field of criticism to account for and to theorize about the experiences of African American women. The general assumption underlying the whole body of black feminism(s) is the uniqueness of black women's experiences in the United States: black women are oppressed by white men's racism and sexism, by white women's racism, and black men's sexism. As the title of this chapter indicates, it is not desirable to talk about a monolithic black feminism representative and inclusive of all black women and their experiences, but rather black feminisms acknowledging that black women's lives are not uniform. Therefore, the second aim of this chapter is to expose the vast body of black feminist theorizing ranging from 1970s to late 1990s. And the third aim of this chapter is to reveal that despite the ferment of opinion and the variety of critical methodology on which black feminist criticism rests, a consensus can be discerned concerning the fundamental tenets of black feminist criticism(s) and the politics it entails: that being female and black constitute a special status for African American women; the importance of black women's defining their experiences (self-definition) drawing upon a heritage of oppression and struggle; that black feminism and ideology are embedded in the historical and contemporary realities of black women, that is, they emerge in the context of lived experience; that black feminist thought and theory should transform social life as well as the individual lives of black women; the importance of self-definition to resist and subvert racist-sexist myths of black womanhood; rootedness in the past; the importance of the preservation of common cultural bonds to mobilize constituency and finally the interstructure of race, class and gender oppressions in the lives of black women.

The following chapter, “Triple Jeopardy”, is an attempt to account for the parameters of the race, class and gender intersectionality as the most important contribution of black feminist thought to late postmodern criticism. To theorize the simultaneity of race, class and gender, it is vital, in the first place, to admit that race, class and gender are not independent, autonomous categories of analysis. Rather, each is inscribed within the other, and they intersect differently under given historical circumstances. Therefore, a second premise of this theory is historical specificity. Race, class and gender are articulated by the dominant ideology in context-specific ways at different historical conjectures to oppress and marginalize black women. Another premise of race, class, gender intersectionality is its rejection of reductionist approaches to account for the dynamics of these categories. Still another is the outright disregard for any additive models (race+gender+class) employed to account for their simultaneity. Rather, a multiplicative model (racexgenderxclass) denoting their intersectionality best captures the intricate, shifting relations of these forces. Lastly, this theory puts emphasis on the significance of the links between everyday material experiences and practices and social and political structures saturated with power and its distribution. And this is exactly what the race, class and gender intersectionality does when applied as a theoretical tool to an analysis of black women’s experiences in the United States.

Proceeding from the argument that the simultaneity of race, gender and class is the only viable and effective theoretical tool to be applied to the experiences and struggles of black women in the United States, I claim in the next chapter that such an approach to the study of African American women’s literature yields three different images of black woman with respect to their struggles and resistances at the nexus of race, gender, and class. It is the contention of this chapter to demonstrate a typology of black women’s images in a selected body of black women’s writing with respect to their struggles against a white, capitalist, patriarchal system. These are the images of the invisible, shrinking woman, the assimilated woman, and the empowered woman, which recur in black women’s literary works extending from slave narratives to contemporary black woman’s fiction.

Before an analysis of these three images, a set of guidelines are to be provided to follow the ensuing discussion. One of them establishes these images representing three

different levels of consciousness that define black women's stances towards race, sex and class oppressions. Another one clarifies that all the images are to be analyzed within a context-specific approach which requires a historical and cultural insight that will highlight the social, economic and cultural milieu surrounding them. A third guideline directs our attention to the selection of novels written in different epochs of American history to reveal the recurring pattern of these images in African American women's literary writing. The fourth one points to the shifting, unstable, and overlapping character of each image. Namely, because each image represents different levels of consciousness, a move from one to another is always possible. The last guideline focuses upon the diversity of black women's experience in a historical continuum, dispelling any notions of an essentialized black woman's experience.

The image of the invisible shrinking woman explored in the literary works by African American woman authors represents the black women defeated by the white supremacist, sexist, capitalist America. For these black women, racism, sexism and sometimes poverty fall so heavily upon their lives that they cannot escape this multi-faceted oppression. Defeat may take various forms for these black women: confinement within suffocating, unfulfilling marriages, death, self-delusion, infanticide, homicide, suicide, self-alienation, madness, psychological breakdown. Poverty comes as a additional burden further aggravating their oppression that is already contrived by virtue of their sex and race. Elite, white male constructions of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality, the inequalities of a white capitalist system, and the racist ideology intersect to devise an all powerful system oppressing these black women. Their invisibility comes with their inability to define themselves outside hegemonic constructions of black womanhood that have consistently denied black women the right to speak out for and define themselves. Their shrinking withdrawal from life comes with their inability to generate alternative ways to cope with their multiple oppressions, resulting in spiritual inertia almost to the point of non-existence.

The second image to be analyzed is that of the assimilated black woman. In fact, these black women represent a contemporary black cultural and social phenomenon widely discussed by African American scholars: assimilation into the white man's culture. The assimilated black women internalize the white racist-sexist order's notions

of femininity, masculinity, material success, beauty and sexuality. They valorize white middle-class values of material success at the cost of disclaiming their heritage, their sense of history and their connections to black culture. Seeing their racial and cultural identity solely as signifiers of their marginalization and powerlessness, these black women internalize the dominant society's controlling images of themselves, and therefore choose to counter-attack them with the "master's" values and norms. In a society where whiteness is the mythical norm, where there are no images affirming and celebrating blackness, these black women construct their identity and self-worth within the "safe" borders of a materialistic, sexist white society. In the process, they sacrifice their sustaining ties to black history and culture, which mostly ends in spiritual loss and a crisis of identity. Assimilation is the tragic response of the black women bereft of the inner sources and strength in confronting their "multiple" oppressions. And the real tragedy of the assimilated black women is that their tenuous, fragile existences in white man's world are marked by self-erasure.

The last image is that of the empowered black woman who generates a political and critical consciousness to resist the controlling images of black womanhood, and thus succeeds in creating and living a meaningful life in the white-supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist America. Rather than the objects of a white patriarchal, racist discourse, the empowered black women are subjects defining and voicing their own experiences. The empowered black women are in a constant process of negotiating their own internally defined images of self as African American women with the externally defined, racist-sexist images black women. Therefore, the act of self-definition is central to any discussion of empowerment. The empowered black women are self-determined to define themselves, to break up the centuries-long silence surrounding their lives, their experiences. Besides, they possess the political consciousness to see into the intricate workings of "multiple" oppressions, thereby they never choose the white man's terms for empowerment. Self-definition in relation to black community, black culture and the ancestral past becomes the most viable route to empowerment for these black women.

This typology of black women's images to be explored in various forms of African American women's literature is intended in the first place to argue that the theory of the simultaneity of oppressions is central to any considerations of black

women's history and literature. Secondly, it aims to prove that there exist three recurring images of black woman in African-American women's literary tradition with respect to their struggles, reactions, resistances at the nexus of race, gender and class. Third, this typology aims to demonstrate the multidimensionality of black women's experiences, and thus invalidates monolithic, totalizing and stereotypical conceptualizations of black woman's experiences. Therefore, the material conditions of a slave girl in the antebellum South that shape her experiences will be different from the material conditions of a black domestic worker or those of an upper-class black professional in an urban context. How the race, class and gender dynamics are articulated by the dominant ideology under certain given historical conditions is central to an analysis of these black female images. Also, this typology aims to reveal how race, class and gender dynamics are articulated by the dominant ideology at certain historical conjectures to oppress black women. And finally, this typology aims to demonstrate that despite differences in class, sexuality, education, age, and time and space, all black women confront "multiple" oppressions. How they interact with or challenge these structural power relations determine the variations in their experiences.. What is common to them all is the reality of an overarching system of oppressions that "make it practically impossible for black women to survive if they do not engage in meaningful resistance on some level" (hooks, *Black Looks* 18).

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Race

The definition of the terms “race” and “racism” is no simple task. For centuries, the question of “racism” has spurred intense debates giving rise to conflicting views and theories that have attempted to solve the “race” problematic by providing alternative critical theories or analytical tools. Questions about how to theorize “race” and “racism” have shaped both past and contemporary societies. The difficulty in providing clear-cut definitions for “race” and “racism” arises mainly due to changing political, economic and social agendas, and hence denotes the differing connotations the phenomenon of “race” acquires within time. Therefore, it is not possible and desirable to talk about a monolithic, centered conception of “race,” but of “racisms” changing, evolving within a historical context.

Despite the inflation of meanings and theories in the literature on “race” and “racism,” one fact remains obvious and self-evident: that the category of “race” has come to play a very fundamental role in shaping contemporary social relations and politics. The task for theory then remains to be one of raising questions about the very nature and functioning of the phenomenon of “racism”: what roles has it played in structuring societies and shaping state policies, what interests has it served in the distribution of rights and services that have had serious effects on peoples’ life chances; is it possible to talk about a unitary, transhistorical or universal racism, or does it make more sense to talk about historically specific racisms? How does racism operate in relation to and through other systems of exclusion and marginalization?

These questions have always been at the center of most theoretical and conceptual debates dominating the contemporary agenda on “race” and “racism”. However, the absence of commonly agreed conceptual tools or even agreement about

the general parameters to study and analyze "race" and "racism" makes race studies a contested arena where an incessant war of meanings is waged. The fact that "race" has no fixed, static meaning, or that it is a decentered concept could easily be demonstrated by the words of two prominent scholars who have problematized race. When W.E.B. Du Bois asserted in 1903 that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line- the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia, and Africa, in America and in the islands of the sea" ("*The Souls of Black Folk*" 372), he was referring to the institutionalized and legalized patterns of racial domination in the United States, a kind of racial dictatorship as Michael Omi and Howard Winant effectively discuss. But when the Black British scholar Stuart Hall claimed, at the turn of the twentieth century that "the capacity to live with difference is, in my view, the coming question of the twenty-first century" (361), he was signaling a major shift in critical and theoretical debates in the 1990s: an engagement of theories about "race" and "racism" with wider controversies in social sciences surrounding questions of culture, identity and difference, controversies that have been unleashed by the emerging literature on the cultural politics of racism.

The variation used in U.S. census enumeration reveals the contingency of "race" and racial logic. Michael Omi and Howard Winant reveal that groups such as Japanese-Americans have moved from categories such as "non-white", "Oriental", or simply "Other" to recent inclusion of as a specific "ethnic" group under the broader category of "Asian and Pacific Islanders" in the 1980 U.S. census. (3). Likewise, Omi and Winant point to the United States' difficulty in placing the Chinese and the Mexican into clear-cut racial categories in the nineteenth century. They argue that with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), Mexicans were given the legal status of "free white persons", while the Chinese were, as a result of *People v. Hall* Supreme Court decision, considered "Indian," and deprived of political rights accorded to whites (82). The United State's shifting racial perspectives point to the relatively arbitrary way in which the category of race has been constructed, and are indicative of the instable, ever-shifting, and indeterminate nature of racial categories and what these categories signify. In other words, it can be asserted that racial signifiers are not fixed but are deemed appropriate according to the time and conjecture in which they are utilized.

Thus, it is not desirable to talk about a single monolithic racism but of racisms constructed under specific historical circumstances. This means that racism is not a static concept with a single meaning, but a fluid one with multiple signifiers influenced by prevailing political, economic, social conditions. Such an understanding of racism requires in the first place to study racism as a discursive formation. Ann Laura Stoler tellingly argues that racism, as a discursive formation, "moves as easily between different political projects as it seizes upon *different* elements of earlier discourses reworked for new political ends" (376). Likewise, David Theo Goldberg views racism in his "The Semantics of Race," as a "hybrid" concept (which actually refers to the historically changing meanings of race) which is influenced by the prevailing social and political conditions at the time, "yet simultaneously bearing with it sedimentary traces of past significations" (374). Stoler's and Goldberg's conception of race as a discursive formation parallels Michel Foucault's definition of it. In his *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault writes,

> *[A discursive formation is marked by] the different possibilities that it opens of reanimating already existing themes, of arousing opposed strategies, of giving way to irreconcilable interests, of making it possible, with a particular set of concepts, to play different games. Rather than seeking the permanence of themes, images and opinions through time, rather than retracing the dialectic of their conflicts in order to individualize groups of statements, could one not rather mark out the dispersion of the points of choice, and define prior to any options, to any thematic preference, a field of strategic possibilities*. (36-7)

In fact, Foucault's insight into the concept of racism disqualifies any analysis of racism aiming to account for racism's origins because for Foucault any comprehensive analysis of racism should focus upon its "polyvalent mobility," that is its ability to wield itself to a variety of "projects" such as capitalism, modernity, the Enlightenment, slavery, and modernity. Narratives of racism have mostly focused upon determining racism's that particular moment of emergence. Just to provide some sense of this range, I list below in no particular order, nor with careful attention to disciplinary context, some examples.

George Mosse traces racism's foundations both to "the Enlightenment"-- as do many others -- and to "the religious revival of the eighteenth century" (3). For David Theo Goldberg too, modernity marks the divide in the rise of race consciousness. He cites that "[t]he shift from medieval premodernity to modernity is in part the shift from a religiously defined to a racially defined discourse of human identity and personhood" (*Race Critical Theories* 286). For Oliver C. Cox, "racial exploitation and racism developed among Europeans with the rise of capitalism" ("*Race Relations*" 72). He argued that racism arose from the need to exploit labor in the form of slave labor. He located the origins of race prejudice from the period of European expansion at the end of the fifteenth and the beginnings of the sixteenth centuries. In his *Caste, Class and Race*, Cox argued that race prejudice was used to legitimize the exploitation of the labor power of certain groups of workers, and was "a social attitude propagated among the public by an exploiting class for the purpose of stigmatizing some group as inferior in that the exploitation of either the group itself or its resources or both may be justified" (393).

Another recurring theme in debates surrounding the emergence of the race idea has been the issue of the relationship between slavery and racism. For Eric Williams, racism was a consequence of slavery: the outcome of the need to legitimize the institution of slavery and the means of exploitation, subjugation and coercion on which it rested. Michael Banton focuses on the linkage between the European capitalist expansion and conquest, and the construction and dissemination of racist ideas. For Uday Mehta, racism is theoretically inscribed within liberalism.

Ann Laura Stoler argues that these "discrepancies and commonalities" in racism's historiography are "evidence of a fundamental feature of the ways in which racial discourses work" (375), that is, their ability to attach themselves with great ease to shifting political, economic projects. Foucault's conception of racism as a discursive formation provides us with an analytical tool to understand the dynamics of racism. By Foucault's account, historical research on the emergence of "racial formations" should be less interested in the "accuracy" of these different datings and accounts than in their plurality and why such a range is possible. Viewed in this way, we should not expect the "racism" of the antiquity, of the colonial period, of slavery, of Enlightenment, of the

post-civil rights 1970s, or of the multicultural 1980s to reveal a common set of intentions, consequences, and themes. Each must be studied within a historical perspective that takes account of time and place, situating the divergent economic, political and social transformations that went into the making of specific "racial formations".

Within poststructuralist/postmodern discussions of race, essentialist and reductionist approaches to the study of race and racism are invalidated. Essentialism is the assumption that social differences between men and women, people of different races, or social classes "would reflect an essential underlying identity. By this token, there would be stable truths to be found and an essence of, for example, femininity or black identity" (Barker 20). Therefore, assumed innate biological differences between the members of different groups cannot be depended upon to account for cultural and social differences between them. "The non-reductionism of cultural studies insists that questions of race, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity [. . .] have their own particularities which cannot be reduced either to political economy or to each other" (Barker 9). A reductionist approach to the study of racism is the attempt to understand racism in terms of another social category such as class or ethnicity. The ethnicity based paradigm of race arose in the 1920s and 1930s as an explicit challenge to the prevailing racial views of the period (Omi and Winant 14-15; Gossett 416). In contrast to biologically based theories, the ethnicity based theory for race admitted that race was a social category. "Race was but one of a number of determinants of ethnic group identity or ethnicity. Ethnicity itself was understood as the result of a group formation process based on culture and descent" (Peterson 2), and culture included such factors as religion, language and customs, nationality, and political identification.

The class based paradigm of race attempted to explain racism in terms of class. For example, Alex Callinicos argues that racism is inscribed within capitalist modes of production, and that it "helps to keep capitalism going," and "it is thus in the interests of the capitalist class" (40). Likewise, Robert Miles saw racism as central to the process of capital accumulation and class relations in capitalist societies. In his essay "Apropos the Idea of 'Race' . . . Again," Miles insists that racial differentiations are constantly created in the context of class differentiation. Oliver Cox too maintained that racism is a

function of capitalism and that racial oppression is a masked form of class oppression. He said, "Here then are race relations; they are definitely not caste relations. They are labor capital-profit relations; therefore, race relations are proletarian bourgeois relations and hence political-class relations" (*Caste, Class* 336). In his book *The Declining Significance of Race,* (1980) William Julius Wilson develops a class conflict model of U.S. racism. He identifies three historical stages in the United States marked by three different modes of economic relations: these are slavery and plantation economy, segregation and the rise of the white working class, and finally industrial expansion and dispersed racial conflict. Wilson claims that race relations in each stage were determined by different systems of production and by state laws and policies.

The literature of race theorizing in the United States has been largely dominated by debates discussing whether it is the category of race or that of class that is more central to the study of race relations. As Lucius Outlaw points "Since the Black nationalist tradition has continued to stress 'race' over class, and classical Marxism class over 'race' the 'class or race' debates have persisted at great expenditures of paper and ink [. . .]" (76). In his essay, "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance," Stuart Hall talks about the inefficiency of any reductionist approach to the study of the phenomenon of racism. Hall distinguishes two major tendencies employed to account for racism. One is the economic, the other one is sociological. He explains the economic approach attempts to explain race by reference to the economic relations exclusively, whereas the sociological approach (which Michael Omi and Howard Winant define as the ethnicity paradigm of race) tries to define race by concentrating upon social relations between different racial and ethnic groups or dealing "with cultural differences (ethnicity), of which race is only one, extreme case" (39-40).

Hall rejects such reductionist approaches to the study of race and suggests "theoretical protocols" that must be central to any study of racism. The premise of historical specificity, he says, should govern any investigation of race/racism. So, like Ann Laura Stoler or Foucault he denies the existence of a "unitary," "transhistorical" racism but admits the existence of racisms produced under specific political, economic, social circumstances. Another premise is that one cannot explain racism in abstraction, separate from other social relations such as class, sexuality or gender. Nor can one

explain it by reducing it to these relations. The last premise he introduces to the study of racism is the "articulation" of racism under specific historical circumstances-"as a set of economic, political and ideological practices" with other social practices (59). The critical race theory Hall envisions is one that is non-reductionist, historically specific, and it is one that can link the structural (economy) and super-structural (culture) aspects of racism, and can see how race interacts with other axes of social stratification such as gender and class.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant's notion of racial formation provides us with a theory of racism congruent with the insights of Foucault, Stoler and Hall. Drawing upon certain concepts of poststructuralist theory (articulation and hegemony), Omi and Winant state that "the effort must be made to understand race as an unstable and 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle" (55). They define these shifting meanings of race as racial formation which is

> *the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed. Our attempt to elaborate a theory of racial formation will proceed in two steps. First, we argue that racial formation is a process of historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized. Next, we link racial formation to the evolution of hegemony, the way in which society is ruled and organized*. (55-6)

Central to their argument is the idea that "race" is socially and historically constructed and changes as a consequence of shifting social and political agendas. Proposing their theory of "racial formation," Omi and Winant claim that race should be understood as

> *an unstable and 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle [. . .]. The crucial task [. . .] is to suggest how the widely disparate circumstances of individual and group racial identities, and of the racial institutions and social practices with which these identities are intertwined, are formed and transformed over time. This takes place [. . .] through political contestation over racial meaning.* (57)

The discussions and analyses of Omi and Winant, shaped by their notion of "racial formation," are insightful and informative, particularly for their moving beyond the reductionist thinking while preserving the sociohistorical dimensions of race. Another strength of their theorizing lies in the advance it makes by combining structural and cultural dimensions of racism. Omi and Winant's racial formation perspective defines racism as a matter of both social structure and cultural representation. This is a novel approach to the study of racism for too often the attempt is made to study and understand racism primarily in terms of culture (cultural racism that has to do with representations of blacks in media), or state institutions and practices (institutional racism that has to do with legislation, education, health care, political policy). Therefore, the racial formation perspective, as Omi and Winant observe, links the macro-level social processes (state activity and policy-making) with micro-level social processes (racial judgments and practices people carry out at the level of individual level in everyday life, and cultural representations of race). For Omi and Winant, racial formation processes occur through this linkage between structure and representation, and it is "racial projects" "which do the ideological 'work' of making these links" (56).

And part of the strength of their theorizing lies in their acknowledgement of the intersectionality of race, class and gender. They argue that "race with other axes of oppression and difference--most importantly class and gender--along which the (U.S.) politics is organized today" (66). They emphasize that race, class and gender are not "fixed and discrete categories" autonomous in themselves but that they "overlap, intersect, and fuse with each other in countless ways" (68). Further, they employ the concept of both to account for the way racial formation is linked to political practice and organization, and the way race articulates with gender and class. Defining race, class and gender as "regions" of hegemony where certain political projects are made and conducted, Omi and Winant remove any clear borders between these forms of

[1] Chris Barker defines articulation as "a temporary unity of discursive elements which do not have to 'go together'. An articulation is the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements under certain conditions. Articulation suggests expressing/representing and a joining together so that, for example, questions of gender connect with race but in context-specific, contingent ways" (381).
[2] Introduced by the Italian scholar Antonio Gramsci, the concept of hegemony refers to the conditions necessary, in a given society, for the achievement and consolidation of rule. He wrote that hegemony is "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group [. . .] " (1143).

oppression. So, as socially structured categories of differentiation, race, class and gender are articulated by "racial projects" of the dominant group to consolidate hegemonic, racial rule.

Omi and Winant's reading of the neoconservative policies of the Post-Civil Rights America as a racial project rearticulating the meaning of race and racial equality in America proves both the strengths of their racial formation theory and its applicability as a race theory to this study. The long-established racist imagery of blacks was, in the aftermath of the post-Civil Rights era, being given new blood and power by neoconservative politics. In other words, a subtle but more powerful racism characterized post-industrial America. This was achieved through rearticulating old racist thoughts, stereotypes, fears around issues of family values, equality, crime, American ideals, and poverty. Omi and Winant argue that "the use of 'code words' (non-racial rhetoric used to disguise racial issues) was a classic example of rearticulation" of the meaning of race in post-industrial America (118).

The issue of racial equality rapidly disappeared from the neoconsevative political agendas, and scholars and political leaders alike produced explanations of black inequality that strongly emphasized the cultural "deficiencies" of blacks. A great deal of attention has been focused on issues such as black teenage pregnancy, welfare dependency, the collapse of the black family. But questions about structural racial barriers (housing segregation, black job ceiling) have largely disappeared from public discussion. As Gary Orfield explains,

> *many discussions about the need for job experience or about the lack of job motivation among young blacks never mention the fact that there has been a continuing and massive transfer of jobs from the black to the white side of the color line in metropolitan areas, and that in many markets virtually all new job creation is taking place in outlying white areas largely inaccessible to ghetto workers*. (352)

Behind the family and traditional values rhetoric appropriated by both Reagan and Bush administrations was the black "underclass" family structure that did not conform to the white patriarchal order. The black woman was made the scapegoat for the social ills facing the black urban underclass. The "black matriarchy" thesis

popularized by Senator Patrick Moynihan's report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, in the late 1960s was seen as a prophetic document in late 1980s. According to this thesis, black women working outside their homes were emasculating their husbands and sons, denying them the right to feel like a man. Moreover, they were bad role models for their sons and daughters. Because they couldn't be mothers to their children, their sons often dropped school, and became drug dealers or criminals. Their daughters, deprived of a mother's supervision and care, often ended up as teenage mothers or as prostitutes. And their husbands, because they were never allowed to be patriarchs and hence to feel like a man, either broke up marriages, left their homes for some other women or hung out in street corners. As discussed by David Theo Goldberg, "The Underclass population came to be characterized in behavioral terms, as a set of pathological attitudes, actions, and activities. The outward, visible sign of these pathologies was race. [. . .] Accordingly, 'the underclass' has come to signify not just the unemployed but the permanently unemployed or unemployable" ("*Racial Knowledge*" 166). More importantly, problems of the black urban underclass were thought to be caused by welfare incentives which gave rise to an increase to female-headed families. But nothing was said about the importance of the disadvantaged economic status of black men, who have been disproportionately affected by recent shifts in labor market conditions. As Kathryn M. Neckerman and et al. argue,

> *[s]ophisticated empirical research on the subject shows only modest effects of welfare on family structure. [. . .] Recent economic shifts are likely to be a major factor in the increasing joblessness of black men. The shift from manufacturing to services and the geographic shifts in production activity have altered both the number and characteristics of jobs available in areas where blacks are concentrated. Most inner-city blacks cannot qualify for high-skilled positions in the finance, real estate, and information-processing sector; low-skilled service jobs, however, are characterized by low wages, restricted opportunities for advancement, and unstable employment.* (414-15)

Black feminist scholar Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues that "welfare immediately conjures up images of black female-headed families, despite the fact that the aggregate number of poor persons who receive benefits in the form of aid to dependent children or medicare are predominantly white" (5). Welfare dependency with its black female connotations, drug addiction and crime are too often represented by the mass media as "pathologies" of a black "under" class blamed for its own problems. So, the anti-poverty, anti-welfare programs of the state are justified through the discourse of "cultural deficiency," where race, class and gender intersect.

For the purposes of this study, Omi and Winant's racial formation theory proves to be a valuable analytical tool to theorize race and racism in the United States for the racial formation theory overlaps with the fundamental premise of black feminist theorizing: the intersectionality of race, class and gender. Secondly, as is the case with black feminist theorizing, it conceives of race as a socially constructed category non-reducible to and inexplicable by any other paradigm such as class. And finally, the racial formation theory emphasizes the unstable, contingent character of the concept of race transformed by shifting political and economic conditions. So does black feminist criticism conceptualize race as an unstable category intersecting with gender and class under different sociopolitical circumstances.

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2.2. Gender

In her groundbreaking book, *The Second Sex* (1953), a landmark work in contemporary feminist thought, the French feminist scholar Simone de Beauvoir, writes, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (9). What De Beauvoir answers the question, "What is a woman?" captures one of the most discussed and theorized themes of poststructuralist and postmodern feminist criticism: that the category of "woman" is not a result of biological and genetic structures of human beings but a social, cultural construction.

Poststructuralist/postmodern feminists reject essentialist and reductionist approaches to the study of gender and sex. While biological essentialism conceives of the category of "woman" to be explained in terms of biology, biological reductionism suggests that the innate biological and genetic traits of human beings determine the behavior of men and women in quite different ways. "Men are commonly held to be more 'naturally' domineering, hierarchically oriented and power-hungry, while women are seen as nurturing, child rearing and domestically inclined" (Barker 231). As such, women and men are socially and culturally expected to play out their respective feminine and masculine roles, which are gender roles. As Marie Richmond-Abbott defines it, "'gender roles' has come to mean entirely socially created expectations of masculine and feminine behavior" (4), and "the biological factor of sex (maleness or femaleness) is used to construct a social category of gender (masculinity and femininity)" (5). The concept of gender, conceived as a social construction by feminist scholars, was employed to deconstruct the false binary man/woman that has fixed men and women in permanent relations of domination and subordination. For post-structuralists, there exists no universal category of "woman" and "man" unique to and underlying all cultures. They emphasize cross-cultural variations in the construction of the categories of "woman" and "man," and thereby undermine the "naturalness" and "fixity" of femininity and masculinity, establishing them as socially constructed, discursive formations.

Gender has become a central concept dominating the literature of social sciences largely as a consequence of the feminist movement which has attempted to deconstruct the systematic and widespread subordination of women and their domination by men. The term gender has been widely used by feminists, and it has become a highly contested term within feminist studies. The concept of gender has been employed by feminist scholars and historians to offer either a range of theoretical positions or simple descriptive references to the relationships between the sexes. Early feminist scholars used gender as a concept to distinguish culturally coded entities of masculinity and femininity from biological features (male and female chromosomes, hormones, as well as internal and external sexual and reproductive organs). In other words, they used gender to repudiate biological determinism by exposing the culturally varied forms of masculinity and femininity. Sex and gender were thought to be interdependent, but clearly distinguished. Gender was social while sex referred to essential, natural physical differences in human production. The use of gender "emphasized an entire system of relationships that may include sex, but is not directly determined by sex or directly determining of sexuality" (Scott 1057).

In post-structuralist conceptualizations of gender, the divisions between gender, sex and sexuality are removed. Sex and sexuality, like gender, are understood to be experienced through social practices and processes; they are constituted through gender and at the same time, help constitute gender (Acker 566; Barker 235-36; Hawkesworth 651). Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience" are some of the major works that view sexuality as central to gender relations. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* was an attempt to explain how the "naturalness" of sex, sexuality, and gender are "constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex" (X). According to Butler, gender is the process which coherently constructs sex, (hetero)sexual desire, and (hetero)sexual practice within the individual subject. As a postmodern critic, Butler's conception of gender designates sex and sexuality as discursive formations. In her analysis gender as performativity "becomes the cultural force that produces belief in the naturalness of heterosexuality" (Hawkesworth 666). Butler identifies compulsory heterosexuality as a discursive site

producing gender: “The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ understood as expressive attributes of ‘female’ and ‘male’” (17). Adrienne Rich and Catherine McKinnon claimed that sexuality is central to gender inequality. Rich firmly established that compulsory heterosexuality is at the heart of men’s dominance over women. McKinnon observed that “Sexual objectification is the primary process of the subjection of women. It unites act with word, construction with expression, perception with enforcement, myth with reality. Man fucks woman; subject verb object” (541). Likewise, Jeffrey Weeks, argues that “far from being the most natural element in social life [. . .] (sexuality) is perhaps one of the most susceptible to organization” (24). Following Foucault, Weeks asserts that sexuality is not a natural given but a discursive production that has to do with power. Again, Robert W. Connell argues for the centrality of compulsory heterosexuality, addressing it as one of the central structural features of the capitalist nations such as the United States. Weeks, like Adrienne Rich asserts that homophobia, especially among heterosexual men, is directly related to the sexual ideology supporting men’s dominance. “The explanation for Western culture’s homophobia is complex, but part of it must be the degree to which the fact of homosexuality threatens the credibility of a naturalized ideology of gender and a dichotomized sexual world” (248). Furthermore, Connell argues for an understanding of gender directly connected to particular social practices of labor and power. He says that gender structures the allocation of certain types of work, the organization of domestic activity, the division of paid versus unpaid labor (childcare and housework), the segregation of labor markets, differences in wage, opportunities for employment and promotion. As directly connected to power, gender, as Connell argues structures authority and control, ranking men above women in public and private sectors, creating a male monopoly on the institutional (men dominate the positions of authority and leadership in government, the military and the law) as well as on the interpersonal level (it organizes sexuality, emotional life, social behavior). Like Judith Butler, Connell conceives of gender as an active process structuring various sites of social life. Common to the works of Rich, MacKinnon, Connell and Weeks is an understanding

that clearly indicates the value of addressing beliefs about heterosexuality (sexual power, sexual drives, compulsory heterosexuality) in gender analysis.

Another approach to the analysis of gender is to be found in Marxist-feminist criticism. Marxist feminists, whatever the variations have been, require that there be a "material" explanation for gender inequality. In contrast to the radical feminists like Catherine MacKinnon, who focused on sexuality, Marxist feminists claim the gendered division of labor. Marxist feminist Heidi Hartmann insists that relations of production constitute the central parameter to account for patriarchy. In other words, patriarchy always develops and changes as a function of relations of production. She suggests that "it is necessary to eradicate the sexual division of labor itself to end male domination" (168). For Marxist feminists, "the economy capitalism and the family patriarchy" (Lorber 2) are the breeding grounds for women's oppression. Within Marxist tradition, gender is treated as the result of shifting economic structures and as a category having no analytic value of its own.

Psychoanalytic feminists, such as Nancy Chodorow, Luce Iregaray, Juliet Mitchell, drawing from the ideas of Freud, Lacan and Lévi-Strauss, focused on the early stages of child development to account for the formation of gender identity. They emphasized the centrality of language (language as systems of meaning - symbolic orders - that precede the actual mastery of speech, reading and writing). For Nancy Chodorow, the pioneering voice of the American school of psychoanalytic feminist criticism, the unconscious is a critical factor in the construction of the subject. In her book *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology*, Chodorow focuses upon the division of labor within the family and the assignments of tasks to each parent, which play a central role in her theory. She also considers the unconscious as the site of sexual division and, therefore, of constant instability for the gendered subject. The psychoanalytic feminists have focused upon the unconscious, sexuality, language, mothering, the incest taboo to account for the gendered subject. They admitted the centrality of sexuality to the oppression of women because "it is inscribed in bodies and also in the unconscious" (Lorber 3).

Patriarchy, "the process, structure, and ideology of women's subordination" (Lorber 3) is a central concept in radical, Marxist, and psychoanalytic feminist criticism

but each strand of feminism conceptualizes it differently (Lorber 3). As outlined by Judith Lorber, for radical feminists, patriarchy is "the structure and process of men's misogynist domination of women through violent control of their sexuality and childbearing," while it is for Marxist feminists the domination of women in the home by their husband, which is paralleled by their exploitation in the workplace by the capitalist system. For the psychoanalytic feminists, "patriarchy is the symbolic rule of the father through gendered sexuality and the unconscious" (Lorber 3).

An enormous body of literature on gender produced since the beginning of 1970s shows that gender is ubiquitous, as the wide ranging subject matter of the studies reviewed so far indicates. However, these conceptualizations of gender are not without their shortcomings and pitfalls. First, none of the studies above take into consideration the intersectionality of race, class and gender. Secondly, they have provided ahistorical conceptualizations of gender, and finally some have focused too much on the family or the household and left no way to connect the concept of gender to other systems of economy, politics or power (psychoanalytic feminists), some like Marxist feminists have reduced gender to class while some have made gender too much a matter of the self--a self that is completely unmarked by race, class, or ethnicity (Butler), and a self that is peculiarly disconnected from social, political and economic institutions. Still, others like Connell have insisted that gender is an autonomous structure constitutive of race and class.

Feminist theorists as politically diverse as Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone have found the source of women's oppression in the identification of woman with her body, and hence argued that the source of woman's liberation lies in deconstructing that connection. For example, de Beauvoir comments in *The Second Sex* that woman has been thought of as "womb"; and she later observes that woman is thought to belong to the physical world of nature, her life shaped by the dictates of her "biologic fate" (57), whereas men's world is one of creation. They use their minds to create "values, mores, religions" (119). Theirs is a world of culture as opposed to women's world of nature. In like manner, Betty Friedan in her *The Feminine Mystique* argued that women should be encouraged to be "culturally" creative like men, because cultural activities, as opposed to childbearing and rearing, are "mental" and are

"highest value to society"--"mastering the symptoms of atoms, or the stars, composing symphonies, pioneering a new concept in government or society" (247-77). This view is more explicitly explored by Shulamith Firestone in her *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970). Firestone claimed that women should dissociate themselves from their bodies because their oppression stems from the biological difference between men and women.

Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett are but some of the white feminist scholars who have fallen prey to what Adrienne Rich has called "white solipsism," that is the tendency "to think, imagine, and speak as if whiteness described the world" (*Lies, Secrets* 299). In other words, these white feminist scholars theorize gender in ways that disregard class and race oppressions in the lives of black women and other women of color. They fail to bring in elements of identity other than gender, to bring in oppressions other than sexism, and therefore obscure the racial and class identity of those described as "women". While Simone de Beauvoir is ultimately silent about race and class (mostly because of her white middle-class privilege), Kate Millett and Shulamith Firestone compared sexism and racism, and concluded that sexism is more fundamental than racism. Such a comparison between racism and sexism presupposes the nonexistence of black women who are the victims of both racism and sexism. It is worth to note that Millett and Firestone did not ignore race and racism but they conceived of racism to be independent of sexism, and therefore gave seriously misleading descriptions of gender and gender relations.

In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett argued that sexism is more fundamental than racism in three senses: it is "sturdier" than racism and therefore more difficult to eradicate; it is marked by a more "pervasive ideology," and as such those who are not racists may nevertheless be sexist; and sexism is the Western culture's "most fundamental concept of power" (33-4). Firestone, in her *Dialectic of Sex*, argues that racism is "extended sexism," and concludes sexism is more fundamental than racism:

> *Racism is sexism extended.[. . .] Let us look at race relations in America, a macrocosm of the hierarchical relations within the family: the white man is father, the white woman wife-and-mother, her status dependent upon his; the blacks like children, are his property, their physical differentiation branding them the subservient class, in the same way that*

> *children form so easily distinguishable a servile class vis-à-vis adults. The power hierarchy creates the psychology of racism, just as, in the nuclear family, it creates the psychology of sexism*. (108)

Obviously, Firestone sees sexism as the cause of racism, and contends that racism cannot be eradicated unless sexism disappears. Both Firestone and Millett dismiss the unique experiences of black women and other women of color. In the case of black women, racism and sexism cannot be studied as separate oppressions because black women are both female and black. White feminists' approach to the issue of gender oppression as if their own experiences represented the experiences of all women was not criticized by Adrienne Rich only. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her introduction to *Third World Women and The Politics of Feminism* (1991), criticizes feminist historians for focusing on "gender" as the sole basis of struggle and omit any discussion of the racial consolidation of the struggle (12). She proceeds to argue that

> *[t]o define feminism purely in gendered terms assumes that our consciousness of being 'women' has nothing to do with race, class, nation, or sexuality, just with gender. But no one 'becomes a woman' (in Simone de Beauvoir's sense) purely because she is female. Ideologies of womanhood have as much to do with class and race as they have to do with sex.* (12-3)

Susan Bordo is another feminist critic and historian, who has viewed white feminists' theoretical formulations of gender skeptically. She has identified the emergence of a new "gender skepticism" (216), which is the outcome of the inconsistencies between gender generalizations and the experiences of women of color. For black women, gender has always been mediated by race, class, and sexuality. Therefore, an analytic framework that isolates gender, or studies gender in terms of an "additive model" (gender+racism+classism) is seriously misleading and may only serve to mask the privileges of white, heterosexual, middle class feminists who experience only one form of oppression, gender (Higginbotham 1995; King 1995; Brewer 1993).

Amidst all this large body of gender theorizing, one cannot help asking, "How is gender to be conceptualized as an analytic category?" In her influential essay, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," Joan W. Scott provides us with the

parameters to employ gender as an analytic category. Scott defines gender as a concept involving two interrelated but analytically distinct parts. "Gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (1067). By conceptualizing gender as a constitutive element of social relationships, Scott emphasizes that gender is a process that operates in multiple fields, including cultural symbols (such as Eve and Mary as symbols of woman in the Western Christian tradition), normative concepts that set forth interpretations of the meanings of symbols (concepts that are expressed in religious, educational, scientific, legal, and political doctrines); social institutions and organizations and subjective identity (1067-68). In fact, Scott links the individual subject with the social structure, and proposes that it is vital to see into the nature of their interrelationships to understand how gender works. Furthermore, she criticizes theoretical assumptions informing radical feminism, Marxist feminism, and psychoanalytic feminism on the grounds that they gave rise to a variety of misapplications of gender as an analytic category, resulting in ahistorical, oversimplified and reductionist explanations. Indeed, Scott argues that gender should be employed to see into the historically and culturally specific relations between individual subjects and modes of social organization and structure. If feminist scholars and historians examine "how things happened in order to find out why they happened" (1067), they will be able to deconstruct the binary and hierarchical construction of gender, disclaiming the belief that gender is "self-evident or in the nature of things" (1066).

Gender, in Scott's conceptualization, does not exist in a set of relationships that are distinct from other relations of class and race, but as part of these processes that also constitute class and race, as well as other sites of domination, such as sexuality. Sexuality and the creation of sexually coded meanings are indispensable from the processes of gender, race and class. Therefore, analyzing the social construction of gender means taking into consideration the intersections of gender, race, class and other constructed categories of identity and difference. In fact, what Joan Scott does with the concept of gender is what Omi and Winant do with race. First, like Omi and Winant, Scott argues for a historically specific conceptualization of gender, criticizing

universalizing, totalizing accounts of gender. Secondly, she conceives of gender not as a static entity but as a process ordering human activities, practices, and social structures in terms of differentiations between women and men. Next, she, like Omi and Winant, conceptualizes gender in ways that connect the culturally coded meanings of gender to social, political decision making processes marked with power and its distribution. As such, the link between gender as culture and gender as structure is established. Finally, gender, as a social construction and as process, is embedded in the processes of race and class, and they interact differently under given historical circumstances.

Judith Lorber's conceptualization of gender parallels that of Scott, in that she, too views gender as process, stratification and structure. Lorber argues that gendered patterns of interaction informing everyday life are directly linked to social structures (law, education, the state, religion, economy, family, politics) which, through processes of signification, constitute women "as a group to be the subordinates of men as a group" (35). Furthermore, she contends that gender is a system of stratification which "ranks men above women of the same class and race" (32). So, white middle-class men are superiors of white-middle class women. But what about African American women, who are neither white nor male? Cognizant of the intersectionality of race, class and gender for African American women, Lorber asserts that black women occupy a position where their race and gender (and if they are poor, their class) further dichotomize the society's stratification scheme. Black women rank below black men because they are women (gender); black women rank below white women because they are black (race); and black women rank below white men because they are women and black (race and gender). Like Scott, Lorber studies sex, sexuality and gender as socially constructed categories that "govern our lives in the most profound and pervasive ways, through the social experiences and social practices" of everyday life (35). And the link between gender as everyday experience and gender as structure is secured by systems of signification produced and mobilized by the major social institutions of society.

Joan Scott's and Judith Lorber's conceptualization of gender prove to be efficient and fruitful when they are evaluated in terms of black feminist theoretical formulations of gender. For black feminists, gender can neither be reduced to race or class nor studied as a separate entity in its own right. Gender intersects with race and

class under given historical circumstances. Their intersectionality changes with shifting political, economic and social conditions. It is only in the writings by black feminists that we can find attempts to theorize the interconnection of race, class and gender as it occurs in the lives of African American women. This fundamental aspect of black feminist thought will be further explored in the chapters to come. Therefore, it is quite appropriate to assert that throughout this study gender occurs as only one component of black women's "multiple" oppressions. This means that gender operates through race and class oppressions. In this multiplication model, no one oppression is more fundamental than the others. Besides, gender is studied as a fluid structure of domination which intersect with other axes of power to locate women differently at particular historical conjectures. Additionally, gender, within the context of this study, is studied as a social construction and a political concept, which requires in the first place an understanding that acknowledges the regulatory power it entails. As is the case with race/racism, gender is not a static, universal and transhistorical concept. It articulates with other domains of power (race, class, ethnicity, sexuality) under specific political, economic and social conditions. This means that gender is a historically specific category of analysis. Lastly, gender is conceived as an ideology in this study. In the Gramscian sense, ideology is not separable from the day-to-day activities of life "but is a material phenomenon rooted" in everyday activities (Barker 59). More importantly, ideology is the "world views of dominant groups (in our case, the views of elite, white male Americans) which justify and maintain their power" (Barker 64), and represent their world views as common sense, the basic site of ideological struggle. Within the context of this study, elite, white, male constructions of gender (what a woman is and ought to be) have consistently oppressed African American women, designating them through historically specific controlling images. Again, it is vitally important to note that these images of black women have always been produced and mobilized through other axes of power such as race, class and sexuality. The literary works that will be analyzed in this study will attempt to exemplify the complex dynamics that arise from the confluence of such factors.

3. BLACK WOMEN IN WHITE AMERICA : A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Zora Neale Hurston, in her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, narrates a striking moment between an old grandmother and her young granddaughter, the novel's protagonist, Janie. The old nanny, a former slave, wants things to be different for her granddaughter, whom she has had to raise alone in the white master's backyard. "I wanted you to [. . .] pick from a higher bush and a sweeter berry," the old woman says, offering this description of the power relations which had so constrained her own life:

> *Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out [. . .] So de white man throw down the 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 womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been praying' fuh it tuh be different wid you.* (186)

Hurston gives us a literary expression of the painful historical realities and social inequalities black women have had to face since slavery. However, the history of the African American woman and her role in the making of American history have always been neglected by historians, just as the history of women in the United States has been ignored. Their struggle has been against sexism, which all women have experienced. It has also been against racism, which both black men and black women have experienced. Therefore, black women have experienced a special kind of oppression which is racist, sexist, and classist because of their dual racial and gender identity and their limited access to economic resources. Given their multiple oppressions, it becomes vital to recover and describe black women's experiences and their place in the making of American history.

Black woman's history in Northern America started with slavery. The slave system was based upon racial and patriarchal ideologies wedded to the pursuit of profit.

This “peculiar institution”, as Kenneth Stampp defines it, defined black slaves as chattel to be sold and bought and disposed of at the master’s will. Under chattel slavery, the African imported to North America was legally denied the right to have family, personal honor and community. The intention of slavery was to create in the slave a sense of alienation from all human ties except those that bound him or her in absolute dependence to the master’s will.

What gave American slavery its uniquely oppressive character and power was a racist ideology that had its roots in eighteenth century theories of racial difference. Promoted by such European philosophers as Friedrich Hegel, Immanuel Kant and David Hume, American racist ideology was based upon the idea that enslavement was the natural and proper condition for particular races of people. Furthermore, differences in skin color, hair, mouth, and shape of the skull were assumed to signify differences in intelligence, morality and spirituality. Such a racist mindset was used to justify all inhumanities, brutality and oppression inflicted upon black slaves. Deprived of the right to be a human being, black slaves’ lives had been a concession of miseries, sorrows and insurmountable psychic and physical pains.

Slaves, male and female alike, were exploited for their skills and physical strength for slaveholders’ economic interests. Women, no less than men, were viewed as profitable labor-units. For most girls and women, as for most boys and men, it was hard labor in the fields from sunup to sundown, as one female ex-slave, Abbie Lindsay from Lousiana, reports in Gerda Lerner’s documentary book: “The hands are required to be in the cotton fields as soon as it is light in the morning [. . .]. [T]hey are not permitted to be a moment idle until it is too dark to see,” (16). Therefore, keeping the plantation system economically intact and afloat outweighed considerations of sex. In this sense, the oppression of women was identical to the oppression of men.

But slave women suffered in different ways as well, for they were victims of sexual abuse and other dehumanizing mistreatment that could only be inflicted upon women. In addition to being exploited as a laborer in the fields, a worker in the domestic household labor, black slave women suffered under the breeding system and rape. When the abolition of the international slave trade began to threaten the expansion of the young cotton-growing industry, the slaveholding class depended upon natural

reproduction as the best and the cheapest way of replenishing and increasing the domestic slave population. In the eyes of the slaveholders and traders, slave women were not mothers at all; they were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of the labor force: "They were breeders-animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their members" (Davis 7). Because slave women were classified as breeders as opposed to mothers, their infant children could be sold away from them like calves from cows. Slaveowners naturally sought to ensure that their "breeders" would bear children as often as biologically possible. "Advertisements announcing the sale of black females used the terms 'breeding slaves,' 'child-bearing woman,' 'breeding period,' 'too old to breed,' to describe individual women" (hooks, A*'int I A Woman* 39). A report presented to the General Anti-Slavery Convention held in London, June 1840, testifies that barren black females were the victims of greater physical and psychological abuse: "Where fruitfulness is the greatest of virtues, barrenness will be regarded as worse than a misfortune, as a crime and the subjects of it will be exposed to every form of privation and affliction. Thus a deficiency, wholly beyond the slave's power becomes the occasion of inconceivable suffering." (hooks, *A'int I A Woman* 40).

As females, slave women suffered from sexual coercion as well. As Angela Davis argues, "If the most violent punishments of men were floggings and mutilations, slave women were flogged and mutilated, as well as raped" (23). In fact, rape was an effective weapon of domination, a weapon of subordination, the main aim of which was to break a slave woman's power to resist, and in the process, to demoralize and emasculate their men (Davis 23-4). The sexual oppression of female slaves was an instrument to dominate an entire race. It had devastating effects on black male-female relations and black family households in that it weakened the black family, robbed the black male of his role as supporter and protector of his wife and children, and denied black motherhood and womanhood. Neither laws nor black men themselves could save slave women from such assaults. Rape of black female was legally no crime because black women were not "women" so it was impossible to talk about rape. Susan Bordo discusses that "Black women, it has been imagined, cannot be raped any more than an animal can be raped" (236). Likewise, historian Eugene Genovese draws our attention

to the sexual exploitation of enslaved black females in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* , contending that "Rape meant by definition, rape of white women, for no such crime as rape of a black woman existed at law. Even when a black man sexually attacked a black woman, he could only be punished by his master; no way existed to bring him to trial or to convict him if so brought" (441).

The economic and sexual exploitation of black female slaves during slavery has had profound effects on the lives of African American women. The image of Jezebel, which objectified black women's sexuality as lustful, insatiable and deviant, was the product of slavery, and it has survived up to the present day constructing racist and sexist cultural representations of black womanhood. Of course, the objectification of black woman as insatiable, lascivious prostitutes was not new when white colonizers enslaved them in the New World. The African woman had long been associated in the white mind with deviant sexuality.

When Europeans entered the vast continent of Africa in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they encountered a people whose most explicit attributes, as they defined them, were savagery, bestiality, lecherousness, and being uncivilized. As argued by historians like Winthrop Jordan, Beverly Guy-Sheftall and Sander Gilman travelers' tales were full of descriptions of the Africans' peculiar physical attributes. Europeans' account of African women reached absurd proportions in narratives when a sexual link between black women and apes was asserted. For Europeans, Black women were lewd, lascivious, and unfeminine--the antithesis of virtuous, European women. When this long-lasting image of black women combined with the profit motive and the insatiable desire for cheap labor during slavery in the New World, it reinforced the images of African women as beasts of burden, and hypersexual, which rationalized their involuntary roles as workers, breeders, and targets for white sexual assault.

The devaluation of slave women during this time was quite ironic given the high valuation of white American women. The Cult of True Womanhood that emerged during the nineteenth century had an intense demoralizing effect on enslaved black females. It was a gender ideology, which re-defined what white womanhood is and how it ought to be. The cardinal tenets of white womanhood was virtue, piety, domesticity, chastity, and purity (Welter 152). White male idealization of white woman

as innocent and virtuous "served as an act of exorcism, which had as its purpose transforming her image and ridding her of the curse of sexuality" (hooks, *A'int I A Woman* 31). Within the discourse of the Cult of True Womanhood, wifehood and motherhood were valorized as the sole determinants of a woman's existence; the home was the only sphere reserved for women . The prime objective of a woman's life was to obtain a husband and then to keep him pleased. Her duties consisted mainly of bearing and rearing heirs and caring for the household. In order to be a paragon of virtue it was vital to repress all signs of overt sexuality. As historian Barbara Berg illustrates in her history of American feminism, *The Remembered Gate*, "The cult of purity denied that [white] women had natural sex drives," for the dominant view was that "the best of mothers, wives and managers of households know little or nothing of sexual indulgence. Love of home, children, and domestic duties are the only passions they feel" (84).

The designation of the white woman as a delicate, submissive wife depended upon male protection contrasted sharply with the mass sexual exploitation of enslaved black women. As white American patriarchal ideology idealized and defined white womanhood, they sexually assaulted and brutalized black women. Nineteenth century gender ideology served to mark racial differences "in profound ways through the construction of gendered differences between black and white womanhood, especially with respect to their sexuality" (Guy-Sheftall, "The Body Politic" 14-15). It takes little imagination to comprehend the fact that black woman repeatedly failed the test of true womanhood. Apparently, the qualities of chastity and virtue were absent in the lives of slave women. While the white lady remained responsible for conventional womanly duties in the mundane realm of household management, slave women worked as field hands side by side with black slave men for exhausting hours. Their work was not confined to the fields only; childbearing and rearing fell upon them as an added burden if they ever could spare time and energy to care for their own children. As Angela Davis reports from a slave narrative of the period related by Moses Grandy,

> *On the estate I am speaking of, those women who had sucking children suffered much from their breasts becoming full of milk, the infants being left at home. They therefore could not keep up with the other hands: I*

> *have seen the overseer beat them with raw hide, so that the blood and milk flew mingled from their breasts*. (9)

Pregnancy of enslaved black women was not an obstacle to do agricultural work. The whipping and flogging of pregnant and nursing mothers was a common practice if they did not work efficiently or if they protested against their masters or overseers. As Jacqueline Jones writes,

> *The whipping of pregnant and nursing mothers--'so that blood and milk flew mingled from their breasts'--revealed the myriad impulses that conjoined to make women especially susceptible to physical abuse. [. . .] One particular method of whipping pregnant slaves was used throughout the South: 'they were made to lie face down in a specially dug depression in the ground,' a practice that provided simultaneously for the protection of the fetus and the abuse of its mother. Slave women's roles as workers and as childbearers came together in these trenches, these graves for the living, in southern cotton fields. The uniformity of the procedure suggests that the terrorizing of pregnant women was not uncommon*. (20)

Obviously, the economic arrangements of slavery contradicted the hierarchical gender roles incorporated into the new ideology. Fragility, delicacy were valorized as the ideal state of woman; strength and ability to bear fatigue were distasteful qualities in a white woman. These were "features to be emphasized in the promotion and selling of black female hand at a slave auction" (Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood* 25). Angela Davis relates a traveler's observation of a slave crew in Mississippi returning home from the fields. The description of slave women aptly demonstrates that they were practically anomalies measured against the test of delicacy and fragility: " [. . .] forty of the largest and strongest women I ever saw together; they were all in a simple uniform dress of a bluish check stuff; their legs and feet were bare; they carried themselves loftily, each having a hoe over the shoulder, and walking with a free, powerful swing like chasseurs on the march" (Davis 11).

It was also impossible to talk about black woman's virtue, chastity and purity in the face of a racist and sexist ideology which institutionalized rape, and hence legalized

free access to black female bodies. Furthermore, it was not the prevailing racist-sexist system but the very nature of the black woman to be blamed for her sexual abuse. As Hazel Carby discusses,

> *[a] basic assumption of the principles underlying the cult of true womanhood was the necessity for the white female to 'civilize' the baser instincts of man. But in the face of what was constructed as the overt sexuality of the black female, excluded as she was from the parameters of virtuous possibilities, these baser male instincts were entirely uncontrolled. Thus, the white slave master was not regarded as being responsible for his actions toward his black female slaves. On the contrary, it was the female slave who was held responsible for being a potential, and direct, threat to the conjugal sanctity of the white mistress*. (*Reconstructing Womanhood* 27)

The ideology of the Cult of True Womanhood of the period thus confirmed the different material circumstances of these two groups of women and resolved the contradiction between them by marking racial difference in profound ways through the construction of gendered differences between black and white womanhood. Given the realities of enslaved women's lives compared to the ideologies of gender-based differentiation, African American women were labeled as unfeminine, and thus fell short of the qualifications of a "true" woman. What needs to be discerned here is the fact that social constructions of black womanhood and manhood have been, since slavery, inextricably linked to racial hierarchy, meaning systems and institutionalization. Relatedly, the social structure of inequality is rooted in the embeddedness and relationality of race, class and gender. As Rose M. Brewer aptly discusses "dismissing intersections of race, class and gender conceptually erases African American women from the annals of American history" (18).

As early as 1852 Sojourner Truth, a highly revered black feminist abolitionist, observed black women's unique position and experiences at the intersection of gender and racial ideologies in her address at the Third Women's Rights Convention, in Akron, Ohio. Her legendary speech is an eloquent statement of the multiplicity and simultaneity of the oppressions of race, class and gender in the lives of black women. Truth's speech

was "actually a scathing indictment of the racist assumptions that place black females outside the category of woman, all the while exploiting their femaleness" (duCille 35). Drawing upon her own planting and plowing experiences and other burdens she had been forced to endure as a slave, Truth launched an unprecedented attack on the gender conventions and publicly politicized black women's particular status and struggles. In her speech, often punctuated with the cry, "And ain't I a woman?," Truth demystified the racial-sexual ideologies that have denied black women the rights and the privileges accorded to white women:

> *That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman! I could work as much and eat as much as a man--when I could get it--and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?* (36).

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Jacobs is another sophisticated, sustained dissection of the conventions of true womanhood by a black female author before emancipation. The author of this slave narrative "used the material circumstances of her life to criticize conventional standards of female behavior and to question their relevance and applicability to the experience of black woman" (Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood* 47). Writing under the pseudonym Linda Brent, Harriet Jacobs reflected in one key passage, "in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others" (56). In an attempt to appeal directly to the compassion of her white Northern readers, Jacobs contrasted the material conditions of slaves with their own lives:

> *O, you happy free women, contrast your New Year's day with that of the poor bond-woman! With you it is a pleasant season, and the light of the day is blessed. [. . .] Children bring their little offerings, and raise their*

> *rosy lips for a caress. They are your own, and no hand but that of death can take them from you. But to the slave mother New Year's day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on a cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns.* (14)

The racist, sexist, and classist social structure of the nineteenth and early twentieth century American life was mirrored in the women's rights movement as well. The designation of black women as deviants from the gender ideologies of nineteenth century America gave rise to a continued devaluation of black womanhood which excluded them from the first wave feminist movement in the United States. The history of feminism in the United States is marked by two distinct periods or "waves". Significantly, both waves are directly related to the struggles initiated by African Americans for freedom and equality. The first wave emerged out of the Abolitionist Movement and culminated with the suffragists' successful passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Free and enslaved African American women created numerous strategies and tactics to dismantle slavery as a legal institution and to resist racially gendered sexual abuse. The important challenge for black women activists was to confront the interlocking and overarching systems of racism and classism in the feminist movement among its white members and within its theory.

During the first decades of the twentieth century, the United States underwent a profound change due to the industrial revolution. In the process, white women's lives were radically changed. By the 1830s, many of women's traditional economic tasks were being taken over by the factory system and mass production. With the rise of industrialization class differences intensified and the distinctions between different classes of women, certainly clear during the previous epoch, became further entrenched and gave rise to a more rigid social class differences. Employment opportunities for middle and upper-income women decreased as gender restrictions in businesses, trades, and professions rigidified.

The more the United States economy became industrialized, the more the separation between the domestic and the public spheres rigidified. The cult of true womanhood, which emerged as an ideological consequence of industrial capitalism,

idealized wifehood and motherhood, and designated home as the appropriate sphere of the "true" woman (Welter 162; hooks, *Ain't I A Woman* 46-7; Davis 32). Although elite and middle-class women were discouraged from pursuing careers in business and the professions, their easy access to material sources and leisure provided them with privileges that neither men nor women of other classes possessed. The cult of domesticity, disseminated through the church, the educational system, and popular literature, sought to define femininity for all classes of women but also became the basis of the demand for the family wage that allowed women and children to stay home. These conditions, however, did not apply equally to all strata of women. The Irish, for example, faced some of the worst socioeconomic conditions among Euro- American groups (Mullings 42). By 1850, women worked in nearly 175 industries in manufacturing, through their low wages creating the surplus value that helped to build the new economy (Mullings 42). The extent to which women worked outside the home was conditioned by class, ethnicity, and marital status. While Euro-American working-class women toiled in the factories and elite white women adorned parlors, African American women, men, and children were undergoing massive exploitation. Enslaved labor was begun to be used for industry as well. "In textile, hemp, tobacco, sugar refining, and rice milling factories, in the lumber and transportation industries, and in foundries, salt works, and mines, black women did what was considered to be men's work" (Mullings 99).

The 1830s were years of intense turbulence and resistance. The Nat Turner revolt in 1831 announced that Black men and women were profoundly dissatisfied with their lot as slaves. It was the beginning of organized abolitionist movement. The early thirties were also marked by strikes operated largely by young working-class women, whose working conditions and low wages were so exploitative. Around the same time, middle-class white women were beginning to question their identities as wives and mothers defined by the gender ideology, and to fight for the right to political power and for access to careers outside their homes As discussed by Angela Davis, the middle-class housewife as well as the white working-class women used the metaphor of slavery as they sought to articulate their respective oppressions (33). Middle-class women denounced their empty, unfulfilling domestic lives by defining marriage as a form of

slavery. For white working women, the economic oppression they experienced on the job was no different from the oppression of a slave. For black women, gender, race and class oppressions combined to rationalize greater exploitation. Given the realities of enslaved women's lives compared to the ideologies of gender-based role differentiation, black women were not women at all. As mentioned earlier, they performed tasks usually reserved for men. Even when they were employed as factory workers, they did the dirtiest and the heaviest tasks that Euro-American working-class women would never be asked to do. Their race prevented them from combining powers with white working-class women who did not want to compete for wages with members of an inferior race.

Abolitionism provided white women, working and middle class, with the opportunity to give voice to their silenced oppressions at home and at the work place. Not only were some white women politicized, through antislavery work, to recognize and act on the oppression in their lives but also they found a public arena in which they could voice these grievances collectively. Along with Black female reformers, they learned vital political skills such as petitioning, speaking, and organizing, which were necessary for their struggles. In this process women began shattering the gender stereotypes of themselves as secondary partners to men and violating taboos against female participation in public life. As Angela Davis aptly discusses,

> *[t]he anti-slavery movement offered women of the middle-class the opportunity to prove their worth according to standards that were not tied to their role as wives and mothers. In this sense, the abolitionist campaign was a home where they could be valued for their concrete works. [. . .] Furthermore, they learned how to challenge the male supremacy within the anti-slavery movement. They discovered that sexism, which seemed unalterable inside their marriages, could be questioned and fought in the arena of political struggle*. (39)

Of all the pioneering white women abolitionists, it was the southern white Grimke sisters from South Carolina, who most consistently linked the issue of slavery to the oppression of women. From the beginning of their lecturing career, they defended their rights as women to be public advocates of abolition. The male attacks they had to face at their meetings taught them the lesson that they could never campaign to free the

slaves unless they defended their rights as women. Manifestations of black women's race and gender consciousness were also to be found in the single-sex, self-help organizations which free Northern black women formed in the early 1800s and in the public speeches delivered by various black free women. Though ignored by historians attempting to document the development of feminism in the mid-nineteenth century, black women's self-help, abolitionist, and other reform activities witness the evolution of a feminist consciousness among black women.

In 1832, Maria W. Stewart (1803-1879), a free black from Connecticut with abolitionist and feminist impulses spoke on a variety of issues relevant to the black communit--literacy, abolition, economic empowerment, and racial unity. Rallying also for the rights of black women, Stewart admonished black women in particular to move beyond traditional gender roles and "to improve [their] talents" (26) by pursuing formal education and careers outside the home. Passionate in her defense of black womanhood, she asked: "How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles? [. . .] Possess the spirit of independence. [. . .] Sue for your rights and privileges" (29). Sojourner Truth stands as the most revered black feminist-abolitionist with respect to her involvement on the part of black women in the first wave women's rights movement. Her legendary speech delivered at women's rights convention in 1851 is an invaluable expression of black feminist thought because it displays the simultaneity of the oppressions of gender and race in the lives of black women. Furthermore, her speech was an exposition of the class bias and racism of the new women's movement. In repeating her question "Ain't I A Woman?" no less than four times, Truth was announcing that she was no less a woman than any of her white sisters because of her race and her economic condition. Truth continued to draw hostility from white women at such meetings. In her defiant speeches, she incorporated her critique of white women's racism into her analyses of male power. As Angela Davis points out in her book *Women, Race & Class*, it was Truth's ability to represent her black sisters--both slave and "free"--and her courage in imparting a "fighting spirit" to the campaign for women's rights that is Truth's unique historic contribution to the feminist legacy (64).

A figure like Anna Julia Cooper--novelist, suffragist, and racial activist--voiced her feminist vision during the horror of the turn-of-the-century Jim Crow era. Cooper's insights are remarkable in that she encouraged black women to speak for themselves and to project their own unique voices. In her first book-length black feminist text, *A Voice from the South* (1892), Cooper analyzed the fallacy of referring to "the Black man" when speaking of black people and argued that just white men cannot speak through the consciousness of black men, neither can black *men* "fully and adequately [. . .] reproduce the exact Voice of the Black Woman" (qtd. in Gates, Foreword xix).

She projected a woman-centered radicalism which insisted on female autonomy. Cooper lectured black women not to subscribe to patriarchal social codes which discouraged women from seeking an education on the grounds that it would damage their marriage: "Admitting no longer any question as to their intellectual equality with the men [. . .] they deny that their education in any way unfits them for the duty of wifehood and maternity or primarily renders these conditions any less attractive to them than to the domestic type of women" ("Higher Education" 325). Cooper vehemently denounced black male opposition to higher education for black women and observed that "while our men seem thoroughly abreast of the times on almost every other subject, when they strike the woman question they drop back into sixteenth-century logic" ("Higher Education" 327).

Mary Church Terrell was another early black feminist figure, who unmistakably reflected the fact that white women's feminist activism cannot represent and talk for black women's experiences. She said, "Not only are colored women [. . .] handicapped on account of their sex, but they are everywhere baffled and mocked because of their race. Not only because they are women, but because they are colored women are discouragement and disappointment meeting them at every turn" (64-5). Terrell was apparently implying the necessity of a separate black women's feminism due to the racism of white feminist activism. She was also denouncing the fact that fighting against racism only could not empower black women because black women had to fight against an overarching system of patriarchy, both in their black community and in a racist white America.

These short portraits of activist feminist women--Stewart, Terrell, Cooper, Truth --demonstrate a tradition of little-known black feminist pioneers. Indeed, many black male abolitionists of the nineteenth century did not take sexism seriously. Much of feminist theory and activism of the nineteenth century reflected and contributed to what Adrienne Rich has called "white solipsism": the tendency "to think, imagine, and speak as if whiteness described the world," "a tunnel-vision which simply does not see nonwhite experience or existence**"** (299). White feminist activists failed to comprehend the uniqueness of black women's situation in that they were disempowered not only by sexism but also by racism and classism. We need to know that these early black feminist activists were filled with a passionate rejection of female inferiority as well as that their efforts to align with white women reformers in the nineteenth century were systematically rejected.

Among the approximately three hundred women and men attending the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls in 1848, there was not a single black woman in attendance. Nor did the convention's documents made even a slight reference to Black women. Given the organizers' abolitionist involvement, it was quite puzzling that slave women were entirely disregarded. As Angela Davis discusses, the main focus of the Seneca Falls Declaration was "the institution of marriage and its many injurious effects on women," and it was a turning point in the United States history in that "[i]t was the *articulated consciousness of women's rights* at mid-century" (53). However, the Declaration all but ignored the predicament of white working-class women, as it totally ignored the condition of Black women in the South and North alike. Obviously, the Declaration was signaling the undercurrent of racism and classism in these early interracial abolitionist and feminist activism, which erased all hopes for an integrated women's movement. These fragile beginnings in black and white female relationships were to give way to a complete split between black and white women's struggles to achieve their political and feminist rights in the years to come. Division along racist and classist lines was to be repeated more than a century later in the 1960s civil rights and women's movement.

Given white women's dedication to the abolitionist cause, one could not help inquiring the racism of white women activists. Historian Gerda Lerner's *Black Women*

in White America gives accounts of racism in the abolitionist movement and the exclusion of black female antislavery activists. Lerner reprints Clarissa Lawrence's poignant statement to the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women in Philadelphia in 1838. Lawrence's words speak to the great struggle of Blacks who desperately sought white allies to end slavery: "We meet the monster prejudice everywhere. We have not power to contend with it, we are so down-trodden. We cannot elevate ourselves. [. . .] We want light; we ask it; and it is denied us. Why are we thus treated? Prejudice is the cause [. . .]" (359). bell hooks attempts in her *Ain't I A Woman*? to account for the racism in the abolitionist movement. She asserts that early nineteenth-century reformers attacked slavery, not racism:

> *When white women reformers in the 1830s chose to work to free the slave, they were motivated by religious sentiment. They attacked slavery, not racism. The basis of their attack was moral reform. That they were not demanding social equality for black people is an indication that they remained committed to white racist supremacy despite their anti-slavery work. While they strongly advocated an end to slavery they never advocated a change in the racial hierarchy that allowed their caste status to be higher than that of black women or men. In fact, they wanted that hierarchy to be maintained.* (125)

The historical research of Pamela Allen and Robert Allen on the abolitionist period makes the same important distinction-that whites' support for ending slavery was balanced by their fear of "amalgamation":

> *Few whites, however, deigned to mingle with their black co-workers as social peers. Such conduct was both unpopular and uncommon. Racists asserted that social intermingling led to interracial marriages and thus defiled the 'pure' blood of the white race. White abolitionists accepted this argument and went to great lengths to deny that they were amalgamationists. 'We do not encourage intermarriage between the whites and blacks,' said the New Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society in a notice to the public. [. . .] Lydia Marie Child, an advocate of racial equality, termed the race-mixing issue 'a false charge [. . .]' yet she*

could not resist adding that 'by universal emancipation we want to stop amalgamation.' (35)

Given this important dimension of the abolitionist experience, it is clear why so many contemporary black feminists have criticized early white feminist abolitionists' drawing parallels between themselves and black slaves. Nancie Caraway, bell hooks, Angela Davis are but a few of contemporary black feminist scholars, who protested against the slavery-marriage analogy. For them, such thinking trivialized the depth of the suffering of enslaved Black men and women "for whom slavery meant whips and chain" (Davis 34). For the slave woman, it also meant rape. This constant comparison of the plight of "women" and "blacks" deflected attention from the fact that black women were extremely victimized by both racism and sexism. Contemporary historiographers and in particular white female scholars accept the theory that the white women's rights advocates' feeling of solidarity with black slaves was an indication that they were anti-racist and were supportive of blacks. hooks calls such a claim "fierce romanticism," asserting that most white abolitionists, though enthusiastic in their anti-slavery protest, were totally opposed to granting social equality to black people (*Ain't I AWoman* 124).

At the outbreak of the Civil War, the women's rights leaders channeled all their energies toward a defense of the union cause. By the decade of the 1860s, white feminist, abolitionist activists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott--the principals of the Seneca Falls Convention--and Susan B. Anthony traveled to deliver pro-Union lectures demanding "immediate and unconditional emancipation" (Flexner 108). They continued to make connections between antislavery and women's rights. Stanton, speaking to the American Anti-Slavery Society meeting in 1860, spoke of the "subjective" link between white women and slaves, both of whom knew oppression from the inside (Du Bois, *Stanton Anthony Correspondence* 78).

After the Civil War, Black suffrage became the issue which would dominate reform politics. Feminists, abolitionists, and their allies in the Republican Party, known as Radicals, embraced this cause as their most important postwar goal. The period of Reconstruction was a time of intense public concern with political issues, and particularly with the vulnerable status of the newly freed Blacks. Bettina Aptheker describes the postwar climate as one in which explosive social and political issues were

debated: “What would replace the old slaveholding regime of the Old South? Who would determine political and economic structures? What is the position of the newly freed slaves? Are they ‘persons’? Are they ‘citizens’? Should they exercise all the rights and privileges of citizenship? Should they vote?” (40).

Discussions on the legal urgency of suffrage for Blacks at the war’s end convinced both races of feminists that suffrage was the key to the legal position of women as well. They prepared an agenda which advocated woman suffrage along with Black suffrage (the common meaning of which was “Black male suffrage”). In 1866, the American Equal Rights Association (ERA) was founded, with Stanton, Anthony, Fredrick Douglass, and the black feminist activist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper as officers. Stanton opened the ERA’s founding convention with the following statement: “Has not the time come to bury the black man and the woman in the citizen?” (Du Bois, *Feminism and Suffrage* 90). However, Stanton’s alliance could not survive the racism of the post-Civil War era. Inevitably, the divisions came over the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. When the Fourteenth Amendment, conferring citizenship, equal protection, and due process of law, was proposed to Congress in 1866, not only did it have one mention of woman suffrage, but the word “male” had been inserted into the Constitution for the first time. The Fifteenth Amendment, proposed soon after, guaranteed Black male suffrage (Allen 139, 140, 144).

Both white and black feminists were shocked when they were left outside the American citizenship. The word “male” in the Fourteenth Amendment raised the issue whether women were indeed United States citizens at all. But “feminists’ subsequent reactions in the fierce debates about the ratification process comprise a disappointing chapter in feminist history, one that saw the total breakdown of interracial politics” (Caraway 140). Anthony and Stanton felt they were betrayed by their abolitionist friends who now ignored women’s rights in this time of the “Negro’s Hour,” meaning Negro males. The Radical Republicans feared that association with women’s suffrage would destroy their efforts to secure voting rights for black males, and therefore they did not support woman suffrage (Davis 74-5).

In the face of such political tensions Stanton and Anthony adopted a racist rhetoric to defeat the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. As suffrage historian

Eleanor Flexner wrote, "[Stanton's] indignation and that of Miss Anthony knew no bounds." Anthony pledged that "I will cut off this right arm of mine before I will ever work or demand the ballot for the Negro and not the woman" (147). Stanton's letter to the editor of the *New York Standard*, dated December 26, 1865, explicitly embodies a tone of white supremacy:

> *The representative women of the nation have done their uttermost for the last thirty years to secure freedom for the Negro; and as long as he was lowest in the scale of being, we were willing to press his claims; but now, as the celestial gate to civil rights is slowly moving on its hinges, it becomes a serious question whether we had better stand aside and see 'Sambo' walk into the kingdom first. [. . .]*
>
> *'This is the Negro's hour.' Are we sure that he, once entrenched in all his inalienable rights, may not be an added power to hold us at bay? Have not 'black male citizens' been heard to say they doubted the wisdom of extending the right of suffrage to women? Why should the Africa prove more just and generous than his Saxon compeers? If the two millions of Southern black women are not to be secured the rights of person, property, wages and children, their emancipation is but another form of slavery. In fact, it is better to be the slave of an educated white man, than of a degraded, ignorant black one [. . .].* (Davis 70)

In such a tone, Stanton and Anthony caused the weakening of the common struggle of the ERA for universal rights attempting "to build feminism on the basis of white women's racism" (Du Bois, *Stanton-Anthony Correspondence* 92). In their furious attempt to defeat black male suffrage, Stanton and Anthony failed to make a thorough analysis of the political conditions prevailing at the war's end. With the triumph of the Union Army over their Confederate opponents, Stanton and her co-workers asked the Republicans to reward them for their wartime support. The reward they demanded was woman suffrage. Of course, they could not get the reward in the aftermath of the Union victory. But this was not because Republicans were men, it was rather because the economic and political interests of the period were more important to them.

The Republican party was composed mostly of Northern capitalists whose main concern was to secure the Black vote to ensure their political and economic hegemony in the chaotic postwar South. What they wanted was two million black votes for their party, and they wanted nothing to interfere with this immediate interest. As Angela Davis aptly discusses, "[t]heir struggle against the Southern slaveocracy did therefore mean that they supported the liberation of Black men or women as human beings, that they conceded the necessity of extending the vote to newly emancipated Black men in the South did not imply that they favored Black males over white females" (74).

The turning point of this period, around which the above tensions occurred, was the 1869 final meeting of the American Equal Rights Association. This meeting signaled the abandonment of Black civil rights as a feminist principle and set the racist tone the American suffrage movement would have for the next decades. The issue at hand was whether the association should endorse the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave the franchise to black men but not to women of any race. For Stanton and Anthony the Union victory was the real emancipation of the millions of Black people. They thought that the abolition of slavery and the Civil Rights Bill granted black people the same rights as those of middle-class white women. However, the assumption that emancipation had rendered the former slaves equal to white women ignored the fact that black people still suffered the pain of economic deprivation, and they faced the violence of racist mobs and lynchings. In the face of widespread violence and terror directed against black people, Frederick Douglass, the black male abolitionist, who had always tried to accommodate both black males' and all females' rights, insisted that Black people's need for electoral power was more urgent than that of middle-class white women. Although Douglass once said that the amendment was just "the culmination of one half of our demands," and he demanded that they collaborate "to secure the further amendment guaranteeing the same sacred rights without limitation to sex," at the peak of the debates going on in the 1869 ERA meeting, he made a plea for the greater urgency of black male suffrage (Aphteker, *Woman's Legacy* 46-7).

Fredrick Douglass's call for unity in respect to the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment--with its implication that only male citizens were unconditionally entitled to the ballot-- was also supported by the outstanding black poet and leading advocate of

woman suffrage Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. In her speech "We Are All Bound up Together" delivered to the Eleventh National Woman's Rights Convention in 1866, Harper referred to the racism of white women and claimed that even if the black women were given the ballot, it would not solve the race question: "I do not believe that giving the woman the ballot is immediately going to cure all the ills of life. I do not believe that white women are dew-drops just exhaled from the skies. [. . .] You white women speak here of rights. I speak of wrongs" (218). Apparently, Harper was accusing white feminists of their inability to go beyond their gender interests to see that black women were oppressed by racism as well. Harper and other black woman activists were assured that the rights of black men had to be secured before black women could assert theirs. The race issue was deemed to be more important than black women's rights for, as Giddings discusses, "[i]f the race had no rights, the women's struggle was meaningless" (68). When the 1869 ERA convention passed Douglass's resolution supporting the Fifteenth Amendment, the organization split, which brought an end to the tenuous alliance between Black Liberation and Women's Liberation. But after the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, black women continued their own struggle throughout the 1870s with renewed passion and vigor.

Although Fredrick Douglass was the nineteenth-century's most dedicated proponent of Black Liberation, he failed to understand that getting the franchise would not heal the whole social and economic ills of his newly freed race. His naivé faith in the power of the ballot to grant blacks with absolute freedom and equality was betrayed by the fact that blacks were still in utter economic and political deprivation. Furthermore, they were terrified by the specter of mob lynchings, which, as Ida B. Wells, the black feminist, anti-lynching crusader asserted, were used "to keep the race terrorized" and "to keep the nigger down" (Caraway 160).

The Reconstruction had failed the land reform, and Southern blacks were still working as tenant farmers or sharecroppers in the white man's fields. The convict lease system forced them to play the same old roles designed for them by slavery. Men and women alike were arrested at the slightest pretext in order to be leased out by the authorities as convict laborers. As Angela Davis explains, "[w]hereas the slaveholders had recognized limits to the cruelty with which they exploited their 'valuable' property,

no such cautions were necessary for the postwar planters who rented black convicts for relatively short terms" (89). Black women who could escape toiling in the fields ended up in the kitchen or the washroom of the white man's house. As Angela Davis statistically demonstrates,

> *Only an infinitesimal number of black women had managed to escape from the fields, from the kitchen or from the washroom. According to the 1890 census, there were 2.7 million black girls and women over the age of ten. More than a million of them worked for wages: 38.7 percent in agriculture; 30.8 percent in household domestic service; 15.6 in laundry work; and a negligible 2.8 percent in manufacturing. The few who found jobs in industry usually performed the dirtiest and lowest-paid work.* (87-8)

Because outright discrimination prevented black men from getting well-paying jobs to keep their families economically stable, black women had to take the only jobs available to them, no matter how poor and humiliating the conditions. A black Southern domestic worker quoted anonymously in Gerda Lerner's *Black Women in White America* points to the fact that black domestic workers predicament bore the familiar stamp of slavery:

> *I frequently work from fourteen to sixteen hours a day. [. . .] I not only have to nurse a little white child, now eleven months old, but I have to act as playmate [. . .] to three other children in the home [. . .] If the baby falls to sleep during the day [. . .] I am not permitted to rest. It's 'Mammy, do this,' or 'Mammy, do that' [. . .] from my mistress all the time.[. . .] I live a treadmill life and I see my own children only when they happen to see me on the streets when I am out with the children, or when my children come to the "yard" to see me [. . .] I am the slave, body and soul, of this family. And what do I get for this work [. . .] The pitiful sum of ten dollars a month! [. . .].* (227-8)

The relation between black women's domestic labor and slavery is affirmed when we consider the sexual abuse perpetrated by "the man of the house" (Davis 91). The myth of the promiscuous, low, lustful black woman which had legitimized her

systematic rape during slavery had been deeply embedded in the white man's psyche. Sexual abuse has been another dimension to the black women's domestic work, which finds voice in the words of a domestic worker from Georgia in Bettina Aptheker's historical work: "I believe nearly all white men take, and expect to take, undue liberties with their colored female servants--not only the fathers, but in many cases the sons also. Those servants who rebel against such familiarity must either leave or expect a mighty hard time, if they stay" (*A Documentary History* 49).

In fact, black woman's desperate economic situation as an outcome of a racist, classist and sexist America did not change until the outbreak of World War II. With the war, more than four hundred thousand Black women left their domestic jobs. At the war's peak, they had more than doubled their numbers in industry. But even so, "as late as 1960 at least one third of Black women workers remained chained to the same old domestic jobs and an additional one -fifth were non-domestic service workers" (Davis 98). No statistics could better reveal the reality of black women's entrapment at the very bottom of the social strata than Louise D. Stone's agitation related by Gerda Lerner. In her article titled "What It's Like to Be a Colored Woman" in *Washington Post,* dated November 13, 1966, Stone writes: "There are two kinds of females in this country--colored women and white ladies. Colored women are maids, cooks, taxi drivers, crossing guards, schoolteachers, welfare recipients, bar maids, and the only time they become ladies is when they are cleaning ladies" (Lerner 217).

The last decades of the nineteenth-century saw further deterioration in the black community. In 1893, the Supreme Court reversed the Civil Rights Act of 1875. With this decision, Jim Crow and lynch law--a new mode of racist enslavement--received judicial sanction. Three years later, it announced the "separate but equal" doctrine of Plessy v. Ferguson, which institutionalized the South's legal system of segregation. The last decade of the nineteenth-century was a critical moment in that earlier racist prejudices against black people were now fueling into an overarching white racist ideology which took its strength from the rationalizations of sociology and science. "Scientific" reason was called upon to explain and justify, why the rich, the poor, Blacks, and women should remain in their prescribed places. "Darwinist concepts of racial degeneracy and extinction provided the 'scientific' basis for most of the anti-

Negro propaganda that spewed forth in unprecedented volume around the turn of the century" (Fredrickson 256). Blacks' severe social and economic deprivation during Reconstruction was rationalized through radical Darwinist notions. Rather than put the blame on a policy of neglect and repression, the "supposed" failure of blacks during Reconstruction was linked to their failure in the "competitive" stage of race relations (Fredrickson 255). Blacks were but a degenerating race. So it would be of no use to prepare them for citizenship. Coming in the wake of the "supposed" failure of blacks during Reconstruction, Darwinism rationalized a hands-off policy and alarmed whites of the need to segregate "a race liable to be a source of contamination and social danger to the white community, as it sank even deeper into the slough of disease, vice, and criminality" (Fredrickson 255).

More importantly, racism and sexism worked in convoluted ways to establish white male supremacy, and myths of black inferiority and bestiality. Working through myths of womanhood, racist ideology took a stronger hold on American psyche than ever before. The articulation of racism and sexism aimed to secure white middle-class women's return to home and adoption of her womanly duties as well as to suppress a whole race, whose "hyper-sexuality" was seen a direct threat to the survival of the Anglo-Saxon race. While white woman's reproductive capacity was celebrated, that of black woman caused the "black peril" panic when the 1880 census demonstrated that the rate of increase in the black population was vastly outstripping that of whites (Morton 23). Black women's reproductive capacity was no longer celebrated as it was during slavery. On the contrary, it was now a menace to the health of the white race at a time when white women were seen to have failed the test of true womanhood. As Charles Rosenberg and Carroll Smith Rosenberg aptly discuss, "while the 'black peril' reflected and served to justify demands for the return of white women to true womanhood, as well, these sexual tensions fueled Northern racism" (352), which found its most virulent form in mob lynchings.

Eugenicists argued that deviation from traditional feminine roles caused white racial suicide and destroyed white supremacy. Either women would carry out their womanly duties, or they would damage their reproductive capacities and their offspring and cause national disaster. Patriarchally prescribed gender roles became rigidified and

internalized through a rhetoric of the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race. The gender ideology of the time saw home as women's proper place where she would raise white children to be added to the white superior stock. Therefore, the birthrate of White Americans "became a crucial indicator of the nation's health, equated with racial vigor and fitness" (Morton 23). White women were to be the mothers of the race, and they had a very special responsibility to safeguard white supremacy. Black women, on the other hand, was the scapegoat for Negro familial, moral and economic decline. The manipulation of the racist patriarchal ideologies surrounding Black female and male sexuality was aimed to dehumanize and disempower black men, to debase black women, and to secure the construction of white women as white man's property. The myth of the "bad" black woman designated a bestial, uncontrolled sexuality of black womanhood which even forced "the black man turn from her in disgust to pursue women of the white race--and thus to the horrible crime of rape" (Morton 28). As Angela Davis discusses, the myth of the black rapist and that of the "bad" black woman were inseparable companions: "If Black men have their eyes on white women as sexual objects, then Black women must certainly welcome the sexual attentions of white men. Viewed as 'loose women' and whores, Black women's cries of rape would necessarily lack legitimacy" (182).

It is important to note that racist-sexist myths of black womanhood and manhood were used to justify the lynching of black men and the rape of black women by white men. The black feminist, anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Well's insights into the culture of lynching uncovered not only the economic and political aspects of it but also revealed how myths of oversexed black male female sexuality were constructed to justify the practice, and defined black men and women as deviants from the ideological constructions of manhood and womanhood. Wells was the outstanding historical figure dedicated to the reveal the economic and political significance of lynching and exposing the sexual ideologies which fueled it. Not only did lynching served to thwart Blacks' economic stability, but also it worked to defraud black males of their votes and the benefits of citizenship. Wells asserted that "The southern white man would not consider that the Negro had any right which a white man was bound to respect. [. . .] 'No Negro domination' became the new legend [. . .] and under it rode the Ku Klux Klan [. . .] the

lawless mobs [. . .]" (598). In her attempt to expose the convergence of sexual and racial ideologies in lynching, Wells wrote that the white men "invented the [. . .] excuse that that Negroes had to be killed to avenge their assaults upon (white) woman" (599), and that "[t]o justify their own barbarism they assume[d] a chivalry which they did not possess" (600). Wells argued that "true chivalry" should apply to all women, that it should not be confined entirely to white women. So, while the designation of black men as "wild beasts" lusting for white flesh justified their lynching, the designation of black womanhood outside the parameters of the cult of true womanhood justified their rape by white man.

As Abby L. Ferber aptly discusses in her *White Man Falling,* racism in the United States has always been articulated with sexism, which in turn rationalized white supremacy through patriarchal ideologies of white womanhood, and black womanhood. After the Emancipation, Negrophobia, the fear of blacks, has been socially constructed to fuel into fears of miscegenation, which aimed to keep blacks under surveillance through the use of terror:

> *Throughout U.S. history, the fear of black political and economic equality has been rearticulated as the fear of interracial sexuality and guarded against with force. Additionally, gender has been central to this force, as the protection of white womanhood and the threat of interracial sexuality have become synonymous. While interracial sexuality has been condemned historically, it has only been the relationship between white women and black men that has been the focus of attention; the exploitive relations between white women and black men have been largely ignored by the white community. The construction of whiteness as racially pure [. . .] provided white males with the freedom to engage in interracial sexual relations, often through the rape of black women, while at the same time defending white womanhood against the fictional black male rapist.* (42)

The myth of the "bad" black woman defined black women as deviants from the socially sanctioned gender roles. Judged against the conventions of true womanhood, black women had none of the virtues expected from a "lady". They were thought to be

lustful, sexually insatiable, therefore, they were not "pure"; they worked outside their homes and left their children and spouses unattended and uncared, therefore they were not angels in the home. Falling short of morals, they deserved none of the respect granted to white women. Gerda Lerner enumerated a wide range of practices that reinforced this myth: "the laws against intermarriage; the denial of the title 'Miss' or 'Mrs.' to any black woman; the refusal to let black woman customers try on clothing in stores before making a purchase; the assigning of single toilet facilities to both sexes of Blacks; the different legal sanctions against rape" (163-64). Cast against an overwhelming racist-sexist ideology, black women were not thought to be women at all. As one Southern woman quoted anonymously by Gerda Lerner laments,

> *I am a colored woman, wife and mother. [. . .] A colored woman, however respectable, is lower than the white prostitute. [. . .] Southern railway stations have three waiting rooms, and the very conspicuous signs tell the ignorant that this room is for 'ladies' and this is for 'gents,' and that for the colored people. We are neither 'ladies' nor 'gents', but 'colored.'* (66-67)

The racist-sexist myths of the dominant society had not only debased black woman's image, but had also excluded them from the mainstream of labor force and continued to make them vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Virulent racism getting its hold of the white mind during the turn-of-the-century decades left its stamp on the white women's suffrage activism as well. In 1893, the National American Woman Suffrage Association passed the resolution that of black and other immigrant, working-class women should be literate to qualify as voters (Davis 116). At a time when black women were undergoing massive economic, sexual exploitation and social segregation, white women suffragists chose to ignore the injustices inflicted upon black women.However, white women's inaction did not stop black feminist activists from envisioning "an egalitarian and inclusive political theory which demonstrated a public voice of advocacy for all women and all oppressed persons" (Caraway 164). Clubwoman and educator Anna Julia Cooper elaborated upon the unique position of black woman in America due to her oppression both by virtue of her race and her sex: "

> *The colored woman of to-day occupies [. . .] a unique position in this country. In a period of itself transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make our civilization. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both.* ("Status of Woman" 45)

Fannie Barrier Williams was another strong black feminist activist whose insights into the oppression of black women debunked the myth of the "bad" black woman. Speaking at the 1893 World Columbian Exposition, Williams asserted that sexual immorality did not rest on black women but on the white men who continued to harass them (Giddings 86). In her article "A Northern Negro's Autobiography," which appeared in *The Independent* in 1904, Williams exposed the sexual exploitation of black women in the hands of white men, and subverted the myth that they received such sexual assaults because they were "by nature" licentious:

> *It is a significant and shameful fact that I am constantly in receipt of letters from the still unprotected colored women of the South, begging me to find employment for their daughters [. . .] as domestics or otherwise, to save them from dishonor and degradation. Their own mothers cannot protect them and white women will not, or do not.* **(** 165)

At a time when racist-sexist, white supremacist ideology designated the black woman as lacking in morals and intellect, Fannie Barrier Williams, in her 1905 essay titled "The Colored Girl," gave voice to their silent spiritual and physical struggles, and demanded the same respect and concern the white women is entitled to receive:

> *The white manhood of America sustains no kindly or respectful feeling for the colored girl; great nature has made her what she is, and the laws of men have made for her a class below the level of other women. The women of other races bask in the clear sunlight of man's chivalry, admiration and even worship, while the colored woman abides in the shadow of his contempt, mistrust or indifference. [. . .] We cannot comprehend the term American womanhood without including the colored girl. [. . .] In law, religion and ethics, she is entitled to*

everything, but in practice there are always forces at work that would deny her anything. [. . .]

What the colored girl craves, above all things, is to be respected and believed in. This is more important than position and opportunities. In fact there can be for her no such thing as opportunity, unless she can win the respect of those who have it in their power to humiliate her. (150,51,54)

Black women leaders such as Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin of Boston, Mary Church Terrell of Washington, D.C., and Mary Margaret Washington of Tuskegee, Alabama, following Fannie Barrier Williams' exhortations, started, in the mid-1890s, a movement to mobilize black women from all walks of life and to engage them in the battle for racial and sexual equality. Black women's clubs emerged not only because white women's clubs prohibited their membership, but because they had a unique set of issues--defending black womanhood, uplifting the masses, motherhood, family life, to name a few. In 1895 this national mobilization movement of black women achieved further momentum when James W. Jack, then president of the Missouri Press Association, announced that the Negro women fell short of morality, and that they were "prostitutes" (Hine 13). Upon learning this comment, Ruffin declared that it was time for further organization to stand up against such racist slurs directed against black women. Ruffin mobilized black women to make it known to the white world that "[their] aims and interests are identical with those of all good aspiring women" (Hine 14). Jack's statement gave rise to the convening of the first national conference which led to the formation of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in 1896. The NACW combined the resources and energies of numerous local and regional clubs into one strong organization in order to attack a white racist-sexist social order that viewed them with contempt.

Like the club movement of white women, black women's club movement was led by middle-class women. However, while the white club members served the interests of middle class women, black club members believed that progress meant reaching and helping those who had the fewest forces and the least opportunity. On the agenda of NACW, there were a number of issues to be handled urgently: temperance,

higher education for boys and girls, health conditions, the importance of a home life, morality, black motherhood, relationships between black men and black women and the problematic nature of those relations, race pride and race advancement. In virtually every city and rural community in twentieth-century America there existed an organized grouping of black women, often led by a group of elite educated black middle-class women, which focused on alleviating one or more of the many social problems plaguing an increasingly urban, impoverished, politically powerless, and segregated black population. The urgent need for black female education motivated several black women to found new institutions. Mary McLeod Bethune, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Charlotte Hawkins Brown founded schools for their sex because they knew that education was vital to the uplifting of the race. In 1909, Burroughs founded the National Training School for Women and girls in Washington D.C., which stressed industrial education for employment in areas that were open to them.

Black club women were also aware that upgrading sexual images was central not only to achieving self-respect and empowerment among black women but to the advancement of the whole race. In their attempt to challenge and subvert the myth of the "bad" black woman, club women accused their race men of collaborating with white men in the further debasement of black womanhood. At the turn of the century, Fannie Barrier Williams challenged: "Is the Colored man brave enough to stand out and say to all the world, 'This far and no farther in your attempt to insult or degrade our women?'" ("The Colored Girl", 155). Her complaint was that black men too catered to the racist-sexist notions of the white-supremacist ideology:

> *We have all too many colored men who hold the degrading opinions of ignorant white men, that all colored girls are alike. [. . .] How rare are the reported instances of colored men resenting any slur or insult upon their women. Colored women can never be all that they would be until colored men shall begin to exalt their character and beauty and to throw about them the chivalry of love and protection which shall commend the recognition and respect of all the world*. (154)

Black women's exclusion from the American Negro Academy--a kind of think tank for the intellectual black elite called the Talented Tenth, which was organized in

1897 and whose purposes were to bring together leading male intellectuals like Reverend Francis Grimke, Reverend Alexander Crummell, and W.E.B. Du Bois, was an outright expression of black male attitude toward black woman's political role in their struggle to achieve complete political, social and economic equality. For all the achievements of black women in this period, the academy's bylaws "stipulated that only men of African descent" were entitled to membership (Giddings 116). To elaborate, black male leaders did not take black women's political role in the racial struggle seriously. They minimized the importance of their race women's political, social activism in their struggle against a hostile white world. They thought if black men had their rights as U.S. citizens, black women would be saved from their degraded positions. Nineteenth century black male leaders like James Forten, Charles Remond, Martin Delaney, Fredrick Douglass supported the efforts of women to gain political rights but they did not support social equality between the sexes. As bell hooks discusses in her book *Ain't I A Woman?*, "Like white male liberals in the nineteenth-century, black male leaders were not against granting women access to political rights as long as men remained the acknowledged superior authorities" (91). Again Elizabeth Fox-Genovese discusses that "[t]he evidence from slavery and from Reconstruction strongly suggests that black men espoused their own version of 'white' views of male dominance within and without the family, and that they actively encouraged the domestic subordination of women as a necessary contribution to the survival and progress of the race" (51).

What the early black male leaders lacked in their vision of racial struggle was their inability or reluctance to see into the intricate structure of the simultaneous oppressions of race, class and gender. If state legislations and laws were enough to ensure their freedom, then they could have stopped lynchings with their right to the ballot. But despite their political gains following the emancipation, racism took on a stronger hold on their lives because the racialization of gender, and the sexualization of racism ensured further oppression of the whole race through ideologies of manhood and womanhood. Black and white women alike were made the mediums through which white male supremacy controlled social order in white society, and at the same time oppressed a whole race. Anna Julia Cooper's essay "Womanhood a Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race", included in her *A Voice from the South by a*

Black Woman of the South (1892) is perhaps the best expression of the black women's unquestionable role in the absolute freedom of the whole race: "Only the BLACK WOMAN can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole [. . .] race enters with me" (563).

Neither the mass migration of Southern blacks to the North beginning in the period of the First World War in search of better lives and better wages, nor the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution granting women the right to vote altered the political status and material conditions of the lives of the majority of black women. They made their way up to North seeking better jobs, decent housing, equal education, freedom from terrorism in the "promised land." They thought that they left behind racial discrimination, grueling poverty, sexual exploitation, second-class citizenship. World War I gave black women the opportunity to be employed in jobs other than domestic work or teaching in a "colored" school. For the first time, Black women were earning decent wages in the mainstream of American labor force. Although it was true that Black women were leaving the kitchen and the laundry, "they did so only as fast as White women made their way up the employment ladder. [They] found jobs primarily in those places left vacant by the shifting of Hungarian, Italian, and Jewish girls to the munitions plants, where higher pay was available" (Giddings 143). Furthermore, black women workers had to perform the dirtiest and the heaviest tasks in the labor force. Because White women refused in most instances to work side by side with black women, the latter was usually demanded to do the dirtiest tasks under segregated conditions.

In addition to their inferior positions in the labor industry, black women were often paid less than white women. To make things worse, black working women, like their male counterparts, were left outside unionist activity of the period. Women's Trade Union League and the Women's Bureau, established to defend the rights of working women, ignored the needs of two million black working women (Giddings 144). Although the kitchen and the laundry were not the only job opportunities open to black working women, "[o]f the two million [. . .] employed in 1920, nearly a million were still in domestic and personal service. Another group, nearly as large, was in agriculture.

Out of 1,930,000 women workers in industry, only 6.7 percent were black" (Giddings 145).

Black women began to lose their tenuous gains in industry when the war ended in 1918. The demobilization of more than four million soldiers, the influx of new immigrants in search for better lives gave rise to a competition for decent wages. Again Negrophobia was on the march. With the rise of the "new" Ku Klux Klan, racial tensions were exacerbated, which resulted in a series of racial upheavals occurring from in cities from Omaha to Chicago. In the competition for jobs, blacks were the inevitable losers, and things were even worse for black women. Even those who had been employed as domestics saw their jobs taken over by white working-class women, either native born or immigrant. Virtually barred from the industrial sector, black women had almost no chance other than work in the most unqualified jobs, if they were ever lucky enough to find one after the war. Because racism barred black men from working at decent jobs, there was no hope of making up the black working-women's loss of income.

The economic situation of the blacks had devastating results on their families and marital relations. As Elise Johnson McDougald, the Harlem journalist and teacher, wrote in 1925 that "The masses of the Negro men are engaged in menial occupations throughout the day. Their baffled and suppressed desires to determine their economic lives are manifested in over-bearing domination at home" (82). According to the gender ideology prevailing at the time, men had to be the bread winners of their homes and protectors of their wives and children. "Maleness" dictated these roles. Unable either to work or to protect the unity of their families, black men most of the time either reverted to domestic violence or left their homes for other women, especially the white women.

During the segregationist decades a host of social scientists had emphasized the decline of the black family as the sole cause for Negro depravity. Therefore, "[it] is not surprising that when sociology turned in the early twentieth century to examine the 'Negro Problem,' it was quick to equate the problem with black familial failure and licentious black womanhood" (Morton 28). In other words, all the social and economic ills plaguing the black family were seen as the outcome of a matriarchal structure, in which black women had unnatural dominant roles. In fact, Black family problems were

the outcome of a racist socio-economic system which had denied them access to American mainstream labor life.

Although the period between 1920-1960 is generally seen as the "nadir" of feminist activity after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919, which granted women the right to vote, there were a considerable number of black feminist scholars who discussed and wrote on various subjects concerning black women. Black women's activism centered around passing a federal anti-lynching bill, unionizing themselves as workers, securing birth control, improving the working conditions of domestics, enhancing their educational status, and equal access to jobs, black family problems. Nannie Burroughs organized the national association of Wage Earners in 1920, especially for black domestic workers. The feminist, Pan-Africanist Amy Jacques Garvey (1896-1973), wrote about imperialism, racism, capitalism and the interlocking systems of racism, classism, and sexism that black and other third world women experienced globally.

Birth control was another item on the black feminist agenda in the 1920s and 1930s. The Women's Political Association of Harlem, founded in 1918 and concerned about all aspects of black women's leadership, was the first black organization to advocate birth control. However, the birth control debates gave rise to further controversy among black nationalist circles because for them birth control was nothing but race suicide. Therefore, black feminist demands for sexual autonomy clashed with nationalist concerns about race extinction and the traditional male views about women's cardinal role as mothers.

In 1935, Mary Church Terrell and Mary McLeod Bethune signed the charter of the first council of organizations in the history of organized black womanhood--the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), black women's own national political organization. On their agenda was not only making visible the activities of black women but also "to develop competent and courageous leadership among Negro women and effect their integration and that of all Negro people into the political, economic, educational, cultural and social life of their communities and the nation." (Hine 20) To these ends, NCNW leaders founded their own official organ, *Aframerican Woman's Journal*, which was dedicated to achieving an Anti-lynching Bill, the development of a

Public Health Program, Government Housing Plants. (Hine 20-1). The contribution the above black feminist activists made to the tradition of Black Feminism dating back to Sojourner Truth is invaluable although their determination and their struggles have always been excluded from the annals of American history. In fact, their increased organized activity during the Great Depression and World War II era was to be the very foundation of the modern Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

The resurgence of racism after the war, as evidenced in race riots and lynchings, had minimized the question of the woman's question for black Americans--indeed for the entire nation. Discriminated against in housing, employment, and public accommodations, attacked brutally in cities across the nation, huddled into ghettos where overcrowding, poverty, crime, violence had denied them the right to live decently, black men and women alike were more concerned with the issue of survival: "The postwar years presented new challenges to Blacks and black women. In order to advance, many felt, it was now necessary to demand social equality. Only that way could economic and political progress be assured" (Giddings 152).

The Second World War was another turning point for African-Americans in the United States. Millions of women were employed during the war years in jobs that had previously been considered to be man's work--labor in munition plants, aircraft factories, the auto and steel industries and others that met the needs of the war. During the war more than 400,000 black women left their domestic jobs to work alongside white women in defense plants throughout the nation. But factory was not the only venue open to black women, as sociologist Delores Aldridge cogently discusses in her article: The number of "black women employed in clerical and sales positions quadrupled [. . .] and the number of black women in federal service positions also increased significantly" (52). However, black women's work experiences did not change during the Second World War. As historian Karen Tucker Anderson has demonstrated, the status of being the last hired and the first fired remained throughout the World War II years and after. It is not surprising, therefore, that at the end of the war, black women, out of economic need, were forced back into their traditional domestic jobs. The aftermath of the war was marked by the resurgence of virulent racism: bombings, lynchings swept across the nation; residential segregation forced

African-Americans to live in ghettos plagued with poverty, crime, and violence; job ceiling prevented blacks, both male and female, to have access to well-paying jobs for decent lives. Racial attacks and the exigencies of life in northern ghettoes had pushed the issue of sexual liberation into a holding pattern.

With the rise of the gender ideologies attempting to define a woman's "place" following the war the media and the political leaders of the time collaborated to push women back into the "humble role of housewife" (Chafe, *The American W*omen 231). White middle-class women's search for fulfilling careers outside their homes was evaluated by the *Life* magazine's 1947 issue as follows: "There was no middle ground, no way to combine marriage and a career, a job and motherhood, the article declared. "A woman became either a well-adjusted home-maker or a feminist neurotic" (Chafe, *The American Woman* 210). The overall effort in the United States to brainwash women so as to reverse the effects of the war, coincided with the representation of black women as Sapphires, emasculating, castrating bitches who denied their men the right to be "men". 1950s famous Amos'n Andy television series represented black man as a "head-scratching, shiftless, and henpecked husband whose behavior is understandable because his wife is a "Sapphire." Barbara Christian writes in *Black Women Novelists*,

> *Sapphire's most salient quality is her ability to make black men look like fools, partly because she is unfeminine, that is strong and independent, and partly because she is, by nature, emasculating. Although similar to the mammy, Sapphire is not so much maternal toward white folks as she is unfeminine in relation to black men. To them, she is cold, hard and evil. (90)*

bell hooks argues that "Sapphire's shrewish personality was used primarily to create sympathy in viewers for the black male lot" and in the present day "is projected onto any black woman who overtly expresses bitterness, anger and rage against her lot." Indeed, it is such a dominant image, hooks writes, that it has caused many black women "to repress these feelings for fear of being regarded as shrewish Sapphires" (*Ain't I A Woman?* 85-86). Just like the nineteenth-century racist-sexist ideology which sought to define white women's roles through debasing and humiliating myths of black womanhood, the racist-sexist ideology of the post-war period was designating the white

woman as the angel in the house through a continuous debasement of black women as castrating, emasculating bitches. In the 1960s, this image of the black woman would further be elaborated by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in his infamous report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*.

The Civil Rights Movement that had begun in 1955 with the courage of a black woman, Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her seat at the front of a city bus, was the locomotive force for Women's rights movement. As if the history were repeating itself, white feminists, like their predecessors, launched their efforts in the wake of the 60s black liberation movement. How the black women related to these movements is of vital importance to demonstrate how she was left outside the women's movement due to her race, and acquired minor roles in the Black Civil Rights Movement due to her sex. The Black woman found herself on the outside of both political entities, in spite of the fact that she is the object of both forms of oppression.

Black male leaders in the struggle defined freedom as gaining the right to participate as full citizens in mainstream American life. They did not reject the patriarchal system of the white man. In fact, gender ideology had a stronger hold on Black liberation movement than ever. Black leaders demanded that black women assume a subservient position. Toni Cade's article "On the Issue of Roles" is a telling discussion of the sexist attitudes that prevailed in black organizations during the 60s:

> *It would seem that every organization you can name has had to struggle at one time or another with seemingly mutinous cadres of women getting salty about having to man the telephones or fix the coffee while the men wrote the position papers and decided on policy. Some groups condescendingly allotted two or three slots in the executive order to women. Others encouraged the sisters to form a separate caucus and work out something that wouldn't split the organization. Others got nasty and forced the women to storm out to organize separate workshops. Over the years, things have sort of been cooled out. But I have yet to hear a coolheaded analysis of just what any particular group's stand is on the question. Invariably, I hear from some dude that Black women must be supportive and patient so that black men can regain their*

> *manhood. The notion of womanhood, they argue [. . .] is dependent on his defining his manhood. So the shit goes on*. (107-8)

Black leaders in the liberation movement like Elijah Muhammed, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Amiri Baraka, Stokely Carmichael righteously supported pathriarchy. They were all assured of the urgent necessity to subordinate black women both in the political and domestic spheres. hooks quotes from Amiri Baraka's essay in the July 1970 issue of *Black World* to reveal black men's determination to teach black woman a "manly" lesson:

> *We talk about the black woman and the black man like we were separate. [. . .]But we must erase the separateness by providing ourselves with healthy African identities. By embracing a value system that knows of no separation but only of the divine complement the black woman is for her man. For instance we do not believe in the 'equality' of men and women. We cannot understand what the devils and the devilishly influenced mean when they say equality for women. We could never be equals [. . .] nature has not provided thus. The brother says, 'Let a woman be a wo-man [. . .] and let a man be a ma-an [. . .]'.* (*Ain't I A Woman* 95)

While the 60s black power movement was a reaction to the white racist order, it was also a movement that supported black patriarchy. (Giddings 319; Murray 192; Lewis 50; Dubey 17) Black leaders were attacking white male patriarchs for their racism, but they were also collaborating with the white patriarchal order to subordinate their women (Giddings 319; Murray 192; Lewis; 50) At a time when blackness was equated with "maleness" New York senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's "Black Matriarchy" thesis gave further credence to black male sexism in the liberation rhetoric. Entitled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," the report, widely known as "The Moynihan Report" explained the high rates of poverty among urban blacks through a rhetoric of "pathological" black family. Moynihan said, "At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of the Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family. It is the fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community at the present time. Unless the damage is repaired all the effort to end discrimination, poverty, and injustice will come to little" (Moynihan, chp.2). Moynihan defined the black family

structure as a "tangle of pathology" (Moynihan, chp. 4) because the black family was matriarchal not patriarchal, and this was, for Moynihan, the breeding ground for all social ills inflicting the black community: delinquency and crime, illegitimate births, dissolved marriages, single-headed households, welfare dependency. Moynihan further argued that black women were bad role models for their sons and their girls. He said, "Negro children without fathers flounder and fail" (Moynihan, chp.4). For Moynihan, black women who denied black men to be patriarchs were the perpetuators of a "pathological" culture in black community. Black women who have always worked outside their homes out of economic necessity were accused of making their men feel dispirited and emasculated. Moynihan reasoned that black women had become heads of family, the breadwinners at the cost of black male emasculation. Therefore, they were not suitable partners in marriage, which translated into high rates of desertion, divorce and female-headed families and out-of-wedlock births.

The Moynihan Report had a twofold effect on the American society: First, it gave rise to the emergence of the "blaming the victim" rhetoric, would always blame the blacks for their internal problems, rather than a white, racist political and social system that has always kept them economically deprived. Second, the report encouraged black male chauvinism of the time, and helped shape black attitudes. As Giddings writes, an *Ebony* article stated, "The immediate goal of Negro women should be establishment of a strong family unit in which the father is the dominant person" (329). Not only was the report to further distort black male-female relations in the ensuing years but also cause blindedness to "the plight of disproportionate numbers of poor black women, female heads of families, and the necessity for two decent incomes if blacks were to have a quality of life comparable even to that of single-income white families" (Giddings 334). Such cultural explanations for social inequality mediated through a rhetoric of "family values" have reinforced the patriarchal ideal both within and without the black community, while masking prevailing economic and social trends which indeed fragment black households.

The Black Declaration of Independence published as a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* on July 3, 1970 was a further confirmation of black patriarchy. The document ignored both the personhood and the contributions of black women in the

struggle for human rights. At a time when women's rights movement was beginning to capture the attention of the whole nation, the Declaration "declared itself in the Name of our good People and our own Black Heroes," which was followed by the names of outstanding black leaders prominent in the struggle for black liberation (Murray 191). The names of Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Mary McLeod Bethune, and many others, and their relentless struggles for black liberation were absent from the declaration.

In the face of such black male indifference to black women's crucial role in the hundreds years of struggle, one could not help asking, "Then, what was black women's reaction to such misogynist attitudes from their race men at a time when women's liberation movement was being revitalized?" As Gloria Wade-Gayles reflects, many black women chose "to walk behind their men" because "the women were hungry for the respect and attention they believed whole black men could and would give them" (38). Black women's distrust in women's movement which, as it did almost a century ago, addressed the needs of college-educated, middle-class white women, was the most important reason why black women did not join the feminist movement. Furthermore, at a time when the black matriarchy thesis publicly questioned and degraded black man's masculinity, black women were facing a dilemma of competing identities and priorities. Once again, Frances Harper's nineteenth-century assessment of the respective importance of race and sex in the reality of black women of that day was resonating with the black women's stance towards racism and sexism in the twentieth-century. When it came to choose between racism and sexism, considerations of racism outweighed those of sex. As Diane K. Lewis's insight into this historical dilemma facing black women is quite illuminating:

> *Black women, due to their membership in two subordinate groups that lack access to authority and resources in society, are in structural opposition with a dominant racial and a dominant sexual group. In each subordinate group they share potential common interests with group comembers, black men on the one hand and white women on the other. Ironically, each of these is a member of the dominant group: black men as men, white women as whites. Thus the interests which bind black*

> *women together with and pull them into opposition against comembers crosscut one another in a manner which often obscures one set of interests over another. Historically, their interests as blacks have taken precedence over their interests as women. A shift in the power relations between the races had to come before changes in the structural relationship between the sexes*. (45)

Therefore, the question of racism rather than sexism had priority for the black women. Insisting on women's rights at the cost of racial interests was being disloyal to the race. In other words, being a feminist meant being a traitor to the race. Black women had to prove their loyalty to their men, and thereby to their race, for the liberation of their people. Black nationalist Haki R. Madhubuti's "BLACKWOMAN," one of the most popular poems of the Black Arts Movement, reveals black women's subordinated position in the liberation movement:

> *blackwoman*
> *is an in and out*
> *rightsideup*
> *action-image*
> *of her man . . . . . .*
> *in other*
> */(blacker) words;*
> *she's together*
> *if he bes.* (55)

Black women stayed alienated from the predominantly White women's movement. As in the first wave feminist movement, the second wave of feminism was marred by white women's racism, and classism. Although black women still occupied the lowest ranks of the labor force, had a "harder time finding a mate," stayed "single more often," stayed "in the labor market longer," were "widowed earlier," and carried "a heavier economic burden as a family head than [their] white sister(s), and were made the targets of a racist-sexist white ideology which displayed degrading images of black women in the media, white women took none of these issues into consideration" (Wade-Gayles 40). As they did almost a century ago, white women made their lot

synonymous with that of the "niggers", which Toni Morrison evaluated as "an effort to become Black without the responsibilities of being Black." (qtd. in Giddings: 308). Many women felt as the black feminist scholar Linda La Rue did:

> *It is time definitions be made clear. Blacks are oppressed, and that means unreasonably burdened, unjustly, severely, rigorously, cruelly, and harshly fettered by white authority. White women, on the other hand, are only suppressed, and that means checked, restrained, excluded from conscious and overt activity. And there is a difference*. (166)

In the face of their multiple oppressions of racism, sexism and classism, black women had nobody but themselves to return to stand up for their rights. White women's movement was against white male sexism but they had allied with white men in the oppression of black women by ignoring the reality of racism in the lives of black women. Black Liberation Movement, on the other hand was against the racist order but they too had allied with their white oppressors in their determination to establish black patriarchy. As bell hooks aptly discusses, "As long as these two groups or any group defines liberation as gaining social equality with ruling-class white men, they have a vested interest in the continued exploitation and oppression of others." (*Feminist Theory* 15)

The experiences of black women within the feminist and black liberation movements became a touchstone for reflections on the deconstruction of gender and the need to assess, critique, and rethink the roles African American women played in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Although the voice and moral vision of black women in the Civil Rights Movement and later in the Women's Liberation Movement had been muted, the decades of the 1970s and 1980s saw the irrevocable shattering of this silence, resulting in the emergence of Black Feminism and Black Women's studies, which would recover and define the substance of African American women's experiences.

4. BLACK FEMINISM(S) AND THE BIRTH OF BLACK WOMEN'S STUDIES

In 1932 William Faulkner described a black woman in his novel *Light in August* as follows: "But now and then a negro nursemaid with her white charges would loiter there and spell them [the letters on the sign] aloud with that vacuous idiocy of her idle and illiterate kind" (53). Faulkner's white-male consideration of black female intellect and character typifies the way African American women have been represented in mainstream literature, scholarship, and the popular media. Black women have either been omitted from the annals of American history or, if ever referred to, they have been represented no better than Faulkner's description. They have always been the objects of a white supremacist, racist, sexist discourse that has always denied them the right to speak for themselves. They have been Jezebels, Mammies, Sapphires, Matriarchs, welfare queens, sluts and whores, but their contributions to the making of the American history in general, and to black American culture and the black liberation struggles in particular have been continuously ignored. Neither white feminism nor black liberalism could sufficiently comprehend the material conditions of black women. In the aftermath of the women's and black liberation movements, it became apparent that only a feminist, pro-woman perspective that acknowledges the multiple oppressions of sexism, racism, and classism in the lives of black women could talk to the special circumstances of black women's lives in the United States.

A black feminist standpoint was central not only to voice a hundred years of silence and oppression but also to the birth and expansion of black women's studies as a separate field of study both from women's studies and black studies. With the rise of black consciousness and feminism during and after the radical 1960s, both groups rejected their marginalization in the formal American history. They demanded a radical rewriting of history, which would give them due respect and attention in the making of the American history. As Patricia Morton discusses, "The rise of black studies and

women's studies programs in colleges and universities signified the striving by both groups fully to include themselves in American scholarly discourse. Both strove to establish a full presence in the past to support their demand for a full presence in the present." (113). Again, both groups had no place to spare for black women in their histories although she belonged to both groups by her race and her sex respectively. If black women ever happened to surface in black man's historiography, they appeared on the black male historiography as castrating women. As discussed by Morton, *Black Rage* (1968) by William Grier and Price Cobbs, intended to analyze the ghetto uprisings of the late 1960s, put the blame on strong, emasculating black women rather than white racism. "The primary question that *Black Rage* appeared to be trying to answer," contended Morton, "was why the Afro-American woman was continuing to damage her man as a man, thus perpetuating 'the scars and wounds of yesterday'" (116).

Black male slavery historiography emphasized the black man's paternal authority and manly status in history. Herbert Gutman in his *The Black Family in Slavery and in Freedom, 1750-1925* (1976) embarked upon establishing black masculinity and black patriarchal ideal rather than distinguishing black women's experiences from those of black males. In his Introduction, Gutman notes that his study "was stimulated by the bitter public and academic controversy surrounding Daniel P. Moynihan's *The Negro Family in America: The Case for National Action* (1965)" (xvii). Gutman's findings indicate that rather than being dysfunctional, the stability and the strengths of the black family have enabled them to survive not only slavery, and continued racism, but also the difficulties of migration and urbanization: "It [the black family] did not disintegrate following the emancipation, and it did not disintegrate as a consequence of the great migration to northern cities prior to 1930" (433). He argues that rather than being matrifocal, the black families lived in extended households "usually including the core nuclear family and one or two relatives" (444). Gutman's intention was not to discover the black women's historical experiences in their own right but to prove that the black family and culture was historically patriarchal. He asserts that in all types of households "a husband or a father was present" (444). In fact,

Gutman's revisionist black family history aimed to replace the image of matriarchy with patriarchy, emphasizing the black man's dominant roles in the family.

In similar vein, Eugene D. Genovese, in his *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1972), attempts to restore to black men their sense of power marred by the matriarchy thesis having its roots in the slave family life: "What kind of evidence and how much of it is needed to convince skeptics that the essential story of black men in slavery lay with the many who overcame every possible hardship and humiliation to stand fast to their families?" (485-86). Especially the chapter titled "Husbands and Fathers" is a manifestation of black male power contrary to the generally acclaimed black male emasculation: "Skeptics might wonder how these allegedly emasculated men so easily dominated the strong-willed and physically powerful women of the matriarchal legend [. . .]" (482). Apparently, black historiography was black man's story intended to grant black men their long-denied manliness. Black women's history therefore remained marginalized in this discourse. Therefore, recovering their (her)stories lost in both black and mainstream historiographies was to be one of the most fundamental tasks waiting for African American women during the closing decades of the twentieth-century.

As women's studies emerged during the 1970s, they too were exclusive of the African-American woman. As Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith pointed out, women's studies courses, "usually taught in universities, which could be considered elite institutions just by virtue of the populations they served, focused almost exclusively upon the lives of white women" (Introduction XX). The identification of the history of American women as the story of white women was the norm in women's studies programs. Patricia Morton takes William O'Neill's 1969 history, *Everyone Was Brave*, a male-authored women's historiography as an example of the erasure of black women from the American history, being considered neither black nor woman. She says that O'Neill wrote of white women's shock in the face of white men's support for Negroes (black males) but not for women (white women) (118). When African-American women were mentioned at all in such "women's histories" it was, as in the black studies tradition, limited to the familiar types, and in particular, as matriarchs. For example, Andrew Sinclair, in his *The Emancipation of American Women* (1965), wrote that the principle of matriarchy within the black community retarded the liberation of the race.

He said that the Black Liberation Movement was promising in that it revolted against the dominance of black women as much as against white supremacy. In short, black woman was the impediment on the road to black men's freedom. Establishing black patriarchy was essential to black freedom and success (351-52).

The result of the exclusion of black women both from women's history and black history has been, in bell hooks' words, that "when black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black *men*; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on *white* women." (*Ain't I A* Woman 7). A year later after hooks wrote about the racial and sexual differentiation which together make for the exclusion of black women, black feminist scholars Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith were echoing the historical invisibility and marginalization of black women in their pathbreaking black feminist book, provocatively titled, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men: But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982).

Given the casting of black women as the *other* in both the women's and the black studies, it becomes more explicable why black women's studies as an autonomous discipline began to emerge in the late 1970s. This was a development charged with political and cultural significance. As Barbara Smith and Gloria Hull pointed out, for a group so long marginalized, named and defined by others, "Black women's studies," meant that "black women exist--and exist positively--a stance that is in direct opposition to most of what passes for culture and thought on the North American continent." In the words of these authors, "like any politically disenfranchised group, Black women could not exist consciously until we began to name ourselves" (Introduction XVII).

In 1970, the publication of Toni Cade's *The Black Woman*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and Shirley Chilsom's *Unbought and Unbossed* signaled the emergence of new voices surrounding issues of race, class, and gender. In her preface to *The Black Woman*, Cade wrote:

> *We are involved in a struggle for liberation: liberation from the exploitative and dehumanizing system of racism, from the manipulative control of a corporate society; liberation from the constrictive norms of 'mainstream' culture, from the synthetic myths that encourage us to fashion ourselves rashly from without (reaction) rather than from within*

> *(creation). [. . .] Our art, protest, dialogue no longer spring from the impulse to entertain, or to indulge or enlighten the conscious of the enemy; white people, whiteness, or racism; men, maleness, or chauvinism: America or imperialism [. . .] depending on your viewpoint and your terror. What typifies the current spirit is an embrace, an embrace of the community and a hardheaded attempt to get basic with each other.* (7)

The founding in 1973 of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) in New York City was a turning point in contemporary black women's history and modern black feminism. The Statement of Purpose which NBFO released in 1973 revealed their conception of liberation:

> *Black women have suffered cruelly in this society from being the phenomenon of being both black and female, in a country that is both racist and sexist.[. . .] Because we live in a patriarchy, we have allowed a premium to be put on black male suffering [. . .] We have been called 'matriarchs' by white racists and black nationalists[. . .] We, not white men or black men, must define our own self-image [. . .] and not fall into the mistake of being placed upon the pedestal which is being rejected even by white women. [. . .] We will continue to remind the Black Liberation Movement that there can't be liberation for half of the race. We must, together, as a people, work to eliminate racism, from without the black community [. . .] but we must remember that sexism is destroying and crippling us from within*. (Schneir 173-74)

The Combahee River Collective was an important black feminist group that began in 1974 as the Boston chapter of the National Black Feminist Organization. In 1977, three members of the collective--Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier--wrote a statement documenting the activities of the collective and articulating their philosophy. This black feminist manifesto is a clear expression of the evolution of contemporary feminism and of the concept of the simultaneity of oppressions in the lives of black women. The topics they discussed in the paper still surface in today's black feminist criticism: the imperative for a recognition of the rootedness of black

feminism in the historical reality of black women's incessant struggles for survival and liberation since slavery; the belief that black women are inherently valuable and that sexism, racism and classism oppress black women simultaneously; the rejection of the stance of lesbian separatism in black feminism; the distrust of the majority of black people in black feminism for fear that it would mar the black struggle and threaten black nationhood; racism in the white women's movement; contrary to white women's feminism, the inclusive politics of black feminism that has made them "concerned with any situation that impinges upon the lives of women, Third World, and working people." (21).

Barbara Smith's path-breaking essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977) defined black literary criticism and underscored the importance of sexuality in reading black women's literature. Smith wrote about the need for an autonomous black feminist movement to study black women writers and artists. She argued that without a political movement there could be no black feminist political theory necessary for a critical evaluation and reading of the art of black women. She insisted for the development of both the political movement and the political theory so that a black feminist literary criticism would represent "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" (412). To support her argument, Smith demonstrated how a variety of male critics and white feminist critics whose sexist and racist assumptions made them critically blind to the importance of the work of black women writers.

In many ways, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" was a manifesto for black feminist critics, clarifying both the principles and the conditions of their work. The first principle she saw central to a black feminist approach was a primary commitment to the exploration of the simultaneity of the racist, classist and sexist oppressions in the lives of black women. A second principle that Smith proposed to govern black feminist criticism was an inclusive critical stance towards black lesbian feminist writings. Smith's essay was an important statement in that it revealed the suppression of the black female and lesbian voice. Her vision of a black feminist criticism would "have an essential role [. . .] in creating a climate in which black lesbian writers can survive" (424).

In her 1980 essay "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," Deborah McDowell laments the fact that black women writers were hardly mentioned neither by mainstream nor black male or white feminist critics. McDowell attempted to establish the parameters for a clearer definition of black feminist criticism She argues that black feminist criticism should be conducted within a political movement that could bring about social change in the daily lives of black women. She writes, "Just as it is both possible and useful to translate ideological positions into aesthetic ones, it must likewise be possible and useful to translate aesthetic positions into the machinery for social change" (433). McDowell argues that black feminist critics should have a deep knowledge of black history and black culture regardless of which theoretical framework they choose because such an approach to black women's literature "exposes the conditions under which literature is produced, published, and reviewed" (434). In other words, she proposes a historically contextualized approach to black women's literature to determine the dominant attitudes about black women at the time they wrote. Insisting on an examination of "the specific language of black women's literature," of the unique ways black women writers employ literary devices and create their own mythic structures, and of the thematic, stylistic, and linguistic commonalities in black women's writing, Deborah McDowell attempted to lay the foundations of a sound and thorough articulation of the Black feminist criticism.

In 1987, Mary Helen Washington, in her introduction to *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860-1960*, pays tribute to Harriet Jacobs, Francer Harper, Pauline Hopkins, Nella Larsen, Ann Petry, Dorothy West, Zora Neale Hurston, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Gwendolyn Brooks, whose words and works had been dismissed either as non-representative or too sentimental. Washington writes that Richard Wright, the prominent black male author of the Harlem Renaissance, called Zora Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* "to be a novel that carried 'no theme, no message, no thought,' and during the thirty years that Wright dominated the black literary scene, Hurston's novel was out of print" (XX). While Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* received nationwide acclaim, Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* (1953) was considered to be out of the African- American canon although it was a novel about the anger, repressions and silences of a black woman. While the same feelings and frustrations of a black male

protagonist were deemed to be worth reading and evaluating, those of a black woman were considered to be irrelative and non-representative. In her introduction to *Invented Lives* titled "The Darkened Eye Restored," Washington revitalizes the words and thoughts of the long forgotten black woman novelists, giving them their long-denied places in the African-American literary tradition. Moreover, she distinguishes the literature of black women from mainstream, black male and white feminist literary canons claiming that

> *their writing is about black women; it takes the trouble to record the thoughts, words, feelings, and deeds of black women, experiences that make the realities of being black [and woman] in America look very different from what men have written There are no women in this tradition hibernating in dark holes contemplating their invisibility. [. . .] Women talk to other women in this tradition, and their friendships with other women--mothers, sisters, grandmothers, friends, lovers--are vital too their growth and well-being [. . .].* (XXI)

The strategies of attribution Washington employs in her critical writing demonstrate that black literary feminism is not a contemporary phenomenon. By placing herself both among historical and contemporary black feminist voices, Washington shows that contemporary black feminism is a continuum of a historical intellectual and literary tradition of black women, which provides vital analytical tools for contemporary black feminist critics.

Like Washington, Valerie Smith, writing in 1988, pointed to the importance of revising the ideas and actions of silenced black feminist scholars, activists and authors. By referring to Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice From the South by a Black Woman from the South* (1892) as an early instance of black feminist theoretical writing, Smith shows that Cooper, like other early black women intellectuals (including Harriet Jacobs, Ida B. Wells, Maria Stewart, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and others) "participates in and transforms the contemporaneous debates about the status of women" (490). This principle of rootedness in the past was a prerequisite not only for black feminist scholars and writers but also for ordinary black women to stand up and survive despite all odds surrounding them. As Alice Walker writes in *In Search of Our Mother's*

Garden, " a people do not throw away their geniuses away" and that "if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists, scholars, and witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, [. . .] if necessary, bone by bone" (92).

Another body of work to emerge in the 1980s was critical of capitalism both as a socioeconomic system and a cultural one. The critiques of capitalism argued for the necessity for a thorough analysis of race, class and gender. Yet, there were differences in their approaches to the problematic in question. bell hooks's *Ain't I A Woman* (1981) acknowledges that "sexism looms as large as racism as an oppressive force in the lives of African American women" (15). Although hooks mentions issues of class, her work is centered more on cultural and psychological issues due to the growing postmodern emphasis on cultural critique. Published the same year as *Ain't I A Woman,* Angela Davis's *Women, Race, and Class* fosters an incisive analysis of the interaction of race, class, and gender. Her analysis foresees "complex commonalities and differences among women and points to a political intervention that is directed at an underlying socioeconomic and political structure and which involves potential alliances and coalitions that go beyond race and gender" (Mullings 5). Davis's work, along with other critical writings published in the 1970s and early 1980s, was an important attempt to define the broad outlines of the race, class and gender central to the lives and struggles of African American women since slavery.

Paula Giddings's 1984 volume *Where and When I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex* in America is "a narrative history of black women" (6), and a major contribution to revising black women's history. Although her analysis defines the impact of race and sex on the lives of African American women, it does not pay special attention to class oppression. She concludes this vast body of black women's history in United States suggesting that "we must be as vigilant about sex discrimination as racial discrimination" (350-51). In her now classic "Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood" (1983), Bonnie Thorton Dill makes a systematic analysis of the oppressive forces in black women's lives. Her conception of the simultaneity of oppressions runs parallel to that of the Combahee River Collective. Yet, she gives a more comprehensive analysis of the forces in question by analytically separating the three systems to demonstrate the ways in which they shape black women's lives.

The writings and criticism of such black feminist lesbians as Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Cherly Clarke reflect the centrality of the simultaneity of oppression to a black feminist understanding of political reality. As Barbara Smith discusses in her Introduction to *Home Girls*, " We examined our own lives and found that everything out there was kicking our behinds--race, class, sex and homophobia. We saw no reason to rank oppressions, [. . .] or to pretend that sexism, among all the 'isms,' was not happening to us." Smith asserts that in their attempts "to comprehend the complexity of [black women's] situation as it was actually occurring," they began to debunk myths of black womanhood. And in doing so, as explained by Smith, they used "the triple jeopardy" as a theoretical framework to expose black women's day-to-day oppression. (xxxii). Smith also focuses upon the homophobia within and without the black community that divides them as political allies, and poses a threat to race solidarity. Conscious of the fact that black lesbian separatism plagues both the black community and the academia, Smith names the third section of her anthology as "Black Lesbians--Who Will Fight For Our Lives But Us?". Many of the writers in this section, Audre Lorde, Cherly Clarke, Beverly Smith, to name a few, are particularly concerned with the erasure of black lesbian feminists from the black feminist scholarship and literature. Cherly Clarke, for example, criticizes Mary Helen Washington for her exclusion of black lesbian voices in her *Midnight Birds* (1980), arguing that "Audre Lorde's lesbian fiction piece, 'Tar Beach,' which appeared in *Conditions Five, The Black Women's Issue* in 1979--prior to the publication of the *Midnight Birds*--would have probably enhanced the collection" (204). The work of Audre Lorde, the best-known and most influential black lesbian feminist of the 1980s, was unique in its opening up new horizons to black feminist thinking. Speaking from a black feminist lesbian stance, Lorde points out a tangle of differences between women, and yet suggests that it is not the differences but the way they are interpreted separates them. Cognizant of the economic and social ills striking at the heart of the black community such as extreme poverty, domestic violence directed against women and children, rape, abortion and sterilization abuse, Lorde claims that "we must recognize differences among women who are our equals, neither inferior nor superior, and devise ways to use each others' difference to enrich our visions and our joint struggles" (502).

In the 1990s, black feminist scholars concerned with race, class and gender hold out different perspectives and emphases concerning the simultaneity of multiple oppressions. Black feminists' consistent focus on the idea of the simultaneity of oppressions as fundamental to the social, political, and economic marginality of black women in American society points to serious flaws in white feminist theorizing. White feminists' assertion of the commonality of women's oppression has denied the other structured inequalities of race and class in the day-to-day struggles of black women. The white feminist axiom "the personal is the political" represented the politics of a few privileged women's personal lives. As Deborah K. King aptly discusses, "For black women, the personal is bound up in the problems peculiar to multiple jeopardies of race and class, not the singular one of sexual inequality" (304). King's further elaboration on the relatedness of these systems of power is important in its rejection of any reductionist approach to the study of these systems. For example, to say that class oppression has more role to play in the subordinate status of black women is a reductionist approach. Or, to say that racism rather than sexism is more central to black women's oppression is but a myopic approach to the oppression of black women. As King argues, "Such assertions ignore the fact that racism, sexism, and classism constitute three, interdependent control systems. An interactive model, which I have termed multiple jeopardy, better captures those processes" (297).

Patricia Hill Collins' book *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) and her article "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought" (1989) are important contributions to black feminist scholarship. Although Collins admits that there is not a unity and coherence in the array of black feminist theorizing, that there are black feminisms rather than a monolithic body of black feminist politics, she, in the first edition of her *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), admittedly argues that " I decided not to stress the contradictions, friction and inconsistencies of Black feminist thought. Instead I present Black feminist thought as overly coherent, but I do so because I suspect that this approach is most appropriate for this historical moment" (xiv). However, in the revised second edition of the book published in 2000, Collins writes that "I have learned much from revising the first edition of *Black Feminist Thought*. [. . .] I saw my individual struggles as emblematic of Black women's collective struggles to claim a similar

intellectual and political space" (xii-xiii). Apparently, Collins admits the variety of perspectives and theories within black feminist theorizing. More importantly, her second revised edition effectively includes issues of social class, which were highly dismissed in the first edition. Of particular importance is her inclusion of the sexual politics of black womanhood which analyses heterosexism as a system of oppression, and also conceptualizes its links to race, class, and gender. Collins's non-reductionist approach, one of the central tenets of cultural studies, to the analysis of the simultaneity of oppressions, denies any theoretical tendencies to explain questions of class, race, gender, sexuality solely in terms of another category or level of a social formation. In other words, race, gender, class, sexuality cannot be reduced either to political economy or to each other. Not only does Collins analyze how race, class, gender and sexuality are articulated at different historical conjectures in context-specific ways to oppress black women but she also shows how these structures of inequality inscribed within the cultural fabric of the American society relate to the everyday lives and realities of African American women.

While black feminist scholars Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thorton Dill (1994) argue that "labor relations are at the core of race and gender equalities" (5), and lay the foundation for an examination of the differences among women of color, Rosa M. Brewer discusses that "gender takes on meaning and is embedded institutionally in the context of the racial and class order--the productive and social reproductive relations of economy" (17). She insists that any discussion of Black women must be holistic and historical, and must be conducted within the theoretical frame of race, gender, and class dynamics. Brewer's examination of black women's labor in North Carolina is informed by her comprehensiveness of the simultaneity of race, class, and gender. She writes, "Pivotal here is the intersection of race/gender hierarchies and the way contemporary economic structuring is shaped by existing arrangements of race/gender divisions" (20).

Although black feminist scholars' analysis of the simultaneity of oppressions has proved to be a valuable theoretical tool to criticize the existing systems of power that marginalize black women within the outskirts of mainstream American social, economic and cultural life, many black women chose to ignore the reality of sexist oppression that directly impinge on their everyday lives. Several factors have

contributed to the imprisonment of black feminist theorizing within the enclaves of an academic elite. As E. Frances White argues, "The 1980s proved to be the height of black feminist intellectual output, feminists continue to publish, but the sense of a radical movement supporting their work has dissipated. With some major exceptions, [. . .] most of us survive in colleges and universities" (51). The most formidable factor has been, as argued by Pauline Terrelonge, the reluctance of many black liberation leaders and spokespeople to address the issue of sexism, "largely because it has been viewed as a racially divisive issue. That is, a feminist consciousness has been regarded as a force that could generate internal conflict between black males and black females" (496). As Joy James cogently argues, "In a society marred by antiblack racism, a defensive or protective race pride among African Americans can easily be reduced to or made synonymous with black *male* advancement. Doing so leads some black females to valorize black males, even abusive ones" (184). The belief that black feminism weakens black liberation struggles, because of its focus on women, was paralleled by another anti black feminist discourse: that black feminism puts black females outside the protective arm of black males and within the destructive reach of whites (James 185). The Million Man March, convened by Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan in Washington, DC, on October 16, 1995 offers a vivid illustration of the exclusion of black women from the political arena, defining their roles as supporters of their husbands and mothers of their children. Asserting that their aim was "to declare to the Government America and the world that [black men] are ready to take [their] place as the head of [their] families and [their] communities, and that [they], as Black men, are ready to shoulder the responsibility of being the maintainers of [their] women and children and the builders of [their] communities," Farrakhan established black men as the heads of their families and the leaders in the black liberation ("Minister Calls for One Million March").

Joy James's reading of a premarch October 1995 public forum, organized by the Institute of African American Studies director Manning Marable at Columbia University demonstrates not only how black women's feminist activism was publicly discredited by black liberation leaders but also established black men as the sole protectors of black women. As Joy James writes, Charlene Mitchell, the only woman on the platform criticized the negative gender politics of the march and showed black

women's long military history in liberation movements. Her feminist critique was harshly attacked by Conrad Muhammed, the former New York Nation of Islam minister, who used the imagery of racial-sexual violence inflicted upon black women activists during the southern civil rights movement. Muhammed spoke about the use of cattle prods up the vaginas of black women and police dogs biting into the breasts of black women. The message Muhammed wanted to convey to the audience was clear: black feminism and activism jeopardized black female physical safety, while anti-feminist, anti-racist black liberation leaders wished to protect them (186-87). Once again, black feminism was invalidated, legitimizing patriarchal politics both in anti-racist black liberation movement and the black community.

To summarize, black women's raised political consciousness following the Civil Rights and the Women's Rights movements, due to their absence in both women's (her)stories and blacks' (his)stories, paved the way for the emergence of Black Feminism and its concomitant black feminist politics, criticism, and black women's studies, which have found their most vivid expressions in a large body of essays, manifestos, anthologies and literary writing. Charged with political significance, black feminist politics aimed to criticize a racist, classist and sexist social order that has always rendered African American women invisible and disempowered. A substantial group of black feminist writers, among whom were Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Angela Davis, Alice Walker, Gloria Joseph, June Jordan, Gloria Hull, Paula Giddings, and Barbara Christian, would in the 1990s redefine feminism as a broad political movement to end all forms of domination. In the words of bell hooks,

> *Feminism is not only a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women have equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels-race, sex, and class, to name a few--and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires.* (*Ain't I A Woman* 194)

Apparently, hooks and others were voicing the black woman's perspective on feminism just like the way Anna Julia Cooper did almost a century ago: "We want, [. .

.] as toilers for the universal triumph of justice and human rights, to go to our homes from this Congress demanding an entrance not through a gateway for ourselves, our race, our sex, or our sect, but a grand highway for humanity" (qtd. in hooks, *Ain't I A Woman* 193). Black feminist theory would come of age during the 1990s and move from the margins to the center of mainstream feminist discourse. Patricia Hill Collins's pathbreaking *Black Feminist Thought* established black feminism as a critical social theory aiming to bring about social change in the black community. The core themes of black feminist thought, as discussed by Collins, have been the interlocking nature of race, class, and gender oppression in black women's personal, domestic, and work lives; the necessity of internalizing positive self-definitions and rejecting the denigrating, stereotypical, and controlling images (mammy, matriarch, welfare mother, whore) of themselves, both within and without the black community; and the need for active struggle to resist oppression and realize individual and group empowerment (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 1990; 23, 32, 83-84).

Although initially motivated by the sincere desire of black feminist activists and scholars to eliminate racist, sexist and classist oppression in the lives of African American women, black feminism has proved ineffective to transform the U.S. social and economic structure. It has failed to actualize its theories in viable political communities due to a variety of factors: First, white women's racism in the feminist movement has prevented most black women from taking active roles in black feminist activism. They thought that being a feminist meant being white, so it could have nothing to do with the realities of being a black woman in the United States. Therefore, most black women viewed feminism with skeptical eyes. Second, black nationalist and cultural rhetoric has always made liberation synonymous with the black male. Therefore, being a feminist meant to undermine the black liberation. At a time when the white media, sociology and state politics attempted to link the social and economic ills of the black community to the lack of patriarchal families where the power of men is absolute, being a feminist was considered to be "consorting with the enemy." Finally, the exclusion of black lesbian feminists from the "mainstream" black feminist activism divided the black community and prevented them from fighting collectively on a united front against a racist, sexist, classist oppression.

Despite the ferment of opinion and the variety of theoretical bases on which black feminist criticism rests, a consensus can be found concerning the fundamental tenets of black feminist criticism and the ideology it entails: that being female and black constitute a special status for African American women in American society; an emphasis on black women's self-determination to interpret her reality and define her objectives drawing upon a heritage of struggle; that black feminist criticism and ideology are embedded in the historical and present realities of black women, that is, they emerge in the context of lived experience; that black feminist theory and thought should bring out changes in the social lives of black women, in other words, it should not be limited to the academic circles only; the importance of self-definition to resist and debunk myths of black womanhood; an appeal to common cultural bonds in order to mobilize constituency, an acknowledgement of the interstructure of the oppressions of racism, sexism, and classism in the lives of black women.

In the mid-to late 1990s it became evident that, despite shared concerns for racial and gender equality, the varied ideological and political stances among black feminist scholars belie any attempt to formulate a monolithic of homogeneous black feminism, a fact which also the title of this chapter explicitly demonstrates. However, as discussed by many outstanding black feminist critics such as Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Smith and Alice Walker, such diversity of approaches and thought among black feminist scholars can be used to build effective coalitions and stimulate dialogue. As Patricia Hill Collins discusses in her essay "Defining Black Feminist Thought," "Dialogues among and coalitions with a range of groups, each with its own distinctive set of experiences, form the larger, more general terrain of intellectual and political discourse necessary for furthering Black feminism" (166). Today, black feminism is still on the make. Growing amid diverse tendencies and tensions, which fuel its insights, the significance of black feminist thought as a theoretical tool for critical inquiry into the American social, cultural and economic mosaic is undeniable.

5. “TRIPLE JEOPARDY”: THEORIZING RACE, CLASS AND GENDER DYNAMIC

5.1. Postmodernism and Black Feminist Theory:

1980s and 1990s were a period of intense theorizing about race, class and gender issues. Postmodernism as a new academic discourse in the United States fostered a powerful critique of existing knowledges, delegitimized all claims of “truth”, criticized the taken-for-granted nature of categories such as race, gender, class, and heterosexuality, suggesting that these seemingly “biological truths” are but social constructions. Destabilizing what has been acknowledged as natural, normal, true, and normative, postmodernism emerged as a new academic project focusing on marginalized, silenced dimensions of social life. Claiming the margin as a site of resistance to authorities of power producing “knowledge claims” has been one of the themes of postmodernism. Known as decentering, this strategy was typically applied to elite white male power by those on the margins to claim the power of marginality. By claiming marginality as a site of resistance and strength for oppressed groups, postmodernism has legitimated Black women’s long-standing struggles to challenge white male constructions of black womanhood in capitalist America. When in the 1970s and 1980s black women broke their silences about their historical oppression, they were speaking from the margins, claiming their historically invisible experiences and struggles, and thus effectively challenging false universal truths that have always defended hierarchical power relations in the United States. Apparently, marginality proved to be a source of strength and creativity for many African American women intellectuals. In her essay, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” black feminist theorist bell hooks writes about the potential danger and creativity of theorizing from the margin:

> *Those of us who live, who 'make it,' passionately holding on to aspects of that 'downhome' life we do not intend to lose while simultaneously seeking new knowledge and experience, invent spaces of radical openness. Without such spaces we would not survive. Our living depends on our ability to conceptualize alternatives, often improvised. [. . .] For me this space of radical openness is a margin--a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a 'safe' place. One is always at risk.* (*Yearning*, 129)

As Patricia Hill Collins acknowledges, "For African-American women as a collectivity, redefining marginality as a potential source of strength fostered a powerful oppositional knowledge" (*Fighting Words*, 128-29). However, despite these contributions, the deconstructive methodologies of postmodernism have been criticized by many black feminist scholars for their inability to construct alternative explanations for social phenomena. Because deconstructive methodologies refute the very foundations of knowledge, they make it difficult to develop alternative knowledge claims (Collins, *Fighting Words* 140). This means that deconstruction has proved to be ineffective as a strategy to produce new theories about oppression or to suggest new politics that might oppose it. In other words, it is, as Patricia Hill Collins argues, a critique of power rather than a theory of empowerment. The black feminist literary critic Mae Henderson aptly discusses the contradictory nature of deconstructive methodologies for African-American women:

> *What is of value in the post-structuralist/deconstructionist school is that it aims at decentering what is essentially a white and male tradition and, in the process creating a space for the presentation of voices hitherto muted or marginalized. What is questionable is that it is a project that dismantles notions of authority [. . .] during a period when blacks, feminists and other marginalized groups are asserting authorship, tradition and subjectivity*. (In McKay et al. 23)

What Mae Henderson implies is that the postmodern notions of authority, subjectivity, tradition are not applicable to the unique position of black women in the United States. As Patricia Hill Collins argues, black women have become knowledge

creators by articulating their experiences in self-defined voices, and in the process have developed an authority based on a black feminist standpoint *(Black Feminist Thought* 2000). The postmodern critique of history and tradition is also problematic from a black feminist point of view. Patricia Hill Collins argues that

> *history and tradition are not told as linear narratives in which individual stories or voices are inserted, but as themes within individual narratives. Depending on which narrative is selected, this approach can lead to complete avoidance of specific political and social contexts. Because everything is contained within the narrative itself, no external, privileged position exists from which a critique of the absence of power dynamics may be launched. This move away from historical specificity that is associated with deconstruction resembles the long-standing apolitical ways of reading that are commonly associated with traditional literary criticism*. (*Fighting Words*, 144)

Emphasizing the importance of historical specificity in black feminist theorizing, Valerie Smith contends that "When historical specificity is denied or remains implicit, all the women are presumed white, all the blacks male" (*Black Feminist Theory*, 44). Given the importance of a shared history of oppression and the centrality of rootedness in the past in black feminist theorizing, the postmodern conception of history and tradition fails to see into the ways how black feminism emerged out of centuries of struggles and resistances. Furthermore, postmodern theoretical paradigm of difference comes under attack by many black feminists. Black cultural critic Hazel Carby notes that "the politics of difference is obsessed with the construction of identities rather than relations of power and domination" (*Multicultural Wars*, 193). In the face of such conceptual vacuums unable to comprehend black women's particular history in the United States, black feminist theorists introduced the intersectionality of oppressions as a conceptual framework "for studying the complexities within historically constructed groups as well as those characterizing relationships among those groups" (Collins, *Fighting Words* 152). The intersectionality of race, class and gender was introduced by black feminist intellectuals as a new conceptual terrain illuminating the mutually constructing nature of systems of

oppression as well as admitting black women's particular experiences in the United States shaped by those mutual constructions. As Chris Weedon notes in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, "we need a theory of the relationship between experience, social power and resistance. [. . .] Theory must be able to address women's experience by showing where it comes from and how it relates to material social practices and the power relations which structure them" (8). And this is exactly what the race, class and gender intersectionality does when applied as a theoretical tool to an analysis of black women's experiences in the United States.

5.2. Race, Class and Gender Intersectionality

Race, class and gender as simultaneous forces are central to reconstructing the lived experiences, historical struggles, cultural perceptions and social construction of black women as well as to reading the literature they produce. The uniqueness of black woman's reality in a capitalist, racist, patriarchal social order necessitates to read black women's literature against a backdrop of racist, classist, sexist, and gender oppressions that has been articulated by the dominant ideology in context-specific ways at different historical conjectures. Such an approach to the study of black women's literature admits in the first place the inadequacy of any analysis that underestimates the fact that race, class, and gender are not separate categories; rather they are interlocking, interactive, and above all relational ones. As Avtar Brah argues, "Structures of class, racism, gender and sexuality cannot be treated as 'independent variables' because the oppression of each is inscribed within the other--is constituted by and constitutive of the other" (137). However, discussions about feminism and racism have often focused on the oppression of black women rather than exploring how black woman's gender is constructed through class and racism. As Kimberlé Crensaw points out, "With black women as the starting point, it becomes more apparent how dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis," either that of race, or sex (208).

Marilyn Frye's metaphor of a bird cage artfully explains the embeddedness of race, class and gender in the fabric of social institutions, as well as the myopism of white feminists and anti-racist politics, which prevents them to see the whole picture:

> *Cages. Consider a birdcage. If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could look at that one wire, up and down the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere.*

> *[. . .]It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere; and then you will see it a moment. It will require no great subtlety of mental powers. It is perfect obvious that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, none of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon. [. . .] As the cageness of the birdcage is a macroscopic phenomenon, the oppressiveness of the situations in which women live our various and different lives is a macroscopic phenomenon. Neither can be seen from a microscopic perspective. But when you look macroscopically you can see it--a network of forces and barriers which are systematically related and which conspire to the immobilization, reduction and molding of women and the lives we live* [. . .]. (40,41)

White feminists saw only one wire preventing black women from joining the American mainstream political and social life: patriarchy. They ignored the wires of race and class in the oppression of black women. Black anti-racist leaders saw just the wire of racism as the only impediment to black women's liberation. But a macroscopic vision, as Frye suggests in her essay, could explain how the "multiple jeopardy" of race, class and gender, as Deborah King names them, have been structurally and systematically mobilized to oppress and marginalize African American women.

Deconstruction of the image of the black woman as matriarch shows how ideologies of race, gender, and class have been articulated in context-specific ways. The image of the matriarch constructs black working women as too unfeminine and too strong deviating from dominant gender roles. Being the sole wage earners of their families, they are thought to be emasculating black men, denying them the right to be family heads, and therefore, making bad role models for their sons. That is why, the dominant ideology explains, many black men leave their families and why there is such disproportionate rates of low educational attainment, crime, and delinquency among the black youth, and why black women have to struggle on their own. So, the black family

becomes, as Patrick Moynihan argued, "the principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation in the black community" (Moynihan, chp. 4). The image of the black family as a "pathology" and a "cultural deficit"[3] detrimental to the social well-being of the black community and to the American society in general diverts attention from the inequalities of a racist, capitalist system that has always kept blacks at the bottom of the occupational ladder.

Furthermore, as black feminist critic Leith Mullings aptly argues, this image of the black woman as matriarch seeks to regulate not only black women's behavior but to re-establish white women's gender roles within the post-World War revival of the cult of true womanhood (116). In the post-World War II era, more white women than ever were entering the labor market. Abortion was a common practice to take control of their reproductive rights. They were challenging their subordinate status both at home and in the workplace. In this specific context, the image of the black matriarch gave a gender lesson to black and white women alike: Aggressive, assertive women who seek fulfillment outside their homes are penalized--they are left by their husbands and stigmatized as unfeminine (118).

The matriarchy thesis put the blame for the economic and social deprivation of the African American community on the family structure and the "deviant" gender roles played by black women. And this happened precisely when the civil rights movement was challenging the racist policies of the state and the women's movement was challenging the patriarchal order. As such, it diverted public attention from the economic policies that have resulted in the decline of educational and employment opportunities and unprecedented levels of unemployment to family structure and gender roles. As argued by Mullings, "By placing the cause in nature rather than history, [the matriarch image] obscures the role of unemployment, racism, and state policies in undermining the African-American family" (118). To summarize, the matriarchy thesis arising in the wake of the Civil Rights and Women's movements explained the economic deprivation of the African American community through ideologies of

[3] Dinesh D'Souza's *The End of Racism* (1995) is one of the most virulent racist attacks directed against the black family. Especially, the chapter "Uncle Tom's Dilemma: Pathologies of Black Culture" connects the "pathologies" of black family to blacks' cultural deficiency.

gender, which in turn reinforced racism and thus helped to reproduce the same unequal conditions from which this image emerge.

To proceed from the deconstruction of black woman as matriarch, in theorizing the construction of race, class and gender in interaction, there are some important points to be made. First, as discussed by Rose M. Brewer and other black feminist scholars in the social sciences, gender alone cannot explain the African American woman's and man's experience. [4] Many contemporary feminist activists argue that sexist oppression is the cause of all other oppressions, and therefore, they reason that racism as well as class oppression stem from sexism. Such reductionist approaches assume a hierarchy of oppressions that proves to be inadequate in an analysis of black women's divergent experiences. Secondly, an understanding of the simultaneity of these forces is an imperative. Thus, the struggle against these forces should be anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-sexist. Finally, the "race, gender, class" dynamic is the only theoretical framework through which gender is incorporated into discussions of the position of black women (Brewer 27). As Deborah E. McDowell discusses, "that black women's experiences must be comprehended simultaneously in sexual, class, and racial terms is perhaps the single most important principle or emphasis of black feminist criticism [. . .]" (53). This approach to the study of black women's experiences in a historically racist setting offers an escape from falling into the pit of a homogenized and essentialized black womanhood. In other words, the simultaneity of oppressions approach admits the multidimensionality of black women's experiences placing "black woman" at the center of a varied set of complex social and material realities. And any such comprehension requires historical specificity. This means that race, class, and gender are articulated in different ways at different historical periods. Bearing in mind that race, class, and gender are but social formations, it becomes vital to study their articulation with respect to the shifting political, cultural and economic conditions. No social construct exists in a vacuum. Race, class and gender, as social constructs, cannot be isolated from cultural practice, beliefs, economic transformations and political struggles in which they are

[4] The black feminist scholars Deborah King, Patricia Hill Collins, Bonnie Thorton Dill, Angela Davis, Barbara Christian, Barbara Smith put black women at the center of black feminist theorizing, and agree that the understanding of race, class, and gender as simultaneous forces is central to an grounded analysis of the everyday lives of African American women.

embedded. Additionally, race, class, and gender are not additive categories. Rather, as Mullings, Brewer, Collins, and King argue, they are interactive, multiplicative, and simultaneous. Therefore, the dynamics of race, gender and class cannot be comprehended through a race plus gender plus class formula which misses an essential reality: "the qualitative difference in the lives of African American women through the simultaneity of oppression and resistance" (Brewer 28).

6. BLACK WOMEN'S IMAGES AT THE NEXUS OF RACE, CLASS AND GENDER

The ideology of black feminism did not spring from abstract theoretical formulations, but from the very realities of African American women's lives and struggles. As Toni Morrison put it in her article "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib," the black woman "had nothing to fall back on: not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself" (qtd. in Jones: 315). And the literature of black feminism has been one of the most effective tools for black women authors "to invent" black women out of their muted and invisible lives throughout the American history. Black feminist literature is expressed in a variety of forms--poetry, fiction and autobiographies; scholarly articles and monographs; polemical tracts; personal interviews and dialogues. It ranges over a wide variety of topics, from the struggles of a black domestic worker to issues of domestic violence, from studies of sexual and racial stereotyping to sociological studies on black family life, from violence, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, welfare mothers, single-headed households, abusive black husbands to Billie Holiday's blues and explorations of black lesbianism, from poverty, sexuality to family and motherhood.

In the very act of writing within a dominant white male culture, black women writers have developed a literary tradition that is not only black, but also distinctively female born of the particular experiences these women share by virtue of being black and women in white America. Although black women's writing compromises a broad and diverse literary tradition, it shares a collective history of oppression and a commitment to improving the lives of black women. As Gabrielle P. Foreman discusses, black women writers still "share (if not as lived experience then as an awareness of the 'race's' positioning) a cultural [. . .] and/or socio-political

positionality" (650). Due to their particular experience in America, black women writers have faced the challenging tasks of self-definition, self-invention, and self-empowerment in a cultural and historical continuum. In other words, black women writers, in their attempt to explore what it means to be black and woman in America, have unraveled the cultural and historical threads that make up their past, paying tribute to their foremothers whose creativity and struggles have gone unnoticed. For example, Alice Walker talks about the importance of models in an artist's life. She argues that " [t]he absence of models, in literature as in life [. . .] is an occupational hazard for the artist, simply because models in art, in behavior, in growth of spirit and intellect [. . .] enrich and enlarge one's view of existence" (*Saving the Life,* 156). What Walker wants to emphasize is that black women writers should establish connections with earlier black women authors and with their ancestors to build "common thread" through the diversity of black women's experiences. She mentions that her story "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff" was based upon her own mother's experiences during the Depression, on Zora Hurston's folklore collection of the 1920s, and her "own response to both out of a contemporary existence" (160). Apparently, Walker, writing as a black woman author in contemporary America, reestablishes both herself and her art in a historical and cultural legacy. Toni Morrison, in her "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," opposes the idea that the artist should be the supreme individual in his/her creation of the work of art. Rather, she proposes an implied "we" in a narration (201), which will connect the past and the present. Her insistence on rootedness in the past becomes a clarion call for all those black women authors when she says, "it is if we don't keep in touch with the ancestor that we are, in fact, lost. [. . .] When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself" (202).

In addition to an strong emphasis on building upon a common historical and cultural legacy, debunking the myths of black womanhood has been another point of focus for black woman writers. Having been designated as Jezebels, Sapphires, welfare mothers, matriarchs, mammies, black women have always been the targets of a racist-sexist white ideology that has denied them the right to define and to speak out for themselves. Cognizant of the fact that their identities have been historically constructed out of their very experiences, black women authors engaged in reclaiming and

reconstructing black women's struggles and experiences as separate and distinct from both those of black men and white women. In the process, they have produced independent self-definitions that launch powerful attacks on the externally defined, controlling images of African American women. As argued by Patricia Hill Collins, these self-definitions not only refuted these controlling images but also shed light on the structural power dynamics underlying the very process definition itself (*Black Feminist Thought*, 2000 114). Therefore, black women's literature is about black women, and it takes the trouble to record their histories, their thoughts, their sorrows, their triumphs and defeats in the face of an overarching racist, sexist, classist white ideology.

The simultaneity of the classist, racist, sexist oppressions in the lives of black women is central to an exploration of African American women's literary tradition and the particularities of the black female experience in white America. Beginning from this premise, I will argue that such an approach to the study of black women's literature yields three different literary images of black women with respect to their struggles and resistances at the nexus of race, gender, and class. It is the contention of this study to demonstrate a typology of black women's images in a selected body of black women's writing with respect to their struggles against a white, capitalist, patriarchal system. These are the images of *the invisible, shrinking woman, the assimilated woman, and the empowered woman*, which recur in black women's literary works extending from slave narratives to contemporary black woman's fiction. It is important to note that these images represent three different levels of consciousness that define varying stances of black women toward race, sex and class oppressions.

Before exploring these images of black women in the next chapter, there remain a few points to be clarified. First, the simultaneity of race, class, and gender oppressions in the lives of black women will constitute the theoretical framework through which I will explore the images in question. Second, I am going to employ a context-specific approach to the study of these images, which requires a historical and cultural insight that will highlight the social, economic and cultural milieu surrounding them. Third, as my choice of the novels will demonstrate, I have chosen novels by African American woman authors written in different epochs of American history, by means of which I

aim to demonstrate the recurring pattern of these images in African American women's literary writing.

Fourth, these images do not represent static, unchanging entities. Rather, they are always in flux determined by the black female protagonists' resistance against the interlocking systems of oppression. Each represents a different political consciousness but a move from one to another is always possible. For example, the assimilated woman who prefers to construct her identity through an appropriation of white man's values might later in the novel emerge out as a self-defined, powerful woman who overthrows white cultural norms as she constructs new, alternative ways of being. Or the assimilated black women, unable to construct a supporting and nurturing sense of herself gets lost and destroyed in her "white" world. But there is no regression for the empowered woman. Once empowered, the black woman becomes neither assimilated nor invisible. This does not mean that empowerment is the ultimate end of a black women's inner psychological journey. Rather, it represents both an inner journey (sometimes a physical one as well) and a new consciousness that will continuously have to reaffirm itself in the face of a capitalist, racist, patriarchal order. The struggle continues for the empowered black women, with the distinction that she is now a black female subject with independent self-definitions essential to her survival.

Lastly, this typology of black women's images affirms the diversity of black women's experiences in a historical continuum. Such an understanding dispels any notions of an essentialized black woman's experience. Studying these images at the nexus of race, class, and gender oppressions necessitates a context-specific approach, which admits the multidimensionality of black women's experiences as well as connects them to material social practices and power systems which shape those experiences. Therefore, the material conditions of a slave girl in the antebellum South that shape her experiences will be different from the material conditions of a black domestic worker or those of an upper-class black professional in an urban context. How the race, class and gender dynamics are articulated by the dominant ideology under certain given historical conditions is central to an analysis of these black women images. And the question of how black women react to or resist against these structural power relations under given circumstances is answered in these three different black women images,

each representing different levels of consciousness in their journeys to find and affirm themselves as black women. What is common to them all is the reality of an overarching system of oppressions that "make it practically impossible for black women to survive if they do not engage in meaningful resistance on some level" (hooks, *Black Looks* 18).

I see the mask, sense
the girl and the woman
you became, wonder
if mask and woman
are one, if pain is
the sum of all your
knowing, victim the
only game you learned.
(Sherley Anne Williams, from "I
Want Aretha to Set This to
Music.")

6.1. The Invisible, Shrinking Woman:

The black woman this image represents is a loser in her struggles to survive as a black woman in white America. For these black women, racism, sexism and poverty fall so heavily upon their lives that they cannot find a way out of this multi-faceted oppression. Unable to create alternative spaces for resistance against their multiple oppressions, they become victims of the white, patriarchal, capitalist system that denies them the right to exist out of its controlling images of black womanhood. Their psychological breakdowns are sometimes exacerbated by the physical violence inflicted upon them, which makes escape from oppression all the more difficult. These black women are invisible because they are unable to exist outside their confining and narrow lives. They are invisible because they do not have a self-defined standpoint in which they could articulate their consciousnesses as black women. In her *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde writes that black women's journeys often involve "the transformation of silence into language and action" (40). However, the black female characters which represent this image gradually shrink almost to the point of non-existence. Defeat is unavoidable for these characters whether it be in form of murder, suicide or madness, or a bleak future which offers no prospects of escape from the asylum.

In "Roselily," the initial story of Alice Walker's *In Love and Trouble* (1973), the main protagonist, Roselily is about to marry an unnamed black Muslim man from Chicago in a Mississippi town named Panther Burn. Standing in front of the priest, Roselily thinks of the circumstances that have led to this marriage and of her future life in Chicago with her new husband. Roselily is the mother of three children, each by a different man. She has had to raise and feed them on her own, working in a sewing plant. Roselily thinks of this marriage as her only way to save her children and herself from brutal poverty and to gain the respect she has been so long denied: "Respect, a chance to build. Her children at last from underneath the detrimental wheel. A chance to be on top. What a relief, she thinks. What a vision, a view, a view from so high up" (4). Illiterate, poor and mother of three children, Roselily chooses marriage as the only route to self-actualization. Once established within the "safe" enclosures of marriage as a devoted mother and wife, she thinks she will achieve status and respect as a black woman. However, Roselily's spirit is troubled; the negative images that continuously break through her consciousness are premonitions of what is to come: ropes, chains, handcuffs, veils, cemetery, a trapped, cornered rat, quicksand, flowers choked to death. All these images reflect Roselily's internally fractured psyche as well as what is waiting for her in her new marriage. At the wedding ceremony Roselily is wearing a robe and a veil because her prospective husband is a Muslim. The robe and the veil signify the servitude from which she yearns to run off. Roselily's thoughts about her new life in Chicago are continuously interrupted by images of servitude and entrapment. She thinks that it is going to be a new life in the city:

> *Not to have to go to a job. Not to work in a sewing plant. Not to worry about learning to sew straight seams in workingmen's overalls, jeans, and dress pants. Her place will be in the home, he has said, repeatedly, promising her rest she had prayed for. But now she wonders. When she is rested, what she will do? They will make babies [. . .]They will be inevitable. Her hands will be full. Full of what? Babies. She is not comforted*. (6-7)

Her marriage to this Muslim man is but a shift of her servitude from the Southern backwoods to the urban Chicago, which Roselily senses when she thinks:

"Impatient to see the South Side, where they would live and build and be respectable and respected and free. Her husband would free her. [. . .] A new life! Respectable, reclaimed, renewed. Free! In robe and veil" (7).

Although not mentioned explicitly in the story, we understand from the lines between that Roselily's new husband is a middle-class black man whose religion as well as his class requires a set of social traditions that control and subordinate women. His gray car, his stiff black suit and his condescension towards the black country folk reveal that he is an urban middle-class black man who has a job to provide for a family. Given the black Muslims' insistence on establishing the black men as the heads of their homes as well as their race to give them their long-denied manliness by a racist-sexist dominant ideology, it is apparent that Roselily will be confined within the roles designated by the patriarchal ideal: She will not work outside home; she will raise her children and give birth to new ones. She will not be downtrodden by utter poverty, and she will not be scorned any longer as the mother of three children, but the price she is to pay for this illusive safety is quite high: she is a black woman whose very identity and existence is affirmed through her submission to her husband. Roselily wants to do away with all these barriers suffocating her life and her soul, which we come to understand through her soliloquies when she is standing in front of the priest ready to give her hand to a black man in marriage:

> *She thinks of the something as a rat trapped, cornered, scurrying to and fro in her head. [. . .] She wants to live for once. But doesn't know quite what that means. Wonders if she has ever done it. If she ever will. The preacher is odious to her. She wants to strike him out of the way, out of her light, with the back of her hand. It seems to her he has always been standing in front of her, barring her way*. (8).

Roselily inwardly rebels against all these conventions that victimize her, but she never comes to voice, to action. Being a poor black woman, she has no means to overcome the barriers that have been stifling her life and her spirit. The story closes with Roselily holding her husband's hand that is "like the clasp of an iron gate," and feeling "ignorant, wrong, backward" (8-9). Her husband's iron hands, like her stiff black suit, signify Roselily's spiritual enslavement. Her feelings of backwardness,

wrongness and ignorance at the close of the story make it clear that she will shrink more and more in spirit once she starts her "new" life as the wife of a black Muslim in Chicago.

The image of the invisible, shrinking black woman is to be found in another story in the same collection by Alice Walker. Like Roselily, the protagonist in "Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?" is trapped in her marriage, which denies her self-actualization and self-affirmation. Just like Roselily's wedding ceremony, Myrna's home is described through images of suffocation, sterility and entrapment. In her attempt to demonstrate the spiritual amnesia the female protagonist of the story undergoes, Alice Walker combines a random selection of extracts from the protagonist's past and present diary. This way, we are invited to share a black woman's most intimate feelings of anger and resentment which belie her outward complaisance and invisibility. The story takes place in an unnamed Southern town during the Civil Rights movement. From Myrna's diary we understand that she and her husband have moved into a new house with new furniture, a house that Ruel, the husband has bought for a thirty-year mortgage. Unlike most black Southerners of the time, Ruel is not economically deprived. He is a Southern middle-class black man who wants his wife to go shopping, buy herself new clothes and cosmetics, cook and raise children. Myrna's roles as a middle-class married black woman have been determined by the decorative mythology of the Southern lady. At a time when the woman's roles were more strictly than ever defined by a gender ideology, and the black family was under attack by the racist white ideology, home is the only sphere reserved for female activity. And motherhood and wifehood are the virtues that make a woman a " real woman."

Although Ruel imagines his wife to be the angel in their new, luxurious house, we understand from the diary that the wife is the mad woman in the asylum. Her private opinion of the house comes to us through images of suffocation and sterility: "The bricks resemble cubes of raw meat; the roof presses down, a field hat made of iron. The windows are narrow, beady eyes. The yard is a long undressed wound, the few trees as bereft of foliage as hairpins stuck in a mudcake" (11). The wife's incessant desire for writing stories is harshly rebuked by Ruel, who considers such activity as "foolish, vulgar stuff" (15). He sees his wife's fulfillment only in "having a baby" and "going

shopping" (15). The discrepancy between the vividness of the language she uses to create a sense of self in her diary and her external depersonalization by her use of sweet-smelling Helena Rubinstein cosmetics, the smell of which she hates, shows how her inner and outer worlds are torn apart.

The wife's final breakdown comes when Mordecai Rich, a short story writer from the North, discovers her piles of written material over twenty years, takes them with him and has one of the stories published under his name. At first, the wife saw Mordecai as her route to empowerment and self-actualization because Ruel would now realize that she was not " a womb without a brain that can be bought with Japanese bathtubs and shopping sprees" (18) once her stories were published one after another. However, Mordecai steals her thoughts and feelings to further his career. Worse, he replaces the black woman in the story with a blue-eyed white woman, an act which symbolizes her erasure as a black woman author in the public sphere as well as in the domestic sphere. Unable to exist out of the roles prescribed for her as a black woman, and having lost her only tenuous tie to herself as a writer, the female protagonist attempts to kill her husband with a saw chain, an attempt which is followed by her nervous breakdown. She spends almost a year in the asylum before she returns home "deformed and crippled in spirit" (19). Now she is the "perfect" wife waiting for her husband's return from the work, smelling of "Arpege, My Sin, Wind Song, and Jungle Gardenia," cooking supper, "lying unresisting on his bed like a drowned body washed to shore" (22-23). At the end of the story, we are left with a woman who lives a life of sly deceit as she spends her days shopping at the newly-opened malls, buying things that she will never use, while secretly swallowing the contraceptive pill in the hope that one day Ruel will abandon his attempts at fatherhood. The story closes with the same image of non-identity that had opened the story: "a jar of cold cream melting on a mirrored vanity shelf" (11).

"The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff" is another story in the same collection, which Alice Walker dedicates to Zora Neale Hurston, whose use of the oral tradition and black vernacular as a literary medium as well as the African American cultural traditions, have inspired Walker's writing. In fact, this story is based upon Walker's mother's rebuff by a white woman while trying to obtain government food during the

Depression. As the story opens, Hannah Kemhuff, the female protagonist of the story, is visiting Tante Rosie, the rootworker of the town to avenge herself on the blue-eyed white woman who had caused her ultimate destruction. As we understand from what Hannah tells Tante Rosie, Hannah had already been married with four children to a man of nothing before the Depression struck them. She had been working as a cook in a sawmill, cooking "cabbage and cornpone for twenty men for two dollars a week" (62). In fact, Depression-like conditions were not new for the vast majority of black Americans, for being at the very bottom of a hierarchical labor force, blacks of both sexes have always suffered from racial and sexual discrimination in the labor force that has always denied them jobs to keep themselves and their families economically and psychologically intact. As Jacqueline Jones writes of the disastrous effects of the Depression on the lives of black families,

> *black men's higher rates of unemployment caused their wives to cling more desperately to the positions they already had, despite declining wages and deteriorating working conditions. During the Great Depression, most black women maintained only a precarious hold on gainful employment; their positions as family breadwinners depended upon [. . .] the breath of chance, to say nothing of the winds of economic change. (199)*

Being the only breadwinner of a family of four children and a husband, Hannah works relentlessly to survive against all odds while her husband who has been jobless for some time before the Depression hangs around idly playing poker games. But when the Depression strikes, Hannah loses her job, which brings the family to the point of starvation: "We was so hungry, and the children were getting weak, that after I had crapped off the last leaves from the collard stalks I couldn't wait for new leaves to grow back. I dug up the collards, roots and all. After we ate that there was nothing else" (62). The food stamps sent by the government remain to be Hannah's last chance to save her children from dying of hunger. Out of her pride and a woman's dignity, Hannah dresses up herself, her husband, and her children with the used clothes sent to her by her sister working as a domestic for a white family in Chicago. Standing in the line to get meal for her children, Hannah becomes the target of her husband's as well as the black folks'

mockery and ridicule because of the way she and her family got dressed. Seeing that even well-to-do whites came to get their share of the meal in rags, Hannah now prays that the white officers will not notice the way they are clothed and give them the meal they are so hopelessly in need of. When it is Hannah's turn, the white woman with blue eyes and blond hair says, "You don't need nothing to eat from the way you all dressed up, Hannah Lou. They don't look hungry. Move along now, somebody here may really need our help!" (65).

Hannah's pride and dignity despite all odds facing her are too much for a black man who is left to feel impotent and weak by a racist-capitalist order. Given the Southern racial-caste system sustained by Jim Crowism during the Depression years, and a racially-sexually stratified labor force, it becomes more apparent why the Depression injected new sources of tensions into black families. Looking down upon his wife becomes Hannah's husband's only outlet for releasing his sense of powerlessness. And going and looking after other women remains to be the only way to regain his denied "manhood." When Hannah is made embarrassed and small by the blue-eyed officer, her husband and the black prostitute he had been hanging around for some time laugh at her desperate situation and drive off without looking back. Broken in spirit, Hannah takes her children back home only to see their successive deaths in the days to come. Before long, Hannah finds herself working in a whorehouse and drinking to forget what she is doing: "Somewhere along them years my pride just up and left altogether and I worked for a time in a whorehouse just to make some money, just like my husband's woman [. . .] soon I just broke down and got old all at once [. . .]" (67). But Hannah never forgets the moment when "[her] spirit was trampled down within [her] while they all stood and laughed and [the little moppet] stood there grinning behind her hands" (67). That is why we meet Hannah at Tante Rosie's when the story opens. What she wants from Tante Rosie is to work some voodoo magic on the "little moppet" that will cause her destruction. Shattered to pieces in her spirit, Hannah ends up in a whorehouse where she finds refuge in drinking, trying to forget the loss of her children, the loss of herself and her husband.

In Zora Neale Hurston's short story "Sweat," the black female protagonist Delia is captivated in a marriage of eternal strife. Delia has been married to Sykes for fifteen

years, and she has been washing white people's laundry for fifteen years. Delia describes this marriage as "Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!" (956). She has been toiling as a washwoman, collecting and delivering white people's clothes with her little pony. And all these years, she has been enduring her husband's beatings and infidelity. As Sykes squanders his money on other women, Delia sweats over the laundry she does for whites. Sykes spitefully scatters the white folks' laundry each time Delia sorts them because they always remind him of his economic inadequacy and his powerlessness. So, for Syke, beating is the only way to dominate his woman. Delia has been so exploited and abused by her husband that her neighbors liken her to a cane-chew:

> *There's plenty men dat takes a wife lak dey do a joint uh sugar-cane. It's round, juicy an' sweet when dey gits it. But dey squeeze an' grind, squeeze an' grind an' wring tell dey wring every drop uh pleasure dat's in 'em out. When dey's satisfied dat dey is wrung dry, dey treats 'em jes lak dey do a cane-chew. Dey thows 'em away. Dey knows whut dey is doin' while dey is at it, an' hates theirselves fuh it but dey keeps on hangin' after huh tell she's empty. Den dey hates huh fuh bein' a cane-chew an' in de way*. (919)

This is exactly what Sykes does to Delia. Lying exhausted on her bed, Delia remembers the beginnings of the intrusion of hate and betrayal into their marriage:

> *Anything like flowers had long ago been drowned in the salty stream that had been pressed from her heart. Her tears, her sweat, her blood. She had brought love to the union and he had brought a longing for the flesh. Two months after the wedding, he had given her first brutal beating. She had the memory of his numerous trips to Orlando, with all of his wages when he returned to her penniless, even before the first year had passed. She was young and soft then, but now she thought of her knotty, muscled limbs, her harsh knockly hands [. . .] Too late now to hope for love [. . .].* (957)

Delia's physical deformation due to years of incessant toiling is accompanied by the deformation of her soul. Love has gone out of her heart forever, leaving its place to hatred. And Sykes hates her because she is a skinny, old woman washing white folks' dirty laundry. What Sykes has in mind is to bring her new fat mistress into the house

that Delia built by her fifteen-years of sweat and unremitting toil. Knowing of Delia's fear of snakes, Sykes plans to frighten her to death with a rattlesnake that he brings home in a basket. In the event, it is Sykes who dies of the snake bite. Fifteen years of misery and oppression had brought Delia to the place where she would make no attempt to rescue her husband as the snake venom was working on him. The marriage results in a mutual destruction which is physical for Sykes and spiritual for Delia.

Again, Shirley Williams's "Tell Martha Not to Moan" (1968) is another short story depicting a young black woman's defeat in the face of class, race and gender oppressions. On the surface, the story explores a black mother's search for love in the 1970s America yet on a deeper level, it foregrounds the societal forces that doom that quest for love to failure. Martha, a teen mother on welfare, represents another invisible, shrinking black woman, who is always dependent on a man to define herself. Unlike her mother who has always had to "scrub somebody else's toilets" to make ends meet, Martha prefers to stay on welfare firstly because she knows that if she chooses to work, her chances would be no more fulfilling than her mother's. The only jobs available to her would be low-paying, unskilled ones. Secondly, she does not want to leave her two-year-old son on his own knowing very well what will be waiting for him unless he is attended. She says, "Go out and scrub somebody else's toilets like my mamma did so Larry can run wild like I did?" (54). Martha gets pregnant at the age of sixteen only to be left on her own to take care of the baby. And when the story opens, Martha is pregnant again by a traveling musician, Time, whom she meets at the town's night club. Martha thinks that she has found love finally in Time, who, just like the men before him, leaves Martha on her own with her second baby.

At the surface, the story seems to deal with a poor black woman's continuous betrayals by black men who come into and go out of her life. However, understanding Martha's love and troubled relations with black men requires a comprehensive analysis of how the prevailing Eurocentric gender ideology--definitions of appropriate gender behavior for black women, black men, and members of other racial/ethnic groups--shapes black heterosexual love relationships. Writing in her 1970 essay "On the Issue of Roles," Toni Cade remarks, "Now it does not take any particular expertise to observe that one of the most characteristic features of our community is the antagonism between

our men and our women" (106). Likewise, Patricia Hill Collins argues in the second edition of her *Black Feminist Thought* that this antagonism that many African-American women and men feel and express toward one another "reflects the contradictions characterizing Black masculinity and Black femininity within prevailing U.S. sexual politics" (156). Therefore, Martha's failure to form healthy, sustaining relations with black men must be understood within the context of how broader overarching structures of power operate to encourage these individual outcomes in daily interactions.

When read against the economic changes and the dominant cultural norms prevailing in the United States in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, Martha's story reveals how the intersecting oppressions of race, class and gender corrupt and distort black male-female relations as well as their inability to resist dominant false definitions of manhood and womanhood. Massive global economic restructuring since World War II accompanied by shifting patterns of industrial development had created a more rigid, racially and sexually stratified labor market, which gave rise to an accelerated increase of African American mother-child families. The outcome of the structural unemployment and underemployment of black men in the 1960s and 1970s was an unprecedented increase in husband-absent, female-headed households. However, the rhetoric of the dominant gender ideology of the times was putting the blame on the distorted gender roles in the black family rather than on the racist, capitalist U.S. labor market. Black families were torn apart because black women working outside their homes, and earning wages denied black men to feel like a "man." These hegemonic gender ideologies of black masculinity defined in terms of Black men's ability to control and own their women have been internalized by black men who have, in the process, reinscribed themselves within a racist-sexist system, and have thus become willing partners in their own oppression. When the black women's deviation from gender roles is represented by the dominant ideology as the breeding ground for black men's powerlessness, it is not surprising that the sexism that had always undermined the black liberation struggle gave way to a misogynist approach to black women. The equation of power and freedom with patriarchal norms of manhood has prevented black men and women from relating to each other through relations based on love and respect.

Martha's suspended life stands at the very center of these intersecting oppressions of race, class and gender. Martha was born into a family where there is no love but misery, poverty and betrayal. Her mother has had to work as a domestic in white households to feed her children while her jobless husband, "always coming and going and every time he go leave a baby behind," just added up to her already heavy burden. Martha does not want to be like her mother and many other poor black women who have been trapped in marriages where incessant toil and domestic violence have dried up their emotional and sensory life. Martha wants to love a man, "a mighty good man," who will respect and love her. She thinks that she has found what she has been looking for so long in Time, who tells her how beautiful she is, and that he is going to make her his "black queen." However, the whole relation reeks with pornographic sexuality and disrespect. Time is much more concerned with owning and ruling a woman than loving her. He is more interested in Martha's "fine ass" than the "lots of pitchers in her mind" that Martha "can't tell nobody what they look like" (50). Sadly, Time is just one of many other black men who has internalized the white racist-sexist assumptions of black women's sexuality constructed outside "normative" white heterosexuality. When he has sex with Martha, he does not love but just hurts, and dominates her body. Martha's body becomes the only place where he could alleviate his feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy. He feels like a "man" only when he has sex with Martha, and when his friends tell him how good he is at the piano: "Out of sight, man, the way you play. [. . .] "You ought to get out of this little town so somebody can hear you play" (51). But when this false mask of power is torn by Martha, Time beats her and leaves her pregnant for her second baby: "You always talking bout music and New York City, New York City and the white man. Why don't you forget all that shit and get a job like other men? I hate that damn piano" (54). When the story closes, Martha is sitting in her mother's kitchen, still hoping that Time will come back and make her his black queen, which, we know, will never happen. A poor black mother on welfare, now with her second baby on its way, Martha's future seems to be blurred and bleaker than ever.

The image of the invisible, shrinking black woman can also be traced in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982). It is a novel of six stories, each story

about a different female character who happens in some way to end up in The Brewster Place, a modern ghetto cut off from the rest of the city by a huge, gray wall. Each story depicts a different black female protagonist with different backgrounds and life experiences. What is common to them all is an insurmountable system of oppression which brings defeat and disillusionment into their lives. Naylor begins the book by the classic lines from Langston Hughes's "Montage of a Dream Deferred" (1951): "What happens to a dream deferred?" Each story in the novel is about a dream deferred. These are the dreams of poor black women who have, in their struggles to survive in a racist-sexist America, become mutilated in body and spirit. The wall at the end of the street, which cuts off Brewster Place from the main arteries of American life, is the central metaphor running throughout the novel, signifying these women's invisibility and powerlessness at the nexus of interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression.

The first story in the novel, "Mattie Michael" opens with the title character's arrival in Brewster Place. The events that have brought Mattie to this dead-end street take start in southern, rural Tennessee, Mattie's homeland, when Mattie's father finds out that she is pregnant by the "low-down ditch dog" Butch Fuller (13). Samuel Michael, Mattie's father, with his "set and exacting ways" (19) is the absolute patriarch who cannot tolerate any sign of disobedience to his authority. He would always warn Mattie against such attractive womanizers like Butch Fuller, saying "No decent woman would be seen talkin' to him" (9). Mattie's single sexual encounter with Butch, portrayed around the metaphor of eating sugar cane, is the freest and most pleasurable, physically and spiritually, taking place among sugar cane stalks, basil and wild rhyme. Mattie's stepping outside the strict and conventional guidelines controlling women's sexuality represents dishonor and shame for her father who punishes her disobedience with brutal beating: "Mattie's body contracted in a painful spasm each time the stick smashed down on her legs and back, and she curled into a tight knot, trying to protect her stomach" (23). The price Mattie has to pay for her sexual freedom is quite high: the severance of all ties with her home and her parents.

As she rides the bus out of Rock Vale to North Carolina, she remembers the taste of sugar cane and the smell of wild herbs. However, she buries all these sweet

feelings deep down inside her, and chooses mothering as the only way of defining and realizing herself as a woman. Her girlhood friend Etta Mae's "cramped boardinghouse room with its cheap furniture and dingy walls" is no good place to raise her son Basil (27). However, being a poor black unwed mother, her chances for a better, decent living for herself and her son Basil are quite low: she finds "an assembly-line job in a book bindery" which pays so little that she almost starves to death after paying a week's rent, and Mrs. Prell, the babysitter. When her baby son is attacked by a rat, Mattie impulsively leaves the boardinghouse only to find that not only whites but also her own folks would refuse to take in a single black mother. The generosity and love of a Miss Eva Turner, who opens her heart and her home to Mattie saves her and her son from the streets. Throughout her thirty-years spent in Miss Turner's home, Etta Mae builds around her son a false world of security, which she thinks will save him from the dangers out there in the larger white world. Sacrificing her self to her son, Mattie constructs a false conception of herself that requires a distortion and repression of desire and self-denial: "Her body had hungered at moments, had felt the need for a filling and caressing of inner spaces. But in those restless moments she had turned toward her manchild and let the soft, sleeping flesh and the thought of all that he was and would be draw those yearnings onto the edge of her lips and the tips of her fingers" (38). Instead of allowing this insight to develop into self-knowledge, Mattie constructs her identity within the dominant societal values of womanhood: she becomes a sacrificial, devoted mother, and denies her sexuality which could be sanctioned, according to the white "normative norms" of female sexuality, under the institution of marriage only.

However, Mattie Michael's years of self-denial, and devoted motherhood bring her nothing but spiritual and material loss. The house, of which mortgage Mattie had to carry working two jobs is put up for bail. When Basil skips bail, forcing the forfeiture of the house, Mattie loses "lifetime of work lying in the bricks of her home" (35) and finds herself on Brewster Place. Just like the plants she has brought from her home "would now have to fight for a light on a crowded windowsill," in Brewster Place denying them the sunlight to grow, Mattie would "have to die on this crowded street because there just wasn't enough life left for her to do it all again" (7).

The second story in the novel centers on Mattie Michael's childhood friend, Etta Mae Johnson, whose race, gender and class, leads her to the dead end of Brewster Place. While Mattie has spent her life as a devoted mother, Etta is a childless woman whose life has been wasted in her desperate attempts "to hook herself to any promising rising black star, and when he burnt out, she found another" (60). Unlike Mattie, who was raised to be obedient and conventional, Etta "spent her teenage years in constant trouble. Rock Vale had no place for a black woman who was not only unwilling to play by the rules, but whose spirit challenged the very right of the game to exist" (59). Etta's "blooming independence" was no match for the racist southern white folks who thought of her as "strange Southern fruit" (60). Her refusal to be submissive and subservient to the white folks and her rejection of the roles of motherhood and wifewood under marriage would soon make her realize that "America wasn't ready for her yet – not in 1937" (60). Therefore, like many other "countless [. . .] disillusioned, restless children of Ham with so much to give and nowhere to give it, (Etta) took her talents to the street" (60).

The central episode of Etta's story is typical of the countless experiences she has gone through for so many years. Knowing that "her youth had ebbed away under the steady pressure of the changing times" (60) and that her aging will not allow her any more years of hustling for survival, Etta fantasizes to become the respectable wife of a church official out of her desire for spiritual comfort as well as her desire for material security. Her dream to establish herself as the respectable wife of Reverend Moreland T., who, she believed, "could move her up to the front of the church, ahead of the deacons' wives and Ladies' Auxiliary, off of Brewster Place for good" (66) is shattered to pieces, just like her earlier dreams of attaching herself "to any promising rising black star" to shine with have left her disillusioned and betrayed. No sooner does Etta "weave his tailored suit and the smell of his expensive cologne into a custom-made future for herself" than she feels "him beating against her like a dying walrus, until he shuddered and was still" (72). Although Etta's demoralizing experience with Reverend Woods is familiar to her, its impact on her is quite devastating:

> *They were all the same, all meshed together into one lump that rested like an iron ball on her chest. And the expression on the face of this breathing*

mass to her left would be the same as all the others. She could turn now and go through the rituals that would tie up the evening for them both, but she wanted just one more second of this soothing darkness before she had to face the echoes of the locking doors she knew would be in his eyes. (72)

Etta's false conception of herself as a woman who could find self-definition, self-respect and security from a man is what leaves her dispirited and defeated at the end of the story. As Naylor makes it clear, "Even if someone had bothered to stop and tell her that the universe had expanded for her, just an inch, she wouldn't have known how to shine alone" (60). As she stands looking at the wall by the close of the story, Etta realizes that the wall which had seemed somehow welcoming when she arrived in the afternoon "with the August sun highlighting the browns and reds of the bricks and the young children bouncing their rubber balls against its side," had now "crouched there in the thin predawn light, like a pulsating mouth awaiting her arrival" (73). The wall represents the dead-end of her physical journeys from Rock Vale to St. Louis, and then to Chicago and New York, and finally to Brewster Place, as well as the dead-end of her spiritual journey she set out to find and know herself. Her dreams sordidly deferred, Etta, now broken in spirit, walks up to the stoop of Mattie's building knowing she would "never get out" of Brewster Place.

"Lucielia Louise Turner" is another successfully rendered depiction of the consequences of disappointed dreams. The central character, Ciel, is the now-mature granddaughter of Miss Eva Turner, to whom Mattie had been a kind of second mother until Miss Eva died and Ciel returned to Tennessee with her parents. Ciel's dreams of loving and to be loved by Eugene, her husband, and to continue their marriage against all odds are deferred because of her desperate attempts to keep a husband who is verbally abusive and physically threatening. When the story opens, Eugene is back home after almost a year's absence during which Ciel, being sick after the birth, has had to live on welfare with her month-old baby. Captivated in a realm of imagination, Ciel tries to maintain a false image of her husband as a lover whose "sooty flesh penetrated the skin of her fingers and coursed through her blood and became one [. . .] with her actual being" (92). Ciel prays "behind veiled eyes that the man will stay" (92). Ciel's refusal to see into the real character of her husband compels her to commit acts of

self-deception. Their relation takes on a worse course when Ciel announces her pregnancy to Eugene, who has just lost his job. Eugene blames Ciel for becoming pregnant, seeing the responsibility of a wife and two children as an impediment to his advancement: "I'm fuckin' sick of never getting ahead. Babies and bills, that's all you good for" (94). Ciel's womanhood becomes the dump area for Eugene's sense of powerlessness and feelings of inadequacy which actually stem from a racist white order that denies black men decent jobs and wages to live decent lives: " 'With two kids and you on my back, I ain't never gonna have nothin'." He came and grabbed her by the shoulders and was shouting into her face. " 'Nothin,' do you hear me, nothin'!" (95)

Apparently, Eugene succumbs to elite, white male notions of manhood constructed by the dominant gender ideology He wants to become the "master" by fulfilling traditional definitions of masculinity--prosperous and in charge of his family. And when the right to feel like a "man" is denied to him, he becomes abusive, threatening those closest to him. As the black feminist Pauli Murray discusses, "A system of oppression draws much of its strength from the acquiescence of its victims, who have accepted the dominant image of themselves and are paralyzed by a sense of helplessness" (106). Even Ciel's being subservient and submissive to her husband's will so that he will not feel like "chickenshit" cannot prevent the breakdown of their marriage. Ciel aborts the baby she desperately wants, which is followed by a profound sense of self-alienation and self-division:

> *Ciel was not listening [to the voice of the abortionist]. It was important that she keep herself completely isolated from these surroundings. All the activities of the past week of her life were balled up and jammed on the right side of her brain, as if belonging to some other woman. And when she had endured this one last thing for her, she would push it up there, too, and then one day give it all to her--Ciel wanted no part of it.*
>
> *The next two days, Ciel found it difficult to connect herself up again with her own world. Everything seemed to have taken on new textures and colors.[. . .] There was a disturbing split second between someone talking to her and the words penetrating sufficiently to elicit a response*. (95-6)

When Eugene announces his intention of leaving her, Ciel is then forced to come to terms with the "other woman" who has had the abortion. When Eugene tells Ciel that loving him "ain't good enough" a reason for him to continue with Ciel, "the poison of reality [begins] to spread through her body like gangrene [. . .] [scraping] the veil from her eyes," making Ciel see, for the first time, into the true character of Eugene and the nature of their marriage. No sooner does Ciel awaken from her long dream of self-denial and repression than she hears "the scream from the kitchen" that signals their daughter Serena's electrocution.

Stepping out of her realm of illusion and silence, Ciel now faces "the other woman" who has always hopelessly struggled to conjure false images of herself and her husband, refusing the stark reality of her life. In her "silent acquiesce[nces]" to the will of her selfish husband, Ciel has lost connection to her true self as an independent agent to make her life on her own and take on the responsibilities of her own choices. It is only when Eugene despises her feelings of love that Ciel comes out of her world of fantasy and faces her buried other self kept silent and suffering for so long. When the story closes we are left with the image of a black woman "tired of hurting," a black woman, having lost the only one "she has loved without pain," (93) "slowly [giving] up the life that God had refused to take from her" (101).

Ciel's surrogate mother, Mattie Michael, who knows intuitively what Ciel is undergoing, forcefully intervenes with Ciel's impending death:

> *'No! No! No!' Like a black Brahman cow, desperate to protect her young, she surged into the room, pushing the neighbor woman and the others out of her way. [. . .]*
>
> *She sat on the edge of the bed and enfolded the tissue-thin body in her huge ebony arms. And she rocked. [. . .] Back and forth, back and forth [. . .].* (103)

Mattie's soothing rocking and embrace enable Ciel to confront her self-deception and self-denial that have resulted in her continuous victimization:

> *And she rocked her back [. . .] to the nadir of her hurt, and they found It--a slight silver splinter, embedded just below the surface of the skin. And Mattie rocked and pulled--and the splinter gave way, but its roots were*

> *deep, gigantic, ragged, and they tore up flesh with bits of fat and muscle tissue clinging to them. They left a hole, but Mattie was satisfied. It would heal.* (103-4)

Although Mattie's motherly love and embrace rescue Ciel from dying, just like it had saved Etta from the streets, it cannot rescue her from Brewster Place. The nurturance and love that black women give each other in Brewster Place make their survival possible despite the all-powerful system of oppressions. Nevertheless, Ciel, like Mattie and Etta, will stay in Brewster Place, which, being a dead-end street leading nowhere, symbolizes the dead-end of black women's struggles to overcome a white, capitalist, patriarchal order. Just like Mattie and Etta, Ciel ends up in Brewster Place without sufficient economic and spiritual resources.

The story "Cora Lee" records the defeat of another black woman stumbling in her life as she, like the other women on Brewster Place, faces an overarching system of oppressions in white America. The story introduces the reader to the title character Cora Lee, who is a welfare mother overwhelmed by her sole responsibility for her children. Cora Lee lives in a world of fantasy where she projects a world in which the mother-child relationship is never ruptured by the impinging and uncomfortable realities of the outer world--hence the necessity to replace the growing one with the newborn baby. Cora would "always welcome [her children] until they changed, and then she just didn't understand them" (113). Her children's growing up meant "coming home filthy from the streets [. . .] rotten teeth and scraped limbs, and torn school books, and those damned truant notices in her mailbox-dumb just plain dumb" (112-13). Cora Lee blocks herself from the realities of an outer world by seeking refuge in heavy doses of soap operas, and in caressing her newborn. Cora Lee cannot bring herself to face the stark realities of a ghetto life impinging upon her children. Rather, she regresses to the "safe" presence of her baby where she could fulfill its needs, feeding it with her body. Once the baby grows "beyond the world of her lap" (112), Cora is at a loss because as long as the baby is "where you put them" and "easy to keep clean" there are "no welfare offices to sit in all day or food stamp lines to stand on [. . .] no neighbors or teachers or social workers to answer about their actions" (112).

Cora Lee's story in fact parodies the welfare myth constructed as justification for the utter impoverishment in the black ghettoes that accelerated at an unprecedented speed in the post-World War II political economy. The 1980s saw the resurrection of the tandem myths of the traditional family and the black matriarchy, first introduced by Daniel Patrick Moynihan into the government policies in 1964. With the election of the Reagan administration in 1980, the meaning of race in the United States was being rearticulated through such "coded words" as "traditional values of family, the work ethic, and sexual discipline (in such new social movements as feminism, welfare rights, and gay liberation" (Omi and Winant 132). The articulation of race with issues of poverty and gender gave rise to cultural racism which linked the deterioration in poor black families and communities to their lack of a work ethic and their deviance from traditional gender roles (Jenks 143,45; Orfield 352; Wilson 13).

As Patricia Hill Collins tellingly argues in her *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), the construction of the image of the welfare queen at the intersecting oppressions of race, sex, and gender has served to disguise "the effects of cuts in government spending on social welfare programs that fed children, housed working families [. . .] and supported other basic public services," shifting the blame from a racist, capitalist order to the victims themselves (80). Wahneema Lubiano describes how the image of the welfare queen associated black women with the social and economic ills plaguing the black communities:

> *'Welfare queen' is a phrase that describes economic dependencythe lack of a job and/or income (which equal degeneracy in the Calvinist United States); the presence of a child or children with no father and/or husband (moral deviance); and, finally, a charge on the collective U.S. treasury--a human debit. The cumulative totality, circulation, and effect of these meanings in a time of scarce sources among the working class and the lower middle class is devastatingly intense. The welfare queen represents moral aberration and an economic drain, but the figure's problematic status becomes all the more threatening once responsibility for the destruction of the American way of life is attributed to it*. (337-38)

The controlling image of the welfare queen represents her as an unwed mother who violates one of the cardinal tenets of the patriarchal ideology. Moreover, she is lazy and thus unable to pass on the work ethic to her children, who are generally lost to streets looming with crime and drug addiction. So the reassertion of the patriarchal values tandem with their appropriate gender roles within the Negro family becomes the only trope for blacks to cure their economic penalties. Cora Lee's story negates the solution the state policies, the sociologists and the media of the 1980s offer to ameliorate the conditions of the poor mothers: the presence of a husband in the black family. However, Cora's men deliver only violence when they are home.

> *A pot of burned rice would mean a fractured jaw, or a wet bathroom floor a loose tooth. [. . .] [S]he still carried the scar under her left eye because of a baby's crying. [. . .] And then there was Brucie's father, who had promised to marry her and take her off Welfare, but who went out for a cartoon of milk and never came back.* (113)

Seeing that the fathers-in-residence of her older children gave her nothing but brutal beatings, lies and betrayal, Cora chooses mothering alone. Cora makes love with "only the shadows- who came in the night and showed her the thing that felt good in the dark, and often left before the children awakened" (113), the shadows "would sometimes bring new babies" but at least they "didn't give [her] fractured jaws or bruised eyes" (114). It is the very circumstances of her life that make Cora an unwed welfare mother, not the cultural aberrations of the black community, as the myth of the welfare mother narrates. Sociologist Charles Murray, in his widely-acclaimed book *Losing Ground,* further stigmatizes black welfare mothers accusing them of procreating to get more from the state. However, Cora does not procreate for profit: she has babies just for the pleasure of having babies and caring for them.

So, here is Cora Lee, an unwed welfare mother, spending her life watching soap operas to escape from the material and psychological responsibilities her grown up children impose upon her. Cora conjures a world of fantasy where she could experience the mother-child relation without being ruptured by the economic and emotional pressures of a ghetto life. This pattern is temporarily halted when Cora and her children are invited to a black production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by a middle-class

activist, Kiswana Browne. In the course of the play, Cora is awed by the success of black players because "she had never heard black people use such fine-sounding words and they really seemed to know what they were talking about" (124). Shifted from the low-culture of soap operas to the high culture of black-produced Shakespeare, Cora Lee dreams of a better future for her children if she takes on her motherly duties: "Junior high; high school; college [. . .] And then on to good jobs in insurance companies and the post office, even doctors or lawyers. Yes, that's what would happen to her babies" (126). However, the lines from the play inserted into the narration of the story make it clear that Cora Lee's Shakespearean dream of upward educational mobility is but a futile fantasy in the immediate context of black urban poverty:

> *If we shadows have offended,*
> *Think but this, and all is mended:*
> *That you have but slumber'd here,*
> *While these visions did appear.*
> *And this weak and idle theme,*
> *No more yielding but a dream [. . .].* (126)

Those "hopeful echoes" she feels on the way home with her children are further disrupted when Sammy pulls on her arm, and asks, "Mama, Shakespeare's black?" (127). Back home, Cora Lee washes the children "and put[s] them each into bed with a kiss" only to find the "shadow" lying in her bed, "who had let himself in with his key" (127). And Cora Lee "turn[s] and fold[s] her evening like gold and lavender gauze deep within the creases of her dreams, let[s] her clothes drop to the floor" (127).

Cora's momentary insight into her life and her acknowledgement of the responsibility for it is but an interlude in her life. Cora, like Ciel and Etta, imprisons herself in a dream world where she constructs a false identity of herself as the perfect mother, refusing to realize that the "babies grow up" one day (121). Cora is a loser in the face of poverty, the violence and betrayals of men who come and go out of her life, and the overall structural racism that locks Cora and her children in the urban ghetto that breeds nothing but crime and despair. She is walled in both physically and spiritually. The wall within encapsulates her in a static world of dream where self-knowledge and a nurturing sense of self are lost to a dream of a perfect mother. As the

black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins discusses in the second edition of her *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), a change of consciousness is only possible through self-knowledge, even within conditions that severely inhibit one's ability to move and to act. "Any individual black woman who is forced to remain 'motionless on the outside,' can develop the 'inside' of a changed consciousness as a sphere of freedom" (118). And Cora Lee chooses to be "motionless" within, and hence lacks the self-knowledge and self-determination for a changed consciousness.

"The Two," another story in *The Women of Brewster Place* is also representative of the invisible, shrinking black woman. It unfolds the story of a middle-class lesbian couple who are oppressed not only by the racist-sexist white order but also by the homophobic black community. Denied an existence and acceptance both in the white world and the "manicured" black middle class neighborhoods, Theresa and Lorraine have drifted from one place to another to escape homophobia and finally ended up in Brewster only to find out the same animosity they had hoped to escape. The title of the story, "The Two," is indicative of how they are distanced from the community of Brewster Place. They are not "Theresa" and "Lorraine," but a pair who are "that way" (131). In fact, the objectification of Lorraine and Theresa as the Other by the women of the Brewster Place is representative not only of their invisibility in contemporary "mainstream" black feminist criticism and scholarship but of their rejection in the black communities as well.

Heterosexism as a system of oppression lies at the very center of this rejection and invisibility. Eurocentric constructions of sexuality accepts heterosexim as the "normal," "normative" form of sexual expression. Heterosexism, "the belief in the inherent superiority of one form of sexual expression over another and thereby the right to dominate," is concomitant to gender oppression. Not only does it validate sexuality under the sanctity of the institution of marriage but also links sexuality to notions of masculinity and femininity. Therefore, homosexuality as a "deviant" form of sexual preference constitutes a threat to the patriarchal order that is kept live and well by sexual/economic dependence on men. Accordingly, being a lesbian means stepping outside the "normal" order of things, and thus constitutes a threat to the sanctity of the

nuclear family, to male dominance and power, to the very heart of sexism. As Suzanne Pharr cogently argues,

> *Homophobia works effectively as a weapon of sexism because it is joined with a powerful arm, heterosexism. Heterosexism creates the climate for homophobia with its assumption that the world is and must be heterosexual and its display of power and privilege as the norm. Heterosexism is the systemic display of homophobia in the institutions of the society. Heterosexism and homophobia work together to enforce compulsory heterosexuality and that bastion of patriarchal power, the nuclear family*. (568)

Lorraine's desire for acceptance by the community of women, believing that being a lesbian "doesn't make [her] any *different* from anyone else in the world" (165), is indicative of her entrapment between her sexuality and the society's dominant views of womanhood. Denied the sisterhood of Brewster women, Lorraine befriends Ben, the old janitor, who ends up in Brewster Place in his escape from the torment of guilt for his impotence in letting his wife force her lame daughter into concubinage with a Southern white man, by which he and his wife Elvira profited. An impoverished Southern sharecropper, Ben lacks the means to have access to white patriarchal power, hence his inability to support and protect his family, for which Elvira blames Ben:

> *If you was a half man, you coula given me more babies and we woulda had some help workin' this land instead of a half-grown woman we gotta carry the load for. And if you was even a quarter of a man, we wouldn't be a bunch of miserable sharecroppers on someone else's land-but we is, Ben.* (153)

Pressing down the urge to shoot Elvira to death, Ben turns to alcohol to dull his sense of inadequate manhood and to assuage the painful memory of her lime daughter who "felt that if she had to earn her keep that way, she might as well go to Memphis where the money was better" (154).

The friendship between Lorraine and Ben, the only positively portrayed black male-female relationship throughout the novel, depends upon their feelings of loss and absence. Ben becomes a surrogate father to Lorraine, who was kicked out of her home

at the age of seventeen by her father who could not tolerate her "difference." And Lorraine becomes a surrogate daughter to Ben, whose prostituted daughter has been forever lost to him. It is this friendship where Lorraine does not "limp along inside" (148) for it is only Ben, who does not castigate her for being a lesbian: "When I am with Ben, I don't feel any other different from anybody else in the world. [. . .] That only place I've found some peace [. . .] is in that damp ugly basement, where I'm not different" (165). Lorraine's desire "to be a human being-a lousy human being who's somebody's daughter or somebody's friend or even somebody's enemy" is continuously frustrated by a homophobic black community that "make[s] her feel like a freak out there" (165). Lorraine's desire for acceptance, love and approval from the black community is a question of wholeness, of maintaining a strong sense of well-being and self-esteem. The denial of her lesbian sexual identity by a homophobic world makes her vulnerable to damaging losses: the loss of her family, the fear of losing her job as a teacher if she comes out of the closet, her loss of a sense of place, of belonging that her continuous physical displacement indicates, the loss of credibility as a trusted, respected member of the black community, and finally the loss of physical safety and mental health that brings about Lorraine's inevitable destruction and victimization when she is gang-raped in the alley by C. C. Baker and his friends.

Lorraine's rape becomes the very site where the oppressions of race, class and gender intersect. Lorraine becomes an easy outlet for the repressed anger of a handful of black men disempowered by racism and poverty:

> *Bound by the last building on Brewster and a brick wall, they reigned in that unlit alley like dwarfed warrior-kings. Born with the appendages of power, circumcised by a guillotine, [. . .] these young men wouldn't be called upon to thrust a bayonet into an Asian farmer, target a torpedo, scatter their iron seed from a B-52 into the wound of the earth, point a finger to move a nation, or stick a pole into the moon-and they knew it.* (169-170)

The wall at the end of the street is symbolical of the denial of elite, white male privileges to black men who cling to their sexual prowess as the only route to realize themselves as "men": "They had only that three-hundred-foot alley to serve them as

stateroom, armored tank, and executioner's chamber. [. . .] the most dangerous species in existence-human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide" (170). Unable to see into the workings of a white, patriarchal, capitalist ideology that severely limits them both physically and psychologically, C. C. Baker and his friends resort to terrorize black women to assert themselves as patriarchs. Socialized by such blaxploitation films as "Shaft" (1971) and "Superfly," (1972) in which black male domination and violation of women are valorized, and homosexuality is despised and severely attacked, these young men yearn for a dream when they will be "propel[led] [. . .] into the heaven populated by their gods-Shaft and Superfly" (161). The brutal gang rape of Lorraine is indicative of the internalization and pervasiveness of white racist-sexist constructions of black masculinity and femininity and how these controlling images are continuously circulated throughout everyday black culture via a white-dominated mass media.

In a culture which has consistently linked images of manliness with displays of machismo, sexual prowess and violence, Lorraine's lesbian sexual identity constitutes a serious threat to black male dominance and control because she, neither sexually nor economically, depends on a male. As such, homophobia turns out to be an effective weapon of sexism that

> *can wield its power over all women through lesbian baiting, the attempt to control women by labeling [them] as lesbians because [their] behavior is not acceptable, that is, when [they] are being independent, going [their] own way [. . .] bonding with and loving the company of women [. . .] lesbian baiting occurs when women are called lesbians because [they] resist male dominance and control.* (Pharr 570)

Likewise, Adrienne Rich argues that "Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also an [. . .] attack on male right of access to women. [I]t is a form of nay-saying to patriarchy, an act of resistance" (192). Therefore, "women who do not attach their primary intensity to men must be, in functional terms (read by way of lesbian baiting), condemned to an even more devastating outdiserhood than their outsiderhood as women" (Rich 200).

The abhorrent misogyny and homophobia in Lorraine's gang-rape represents a violent attempt to impose patriarchy not only on Lorraine but on all women as well: "The thought of any women who lay beyond the length of it [his phallic power] was a threat" to C.C. Baker (162) who, as a prelude to rape, rubs his penis in Lorraine's face saying, "See, that's what you need. Bet after we get through with you, you ain't never gonna wanna kiss no more pussy" (170). That Lorraine's rape is representative of an attempt to attack and "teach a lesson" to all women in the Brewster Place whose love and assistance for each other enable them to survive a racist-sexist world is made all the more apparent when Naylor removes the borders between female bonding, sisterhood, and lesbianism through an exchange between Mattie and Etta:

> '*They say they just love each other-who knows?'*
> *Mattie was thinking deeply. 'Well, I have loved women, too. There was Miss Eva and Ciel, and [. . .] I have loved you practically all my life.'*
> *'Yeah, but it is different with them.'*
> *'Different how?'*
> *'Well[. . .]' Etta was beginning to feel uncomfortable. 'They love each other like you'd love a man or a man would love you-I guess.'*
> *'But I have loved some women deeper than I ever loved any man,' Mattie was pondering.' 'And there have been some women who loved me more and did more for me than any man ever did.'*
> *'Yeah.' Etta thought for a minute. 'I can second that, but it's still different, Mattie. I can't exactly put my finger on it, but [. . .]'*
> *'May be it's not so different,' Mattie said, almost to herself. 'Maybe that's why some women get so riled up about it, 'cause they know deep down it's not so different after all.'* (141)

The most explicit articulation of female bonding in the novel, this dialogue between Mattie and Etta suggests that the love between Mattie and Etta, or between Mattie and Ciel, even though it has not been sexually expressed, is like the love between Theresa and Lorraine. Therefore, this exchange connects Lorraine and Theresa to all the women in the Brewster Place, who are, just like Lorraine and Theresa, vulnerable to male violence and oppression.

Mutilated both physically and psychologically, Lorraine unwittingly murders Ben whose drunken motions on top of a garbage can she sees "[a]lmost in perfect unison with the sawing pain that kept moving inside her" (172). Symbolical of her futile desire to fight back, Lorraine in her derangement, murders her only friend Ben, only to find out that "[t]he movement was everywhere" (173). In the end, Lorraine goes insane, "scream[ing] and claw[ing] at the motions that were running and shouting from every direction in the universe" against the background of a bloodstained wall, symbolizing her victimization by a racist, sexist order (173).

The final story of the novel, "The Block Party," consists of Mattie's cataclysmic dream of the women joining together to destroy the wall that has throughout the novel deferred their dreams within the closure of the race, sex, and class oppressions. The guilty consciousness of a community of women who have now acknowledged their partnership in the destruction of Lorraine and the subsequent murder of Ben is reflected through Mattie's dream in which Cora, Ciel, Mattie, Theresa, Etta and many other black women unite around bonds of sisterhood and demolish the wall. When Mattie awakens from her dream, the day of the long-waited block party has arrived with conditions resembling those in Mattie's dream: the sun is shining against the backdrop of "the stormy clouds that had formed on the horizon and were silently moving toward Brewster Place" (188). Whether the women of Brewster Place will destroy the wall as they do in the dream is a question unanswered as the story closes. However, we are left to feel that these women of the Brewster Place, despite their deferred and unfulfilled dreams, still cling onto their dreams to survive in the midst of a racist, sexist white world.

The dreams of the sixties Black America for racial and economic equality, for self-love and love between individuals which find their most telling expression in Martin Luther King's sermon "I Have a Dream" had been deferred by the neo-conservative policies of the Reagan era in the 1980s. And it is against this historical context Gloria Naylor explores the deferred dreams of black women who end up in the dead-end street of Brewster Place. Notwithstanding their shortfall, it is the sustenance of hope that enables them to continue survival if not yet conquest: "But the colored daughters of Brewster, spread over the canvas of time, still wake up with their dreams

misted on the edge of a yawn. They get up and pin those dreams to wet laundry hung out to dry, they are diapered around babies. They ebb and flow, ebb and flow, but never disappear" (192). Gloria Naylor ends her novel with a celebration of persistence and courage that resists the closure if not the deferral of dreams, which links her to Martin Luther King, who rejected the closure of dreams for African Americans in a racist America:

> *I am personally the victim of the deferred dreams, of blasted hopes, but in spite of that I close today by saying I still have a dream, because, you know, you can't give up life. If you lose hope, somehow you lose that vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage to be, that quality that helps you to go in spite of all. And so today I still have a dream.* (*The Norton Anthology of African American Literature,* The Audio Companion).

Ann Petry's 1946 novel *The Street*, her best-selling first novel, is a vivid portrait of the effects of racism, sexism and classism on a young black woman, Lutie Johnson, in World War II Harlem. The novel explores the victimization of Lutie Johnson by the societal forces of the 1940s America that are beyond her reach. Lutie's initial determination to struggle and make it in white America against all odds is gradually weakened and finally terminated by the stigma of her race, her sex and her poverty. Like Gloria Naylor's imagined community of the Brewster Place where she realistically explores the deleterious effects of race, gender and class oppressions on the lives of individual black women within the changing shifting economic and political patterns of the 1980s America, the World War II Harlem becomes the microcosm by means of which Ann Petry explores intersecting, structural oppressions of race, class and gender in the daily lives and struggles of African Americans.

Lutie Johnson and her husband Jim go through what almost all impoverished African American families experience in a racially and sexually segregated economic system in 1940's America. Jim, unable to find a job to provide for his son and wife, depends upon his wife who works as a stay-in domestic in the affluent, white household of the Chandler family. Lutie "wash[es] someone else's dishes [. . .] clean[s] another woman's house and look[s] after another woman's child" (30) to save up seventy

dollars so that Jim and Bub "could eat on and pay the interest in the mortgage" (29). Jim's wounded male ego soon turns him into an abusive husband, both verbally and physically. When Lutie is away in Connecticut working for the Chandler family, Jim "[gets] himself a slim dark girl whose thighs made him believe in himself again and momentarily released him from his humdrum life" (183). The cultural ethos that undergirded American culture in the forties is echoed in the advice Lutie receives from Mrs. Pizzini, the Italian woman whose husband runs a shop on the street: "It's best that the man do the work when the babies are young. And when the man is young. Not good for the woman to work [. . .] Not good for the man" (33). Mrs. Pizzini is representative of the cult of true womanhood that was resurrecting by the end of the war. Now that the war had come to an end, it was time for women who had left their homes for wartime jobs to assume their "natural" roles as mothers and wives. However, gender cut across race and class lines in Black America. The persistent, blatant racial discrimination of the times had prevented African Americans from having a fair share of the wartime gains. Although a growing number of married women entered the labor force during World War II, "the story of black women differ[ed] substantially from that of their white counterparts during these years. Black women entered (and reentered) the labor force at a slower rate because they encountered persistent racial discrimination" (Jones 234). Black women's occupational structure characterized by long working hours for meager pays in disqualified jobs remained intact during and after World War II. "[A]s early as 1944, black women had begun to feel the full impact of powerful forces at work [. . .] to repopulate the abandoned kitchens of Southern, and Northern, white women" (Jones 256). The racially and sexually segregated nature of the labor force left black women with no options other than institutional or domestic service when it came to providing for their families. Worse, they were left outside the national worker legislation--"minimum wage or hours laws, unemployment compensation, or social security" (Jones 257).

Left to take their own course, the racially and sexually stratified labor force and the institutional housing discrimination had taken a devastating toll on the majority of urban black citizens. The disproportionate rates of black male unemployment that forced black women to work at exploitative and low-paying institutional and private

household service jobs, residential segregation that huddled blacks into cramped living quarters with deteriorating housing conditions were the very tones of black urban living both during and after the war. And it was against this historical background, Ann Petry explored the victimization of her black female protagonist, Lutie Johnson in 1940s America.

Throughout the novel we are given images of black working women, "dirty, tired, depressed" (144), who "have been out all day working in the white folks' kitchens [. . .] (and) then come home and cook and clean for their own families half the night" (65). These women, like Lutie Johnson,

> *trudged along overburdened, overworked, their own homes neglected while they looked after someone else's while the men on the street swung along empty-handed, well-dressed, and carefree. Or, they lounged against the sides of the buildings [. . .] star[ing] at the women who walked past, probably deciding which woman they should select to replace the wife who was out working all day* (65).

Crushed under the need to combine their own child-rearing and household responsibilities with the over-exploitative and over-demanding domestic jobs, these poor working black women represent Moynihan's black "matriarchs," who have been the targets for the most blatant racist-sexist assaults by the white media, the state policies and white sociological research. Petry tactfully debunks the myth of the "black matriarchy" by shifting the blame for the break-up marriages, for juvenile delinquencies, for teenage pregnancies, for domestic violence from the "culturally deprived" black community to the racism of the white man:

> *The men stood around and the women worked. The men left the women and the women went on working and the kids were left alone. [. . .] Alone. Always alone. And they should have been playing in wide stretches of green park and instead they were in the street.*
>
> *Yes. The women work and the kids go to reform school. Why do the women work? It's such a simple, reasonable reason. [. . .] The women work because the white folks give them jobs-washing dishes and clothes and floors and windows. The women work because for years now white*

> *folks haven't liked to give black men jobs that paid enough for them to support their families. And finally, it get to be too late for some of them. Even wars don't change it. The men get out of the habit of working and the houses are old and gloomy and the walls press in. And the men go off, move on, slip away, find new women. Find younger women.* (388-89)

Lutie's naive belief that she could, through hard work, pull herself and her son out of the despair, the crime and the hopelessness of the 116th street, out of the "ever-narrowing space she had been hemmed into" (323) since she was born is soon betrayed when Lutie finds herself surrounded by a network of obstacles of race, class and gender, devouring to destroy her. Having spent her life sweating in white folks' kitchens, Lutie does not want to be like those poor black women populating the 116th street who are "misshapen, walking on the sides of [their] shoes, because [their] feet hurt so badly; getting dressed up for church on Sunday and spending the rest of the week slaving in somebody's kitchen" (186). She works as a steam laundress for four years during her stay with Pop and her lover in one "crowded, musty flat on Seventh Avenue" (55), attending a night school to take a civil service examination. At the end of four years spent "waiting and waiting for an appointment and taking other exams" Lutie finally gets "an appointment as a file clerk" (56). Her "grim persistence" (55) finally puts her through the "'bottleneck' created by the blatant discrimination in federal and privately sponsored training programs, limiting the number of blacks qualified for skilled and semiskilled jobs during the first part of the war" (Jones 238). No sooner does Lutie establish herself as a file clerk, she, with her son Bub, heads for the 116th street where she rents a dingy, cramped apartment. Lutie's initial self-confidence that she, like the Chandlers or the Pizzinis, could make it in white America through hard work gradually gives way to a sense of hopelessness: "She couldn't hope to get a raise in pay without taking another civil service examination, for more pay depended on a higher rating, and it might be two years, ten years, even twenty years before it came through" (82). Apparently, the racial job ceiling, denying black women access to well-paying jobs, keeps Lutie and many other black women and men living on the 116th street on the fringes of American life: "jammed and packed and forced into the smallest possible space until they were completely cut off from light and air" (206).

When Lutie looks into the future, she cannot see anything but "116th Street and a job that paid barely enough for food and rent and a handful of clothes. Year after year like that. [. . .] [S]he rebelled at the thought of day after day of work and night after night caged in that apartment that no amount of scrubbing ever get really clean" (147). So, when Boots Smith, the pimp and the bandleader at a night club owned by the white boss Junto, offers her to sing at the club on condition that she be nice to him, Lutie "run[s] headlong into it, snatching greedily at the bait he had dangled in front of her" (161), seeing it now as the only way to get Bub and herself out of the street. Just like the Chandlers who thought of Lutie as a "nigger wench," a whore (40-41), Boots is not immune from the racially-sexually constructed image of black women as Jezebel. He sees Lutie just as a "pick up girl" (161) to be conquered and subdued. Boots's working for the white boss Junto, being subservient to his demands is symbolical of how black men have internalized white patriarchal norms of black masculinity. Junto represents the white patriarch at the top, who wants to keep Lutie for himself. Disgusted by his dependency on a white man, Boots wants to feel like a man through the sexual conquest of Lutie before Junto lays his hands on her. When Lutie appears in his apartment to ask for the two hundred dollars to get Bub out of reform school, Junto attempts to rape her, thinking more about Boots than his victim: "Sure, Lutie would sleep with Junto, but he was going to have her first. [. . .] Yeah, he can have the leavings. After all, he is white and this time a white man can have a black man's leavings" (423). Therefore, raping Lutie becomes a matter of power rather than of sexual desire. Junto represents the white racist patriarchal system that has always stigmatized black men as emasculated, disempowered due to their "inability" to fulfill appropriate gender roles. For Boots, overtaking white cars on highways and sexual prowess have been the only means that "[make] him feel he was a powerful being who could conquer the world" (157). As Susan Brownmiller argues, force, whether it be in the form of rape or physical beating, is "the ultimate test of [man's] superior strength," or a deliberate "act of intimidation by which [. . .] men keep women in a state of fear" (5). Given the racial-sexual dynamics of Lutie's attempted rape, Lutie's body becomes the terrain where Boots wants to reestablish himself as the patriarch.

Lutie's long-repressed rage and resentment against "the white world which thrust black people into a walled enclosure from which there was no escape" comes in the form of the violent murder of Boots Smith. Her murder of Boots represents the one final brick "needed to complete the wall that had been building up around her for years" (423). This imaginative wall, like the real wall in *The Women of Brewster Place*, stands for the race, class, and gender oppressions that have worked in convoluted ways to defer Lutie's dreams of getting out of the 116th Street. Many other bricks have gone into the making of this wall, making her escape impossible: the breaking up her marriage because of poverty; "the hostility in the eyes of the white women who stared at her on the downtown streets and in the subway" (57); "the warm, moist look about [white men's] eyes that made her want to run" (57); the sexually obsessed superintendent Jones, who, getting Bub in trouble with the law, uses him as a means of exacting revenge on Lutie, whom he loathes once she eludes his attempted rape; "the greasy, lecherous man at the Crosse School for Singers" (430), who charges sexual favors from Lutie to forget about the training fee.

Lutie's act of murdering Boots is but an outburst of the lifelong repressed feelings of frustration, resentment and rage she has had all these years "toward the pattern her life had followed" (428). So when Lutie kills Boots, who "had struck her" and "threatened her with violence and with a forced relationship with Junto and himself" (429), she strikes the overarching systems of race, class and gender oppressions that have left her "running around a small circle, around and around like a squirrel in a cage" (323): "[S]he was striking, not at Boots Smith, but a handy, anonymous figure-a figure which her angry resentment transformed into everything she had hated, everything she had fought against, everything that had served to frustrate her" (429).

Not only does the racist-sexist assumptions of a capitalist white society but also the very members of the black community, male and female alike, who have internalized various permutations of the racist, sexist norms of the prevailing ideology contribute to the downfall of Lutie at the end of the novel. Unlike the women of the Brewster Place, who find, thorough female bonding and nurturing, the life power to survive against all odds, nobody black or white in Harlem, male or female, offers Lutie

unconditional support. Seeing in the eyes of these people the same vulnerability, anger, resentment and fear as she has had for so many years, Lutie has little reason to think she would benefit from communal bonds. Therefore, in her self-isolation from the community of Harlem, Lutie locks herself into the American dream of success, failing to recognize the stigma of her race and sex responsible for her consequent disqualifications for achieving her particular version of the American dream: "moving [Bub] and herself," through hard work and self-confidence, "away from the street, giving Bub a room of his home, being home when he returned from school" (305). It is only by the end of the novel that Lutie sees into the real nature of things: Junto, the white capitalist patriarch represents all she has fought against all these years. As the story comes to a close, we find Lutie traveling towards a bleak, unknown future on a bus to Chicago. Having lost her only child to the reform school, and committed homicide, Lutie is the loser, the victim at the nexus of race, gender and class oppressions, which the circles she draws on the bus window "that flowed into each other" (435) metaphorically represent.

Min is another shrinking, invisible black female character in *The Street*. Min's life experience as black domestic worker has sucked all sense of self-worth, self-respect out of her. Min is one of those women on 116th Street who "have a look of resignation, of complete acceptance," which explains their inability to "protest against anything-even death" (197). Min's self-destructive submission to male abuse and to the most demeaning and dehumanizing treatment of her white madams whose houses she cleans has turned her "into a drab drudge so spineless and so limp she was like a soggy dishrag" (57). She has spent years as a domestic serf overworked and humiliated by her white employers. She has never questioned the brutal treatment she has received in white households. Nor has she ever attempted an act of defiance to claim her self-respect and self-value when "openly contemptuous women who laughed at her even as they piled on more work" or when they ignored her right to "days off" and "increase the work week to include Saturday and often even Sunday" or when she was "buried under the great mounds of dirty clothes [. . .] getting no extra pay for the extra time involved" (126-27). Through it all, Min has developed a profound sense of self-denial

and powerlessness that permitted herself to be used and mistreated: “Day after day she’d go back (to her job) until the people moved away or got somebody else” (127).

While Min is exploited and humiliated in the white households because of her race and class, she is abused by black men because of her sex, which, as in the workplace, she receives with silence and submission: “It was the same thing with the various husbands the she has had. They had taken her money and abused her and given her nothing in return, but she was never the one who left” (127). Her three husbands had either robbed or beaten her. Unemployed and hence powerless in the white-dominated society, these black men would revert to physical abuse, the only means to feel themselves like “real” men. From her marriages to these abusive husbands, Min had not learnt love or compassion but the techniques of brutality:

> *First, the grip around the neck that pressed the wind-pipe out of position, so that screams were choked off and no sound could emerge from her throat; and then a whole series of blows, and after that, after falling to the ground under the weight of the blows, the most painful part would come- the heavy work shoes landing with force, sinking deep into the soft, fleshy parts of her body, her stomach, her behind.* (357)

Min has always been on a treadmill taking her from one abusive marriage to another, marriages that she continued despite all that physical and psychological torture she has been exposed to because she has always believed that “a woman by herself didn’t stand much chance” (133). Min’s life, consumed in the “relentless succession of bitter days” (352), bears the imprint of the dominant racist-sexist assumptions of black womanhood. In a racist culture that has historically dehumanized and debased black women as “mules,” whores, or “castrating bitches,” unworthy of the respect and protection white women have always been entitled to receive on a pedestal of “true womanhood,” Min constructs her sense of self around the dominant notions of black womanhood. Hence Min’s passive acceptance of the brutal racism of white women. In a sexist culture that has always valorized male aggressiveness and female passiveness and prescribed the home and the family as the only sites where women could construct their identity, Min internalizes the sexist assumptions of masculinity

and femininity. Hence her passive acceptance of black male violence, and her "shrinking withdrawal from life."

Min's last husband is Jones, the superintendent, in whose damp, narrow basement apartment she is free from "the yoke of the rent" (127) Jones's sexual obsession with Lutie soon turns him into "a sick, crazy animal" (354), "snarling at and slapping [Min]" (117): "Only last night, when she leaned over to take some beans out of the oven, he kicked her just like she was the dog. She had managed to hold on to the pan of beans, not saying anything, swallowing the hurt cry that rose in her throat, because she knew what was the matter with him" (117). The basement apartment that she had made "cosier and more homey" with the "little things" she bought (352), now turned into a dungeon, with its ever "shrinking [. . .] and tightening" walls around her (362). And "a giant" was "blott[ing] out everything else" (363). Unable to stand his monstrous fury, and to take his looks that were always "telling her that she was so hideous, so ugly" (354), Min leaves Jones only to search for the "security" the presence of a man offers. Our last glimpse of Min is that of a moment when she is talking coquettishly to a pushcart man who carries her few belongings. Her desire for "having room to breathe" (362) preceding her departure signals the replacement of a lifelong self-denial with a sense of self-realization. Nevertheless, a lifetime of racial and sexual oppression prevents her from fighting back, from coming to voice. In the black feminist scholar bell hooks terms, Min cannot "decolonize" her mind from the racist, sexist assumptions of a white order, which results in an impoverishment of her psychic being accompanied with low self-esteem and self-denial.

Alice Walker's first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) dramatically portrays the destruction and annihilation of two black women, Mem and Margaret, by their husbands economically trapped by the utter poverty imposed upon them by the sharecropping system in the rural Georgia as well as by their inability to resist white constructions of masculinity and femininity. Being black, poor, and female, Mem and Margaret are losers in the face of multiple oppressions. They are defeated not only by the larger racist, capitalist, sexist order but also by black male sexism.

The sharecropping system during the post-emancipation era kept the former slave-master relationships intact and alive. Although freed from the yoke of slavery,

Southern blacks found themselves trapped by an economic system that was no different than the one they experienced during the slave era. As Jacqueline Jones argues, "In 1910 fully nine-tenths of all southern blacks who made their living from the soil worked as tenants, sharecroppers, or contract laborers. Most barely eked out enough in cotton to pay for rent, food and supplies. They did not own their own equipment, nor could they market their crop independent of the landlord" (80-81). In an industrializing, urbanizing nation, the former slaves and their children, deprived of political and economic power, depended upon the white landlords who extracted from his tenants the most amount of work, for which they had, in return, the least amount of financial security.

At a time when the white-middle class women derived their status from that of their husbands and enjoyed financial and social security but remained unproductive in the context of a capitalistic, industrial economy, black working women in the South "divided their time among domestic responsibilities, field work and petty money-making activities" (80) such as "raising chickens so they could sell eggs" (81) or taking in white people's laundry. As a result, the nature of the sharecropping system mandated that economic and domestic affairs overlapped, which meant that the public/private, and male/female distinctions of the dominant gender ideology were not applicable to the black families. The simultaneity of economic deprivation, and racist-sexist oppression was the breeding ground for the tensions in black family households. Mostly, oppression has bred rage and anger rather than bonded a family tightly together. As Jacqueline Jones aptly discusses, "the chief problem seemed to stem from the fact that black women played a prominent role in supporting the family in addition to performing their domestic responsibilities," and therefore black men felt that they "felt short of their wives' spirit of industry and self-sacrifice" (104). "If whites attempted to cut 'the britches off' black fathers and husbands, then these men would try to assert their authority over their households with even great determination. At times that determination was manifested in violence and brutality" (Jones 103). A black woman quoted anonymously in Gerda Lerner's documentary *Black Women in White America* lamented in 1912, "On the one hand, we are assailed by white men, and on the other hand, we are assailed by black men, who should be our natural protectors" (157).

Likewise, Jack Temple Kirby, depending upon various pieces of oral and written testimony documenting the interpersonal lives of southern farm people during the first half of the twentieth century, argues:

> *There are assuredly scenes of satisfaction, security, sometimes bliss. [. . .] But the corpus of this large, if haphazard, collection of history contains far more instances of unhappiness, especially among women. Marriage was a cruel trap, motherhood often a mortal burden; husbands were too often obtuse, unfaithful, drunken, and violent. The collective portrait is less one of bliss than of pathos*. (169-70)

In like manner, Alice Walker admits the existence of violence striking at the heart of black community. In her afterword to *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Alice Walker writes, "It was an incredibly difficult novel to write, for I had to look at, and name, and speak up about violence among black people in the black community at the same time that all black people [. . .] including me and my family, were enduring massive psychological and physical violence from white supremacists in the southern states, particularly Mississippi" (342). The history of the Copeland family unfolds the brutal abuse and victimization of two sharecropper wives, Margaret and Mem by their husbands, who were reduced to the state of nothingness by the exploitative and oppressive sharecropping system. Grange Copeland works for the white landlord Shipley, in whose cotton fields he "plants, chops, poisons and picks" (8), and in whose shack he and his family live. Grange knows that he will never be able to pay the two hundred dollars he owes to Shipley and that he and his family will forever be as miserable as they are. Margaret, his wife, works in a bait factory, from which she returns home stinking manure. As their ten-year-old son Brownfield observes, "She worked all day pulling baits for ready money. Her legs were always clean when she left home and always coated with mud and slime of baits when she came back" (7). Grange's sense of powerlessness eats into him day by day, making him a depressed, gloomy man, threatening, abusing Margaret and his son Brownfield. The self-hatred breeding from his subservience towards Shipley, his dependency on Margaret's dirty work for subsistence, and his inability to send his son to school or buy a new dress for Margaret, is directed towards those who are easier to destroy: his wife and his son. In

fact, Grange hates his son because he sees in Brownfield the continuation of a life of slavery. The only words we hear Grange speak to Brownfield when he is a child are, "I ought to throw you down the god-dam well" (12). Grange hates Margaret too because her "pliant strength" always reminds him of his powerlessness and futility. To make Grange feel like a man, and thereby assuage his feelings of inferiority, Margaret plays the dog of the house: "His mother was like their dog in some ways. She didn't have a thing to say that did not in some way show her submission to her father" (6). Her submission notwithstanding, Grange "would come home lurching drunk, threatening to kill his wife and Brownfield, stumbling and shooting off his shotgun. He threatened Margaret, and she ran and hid in the woods with Brownfield huddled at her feet (15). Their marriage, like the shack they are forced to live in, gradually becomes "rotten," "rusty," and "gray" (16). In her silence and submissiveness, Margaret becomes the repository for Grange's rage. After five years of patience and silence, Margaret "becomes a wild woman looking for frivolous things, her heart's good times, in the transient embraces of strangers" (26), and neglects her child. While Grange seeks solace in alcohol and in the overflowing breasts of Josie, the local whore, Margaret sleeps with Shipley in exchange for reductions in Grange's debt. Yet, this only exasperates her lifelong misery and suffering: when she gives birth to Shipley's child, Grange leaves for the North, leaving behind a woman crippled with feelings of guilt. Margaret poisons herself and her illegitimate baby: "But the following week she and her poisoned baby went out into the dark of the clearing and in the morning Brownfield found them there. She was curled up in a lonely sort of way, away from her child, as if she had spent the last moments on her knees" (29). Margaret blames herself for everything, especially for her failure to deliver Grange from his feelings of impotence and weakness for she failed the test of "true" womanhood, the cardinal tenets of which were demure beauty, passivity, chastity, and devoted motherhood.

The sharecropping system that once enslaved the father also traps the son Brownfield, who like his father, strikes out at the racism of the white man by abusing his educated gentle wife Mem and their three daughters, taking sadistic pleasure in seeing them shivering with fear before him:

> *Instinctively, with his own life as an example, he had denied the possibility of a better life for his children. He had enslaved his own family, given them weakness when they needed strength, made them powerless before any enemy that stood beyond him. Now when they thought of the 'enemy' their own father would straddle their vision*. (315)

Although Mem and Brownfield believed at the beginning of their marriage that through love, fortitude and kindness they could create and maintain a home, Brownfield's sense of failure and inadequacy at the end of fours years of toiling in the white man's cotton fields, "in debt up to his hatbrim" (72) brings him where his father had left: "That was the year he first saw how his own life was becoming a repetition of his father's. He could not save his children from slavery; they did not even belong to him" (78). Mem's silence and submission to Brownfield's verbal and physical abuse just to make him feel like a "man" in his own home because he can't in the white man's world "could not turn away his wrath, they could only condone it" (79). Brownfield's "crushed pride, his battered ego" makes him drag Mem away from schoolteaching into domestic work. A wife with a diploma, speaking decent English is too much for a man who has been left nothing to build on to: "Her knowledge reflected badly on a husband who could scarcely read and write. It was his great ignorance that sent her into white homes as a domestic, his need to bring her down to his level!" (79). As they tattered on the verge of extreme poverty, Brownfield started to beat Mem regularly "because it made him feel, briefly, good. [. . .] he beat her, trying to pin the blame for his failure on her by imprinting it on her face; and she, inevitably, repaid him by becoming a haggard automatous witch [. . .]" (80). So, between their moves from one shack to another, Brownfield beat Mem, and "screwed" Josie, just like Grange did. Knowing that he could not destroy the white boss who denied him the masculine thrusts of power and acquisition, Brownfield set out to destroy whatever he sees about Mem as a threat to his masculinity:

> *'Why don't you talk like the rest of us poor niggers?[. . .] Why do you always have to be so damn proper? Whether I says 'is' or 'ain't' ain't no damn humping off your butt.'*

> *In company he embarrassed her. When she opened her mouth to speak he turned with a bow to their friends [. . .] and said, 'Hark, mah lady speaks, lets us dumb niggers listen!' Mem would turn ashen with shame [. . .] He wanted her to talk, but to talk like what she was, a hopeless nigger woman who got her ass beat every Saturday night. He wanted her to sound like a woman who deserved him.* (81)

Whenever his male friends inquired how he had been able to marry a schoolteacher in the first place, Brownfield took pride in himself, saying, " 'Give this old black snake to her,' [. . .] rubbing himself indecently, 'and then I beats her ass. Only way to treat a nigger woman!'" (81). So, Brownfield's phallic power and physical violence inflicted upon Mem becomes the only outlet for the hatred, anger, shame, guilt resulting from his brutalization. Mem's physical deformity over the years parallels her spiritual sterility: She was not the beautiful "plump" woman whom Brownfield once adored. She was now a skinny woman with "dried up breasts," fallen hair, and loose teeth. Shrinking more and more in spirit, Mem had become " a woman walking through a dream, but a woman who had forgotten to wake up. She slogged along, ploddingly, like a cow herself, for the sake of the children. Her mildness became stupor; then her stupor became horror, desolation and, at last, hatred" (85).

After nine years of abuse and violence, Mem refuses to move into the "new" cabin owned by the white landlord Mr. J. L., where she and her children will be slaving for the white boss. She wants a decent home where she could feed and love her children, and when she tells Brownfield that she is not moving into J. L.'s cabin and that she has found a job in town that pays twelve dollars a week, Brownfield feels threatened by her determination and strength and tries to keep Mem at her "place" by brutal beating. Even after years of relentless violence and torture that has sucked all tenderness and beauty out of her spirit, Mem apologizes to Brownfield for her defiance and resistance. At this crucial scene, we understand Mem still holds onto the white patriarchy's definition of Brownfield's and her respective roles:

> *'I'm real sorry about it, Brownfield,' said Mem, whose decision to let him be man of the house for nine years had cost her and him nine years of unrelenting misery. He had never admitted to her that he couldn't read*

well enough to sign a lease and she had been content to let him keep that small grain of pride. But now he was old and sick beyond his years and she had grown old and evil, wishing everyday he'd just fall down and die. Her generosity had shackled them both. (122)

Mem's defiant gesture and new-found strength leaves Brownfield filled with more rage and fury than ever because she reminds him of his powerlessness to defy the white boss (read white racism), to whom he says "Yassur," while inwardly he wants to "stick [his] feed knife up in him to the gizzard" (127). Brownfield goes out of his senses to bring Mem back to the line because if she is not her weak, submissive woman any longer who else would he be reigning over to feel himself like a man?:

'You think you better than me,' he cried. 'Don't you? DON'T YOU! You ugly pig!' He reached beneath the bedclothes to grab her stiffly resistant shoulder.

[. . .]

'I'm sick and tired of this mess,' she said. 'I am sick of you.'

No sooner had the words fallen out [. . .] than Brownfield's big elephant-hide fist hit her square in the mouth.

[. . .]

'You going to move where I says move, you hear me? Brownfield yelled at her, giving her a kick in the side with his foot.[. . .] You listening to me, Bitch!' Mem opened her eyes like someone opening up the lid of a coffin. 'I ain't going to Mr. J. L.'s place,'[. . .] 'I have just about let you play man long enough to find out you ain't one,'[. . .] 'You can beat me to death and I still ain't going to say I'm going with you!'

'You goddam wrankly faced black nigger slut!'[. . .] 'You Say one more word, just one more little goddam peep and I'll cut your goddam throat!' (130-31)

Mem is determined to play "the castrating bitch" now to save herself and her children from a brute who is determined to destroy anything within his reach. When she puts the gun to Brownfield's head and makes him admit that she and her children are not to live in Mr. J. L.'s shack, Mem defies white society's definitions of masculinity

and femininity which have bred the cancer into their marriage. Brownfield's wounded male ego never leaves him. The house which Mem has tried to make a home with its flowers, noiseless gas heater, an indoor toilet, and a refrigerator always reminds him of his inadequacy. Brownfield patiently waits for the day his wife "would 'come down,'" and he would "place her once more in a shack" (145).

With her two pregnancies Mem becomes weaker and sick, unable to work any longer, which Brownfield has long been looking forward to. Brownfield drags Mem and his children back to Mr. J. L.'s place, where the new baby freezes to death. In his regained "manly" pride, Brownfield starts to destroy Mem's self-respect and self-confidence until she is nothing "but a tasteless rag" (7): " 'I done waited along time for you to come down,' [. . .] 'This is what I can afford and this is what you going to have to make do with.' [. . .] 'You thought I fucked you 'cause I wanted it? [. . .] Your trouble is you just never learned how not to git pregnant. How long did you think you could keep going with your belly full of children?'" (151). They are now where they had left three years ago: Brownfield, fired from his job with J. L., wraps his wounded pride with the sadistic pleasure he takes in beating and brutalizing Mem and the children while Mem is crushed physically under the weight of her six-days of domestic work in a white man's house and her own domestic responsibilities in addition to her spiritual breakdown due to the tyranny of a man who still could not afford for his family. In one of those evenings when Mem comes home from her domestic job, "carrying several packages," full of the oranges and peppermint sticks she had promised to her children for the Christmas, Brownfield gets out of home drunken and shoots Mem to death:

> *Mem lying faceless among a scattering of gravel in a pool of blood, in which were scattered around her head like a halo, a dozen bright yellow oranges that glistened on one side from the light. [. . .] And [R]uth noticed for the first time, that even though it was the middle of the winter, there were large frayed holes in the bottom of her mother's shoes.* (172)

After Mem's death, one daughter becomes prostitute. Another goes insane. Ruth becomes Grange's salvation, his "third life," in which he finds the healing power of love that now enables to feel himself like a "man" even in the face of a white

supremacist, racist-sexist world that has always bred hatred and violence into their lives. Audre Lorde writes in her *Sister Outsider*, "In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change" (53). Likewise, the black feminist scholar bell hooks argues, "A culture of domination is anti-love. It requires violence to sustain itself. To choose love is to go against the prevailing values of the dominant culture" (*Outlaw Culture*, 246). Therefore, "[w]ithout an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political vision and our radical aspirations, we are often seduced, in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination-imperialism, sexism, racism, classism" (243).

It is against this very backdrop of spiritual amnesia gnawing at the heart of black male-female relationships that makes Mem and Margaret victims of insurmountable suffering and abuse. Mem and Margaret can never be the Southern belle whose home and chastity are protected by the chivalric white men. What Alice Walker wants to imply throughout the novel is that spiritual wholeness is possible so long as one can resist dominant images of herself/himself. Instead, Grange and Brownfield, Margaret and Mem internalize white patriarchal norms of manhood and womanhood only to turn their lives into a succession of miseries. Falling short of white definitions of masculinity due to their economic and political depravation, the Copeland men direct their rage and anger towards the easiest targets around them, their wives, because the "white boss" is so difficult to destroy. Their wives, submissive and subservient to their men out of their feelings of guilt become the repository for the most violent forms of oppression. Mutilated both in spirit and body, Mem and Margaret are denied any sense of worth, any word of love. The racist, sexist, and economic oppressions turn black males and females against each other, feeding hatred and violence into their lives. Mem and Margaret are "the mules of the world," crashed under psychological and physical loads of an intricate and sinister system of race, class and gender oppressions.

Another novel where we can explore the image of the invisible, shrinking black woman is the Harlem Renaissance writer Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928). The novel explores the female protagonist Helga Crane's inner journey to self-actualization and

self-definition, which, as the title of the novel suggests, is doomed to failure. The child of a black father who abandoned his family shortly after she was born and a Scandinavian immigrant mother, Helga Crane's mixed- race becomes the central metaphor for her divided self throughout the novel. However, the novel is not a portrayal of the tragic end of a "tragic mulatto" woman, torn between dual cultural allegiances. Rather, it is a literary exposition of the effects of the dynamics of gender, sexuality, race and class on a "black" middle-class, educated woman in 1920s America. In this sense, *Quicksand* contemplates the inextricability of the racism, sexism, and classism in a black woman's guest for self-definition in 1920s America as she is trying to shackle free from the suffocating restrictions of middle-class ladyhood and fantasies of the exotic female Other personalized in the stereotypical image of the "tragic mulatto".

The social and cultural ethos of the novel is marked by the Freudian 1920s, the Jazz Age of sexual abandon and expression, which for middle-class black women had far more different implications. As the historian Paula Giddings points out, the new interest in "sexual freedom" and "glamour" also swept through urban black communities (185), but the sexual permissiveness of the 1920s sang a different song for black women. The historical construction of black female sexuality as deviant, libidinous, lascivious, wild and low had survived in the minds of both blacks and whites well into the modern era. As pointed out in the historical overview section, black clubwomen were outraged at the turn of the century by a letter from a white male editor of a Missouri paper, J. W. Jacks to Josephine S. Pierre Ruffin, then editor of the *Women's Era*, which despised black women because of their illicit sexuality. In 1920, a symposium titled "Negro Womanhood's Greatest Needs," held out by some of the leading Negro clubwomen who had organized around this attack on black womanhood. As Deborah Mc Dowell details, the symposium and the several issues it ran in the Messenger "concluded that the greatest need of Negro womanhood was to return to the 'the timidity and modesty peculiar to pure womanhood of yesterday'" (Introduction, xiv). As the Harlem journalist and teacher Elise Mc Dougald's essay "The Task of Negro Womanhood" (1925) in *The New Negro* defends black woman's morality, which means that sexual freedom meant vulnerability rather than liberation for black women:

"The Negro woman does not maintain any moral standard which may be assigned chiefly to qualities of race, any more than a white woman does. Yet she had been singled out and advertised as having lower sex standards" (379). Therefore, members of the black bourgeoisie like Helga Crane chose to suppress their sexuality rather than get on the bandwagon of sexual freedom.

When the novel opens, Helga Crane has already made up her mind to leave Naxos, a southern black college which appears to be a combination of Fisk and Tuskegee. Alienated from the racial uplift policies of black intellectual leadership, Helga sees Naxos (which looks like the word "Saxon" reorganized) as a machine rather than a school where both teachers and students are molded into "the white man's pattern" (4). This process admitted no "enthusiasm," no "spontaneity" for such qualities were considered to be "unladylike or ungentlemanly" (4). Unlike Helga, her fiancé James Vayle has been "naturalized," by "the unmistakable Naxos mold" (7). Representative of the black middle-class intelligentsia, Vayle has absorbed all white, middle-class manners and aspirations, and hence his easy adjustment to the Naxos ways.

The way Helga dresses herself after her two-years stay in Naxos points to her maladjustment to its white ways. Looking at the attire of the women workers, Helga thinks:

> *Drab colors, mostly navy blue, black, brown, unrelieved, save for scrap of white or tan about the hands and necks. Fragments of a speech made by the dean of women floated through her thoughts-'Bright colors are vulgar' - 'Black, gray, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people'-'Dark-complected people shouldn't wear yellow, or green or red.'* (17-8)

These words belong to the dormitory matron Miss Mac Gooden, who is the ultimate symbol of purity, of sexual repression, who "pride[s] herself on being a 'lady' from one of the best families [. . .]" (12). She scorns the students for their lack of manners, shouting, "please at least try to act like ladies and not like savages from the backwoods" (12). If the girls fail the test of ladyhood, then they are "savages," and savagery implies not only rudeness and ill manners but also uncontrolled sexual drives.

Therefore, "ladyhood," in other words white middle-class norms of womanhood, dictates that sexual pleasure must be suppressed. And "ladies" should not wear "vulgar" colors, exposing their sexuality but rather traditional colors repressing it. The acceptance of white middle-class dress codes at Naxos signifies the internalization and fear of the racist constructions of black female sexuality. So, in order to be ladies and gentlemen, these blacks at Naxos have "suppressed [the] most delightful manifestations" of their race: "love of color, joy of rhythmic motion, naive, spontaneous laughter. Harmony, radiance, and simplicity, all the essentials of spiritual beauty in the race they had marked for destruction" (18).

Helga does not feel at home in Naxos, among her "race" people. She feels she does not belong there because "the place was smug and fat with self-satisfaction" (4). Yet, she feels that it is not only the school and its white ways "that oppressed her. There was something else, some other more ruthless force, a quality within herself, which was frustrating her, had always frustrated her, kept her from getting the things she had wanted. Still wanted" (11). That force is the mythical constructions of black female sexuality that have prevented Helga from constructing her sexuality as a desiring subject. So, Helga does not travel between racial borders only (due to her mixed-race) but also between sexual ones. Her physical journey which starts with her departure from Naxos, and then to Chicago, and to Harlem, and to Copenhagen, and finally to the South is in fact an inner journey she embarks upon to find her self-identity, to come to terms with her "true" self, which is doomed to failure because Helga can never free herself from the racist constructions of black female sexuality neither when she is in black Harlem nor in white Copenhagen.

Once in Chicago, her birthplace, Helga becomes a secretary to Mrs. Hayes-Rore, a middle-class clubwoman, who is to deliver successive speeches in New York. On the train to New York, Mrs. Hayes-Rore makes inquiries about Helga's family roots only to find out that she was the product of "race intermingling and possibly adultery," which "was beyond definite discussion. For among black people, as among white people, it is tacitly understood that these things are not mentioned-and therefore they do not exist" (39). To be a middle-class "lady," or a "gentleman" necessitates to belong to a family with respectable social background. "If you couldn't prove your ancestry and

connections, you were tolerated, but you didn't 'belong'" (8). Helga Crane had learnt that "Negro society [. . .] was as complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of the white society" (8). And this accounted for her ex-fiancé Vayles's family's discontent with their engagement, which, they thought, would inevitably result in a "social suicide" because "the Vayles were people of consequence" (8).

So, when Helga is established with the cultured, wealthy young widow Anne Grey in New York and has secured work at an insurance company via Mrs. Hayes Rore's references and advice, she has to lock her family history in a "closet, never to be reopened" (45). At first, Helga thinks that she has "found herself" in New York, where "through Ann it had been possible for her to meet and to know people with tastes and ideas similar to her own. Their sophisticated cynical talk, their elaborate parties, the unobtrustrive correctness of their clothes and homes, all appealed to her craving for smartness, for enjoyment" (43). Furthermore, Helga's new "friends looked with contempt and scorn on Naxos and all its works" (43). This novel sense of belonging which Helga finds in the consumerism and social cycles of the black bourgeoisie in Harlem soon leaves its place to feelings of discontent and loss: "She began to lose confidence in the fullness of her life [. . .]. As the days multiplied, her need of something, something vaguely familiar, but which she could not put a name to and hold for definite examination, became almost intolerable" (47). Before long, Helga sees into the real nature of middle-class bourgeoisie. Although they hate white people, they have accepted their social conventions, values, and even internalized white stereotypes of black female sexuality. Ann Grey, like the other members of the black bourgeoisie,

> *aped their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living. While proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro, she yet disliked the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race. Toward these things, she showed only a disdainful contempt, tinged sometimes with a faint amusement. Like the despised people of the white race, she preferred Pavlova to Florence Mills, John McCormack to Taylor Gordon, Walter Hampden to Paul Robeson.*[5] (48-9)

[5] Anna Pavlova (1881-1931), the famous Russian ballerina. Florence Mills (1895-1927), the celebrated black dancer of the 1920s. John McCormack (1884-1945), the Irish tenor, and famous opera singer.

Anne Grey despises the beautiful Audrey Denney for giving "parties for white and colored people together" (61). When Helga asks what makes these parties "disgusting" and "obscene", Anne explains, "And the white men dance with the colored women. Now you know, Helga Crane, that can mean only one thing" (61), white men's desire to sexually exploit black women. Apparently, the controlling images of black women's sexuality also haunt the more sophisticated circle of Harlem's black bourgeoisie. Anne's fear of her sexuality is explicitly understood in her reflections about her new husband Dr. Anderson's feelings for Helga almost two years later, when Helga returns to Harlem. Anne senses the attraction between Dr. Anderson and Helga Crane long before Helga does, and is determined to protect her husband against the "lawless," "primitive" feelings that lurk beneath his self-controlled, cool section, the sexual impulses Helga awakens in him:

> *But underneath that well-managed section, in a more lawless place where she herself never hoped or desired to enter, was another, a vagrant primitive groping toward something shocking and frightening to the cold asceticism of his reason.[. . .] with her he had not to struggle against that nameless and to him shameful impulse, that sheer delight, which ran through his nerves at mere proximity to Helga. And Anne had intended that her marriage should be a success. [. . .] She could look out for her husband. She could carry out what she considered her obligation to him, keep him undisturbed, unhumiliated.* (95).

Anne Grey, Mrs. Hayes Rore, the dormitory matron and her prospective "ladies" at Naxos have internalized white middle-class notions of womanhood and stereotypes at the cost of denying and repressing their sexuality. This silence and invisibility surrounding their bodies and their emotions are representative of what historian Darlene Clark Hine calls "the culture of dissemblance" --the politics of silence, evasiveness, and displacement--in an attempt to protect themselves from sexual violation (37-8). Hine points to the foundation and spread of Black women's clubs at the turn of the century as evidence of the institutionalization of the culture of

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Taylor Gordon, a black singer during the 1920s. Walter Hampden (1898-1976), a famous Shakespearean actor. Paul Robeson (1898-1976), the black singer and actor widely known for his performances in Broadway plays.

dissemblance. These middle-class black clubwomen, in their attempt to uplift the race, were deeply concerned to challenge derogatory images of black women's sexuality, which they attempted to accomplish by suppressing their own sexuality (Hine 44-5). As Lisa Collins argues, "By shunning outward expressions of sexuality (as the Naxos "ladies" and the black middle-class New Yorkers do), they hoped to build a space where black women could wield more control over their bodies and gain dignity and respect within the dominant culture" (110).

The Harlem cabaret scene reveals Helga's internalization of stereotypes about black sexuality. Her feelings of disturbance, of uncomfortableness at the sight of "gyrating pairs" who were "shaking themselves ecstatically to a thumping of *unseen tomtoms*" (emphasis mine, 59) cuts across the intersection of sexuality, race, and class:

> *They danced, ambling lazily to a crooning melody, or violently twisting their bodies, like whirling leaves, to a sudden streaming rhythm, or shaking themselves ecstatically to a thumping of unseen tomtoms.[. . .] She was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra. The essence of life seemed bodily motion. And when the music suddenly died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her. She hardened her determination to get away. She wasn't, she told herself, a jungle creature.* (59)

Helga's initial ecstasy and loss of self-control suddenly gives way to self-loathing for having participated in the "primitive," forbidden pleasures of the "jungle" existence. Participation in the "jungle" is to risk confronting her sexuality and thus to risk her "ladyhood," constructed within the "safe" social conventions of the black middle-class bourgeoisie. Confronting and admitting this side of her is tantamount to being objectified and put on display by the male gaze. Neither the social circles of the black middle-class New Yorkers, nor their hypocritical "racial uplift" politics could make Helga feel at home. Eventually, Harlem becomes as oppressive an environment as Naxos, where she is forced to deny a part of herself, her sexuality.

Helga goes to Denmark, to her mother's relatives, where she thinks there are "no Negroes, no problems, no prejudice (55). The Dahls, her well-to-do aunt and uncle, receive Helga warmly, and Helga receives their "admiration and attention even more eagerly" (67). Before long, Helga becomes the exotic female Other, "a curiosity, a stunt, at which people came and gazed" (71). Immediately after her arrival, the Dahls insist that she should expose her "difference," by wearing "bright things [. . .] striking things, exotic things" to "make an impression" in the social circles of Copenhagen (68). While back in New York Helga was required to be a "lady," here, in Copenhagen nobody wants her to play the "lady," but the primitive exotic. To this end, the Dahls dress Helga in leopard-skin coats, long ear-rings, glittering shoe buckles, huge bracelets, turban-like hats made out of metallic silks, feathers, furs, and glittering jewelry (68-69,74). Helga takes satisfaction and a sense of importance from the "admiring" eyes of white elites in Copenhagen since she naively believes that her skin so despised in America is, in Denmark, a source of pleasure and fascination. Nevertheless, her self-satisfaction, self-acceptance wears down as she realizes that she has been being "schooled for [. . .] the fascinating business of being seen, gaped at, desired" (74). What Helga is to the Dahls is what Josephine Baker is to the Europeans in mid-1920s. A young black woman from St. Louis, Josephine Baker "left the chorus lines of New York for Paris," where she "became the premier example of exotica and erotica" with her "crossing eyes, swinging hips and her infamous banana skirt" (Collins 110). Throughout her career, Josephine Baker displayed images of hot, unrestrained sexuality, directly appealing to European myths of black sexuality (Jordan and Weedon 278). Just like Baker, who represented the fetishized, commodified black female sexuality in 1920s Europe, Helga, with her new "schooling" is catapulted into her assumed role as icon of hot sexuality.

It is Axel Olsen, a widely-acclaimed portrait painter among the elite social circles of Copenhagen, who most strikingly represents the intersectionality of racism and sexism, in both the ways he paints Helga and the way he courts her. The portrait becomes the very site where the European notions of black women's sexuality as savage, primitive, exotic commodify and objectify Helga as the sexual Other: "It wasn't, she contended, herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her

features. [. . .] [C]ollectors, artists, and critics had been unanimous in their praise and it had been hung on the line at an annual exhibition [. . .]" (89). Olsen sees his intended marriage to Helga as an "experience," which, in bell hooks words, is " getting a bit of the Other," an "experience" that will "spice and season [. . .] the dull dish that is the mainstream white culture" *(Black Looks*, 21). Helga's commodified, objectified sexuality for Olsen becomes the discursive terrain where "[c]ultural taboos around sexuality and desire are transgressed," the real fun of which "is to had by bringing to the surface all those 'nasty' unconscious fantasies and longings about contact with the Other embedded in the [. . .] deep structure of white supremacy" (hooks, *Black Looks* 21-2). Olsen follows his marriage proposal with an explicit admission that he would rather that she were his mistress. Helga protests his insulting sexual proposition saying, "In my country the men, of my race at least, don't make suggestions to decent girls" (86). This scene, more than any other in the novel, shows the inextricability of the racial and sexual identities. While Helga, on the surface, rejects Olsen on racial grounds, her rejection, informed by her awareness of her legacy of rape and concubinage at the hands of white men, is against the racially-constructed images of black female sexuality

The "physical division of Helga's life into two parts in two lands" (96) parallels her spiritual division between "ladyhood" and Jezebel. None of these options capture her as a desiring sexual subject but an object. Rejecting to fit into the racist- sexist mold cut out for her by the Dahls, Helga returns to Harlem, where she pursues her desires. Neither Dr. Anderson nor James Vayles, members of Du Bois's Talented Tenth, accept Helga as a sexual subject choosing the objects and terms of her sexuality. Helga's sexual desires, suppressed throughout the novel, but now "burn[ing] her flesh with uncontrollable violence" (109), explode in one Harlem storefront church, where the drunk Helga, dressed in red, submerges herself into passionate religious conversion with the other mostly female members of the congregation. Helga violently laughs, shouts and weeps, which brings about her some kind of psychological release. As Reverend Pleasant Green walks her home after the revival meeting, Helga notices that "wild look" in his eyes. The morning after Helga seduces him, Helga's perplexed feelings about whether she should marry the Reverend emphasize her total loss of

subjectivity: “Helga Crane [. . .] questioned her ability to retain, to bear this happiness at such cost as he must pay for it. [. . .] Was it worth the risk? Could she take it? Was she able? Though what did it matter-now?” (116). Apparently, Helga’s sexuality is not shameless and sinful only when it is sanctioned by the institution of marriage. Now, in rural Alabama, where she moves with her husband, she becomes the “true” woman who “go[es] happily, inexpertly, about the humble tasks of her household, cooking, dish-washing, sweeping, dusting, mending and darning. And there was the garden. When she worked there, she felt that life was utterly filled with glory and the marvel of God” (120-21). As her life turns out to be one of unremitting toil and pain as she gives birth to twin boys and a girl all within twenty months (123), leaving Helga as sick as “having forever to be sinking in chairs (123), Helga’s early delusions about her new life explode, exposing now “the stark bareness of [her house’s] white plaster walls and the nakedness of its uncovered painted floors” and “the awesome horribleness of the religious pictures” (121). “Her protective wall” of religion beaten down, Helga could see into the reality of her existence: She is short of any foundation on which she could define herself; wifehood, motherhood, “the white man’s religion,” the black middle class aspirations and manners, “ladyhood,” or the exotic Other don’t prove to be viable spaces where she could achieve self-realization, self-knowledge and self-definition. Helga’s fourth birth, which her husband welcomes, saying, “We must accept what God sends” (124), leaves her with “darkness into which her bruised spirit had retreated” (128). And as the novel closes, Helga has been forever buried into that darkness of the spirit when she is about to give birth to her fifth child.

Nella Larsen explores the options open to an educated black woman in 1920s America. Helga’s sexuality cuts and crosscuts her race, and her class, and thus leaves her with a few options with which she could define herself. In a racist-sexist culture that has always defined black female sexuality as deviant and aberrant, Helga Crane sets up a physical as well as a spiritual journey to find “safe” spaces where she could define herself as a desiring subject. She travels between the racial-sexual borders of ladyhood and the exotic, primitive female Other only to find that none offers a viable outlet for self-realization and self-definition. When she, out of her fears of transgressing her society’s sexual mores, chooses marriage to legitimate her sexual encounter, she is

forever lost to the "quicksand" of pregnancy/childbearing--the dual price women have to pay for their sexual expression. When the novel opened, Helga was dressed in a "vivid green and gold negligee," reflecting "an air of radiant, careless health" and sexual energy. Near the novel's end, she is portrayed wearing a "filmy crepe" negligee, "a relic of her prematrimonial days," after she has given girth to her fourth child, which signifies that a woman's sexuality is legitimate only when it is harnessed to reproduction. Unable to escape from the racialized-sexualized images of the dominant society, Helga ends up trapped within the white patriarchal society's definitions of womanhood and sexuality, and in the process she sacrifices self-definition and self-knowledge, and hence empowerement. In her groundbreaking essay, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde explores the link between sexuality and power, and acts as a guide to oppositional, empowering sexual politics:

> *There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information of our lives*. (*Sister Outsider* 53)

For Helga, her sexuality becomes a source of repression, restriction and insecurity rather than a source of exploration, pleasure and agency. When she harnesses her sexuality to the exigencies of a white, male-defined gender ideology, she ends up trapped and defeated.

The image of the invisible, shrinking black woman analyzed in the literary works by African American woman authors in this chapter represents the black woman who is defeated by the white supremacist, sexist, capitalist America. Defeat may take various forms for the invisible, shrinking woman: confinement within unfulfilling, suffocating marriages, homicide, infanticide, madness, suicide, death, self-delusion, self-alienation. Poverty further aggravates the burdens this black woman already faces by virtue of her sex and her race. Mem and Margaret in Alice Walker's *The Third Life*

of Grange Copeland, Delia in Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat," Cora in Gloria Naylor's The *Women of Brewster Place* suffer from verbal and physical assault inflicted by their husbands. Sometimes the male assault may take the form of rape as in the case of Lutie Johnson in *The Street* or Lorraine in *The Women of Brewster Place*. White male constructions of femininity and masculinity, the inequalities of a white capitalist system, and racism intersect to devise an insurmountable, overarching system oppressing the invisible black woman. Unable to devise alternative ways to cope with her multiple oppressions, the invisible shrinking black woman cannot define herself outside the parameters of the dominant gender ideology. Marriage and motherhood become the very sites where they are buried alive. The passive, self-effacing, and subservient behavior she acquires in her female roles inhibit her ability to assert herself as an individual in her own right and protest against the omnipresent oppression she encounters.

The black woman representing this image is invisible for she fails to develop a political and critical consciousness which could transform her silence into a self-defined voice, which is vital for self-definition and self-actualization. She is invisible because she cannot break through the hegemonic constructions of black womanhood that have consistently denied her the right to define and speak up for herself. Her withdrawal from life is the result of her defeat in the face of an overarching racist, sexist and capitalist system as well as the result of her spiritual inertia. In other words, this black woman falls short of inner strength, resourcefulness, and will-power to devise ways to resist oppression. In her essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," Audre Lorde talks about "places of possibility" within black women where "new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions" could be tried out "with the renewed courage" (2211). However, the invisible black woman does not always look inward to explore sites of power and resistance, hence her spiritual shrinking almost to the point of non-existence.

Have we in America a distinct mission as a race-a distinct sphere of action and an opportunity for race development, or is it self-obliteration the highest end to which Negro blood dare aspire? (W.E.B. DuBois, "The Conversation of Races" 1897).

6.2. The Assimilated Woman

W.E.B. Du Bois explores in his "The Souls of Black Folk" (1903) the identity crisis of the emancipated Negroes at the turn of the century America:

> *It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others [. . .] One ever feels his two-ness,-an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled; two warring ideals in one dark body [. . .] The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,-this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. [. . .]He wouldn't bleach his Negro soul in a flood of White Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world*. (364-65)

The black identity crisis diagnosed by DuBois at the turn of the twentieth-century is a contemporary black cultural and social phenomenon which is widely discussed by African American feminists like bell hooks and by black scholars like Cornel West. The message DuBois wanted to convey to the masses of newly emancipated Negroes was that their destiny in the American soil was not to be one of "absorption by the white Americans," and "a servile imitation of Anglo-Saxon culture" but one of "a stalwart originality which shall unswervingly follow Negro ideals" ("The Conservation of Races" 820). Vehement in his denouncement of black assimilation into the white man's "mad money-getting plutocracy" (822), DuBois sought to induce feelings of racial pride in his people, to make them see that their cultural identity is inseparable from their political racial identity.

The assimilated black woman, unable to reconcile those "two warring identities," one black, the other American, chooses to assimilate into the mainstream culture in the face of racist, classist and sexist oppressions. The assimilated black woman subdues "all that is Negro in [her] to the American" ("The Conversation of Races" 821), and thereby engages in a constant process of erasing her black racial and cultural identity (which is in essence an act of self-erasure) and assumes the dominant culture's values and rules as the only viable route to self-empowerment and self-definition. Edna Bonanich, who tellingly argues the social phenomenon of black

assimilation in contemporary America, asserts that assimilation into white capitalist system is tantamount to self-erasure: "They [African Americans] have to play the White man's game by the White man's rules or they lose [. . .]. They have to give up who they are, and disown their community and its pressing needs for change, in order to 'make it' in this system [. . .]" (107).

Proceeding from the above insights into the nature of the social phenomenon of black assimilation, it makes sense to argue that the assimilated black woman is in a constant process of self-negation and self-denial. Seeing her blackness as only a signifier of her marginalization, and hence powerlessness, the assimilated black woman internalizes the dominant society's controlling images of themselves, and chooses to counter-attack them with the "master's" values and norms. In order to overcome her feelings of low self-esteem and inadequacy, the assimilated black woman severs all ties with her historical and cultural past and submerges herself into the materialistic consumer white society, where material success becomes the only yardstick to estimate one's sense of worth. Personal integrity, communal ties, love, fraternity are all sacrificed to the exigencies of climbing up the social and economic ladder. In a society where whiteness is the mythical norm, where there are no images affirming and celebrating blackness, the assimilated black woman constructs her identity and self-worth within the "safe" confines of a materialistic, sexist white society. In the process, she sacrifices her sustaining ties to black culture and black experience, which mostly ends in spiritual loss and a crisis of identity.

Audre Lorde writes in *Sister Outsider* (1984), "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (112). Independent, "decolonized" self-definitions are central to black women's empowerment to bring about social change. But the assimilated black woman chooses the "master's tools" to define and "empower" herself. In a racist, sexist society that has always defined black womanhood in terms of degrading stereotypes and thus denied her the right to define, and to speak out for herself, the assimilated black woman embraces the white man's norms to carve out a space for herself in the "master's house." Material success and acquisition of white middle-class social values become her only route to self-affirmation

and definition. Patricia Hill Collins argues in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000)that in the process of self-definition "women journey toward an understanding of how our personal lives have been fundamentally shaped by intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality and class" (114). On the contrary, the assimilated black woman never develops such political consciousness to resist against the controlling images of the dominant society. Rather, she internalizes them and struggles to eradicate whatever black within and without herself, which is but a fatal political mistake. In her futile attempt to fill those bruised spaces within herself with her material gains, she becomes the willing partner of her oppressors. As bell hooks contends,

> *Those black folks who are more willing to pretend that "difference" does not exist even as they self-consciously labor to be as much like their white peers as possible, will receive greater material rewards in white supremacist society. White supremacist logic is thus advanced. Rather than using coercive tactics of domination to colonize, it seduces black folks with the promise of mainstream success if only we are willing to negate the value of blackness. [. . .] [W]e are collectively asked to show our solidarity with the white supremacist status quo by over-valuing whiteness, by seeing blackness solely as a marker of powerlessness and victimization*. (*Black Looks*, 17-8)

Assimilation into the dominant culture is what this black woman chooses to cope with the intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender. However, this strategy never proves to be a viable route to self-fulfillment. The black female protagonists in the novels to be discussed might have achieved status and money; in the process, however, they have forfeited their hearts and their souls. The image of the assimilated black woman can be explored in black women's literary tradition. Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1985) stands out as one of the most striking literary works, in which the image of the assimilated black woman could be explored.

Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* explores the loss of black subjectivity, the collapse of African American communal bonds, the denial of a shared history of oppression in her imagined community Linden Hills, where middle to upper-middle class African Americans are obsessed with "making it" in white America. *Linden Hills* was preceded

by a decade that was marked by the rise of a more visible black middle class than the United States history had ever witnessed. The 1980s was marked by a backlash and reversal of all the gains of the Civil Rights Movement by the ideological workings of Reagan's conservative politics which had rearticulated racism through code words such as family, traditional values, and the work ethic. The old specter of biological racism had been resurrected in its new cultural form. The new politics of racism stigmatized the black culture for all its economic and social shortcomings. To take their places as American citizens next to their white peers on an equal basis, blacks had to be like them. Therefore, post-1960s saw more and more blacks succumbing to the belief that material success is the only route to empowerment.

In *Linden Hills*, Naylor gives us another dimension of African American life, which is in stark contrast with the one she explored in *The Women of Brewster Place*: life in Brewster Place is imposed whereas in Linden Hills it is chosen. Linden Hills is the outcome of a dream gradually realized through a succession of five generations of the Neededs, who believed that "the future of America was going to be white; white money backing wars for white power because the very earth was white" (8). Ex-slave Luther Needed is the patriarch, who decides who is to own those houses with a thousand and a year lease offered by his company. Only those who are willing to efface their racial identities along with their cultural past, and who believe, like the five generations of Neededs, that "life is in the material" could qualify for entrance into Linden Hills. Only those willing to "build not on but over their past" could stay in Linden Hills. There was no place for those blacks "who rooted themselves in the beliefs that Africa could be more than a word; slavery had not run its course; there was salvation in Jesus and salve in blues. [. . .] He'd cultivate no madmen like Nat Turner or Marcus Garvey in Linden Hills-that would only get them all crushed back into the dust" (11). In order to challenge an America that "dared think them stupid-or worse totally impotent," Luther Needed and the occupants of Linden Hills actually buy into the white man's system that has always naturalized black inferiority. As the promise of material success and white middle-class paradigms become the only yardsticks by which they see and define themselves and others, they are left with nothing but their material gains and status to hold on to.

Laurel Dumont, a top executive at IBM, makes a perfect example for the image of the assimilated black woman to be analyzed in *Linden Hills*. After graduating Phi Beta Kappa from Berkeley, Laurel works hard to have a top executive position at IBM and marries a man who is thought to become the next State's Attorney. Their success and status cannot make their gorgeous house on Tupelo Drive a home for them, a home where they affirm and love each other:

> *And with so much in that house, they didn't miss each other as they both stumbled on their way up [. . .] And since their hands were grasped so tightly on their respective set of stairs. It wasn't until they had nearly reached the summit and had time to pause that they realized they had been moving together but away from each other*. (232)

When it strikes Laurel what she has made and achieved all those years are not enough to fill that frightening void and sense of "dislocation" inside her, she desperately admits that all her life has been a succession of wrong doings:

> *Wrong-she and the house on Tupelo Drive that defied her efforts to transform it into that nebulous creation called a home. Wrong-she and the career at IBM that she clung to with a desperation mistaken for pride, ambition [. . .] But if she let go of it, what else was left? There would be nothing to cling to except another link in a long chain that contained only totally circular, totally evasive wrongs*. (227-28)

Laurel has been so intent on reaching ultimate perfection that she has had no time "to think about who she was and what she really wanted" (228). Dispirited, Laurel goes to Georgia to visit her grandmother Roberta Johnson, who epitomizes the black heritage and pride that Linden Hills has destroyed and with whom Laurel used to spend her summer holidays as a child. She hopes that the rooms will be dark and that there will be "no mirrors" so that she can believe that she is still a vibrant little girl with two thick braids, not a displaced woman who has lost, in Grandma Tilson's terms, that inner mirror to turn to when it is crazy outside (59). Laurel hopes that she will find that sense of belonging, that peace of mind and spirit in rural Georgia. Nevertheless, Grandma Roberta tells Laurel, "But this ain't your home, child" (230). Laurel tries to alleviate her spiritual pain by listening to classical music composers such as Mahler, Beethoven or

Brahms, who, according to Grandma Roberta has nothing to do with what Laurel is going through. When Roberta says she would rather see her listening to Bessie Smith or Billie Holiday, Laurel furiously rejects her Grandma: "So running out and buying the records of women who were drug addicts and alcoholics would help me, right? Women who got their identities through a crop of worthless men they let drag them down? All that moaning about Jim Crow, unpaid bills, and being hungry has nothing to do with me or what I'm going through" (235-36).

Assimilated into the white man's system, Laurel denies any connection with her cultural heritage, her reasons being that her life has been different. Laurel's hopes to transform the present without knowing the past, which is almost impossible given the long history of oppression of blacks in the United States's history. She despises the blues tradition with its poor, working-class connotations only to turn her back to a powerful and sustaining form of resistance against the externally defined controlling images of black womanhood. Grandma Roberta, a black woman of self-knowledge and wisdom, knows what is to be found in blues lyrics: the strength and will power of poor black women to define themselves and their experiences in a racist-sexist white order. Grandma Roberta tries to make Laurel see that it is not possible to find home without acknowledging where she comes from: "What [the blues singers] say is one thing, but what you supposed to hear is 'I can'[. . .] [I]t speaks to a place they ain't got no name for yet, where you supposed to be home. Open up that place child. Cause if you don't, there ain't never gonna be no peace [. . .]" (236).

Back home, Laurel's feelings of nihilistic despair are exacerbated when she learns that her husband has left her. A woman alone is not tolerable in Linden Hills. No sooner does Luther Needed learn the situation than he appears at Laurel's door to tell her that she cannot live on Tupelo Drive any longer. Luther Needed, the patriarch of the community, has drawn moral and social borders as well as geographical ones. Laurel has competed with her husband to reach the top of the social ladder, put all her energy into "making it," and hence in the process had no time neither for her husband nor for children. Falling short of white man's definitions of femininity, Laurel has no place in Linden Hills; she is an absence without a husband. Now that her house and her husband, the last castles of her false-identity are lost to her forever, Laurel has to pay dearly for

having surrendered every vestige of who she is, her cultural identity on her way to the top. When she commits suicide by diving off the high dive into her empty pool, her "faceless" body signifies her total loss of identity, of the spiritual amnesia she has been going through all those years.

Like Laurel, Mrs. Tilson and her daughter Roxanne represent the image of the assimilated black woman in black women's literary tradition. Mrs. Tilson and her daughter Roxanne have readily forfeited their hearts, their souls and their very black identities for material gains and social mobility. Roxanne's only aim in life is to marry a wealthy black man and to take her due place in Linden Hills. Her dream is to find self-definition and security from a wealthy black man, become a wife and mother for she has to conform to the white man's definitions of womanhood if she is to stay in Linden Hills. In the eyes of her brother, "Roxanne groomed her life and body with a hawklike determination to marry black, marry well" (53). Although Roxanne was an activist in the Civil Rights Movement, "wearing an Afro for six months and enrolling in black history courses in college" (53), she soon detaches herself from it, seeing nothing but powerlessness and ugliness in her own race. That is why she spends most of her salary on bleaching creams and hair straighteners. She realizes that success lies somewhere else, not in the slogans celebrating black beauty, black power and black culture.

Her mother Mrs. Tilson adores money and its power. Nothing black has a place in her house which she has adorned with Japanese porcelain vases and fragile Norwegian crystal. To Mrs. Tilson, black food, black music, black dialect, black slang, black ancestry, black cultural artifacts are but like slurs to her dignity and pride. Whatever is connected with blackness reminds Mrs. Tilson of weakness, powerlessness and banality. Neither Mrs. Tilson nor Roxanne possess the wisdom and self-knowledge which Grandma Mamie Tilson tries to bequeath some security to her grandson Lester: "[Y]ou keep that mirror and when it's crazy outside, you look inside and you'll always know exactly where you are and what you are. And you call that peace" (59). That mirror is the very self-definition, the self- knowledge acquired through a political and critical consciousness that can restore oneself the dignity and self-worth denied outside in the white man's world. The mirror is the central metaphor running throughout the

novel, revealing the Linden Hills occupants sterile souls and lost identities. That is why Lorraine wishes that there are no mirrors in Grandma Roberta's house.

Lorraine, Roxenna, Mrs. Tilson represent the assimilated woman in black woman's literary tradition. For them, assimilation into the white man's culture is the only way to resist racist-sexist constructions of blackness, which in fact is a individual and communal suicide given the black feminists' firm contention that affirmation and maintenance of racial and cultural differences are central to move from objects of a dominant culture to black subjects with a critical standpoint and consciousness. In their attempt to find a place of agency in the white man's world, no matter how tenuous it is, these women deny all ties with their past and culture and thus end up being re-inscribed within the racist, sexist white order.

Another novel where the image of the assimilated black woman is to be explored is Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929). The novel is set against the backdrop of 1920s Harlem, where, despite the rigidly policed racial boundaries in most of America, the cultural and racial boundaries were more fluid due to a stream of white intellectuals, celebrities, authors, and artists attracted to Harlem for its cabarets or its social occasions where the two races mingled. Therefore, *Passing* not only represents the cultural ethos of its time but is also a product of it. The novel's two protagonists, Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield are middle-class black women who assume false identities that guarantee social acceptance but result in psychological and literal suicide. Clare Kendry is married to the white international banking agent Jack Bellew, a rabid racist, who indulges his wife's adoration of status and luxury. Clare decides to "pass" permanently at the age of sixteen when she is, after her father's brutal death, taken care of by her white great aunts. After having been seduced by her grandfather, Clare was "determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the discreet Ham" (159). To run from the banner of inferiority attached to her race by a "tar-brush" (159), Clare passes for white and marries Bellew, who takes pride in saying, "No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be" (171). Passing herself off as white, Clare severs all her ties with her past and more importantly with herself. She constructs her identity as a middle-class white woman who finds "security" in marriage and in the material comforts her husband provides. Although she has always been aware

of the risks of "passing", she declares to Irene, " Money's awfully nice to have. In fact, all things considered, I think, 'Rene, that it's even worth the price" (160). Below the veneer of the social and material advantages which passing as white provides, Clare is a "deserter," as she defines herself to be, who feels insecure and lonely in her white world. Her survival depends upon her ability to keep up the appearances. She must look like the white middle-class lady who is the social mirror of her husband's status. She must be the envy of other "ladies" in her looks, in her clothes, in her conversation, in home furnishing, must spend her time shopping and preening, and attending tea parties. Maintaining these social activities is inseparable from having a middle-class status and identity. In fact, Nella Larsen's detailed descriptions of home furnishings, of the endless tea parties and women's apparel are but a statement on the condition of these middle-class women. In one particular scene, she depicts tea pouring and drinking as a social ritual: "The tea-things had been placed on a low table at Clare's side. She gave them her attention now, pouring the rich amber fluid from the tall glass pitcher into stately slim glasses, which she handed to her guests, and then offered them lemon or cream and tiny sandwiches or cakes" (168).

Clare, with a cold and hard determination, struggles to protect her "security," which she equates with marriage to a well-to-do and respectable white man, the accouterments of middle-class life--social respectability, luxury and motherhood. Like Helga Crane and Laurel Dumont, Clare is homeless yet she never despairs over it. That cocoon of "security" she had acquired through "passing" is so important to her that at one point, she confesses to Irene: "Why, to get the things I want badly enough, I'd do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away. Really,'Rene, I'm not safe" (210). To be able to live within the "security" her marriage concurs upon her, Clare decides not to have another child after her now ten-year-old daughter Margery, who is light enough not to betray Clare's race. While childbearing is part of each female character's gendered self in the novel, for Clare it is problematized by her racial self, and hence her passionless marriage even though "passion" for a middle-class woman means procreativity.

Irene Redfield, Clare's childhood friend, is the paragon of motherhood, wifehood, virtue, domesticity, chastity. In other words, she is the "true" woman who

finds “happiness” in the “sublime” duties of motherhood and wifehood. Irene is married to a well-to-do, prestigious black doctor, Brian Redfield, on whom she relies for security, identity and material comfort. Although light enough to pass off as white, Irene passes only for occasional convenience like when she, after so many years, reunites with Clare at the rooftop café of the Drayton Hotel in Chicago.

Irene’s middle-class life, like Clare’s is barren and fake. However, it is this very life which Irene spins around her like a cocoon where she feels “safe” and free from the stigma of her racialized sexuality. Unlike Helga Crane, who has always detected marriage with suspicious eyes and thus has never been able to accommodate herself to the racialized and gendered space of “ladyhood,” Irene represents the perfect, self-sacrificing wife and mother, and the “race woman,” who tries to “uplift” the unfortunate black masses with the parties, hosting prominent white rather than black people. Just like her white middle-class manners, speech, apparel, home furnishing, her social activities for the Negro Welfare League (Larsen’s fictionalized amalgam of the NAACP and the Urban League) are actually undertaken to keep up the appearances. The superficiality and barrenness of these mixed race social gatherings is further emphasized when Brian, her husband, says, “Pretty soon the colored people won’t be allowed in at all, or will have to sit in Jim Crowed sections” (198). Such social occasions become the very places where Irene displays her “ladyhood,” to the utmost, and establishes herself as the respectable wife, sacrificing mother and the “altruistic” race woman. But these endless cocktails, tea parties, charity balls are as sterile and lacking in substance as Irene’s inner life:

> *There were the familiar little tinkling sounds of spoons striking against frail cups, the soft running sounds of inconsequential talk, punctuated now and then with laughter. In irregular small groups, disintegrating, coalescing, striking just the right note of disharmony, disorder in the big room, which Irene had furnished with a sparingness that was almost chaste, moved the guests with that slight familiarity that makes a party a success. (219).*

Just like the ball halls and the tea rooms, Irene is psychologically in “disharmony” and “disorder.” Under the safety and closure her marriage provides for

her, Irene represses her sexuality, that "old, queer, unhappy restlessness . . .that craving for some place strange and different, which at the beginning of her marriage she had had to make such strenuous efforts to repress, and which yet faintly alarmed her, though now it sprang up at gradually lessening intervals" (178). Irene has internalized the controlling images of black sexuality to the point of protecting her twin sons from schoolyard discussions about sex, forbidding any discussion of racism in the family as too disagreeable. Furthermore, Irene and her husband sleep in separate bedrooms (he considers sex a joke), which strongly indicates that her marriage devoid of passion.

Irene's repressed sexuality, like that of Helga Crane, is socially constructed by the intricate workings of her race, her class and gender. Never free from the haunting images of black female sexuality constructed by a white racist-sexist order, Irene borrows the white man's terms for social respectability and status. To be a "true" woman necessitates to suppress that "evil" part of her, her sexuality, that could be harnessed to procreative results only. Such uncontrolled, "low" feelings could only be associated with one thing: the sexually promiscuous whore, Jezebel. And, Irene is no Jezebel, she is the personification of the Cult of True Womanhood: "I take being a mother seriously. I am wrapped up in my boys and the running of my house. I can't help it" (210), "We mothers are all responsible for the security and happiness of our children" (197).

In her obsession to keep the "smooth routine of her household" unaffected (188), Irene pays dearly: "She couldn't now be sure that she had ever truly known love. Not even for Brian. He was her husband and the father of her sons. But was he anything more? Had she ever wanted or tried for more? [. . .] [S]he thought not" (235). Nevertheless, for Irene "that security of place and substance" (190) is worth the loss, just like for Clare, passing off as white is worth the risks it involves. Despite her realization that she has never lived fully and felt deeply, Irene continues to keep up the appearances: "Yes, life went on precisely as before. It was only she that had changed. Knowing, stumbling on this thing, had changed her. It was as if in a house long dim, a match had been struck, showing ghastly shapes where had been only blurred shadows" (218).

Irene is as "willful and selfish" (202) as Clare "to get the things [she] wants badly enough" (210). When Clare, years after their meeting at a Chicago hotel, comes to Harlem and pays frequent, and uninformed visits to the Redfields This causes Irene to imagine that Brian and Clare are having an affair, for which Irene "[has] no facts or proofs" (223). Irene's ever growing suspicion brings her almost to the edge of psychological breakdown for her marriage, and hence her very existence is in danger. This means the loss of one thing to Irene: security, which, "in spite of her searchings and feeling of frustration [. . .] was the most important and desired thing in life. Not for any of the others, or for all of them, would she exchange it. She wanted only to be tranquil. Only unmolested, to be allowed to direct for their own best the lives of her sons and her husband" (235).

Marriage and the social status it concurs upon Irene are her only ties to her sense of identity. If Brian is gone, Irene is gone too, which means that she will have to step outside the cocoon she has spun all these years around herself, and thereby become vulnerable to the racist-sexist attacks on black woman's sexuality. Irene knows that, for all its barrenness, she must "hold fast to the outer shell of her marriage, to keep her life fixed, certain" (235). And to this end, Irene could do anything "in utter disregard of the convenience and desire of others. About her there was some quality, hard and persistent, with the strength and endurance of rock, that would not be beaten or ignored" (201). The more Irene sees Clare as a threat to her marriage and hence to her security, the more distracted and disturbed she becomes. Gradually, "her mental and physical languor recede," knowing that "[a]lone she was nothing" (221).

Near the end of the narrative, the social event for "blacks" becomes the center of a spectacle when Clare is "unmasked" by her bigoted husband, John Bellew, who frantically calls her a "damned dirty nigger" (238). At this climactic point, Irene runs across the room and puts her hand on Clare's arm, with Bellew standing just in front of them, and it is soon after this ambiguous scene that Clare "falls" through an open window to her death. Although the evidence is circumstantial, the evidence preceding and following Clare's death is enough to suggest that it is Irene, who pushed Clare through the window. The fear that engulfs Irene when she thinks of the possibility of

Clare's having survived the fall is enough to lift the veil of mystery surrounding Clare's death:

> *In the midst of her wonderings and questionings came a thought so terrifying, so horrible, that she had had to grasp hold of the banister to save herself from pitching downwards. A cold perspiration drenched her shaking body. Her breath came short in sharp and painful gasps. 'What if Clare was not dead ?'* (240)

The final glimpse we have of Irene at the end of the novel highly suggests her psychological death: "Her quaking knees gave way under her. She moaned and sank down, moaned again. Through the great heaviness that submerged and drowned her she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything was dark" (242).

Like "quicksand," "passing" is a metaphor for both psychological and physical death. In Larsen's novel, "passing" does not only denote to the sociological phenomenon of crossing the color-line. Additionally, it foregrounds the loss of racial identity and sexual identity when black women choose to assimilate into the dominant culture to evade the racist-sexist assumptions of black womanhood. Passing off as white and marrying a wealthy white man, Clare constructs her identity around the prevailing cultural notions of "ladyhood," and captivates herself within a world of appearances with which she has to keep up through constant masquerading. "Passing", Clare hopes to get rid of the painful experiences of her past, and the banner of inferiority her sex and her race have always concurred upon her. Yet, the price she has to pay for this constant self-denial is quite high even though she declares that the risks she take are worth the price. The uncovering of her "ivory mask" by her husband at the Harlem social gathering means social death for Clare, which is turned into a physical one by Irene. It is quite clear that even if her death didn't come from Irene, Clare would be dead anyway. As Cherly A. Wall discusses, "[t]ransgressing racial boundaries means running the risk of being turned out of public places and being put out of house and home" (126), which are in fact deadly blows for a black woman who has constructed her sense of identity within the "safe," white middle-class notions of "ladyhood."

Irene Redfield's solution to the oppressions of race, sex, and class is no more different than Clare's. Although she passes occasionally, she has severed all her ties

with her people and her culture, her "uplifting" parties being no different from her tea parties in their substance and motives. To establish herself as the "true" woman the white patriarchal culture celebrates, Irene has to deny one part of herself constantly: her sexuality. Although she inwardly realizes that it is her suppressed sexual feelings that have been haunting her tranquility, Irene is never willing to step outside the roles of the devoted mother and wife for her marriage and the social status it gives her are the only things she clings onto to define herself. Without them, she is the black woman vulnerable to the racist-sexist stereotyping of the white society. Her fear of stepping outside the white middle-class norms of womanhood prevents her from seeing into the workings of a racist-sexist ideology. Irene sees race as the only impediment on her way to happiness, fulfillment, regarding her gender as only a matter of individuality, and thereby failing to see its connection to larger societal forces. "Her weakness, her shrinking, her own inability to compass the thing" (225) prevents her from entering a new political and critical consciousness that could enable her to resist the multiple oppressions, and develop alternative ways of being:

> *She was caught between two allegiances, different yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! [. . .] Sitting alone in the quiet living-room in the pleasant fire-light, Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to regard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was a brutality, and undeserved*. (225)

Internalizing white society's racist-sexist myths of black womanhood, Irene gets involved in a constant process of self-denial, which finally brings about her ultimate psychological breakdown. Unable to define herself outside the white constructions of womanhood, Irene ends up imprisoned within her "safe," morally upright life as wife, mother and socialite. The final scenes of the novel clearly indicate that Irene will never risk stepping outside the "safe" borders of her marriage. When she goes outside to face the gruesome death scene, she wraps Brian's coat around his shoulders, leaving hers behind: "Brian! He mustn't take cold. She took up his coat and

left her own" (241). Undoubtedly, Irene will continue her high-profile, loveless, passionless marriage, but at the cost of denying her black identity and her sexual identity.

The image of the assimilated black woman is also to be found in the Harlem Renaissance writer Dorothy West's novel *The Living is Easy* (1948). The novel is about the story of Cleo Jericho Judson, who, like Irene in *Passing*, turns away from her people and her past to establish herself and her family within the elite social circle of upper class blacks in Boston. If the 1920s Harlem bourgeoisie, of which Nella Larsen personally knew very well, becomes the historical backdrop against which she explores the displacement and alienation of her female protagonists, the black bourgeoisie in Boston from the turn of the century until just after World War I becomes the thoroughly-bred Bostonian Dorothy West's historical and cultural background against which she records the middle-class housewife and mother Cleo Jericho Hudson's yearning to be a member of the upper class black Bostonians, whose lives, just like those of Nella Larsen's black bourgeois Harlemites, imitate the values and ways of white culture down to the smallest detail. In other words, Cleo wants to be a part of the black Boston Brahmins, who have already assimilated into the white culture. To become a member of this upper-class society, Cleo has to be "white."

At a time when the Southern blacks were flooding into the Northern cities to escape from the specter of Ku Klux Klan, from the mob lynchings and from their impoverished lives, Dorothy West's insular, and selfish black upper class in Boston consisting of free-born Northern blacks presents a different aspect of African American at the turn of the century. As Adelaide M. Cromwell writes in her afterword to the novel,

> *Northern blacks took pride in not living in a segregated society. They were, however, an insular group, a black village, a world apart in a white city. Whites controlled their destinies but hardly knew them; blacks were physically visible but socially invisible. On their part, blacks knew little beyond their psycho-social village boundaries and even less beyond their actual city limits.*

> *Dorothy West, an exception to this insularity, chronicled the secret city. It was a vivid and proud world, not characterized by a search for African roots or survivals or Pentecostal churches. It was as American as apple pie-made of the best apples.* (358)

Cleo Jericho Judson, the beautiful mulatto of *The Living is Easy*, is a southern-born woman who marries Boston's "black banana king" Bart Judson, twenty-three years her senior, and a Southern-born, self-made man. Cleo adores money, and the power and status it concurs upon people. Throughout the novel, we see Cleo making up stories and telling lies to extract money from her husband. As the novel opens Cleo is on one of her many trips to her husband's banana business to lie, as usual, for money to rent a ten-room house in Brookline to begin their climb to the upper-class Boston black society. Manipulation and lying are two devices Cleo has developed to further her climb up the social ladder of Boston. Cleo wants to get out of the South End, "so prophetically named with this influx of black cotton-belters" (5). Like other middle-class Bostonians, Cleo finds the ways, the manners, the speech of the black migrants from the South repulsive.

> *These midget comedians made Cleo feel that she was back in the Deep South. Their accents prickled her scalp. Their raucous laughter soured the sweet New England air. Their games were reminiscent of all the whooping and hollering she had indulged in before emancipation. These r'aring-tearing young ones had brought the folkways of the South to the classrooms of the North*. (5).

Anything connected with her racial heritage must be eradicated if Cleo is to be an upper-class Bostonian, who "consider[s] [herself] a special species of fish" (5). Furthermore, Cleo has no intention of raising her six-year-old daughter Judy among these "little knotty-head niggers," as Cleo would disgustingly call them (5). Dark like her father, and a painfully plain contrast to her light-skinned mother, Judy is bent into proper social roles for a Bostonian by Miss Althea Binney, Judy's private teacher, "who for the past three years had been coming four mornings weekly to give Judy the benefit of her accent and genteel breeding" (5). For Cleo, Judy's Negroid features have to be whitened. She tries clothespins on Judy's nose, and gets furious when she shows her

gums, laughing. Even Judy's happy face is enough to irritate Cleo for "[a] proper Bostonian never showed any emotion but hauteur" (39-40). Judy, like her mother has to learn the genteel ways and manners of upper-class Bostonians in order to be "in the parlor" rather than "in the kitchen with an apron" (43). Like Miss Althea Binney, "Cleo's model of perfection," Judy is to be brought up in "the same impeccable mold that produced the young ladies who were to take their inherited places behind the tea-tables of Boston" (92).

Cleo wholeheartedly buys into the white material culture to enter the social circles of Boston Brahmins, and she is determined to carve out a place for herself in the society's inner sanctum at any price. Cleo will do anything she can get away with to climb up the social ladder. As Trudier Harris aptly describes, "On any given day, Cleo will change a story four times between nine and noon just for the heck of it, and she does so again and again as she exacts money from Bart Judson [. . .]" (147). Cleo wants to make her sisters part of her "easy living" in her ten-room mansion in Brookline, which she manages by a succession of lies to Bart and to the Jericho sisters. She lies to Lily, her sister in New York, that she is having a divorce, and then she lies to the other two sisters Charity and Serena in order to get them to come to Boston to help the sister from New York, Lily. What is initially a vacation for the sisters turns into a permanent stay when Cleo turns her sisters against their husbands, bringing about the destruction of their marriages. Cleo does not understand what her sisters find in their impoverished, too black and inferior husbands:

> *What could they find in them to love? Not a man among them a decent provider. Serena and Charity worked in service whenever times were harder than usual. Lily would have gone to work, too, if she could have taken her child on her job as her sisters did in the South.*
>
> *What kind of way was that for her sisters to live, from hand to mouth, from payday to payday, from what she could scrape up to send them?* (50-51)

Love is a feeling forever lost to Cleo. She sees her marriage to Bart as her only passport to the upper echelons of the Boston society. And she mindlessly and frivolously consumes Bart's money to get herself a place among those women "whose impregnable positions had been established by Boston birth and genteel breeding," and

whose lives "were too narrowly confined to a daily desperate effort to ignore their racial heritage" (105). To be an upper class Bostonian, Cleo must cut all her cultural and psychological ties to her Southern roots.

Bart Judson, who always prides himself on being a good provider for his family, keeps Cleo firmly in her domestic sphere, and when Cleo jokingly tells him what to do with his bananas at the market, Bart reprimands her, "'You worry your head about woman affairs. I'll do the rest of worrying'" (81). Treating Cleo condescendingly, Bart returns Cleo to her assigned place in the Boston community. Cleo's resentment of her limited domestic sphere reveals how urban middle and upper-class blacks have assimilated white male notions of masculinity and femininity. They place their wives up on pedestals, where they are just the showpieces of their husbands, the fragile, beautiful objects to be admired and protected, but denied power and self-definition beyond their appropriate sphere. Cleo is painfully conscious that her domestic sphere is not so satisfying and fulfilling as a man's public sphere: "When men spoke, she knew that their worlds were larger than hers, their interests broader. She couldn't bear knowing that there were many things she didn't know; that a man could introduce a subject, and she would have to be silent" (140).

Cleo's feelings of rebelliousness against a patriarchal society with its male business world and separate female domestic world find an outlet only within the walls of her newly furnished ten-room house in Brookline, the altar of her upper-class identity. The New Year's Eve party Cleo throws in her new house functions, as those given by Irene, as a magisterial display of her social status, as a superficial, barren social nicety which exhibits to the smallest the detail the social artistry of Cleo: "When she spoke, her accent and inflection showed no detectable flaws. Her silvery chatter, her low lovely laugh were bright threads weaving her guests together in a comforting assurance that this party might be taking place in a white lady's parlor" (244). The praise Cleo receives from the upper-class Bostonians as to the perfection of the decoration of her house and the food assures Cleo that her acceptance by the society is determined. Moving "among the ladies and gentlemen, her cheeks as pink as roses from their praise" (252), Cleo feels that "this was the hour which gave her whole life meaning" (245). When Cleo's Southern guest of honor, Dean Galloway, who has been

invited to speak on behalf of a falsely imprisoned Southern man, asks the upper-class Bostonians to unite and fight "the poverty of Negroes, their segregation, their terrorization, their wanton murders" (262) in the South, Cleo tactfully reduces his speech to a social gaffe, a disturbing intrusion into her perfect party. She turns down his plea for racial solidarity outright, saying the South's "grief and despair" would breed "humble dogs or mad dogs" rather than decent human beings (264).

To be an accepted part of upper-class Boston society, where the white man's values reign, Cleo cuts all her social and psychological ties to a meaningful cultural legacy. Constructing her identity around false notions of upper-class elitism, Cleo thinks that "the living" will forever be "easy." However, her unscrupulous spending during a wavering war economy to assure her place among the elite Bostonians brings about Bart's bankruptcy. Watching her husband leave her in the final scene of the novel, Cleo asks herself: "But who will love me best? Who?" (347). Our last glimpse of Cleo as the novel closes is one of a lonely and frightened woman not knowing where to turn to for relief. Apparently, it is not her sisters whose lives she has ruined and who are now bringing the food into the home, working as domestics and cooks. Neither is it Judy, her daughter, who is spiritually lost to her as well, thinking of her mother as " the weak, the frightened" (308). Cleo's plea captures the mindlessness and futility of her search for self and power in white avenues to success and assimilation. Mistakenly, Cleo looks to the "master's tools" for self-knowledge and self-definition. In the end, she is defeated both by social reality and by her own lack of self-knowledge.

Mrs. Turner in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a minor character, who also represents the assimilated woman image. Mrs. Turner takes pride in her Caucasian facial features and hates all black folks with Negroid features around her. She despises the local black folks who come to her eating place for their low black manners and "ol' nigger songs" (290). She thinks that if there were not around so many black folks, "it wouldn't be no race problem. De white folks would take us in wid dem. De black ones is holdin' us back" (290). Mrs. Turner's obsession with Caucasian characteristics captures the psychological destruction which the white notions of beauty and femininity have wrought upon black women. As Patricia Hill Collins contends in her book Black Feminist Thought (2000),

> *Dealing with prevailing standards of beauty-particularly skin color, facial features, and hair texture-is one specific example of how controlling images derogate African American women. [. . .] Prevailing standards of beauty claim that no matter how intelligent, educated, or "beautiful" a Black woman may be, those Black women whose features and skin color are most African must 'git back.' Within the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions, blue-eyed, blond, thin White women could not be considered beautiful without the Other- Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair.* (89)

Mrs. Turner's internalization of white standards of beauty is fundamentally the outcome of a racialized-sexualized "social and cultural system that magnifies differences of skin-color and phenotype, and links these differences to notions of superiority and inferiority" (Weedon and Jordan 252). Mrs. Turner's sense of herself is largely the product of a racist-patriarchal notions of femininity and beauty that have throughout the United States history objectified black women as "ugly," deviating from the standards of white beauty. Given that blackness has always been associated in the white psyche with the evil, the immoral, the ugly, the savage, whereas whiteness with the good, the beautiful and the civilized, most African American women have found themselves grappling with the meaning of prevailing standards of beauty. In her autobiography, Maya Angelou writes about how white standards of beauty affected one's sense of worth and identity:

> *Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? [. . .] Then they would understand why I had never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke the common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs' tails and snouts. Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother [. . .] had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair.* (2)

Light-skinned, Caucasian-featured Mrs. Turner cannot escape from the oppressing and controlling images of white beauty: "Her nose was slightly pointed and she was proud. Her thin lips were an ever delight to her eyes. Even her buttocks in bas-

relief were a source of pride. To her way of thinking all these things set her aside from Negroes" (288). Mrs. Turner lives in a self-deceptive inner world in which she has "built an altar to the unattainable-Caucasian characteristics for all" (293). In her world of self-delusion, and self-denial, Mrs. Turner believes that if the black folks had her Caucasian features, there would be no racism, and thereby they would be the white man's equal. Mrs. Turner feels disgusted with the blacks folks around her for their very blackness continuously belie her dreams: "It was distressing to emerge from her inner temple and find these black desecrators howling with laughter before the door" (293).

Mrs. Turner's alienation to her race and to her culture has gone to extreme in that she does nots hop at blacks' stores and have a black doctor treat her: "Don't bring me no nigger doctor tuh hang over sick-bed. Ah done six chillun [. . .] and ain't never had uh nigger tuh even feel mah pulse. White doctors always gits mah money. Ah don't go in no nigger store tuh buy nothin' neither. Colored folks don't know nothin' 'bout no business" (290).

Mrs. Turner deeply resents for being put into the same category with "rusty black man, and uh black woman goin' down de street in all dem loud colors, and whoopin' and hollerin' and laughin' over nothin'" (290). At least, she thinks, she and those who possess white features like her should class off: "Ah'm uh featured woman. Ah got white folks' features in mah face. Still and all Ah got tuh be lumped in wid all de rest. [. . .] Even if dey don't take us in wid de whites, dey oughta make us uh class tuh ourselves" (290). Ironically, Mrs. Turner's black vernacular speech sharply contradicts with her "white" physical attributes. Apparently, Zora Neale Hurston has employed the black vernacular as a cultural means to deconstruct Mrs. Turner's assimilationism. The message Hurston aims to convey is that Mrs. Turner is a black woman, her "white" physical qualifications notwithstanding.

After her eating place is destroyed by a handful of blacks who wanted to teach her a lesson for trying to turn Janie against her husband Teacake because he was too black, Mrs. Turner heads for Miami "where folks is civilized" (298), still worshipping the white man's altar of white beauty. Mrs. Turner's case represents a historical and cultural dilemma striking at the black women's daily attempts to negotiate their sense of worth and beauty with the dominant culture's notions of beauty and femininity. Mrs.

Turner's continuous act of negating blackness reveals the profound traumatic impact of internalized oppression on black women's self identity. Without self-love, self-respect, and a positive connection to black roots, culture and community, it is not possible to fashion a sustaining sense of identity, the spiritual locomotive force carrying black women to empowerment. As bell hooks cogently puts it, "We cannot value ourselves rightly without first breaking through the walls of denial which hide the depth of black self-hatred, inner anguish, and unreconciled pain. [. . .] Collectively, black people [. . .] are empowered when we practice self-love as a revolutionary intervention that undermines practices of domination" (*Black Looks*, 20).

The assimilated black women studied in this chapter have internalized the white racist-sexist order's notions of femininity, masculinity, material success, beauty and sexuality. Unable to open up alternative spaces from which they can resist the controlling, oppressive images of blackness, these women mindlessly borrow the white man's terms to define and affirm themselves. They valorize white middle -class notions of material success at the cost of disclaiming their heritage and sense of history, prerequisites to any serious talk about self empowerment, self-definition, and self-knowledge. Underneath these outwardly successful, upwardly mobile black women lurks feelings of isolation, alienation, loneliness, and homelessness. When the white man's values become the yardsticks by which they evaluate themselves and others, these women are left with nothing but their material gains and social status largely acquired through marriages to secure a sense of self, which is so tenuous, unstable, and fragile. Fundamental to the process of black women's self-definition and claiming subjectivity is the recognition of a shared history of oppression, rootedness in the past and an aversion from the "colonizing," oppressive responses to determine legitimacy. Nevertheless, the assimilated black woman, choosing "the master's tools" to legitimate herself, engages in a constant process of self-denial, often forgetting the toll it takes in terms of spiritual amnesia, frustration, and alienation both from the self and from her community. Assimilation is the tragic response of the black woman bereft of the inner sources and strength in confronting the workings of a capitalist, sexist and racist society. And the real tragedy of the assimilated black woman is that her fragile existential moorings in white man's world are marked by self-erasure.

I
am a black woman
tall as a cypress
strong
beyond all definition still
defying place
and time
and circumstance
assailed
impervious
indestructible
Look
on me and be

renewed. (Mari Evans, “I am A Black Woman,” 1970)

6.3. The Empowered Woman

The image of the empowered black woman is to be explored in this chapter through a wide range of African American women’s literary writing. Two stories, one written at the height of the abolitionist movement, the other in the midst of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, an autobiography written by an ex-slave abolitionist activist, three novels, one from the Harlem Renaissance period, the other from the post-civil rights era, and the last one from today’s America, and finally a play written in 1950s America will serve as the basic literary material for an analysis of the image of the empowered woman in African-American women’s literary tradition. The empowered black woman has acquired the political and critical consciousness fundamental to resisting the intersecting oppressions of race, class and gender. The empowered black women has been able to develop the inner sources she needs to cope with larger societal forces. Rather than the objects of a white patriarchal, racist discourse, these black women are subjects defining and voicing their own experiences. The themes self-definition and self-knowledge are vital to any discussion of black women’s empowerment. In a culture that has always defined black woman in derogatory, controlling images, it is vital for black women to have a voice, and to define themselves in ways that resist and defy externally controlled, hegemonic constructions of black womanhood.

Given their erasure both from the mainstream U.S. history and black historiography, their deep and centuries-long conspiracy of silence surrounding their struggles, their sufferings and strivings, it becomes all the more apparent why black women authors took the painstaking task of giving sound and vision to their condition as black women. To prove that the black woman is a woman, but not a castrating matriarch, a plantation mammy, nor an insatiable sexual deviant, black women writers defied racist-sexist constructions of black womanhood, resolving the contradictions

between the dominant images and the realities of black female experience in the United States history. As Mary Helen Washington remarks,

> *There is a consistently heroic and articulate voice. The women who had once been described as "the mules of the world" chose for themselves some new imagery: the hardiness and resiliency of black-eyed susans, the hunger and yearning of the mysterious midnight bird; they are seeing themselves as reborn, creators of a new world in which new values prevail.* ("New Lives and New Letters", 3)

Just as Sojourner Truth, giving voice to her own experiences as a black woman, demystified the "Cult of True Womanhood," saying "Ain't I a Woman?" almost two centuries ago at the third women's rights convention in Worcester, the empowered black woman is in a constant process of reconciling her own internally defined images of self as an African American woman with the externally defined images of black woman by a white-supremacist, sexist society. Therefore, the act of self-definition is a politically charged process for black women who want to break free from hegemonic constructions of black womanhood and to create alternative ways of being. As maintained by black feminist literary critic Barbara Christian, "To be able to use the range of one's voice, to attempt to express the totality of self, is a recurring struggle in the tradition of [Black women] writers" (1985,172).

Like most black feminist critics Patricia Hill Collins emphasizes the centrality of creating independent self-definitions to black women's daily survival against the simultaneity of the oppressions of race, class, and gender. In *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), Collins argues that a self-defined, womanist is the product of an inner journey from internalized oppression to the state of a free, "decolonized" mind (112). The journey from victimization and objectification to self-empowerment and subjectivity often involves, as Audre Lorde describes it in *Sister Outsider*, "the transformation of silence into language and action" (140). It is also the transformation of ignorance to self-knowledge; without an understanding of how their personal lives have been fundamentally shaped by intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender and sexuality, it is impossible to interpret their reality. bell hooks insistently points to the importance of self-knowledge for black women in their journeys to empowerment: "[The process of

becoming subjects] emerges as one comes to understand how structures of domination work in one's own life, as one develops critical thinking and critical consciousness, as one invents new, alternative habits of being, and resists from that marginal space of difference *inwardly* defined" (emphasis added; *Yearning*, 15).

Apart from developing a critical consciousness and self-knowledge that could enable one to see into the intricate workings of class, race and gender oppressions, the process of self-definition, also necessitates developing a sense of self-respect, self-love and self-value. Given the historical objectification of black women through derogatory images denying them the love and the respect which white women have always been accorded by virtue of their race and class, and how these images have distorted their conceptions of themselves even to the point of self-hatred, and self-denial as well as a distortion of black male-female relations in the black communities, it becomes of vital importance for black women to reclaim the respect that has been long denied to them not only by the white society but also by black men. As Patricia Collins warns in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), developing self-definition, self-love, self-valuation, and self-respect does not mean constructing an "autonomy gained by separating oneself from others" (113). Instead, self is found in the relations black women establish with other black women, with their larger community and their past. Celebration of black identity and culture, consciousness of a shared history of oppression, rootedness in the past are vital to any considerations of an empowered black female self. To quote Toni Morrison's words once again, "it is if we don't keep in touch with the ancestor that we are, in fact, lost. [. . .]When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself" (202).

The empowered black woman does not use "the master's tools" to overthrow racist, sexist and classist oppressions, for she knows that, no matter how oppressed she may be, the power to save herself lies within her inner strength, resiliency and will power. She, unlike a Lutie Johnson or a Clare Kendry, knows that she is an organic part of the black community and history. She, unlike a Lorraine Dumont, does not attempt to transform her present without understanding her past. Nor does she, like Irene Redfield, define herself through her relation to a husband or marriage, or succumb to white male definitions of femininity to carve out a space for herself in a racist patriarchal society. The empowered woman, as Audre Lorde contends in *Sister Outsider*, is self-determined

to define herself, name herself, and speak for *herself*, instead being defined and spoken for by others (43). To Lorde, to be silent in the face of oppression is tantamount to accepting oppression. Living in a male dominated, racist society, the empowered black woman is able to distinguish between self-definition that ennobles and inspires and self-denial that stifles and buries the individual self. Giving voice to her hitherto suppressed, bruised silences, this black woman gets involved in a quest to break out of the Other, and to claim the *I,* connected to an ancestral past and to the black community. The black women in the following literary works written by black women writers at different times in United States history provide ample evidence to explore the empowerment stories of various black women coming with different backgrounds and different social classes.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's short story "The Two Offers" written as early as 1859 is the empowerment story of a black woman in nineteenth-century America. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911), the black feminist-abolitionist activist, poet, essayist, short story writer and novelist of the nineteenth–century America represents one of the pioneering voices of black woman's literary tradition. As Frances Smith Foster observes,

> *Having been born into an articulate and well-respected free black family, Harper could have chosen to avoid many of the distressing realities that controlled the lives of the less fortunate members of her race. She chose not to do so. Harper decided that her personal survival and well-being were inextricably linked with the survival and well-being of the larger society and that confrontation, not silence, was the way to mental [. . .] health. She gave up her small but real claim to a life of relative leisure and privacy and became not only the most popular African American writer of the nineteenth century but also one of the most important women in the United States history*. (3-4)

Her short story "The Two Offers" is one of the earliest short stories by an African-American writer, in which two beautiful and cultivated young black women try to decide how to make the best use of their lives. Like Harper, one of these women feels that her identity is inseparable from the black masses who have been undergoing

massive physical and psychological sufferings and chooses to become a writer to champion the causes of freedom, equality and righteousness.

An exploration of the dominant literary genres of Harper's time is central to an understanding and evaluation of her short story "The Two Offers." Harper wrote at a time when the domestic or sentimental novel was the dominant literary genre in nineteenth century America. The dominating gender ideology of the Cult of True Womanhood would define the boundaries of acceptable female behavior for the heroines surfacing the popular sentimental novels of the time. The white heroines of the sentimental novel were designated within the confines of a gender ideology, the cardinal tenets of which the feminist historian Barbara Welter defined as chastity, domesticity, piety and submissiveness. Any heroine who fell short of these white patriarchal notions of femininity was doomed to destruction, whether it be in the form of death, suicide, or exclusion from society. Receptive to the expectations of a white audience, Harper exploited the conventions of the domestic novel to demystify a sexist ideology that has prescribed wifehood and motherhood as a woman's ultimate reasons for being, and thereof opened up alternative spaces of being, of self-realization for black women who consistently failed the test of true womanhood in nineteenth century America. She disrupted conventional expectations and definitions through creating a character like Janette, who chooses to be a writer fighting for equality and freedom rather than to be submissive wife and a mother.

The story revolves around the two black women's choices for self-definition and self-actualization. Laura Lagrange, Janette Alston's cousin, has two offers for marriage, and she does not know which one to choose. Although not in love with any of the suitors, Laura feels obliged to make a choice between the two offers, for having come of age for marriage, she does not want to end up as an "old maid," which "is not to be thought of" (106). Laura considers a life without marriage, a life without a husband as "the most dreadful fate that can befall a woman" (106). She wants to construct her identity within the "sublime" roles of motherhood and wifehood and therefore marries one of the suitors for social convenience. Laura believes that "the great lesson of human experience and woman's life" was "to love the man who bowed at her shrine," and to become "a willing worshipper" to the exigencies of marriage. However, things do not

happen to be the way Laura has expected: her husband, "vain and superficial in character" takes to gambling and drinking, becoming gradually an absence from his home and proving to be "unworthy of the deep and undying devotion of a pure-hearted woman" (109). Day by day, the unkindness and neglect of her husband leaves Laura with feelings of agony, loneliness and despair, "slowly ooz[ing] away [her soul's] life-drops," and bringing about "a disease that no medicine could cure, no earthly balm would heal" (113).

Shrinking more and more in spirit, Laura is now lying in her death-bed, calling in vain for the wayward husband who fails her in death as in life: "Life had grown so weary upon her head-the future looked so hopeless-she had no wish to tread again the track where thorns had pierced her feet [. . .]" (108). Bending over Laura's death-bed, and mourning over the loss of a beloved one, Janette questions the social conventions that imprison women within the sterile and empty walls of marriage, suppressing woman's inner strength and creativity and denying her the right to exist outside the roles prescribed by a patriarchal order. She tactfully dismantles the myth of true womanhood by referring to it as an "imperfect culture" inhibiting the flourishing and development of whole persons. Having witnessed many "shattered and dismasted wrecks" by the institution of marriage, having seen so many souls "strand[ing] on the shoals of existence Laura asks herself and, indirectly, her reading audience:

> *Will the mere possession of any human love fully satisfy all the demands of her whole being? You may paint her in poetry or fiction, as a frail vine, clinging too her man for support, and dying when deprived of it; and all this may sound well enough to please the imaginations of school-girls, or love-lorn maidens. But woman-the true woman- if you would render her happy, it needs more than the mere development of her affectional nature. Her conscience should be enlightened, [. . .] and scope given to her Heaven-endowed and God-given faculties. The true aim of female education should be, not a development of one or two, but all the faculties of the human soul, because no perfect womanhood is developed by imperfect culture*. (109)

Juxtaposed against the shrinking, defeated black woman whom Laura so aptly represents, is the empowered, self-made black women, Janette Alston, who has succeeded in going and living beyond the conventional roles of motherhood and wifehood, and has preferred to define and actualize herself through her struggles and her choices over the years. Through flashbacks, Janette reveals her painful childhood memories shaped by the loss of a mother who relentlessly toiled day and night to ensure the survival of her family until "her toil-worn hands became too feeble to hold the shattered chords of existence, and her tear-dimmed eyes grew heavy with the slumber of death" (107). Upon her mother's death, Janette was determined to make life different for herself, a life marked by a self-voiced, self-defined and self-made existence charged with a political and critical consciousness: Janette is now a highly respected and widely-known black female abolitionist writer, who fights, through her words, against the ills inflicted upon her race by white supremacist, sexist ideologies in the aftermath of the Reconstruction:

> *Too self-reliant to depend on the charity of relations, she endeavored to support herself by her own exertions, and she had succeeded. Her path for a while was marked with struggle and trial, but instead of uselessly repining, she met them bravely, and her life became not a thing of ease and indulgence, but of conquest, victory and accomplishments. The achievements of her genius had won her a position in the literary world, where she shone as one of its bright particular stars.* (107)

Janette knows that she is an old maid, yet she never broods over her loneliness. True, there is "no husband brighten[ing] her life [. . .] No children nestling lovingly in her arms called mother. No one appended Mrs. to her name [. . .]" (114) but Janette has been determined to chart for herself alternative routes to self-definition and to self-empowerment other than those of wifehood and motherhood, for "she felt that she had a high and holy mission on the battle-field of existence, that life was not given her to be frittered away in nonsense, or wasted away in trifling pursuits" (114). Having come out of her inner journey as an empowered black woman who has created alternative ways of being and self-definition against all odds circumscribing black women's lives, Janette

has learned "one of life's most precious lessons, that true happiness consists in the full development and right culture of [black women's] whole natures" (114).

Another work where the image of the empowered black woman surfaces is the former slave and abolitionist activist Harriet A. Jacobs's autobiographical piece *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861). Harriet Jacobs, under the pseudonym of Linda Brent, portrays her quest for freedom, self-autonomy, and self-respect. Like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Jacobs exploits the prevailing literary genres of the nineteenth-century America-- the seduction novel and the domestic novel--both to secure white readership, especially that of white middle class abolitionist women, and to subvert and demystify the gender ideologies of the time which crosscut ideologies of race, and class [6], legitimizing the brutal treatment and abuse to which slave women were subjected in slavery. Beneath the seemingly traditional style of the text, continuously runs a discursive subtext which dismantles the myths of true womanhood, exposing their inapplicability to the material conditions of the slave women. In so doing, Jacobs challenges the readers of the *Incidents* to interrogate the ideological structures in which they were inscribed and to realize their own racism in the oppression of black women.

Linda Brent is born a slave, but it is only when she is fifteen years old that she begins to understand what it really means to be a slave girl: "My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. [. . .] He peopled my young mind unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. [. . .] He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things" (27). At this point in the narrative, Linda reflects on her initial awareness of how the institution of slavery with all its evils was protected by the laws and the religion: "But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or from even death. [. . .] The degradation, the wrongs, the vices, that grow out of slavery, are more than I can describe" (27-8). Linda introduces her most bitter attack on white man's religion which imprisoned "their consciences with the doctrine that God created the Africans to be

[6] Class, here refers to the political economies of a slave system which totally disregarded the conventional gender roles for black women whose labor force and bodies were vital to keeping the plantation economy afloat and intact.

slaves" (44) and that serving to the white master was tantamount to serving God. Linda is aware of the damage slavery has wrought upon the spirits of slaves. She deeply resents the fact that many slaves would not be persuaded to believe that

> *freedom could make them useful men, and enable them to protect their wives and children. If those heathens in our Christian land had as much teaching as some Hindoos, they would think otherwise. They would know that liberty is more valuable than life. They would begin to understand their own capabilities, and exert themselves to become men and women*. (43)

But Linda, like her uncle Benjamin, has no intention of putting her trust in white man's God, and humbling herself before the master. As Linda says, "He that is *willing* to be a slave, let him be a slave" (26). Linda, like her uncle, is unwilling to be a slave. Although her grandmother tries to make her and her brother accept that their life "was the will of God: that he had seen fit to place us under such circumstances; and though it seemed hard, we ought to pray for contentment," Linda "reasoned that it was much more the will of God that we should be situated as she was" (17). Resolute not to become Dr. Flint's concubine, Linda, through a series of maneuvers, struggles to avoid the fate that falls upon most slave women. And she does so with a mind continuously calculating the material circumstances which she has been forced to live, and the possibilities and the means which she could employ to escape slavery. Although Linda is fully aware of the dangerous implications of her defiance, she is determined not to give in: "I had not lived fourteen years in slavery for nothing. I had felt, seen and heard enough, to read the characters, and question the motives of those around me. The war of my life had begun; and though one of God's most powerless creatures, I resolved never to be conquered. Alas, for me!" (19).

When she is sixteen, Linda falls in love with a free born carpenter, who wants to buy Linda. Yet, Dr. Flint, being "too willful and arbitrary a man to consent to that arrangement" (37), strikes Linda, saying "I have a right to do as I like with you" (39). This "incident" in Linda's life prepares her for the trials she has yet to face. Linda knows that even if Dr. Flints consents to their marriage, "the marriage would give her husband no power to protect [her] from [her] master. [. . .] And then, if [they] had

children, [she] knew they must 'follow the condition of the mother'" (42). Realizing that self-knowledge will not suffice to save her from becoming Dr. Flint's concubine, Linda takes action. She takes a white lover, Mr. Sands, knowing "nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that [she] favored another; and it was something to triumph over [her] tyrant even in that small way" (55). Linda's decision to take a white lover is motivated by consideration not only for securing the means for her freedom but also for improving the chances of survival for any child she might bear, for Linda very well knows the children she might bear into slavery are but "an addition to [Dr. Flint's] stock of slaves" (61).

Out of her determination not to be sexually abused and compromised, and not to succumb to the will of her master, Linda deliberately has an "illicit" liason to secure a future for herself and her children. The language of sin and shame she uses to account for the "incidents" that have forced her to make a "headlong plunge" (55) demonstrates how Jacobs exploited the dominant literary conventions of nineteenth-century America to challenge racist sexual ideologies:

> *I made a headlong plunge. Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant [. . .] I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day*. (55-6)

Linda is confronting American society at a particular point in history when the conventional feminine qualities of passivity, submission, chastity defined a woman's sense of worth and identity. According to the gender ideology of true womanhood, death itself is preferable to the loss of chastity, but Linda Brent both survives her "impure" state and uses her sexuality for empowerment in the face of a white racist-sexist system that has denied black women any sense of dignity and identity. At this climactic point in the narrative, Jacobs subverts a major narrative principle of sentimental fiction: death as preferable to the loss of chastity becomes "Death is better than slavery" (62). Furthermore, Linda dismantles the cult of true womanhood, which

has put the white woman on a pedestal of purity and chastity, sharply contrasting the material conditions of the slave woman that have placed her on a pedestal of immorality and inferiority. Through an exposure of the material conditions of slave women, Linda reveals the inapplicability of white patriarchal norms of womanhood to the realities of slave women:

> *But, O, ye happy women whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by laws [. . .] I wanted to keep myself pure; and under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect [. . .] but the condition of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible*. (54-5)

Linda's reflection, "in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others" (56), marks the development of an alternative discourse of womanhood. Conventional feminine qualities of submission and passivity are replaced by a determined will, constant defiance and resistance. Now a mother of two children, a boy and a girl, Linda is more resolute than ever before to free herself and her children form the "wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications" of slavery (77). While motherhood, in the conventional sense, ties white women to the domestic sphere, for Linda it becomes a source of strength and resourcefulness that will carry her and her children to freedom. When she confesses to the reader that "I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation" (54), Linda claims her right to take control of her life through a selection among life's possibilities. With each choice, Linda becomes more empowered and self-confident: "I must fight my battle alone. I had a woman's pride, and a mother's love for my children; and I resolved that out of the darkness of this hour a brighter dawn should arise for them. My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each" (85).

Linda plots her escape, hoping that in her absence Mr. Sands, the children's father would buy their freedom. On the day of her escape, Linda prays at the graves of her parents in the slave burial ground, honoring and reconciling with her ancestral past, a symbolic act of linking her struggles to a shared history of oppression, which further empowers her to plot her own course and endure what she must:

> *For more than ten years I had frequented this spot, but never had it seemed to me so sacred as now. A black stump, at the head of my mother's grave, was all that remained of a tree my father had planted. His grave was marked by a small wooden board, bearing his name [. . .] I knelt down and kissed them, and poured froth a prayer to God for guidance and support in the perilous step I was about to take. As I passed the wreck of the old meeting house [. . .] I seemed to hear my father's voice come from it, bidding me not to tarry till I reached freedom or the grave. I rushed on with renovated hopes*. (90-91)

Where the dead slaves "hear not the voice of the oppressor" (90), Linda finds her own voice which affirms her identity as a self-determined woman, willing to take on the challenge of making herself anew and creating a meaningful life. During her seven-years spent hiding in her grandmother's garret, Linda is not the "mad woman in the attic," but the sane, manipulative black woman, who, from her "loophole of retreat," as she defines it, frustrates Flint's every move to find her, tricking him into believing that she has fled to North, and even outwits him by having Mr. Sands to covertly buy the children himself. When both of her children have secured safety up North, Linda plots her escape from her "loophole." Linda escapes to New York only to find that her daughter Ellen was "given" as a waiting maid to Mr. Sands's relatives in New York. Linda now realizes that there could be no freedom for her and for her children unless she is legally freed. Having secured the protection of the Bruce family in New York, "who measured a man's worth by his character, not by his complexion" (189), Linda is finally emancipated through the benevolent efforts of Mrs. Bruce, who pays Mrs. Flint, Dr. Flint's daughter, to buy her freedom.

When Jacobs concludes her narrative writing, "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage," she once again disrupts the conventional

expectations of her white readership. Given that both social and literary conventions of nineteenth-century America was dominated by a gender ideology which saw marriage as the only means for a woman to construct her sense of identity, and self-worth, Linda's concluding her narrative with "freedom" rather than marriage is a challenge to the racist-sexist ideology, in that she has chosen the public sphere of influence and activity to empower herself as well as to inspire white women to engage in political activity to end chattel slavery and white racism. Although at the end of her narrative Linda admits that recalling "the dreary years [she] passed in bondage" is painful to her, she is never willing to erase a painful yet meaningful past that brings her "tender memories of her good old grandmother" (201), memories that connect Linda to her past, to her family, to her ancestors. The subjective *I* Linda has achieved through her trials and struggles is the self in relation to her community, to her family.

In her defiance against the white patriarchal constructions of womanhood, Linda proposes a new definition of womanhood. She asserts a radical alternative to the sexual ideology mandated by the white patriarchy: Linda politicizes her sexuality by using it as a source of strength and resourcefulness to gain self-autonomy and self-esteem. Furthermore, she subverts the "Jezebel" and "Mammy" stereotypes, which have objectified black women, denying them a sense of self and dignity. Linda is not the wanton Jezebel, whose "deviant" sexuality has always been used to legitimize black woman's sexual exploitation. On the contrary, she is the sexual subject who exercises her sexuality as a means to resist Dr. Flint, the epitome of corrupt white male power. Neither is she the contended, docile plantation Mammy who nurses white babies. Linda demonstrates the strength of her maternal love through a series of risks she takes to liberate her children. Operating out of self-determination and self-reliance, Linda, in her quest for freedom and identity, defies all social conventions of a corrupt patriarchal racist society. Acting out of her own standards of womanhood and motherhood and making free choices among life's possibilities, Linda emerges empowered from her quest for self-definition and freedom.

Paule Marshall's short story "Reena" (1962) explores the title character Reena's struggle for self-definition and empowerment as a middle-aged, middle-class and educated black woman. At the wake that Reena and her friend Paulie attend for their

Aunt Vi, who lived out her life as a domestic in white women's homes, Reena tells herstory of recreation to her friend Paulie, whom she meets after twenty years of separation. Paulie and Reena represent the women growing up in the 50s, women (now in their forties or fifties) who got an education by relentless struggle and sacrifice. They have waged a battle against the badge of inferiority that came with their race and their sex, and come out of it as empowered and renovated.

Born into a poor family with "half a dozen brothers and sisters who consumed quantities of bread and jam," Reena is determined, as early as the age of twelve, to make something different, something meaningful out of herself. Early on in the story, Reena is introduced as a black girl possessing a sense of purpose, knowing what to do with her life. Marshall defines her entrance into the church where the funeral services for Aunt Vi are being held as follows: " Reena entered the church [. . .] as though she, not the minister, were coming to officiate [. . .]" (2053), while Paulie, through flashback, remembers Reena as a girl who "had a quality that was unique, superior, and therefore dangerous" (2054).What Reena experiences during her long journey she embarks upon to define and create herself is representative of what Paulie and "millions like [her]" have had to struggle against: the racist-sexist stereotypes of black women that have always denied them the right to define and speak out for themselves:

> *formulated by others to serve out their fantasies, a definition [they] have to combat at an unconscionable cost to the self and even use, at times, in order to survive; the cause of so much shame and rage as well as, oddly enough, a source of pride: simply, what it has meant, what it means, to be a black woman in America*. (2053)

Reena's herstory is cast against the politically and socially turbulent years of 1950s and 1960s, marked by the increasing momentum of the Civil Rights Movement, and the resurgence of the same old gender ideology after the World War II. Given that the black movement was made synonymous with black man's achievement of his long-denied manhood, that they were eager to reestablish the white patriarchal values within their families and communities, black women's roles in the liberation struggle was thought to be one of assuming the role of the passive, subordinate housewife and mother, caring for and nurturing her family. Convinced that the question of race was

more important than the question of sex and that being a feminist was tantamount to being a traitor to the race, black women dissociated themselves from the feminist activism of the times and assumed their "prescribed" roles. As bell hooks analyzes, this was the period which saw black women's obsession with the ideal of femininity:

> *White men, like black men, wanted to see all women be less assertive, dependent, and unemployed. Mass media was the weapon used to destroy the newfound independence of women. White and black women alike were subjected to endless propaganda which encouraged them to believe that a woman's place was in the home-that the fulfillment in life depended on finding the right man to marry and producing a family. If women were compelled by circumstance to work, they were told that it was better if they didn't compete with men and confined themselves to jobs like teaching and nursing.*
>
> *The working woman, be she black or white, found it necessary to prove her femininity. [. . .] More than ever before in U.S. history, black women were obsessed with pursuing the ideal of femininity described on television, in books and magazines. An emerging black middle class meant that groups of black females had more money than ever before to spend buying fashions, cosmetics, or reading magazines like McCall's and Ladies Home Journal*. (*Ain't I A Woman*, 177-8)

A middle-class professional black woman, Reena rejects all these roles, and creates a meaningful life for herself and her children, making choices among life's possibilities. After high school, Reena attends a free city college, "where she had majored in journalism, worked part time in the school library, and [. . .] joined a house plan" (2056). Unlike the middle-class Negro girls in the college who were "too busy planning the annual autumn frolic," and who were looking forward to being "tidy little school teachers, social workers, and lab technicians," (2056) Reena is socially responsible to and politically conscious of the larger world around her. She spends her college years as a young black woman committed to social equality and justice,

picketing, boycotting, demonstrating, getting people to sign petitions, which eventually results in her temporary suspension from college.

As Reena talks about her occasional dates during her college years, we once again understand with deeper insight how white constructions of beauty affect both intraracial and interracial relations. Reena is rejected by the family of her black date because she is "too black" (2056). Reena painfully remembers the psychic wounds inflicted because of her color as a child:

> *Because I was dark I was always being plastered with Vaseline so I wouldn't look ashy. Whenever I had my picture taken they would pile a whitish powder on my face and make the lights so bright I always came out looking ghostly. My mother stopped speaking to any number of people because they said I would have been pretty if I hadn't been so dark. Like nearly every little black girl, I had my share of dreams waking up to find myself with long, blonde curls, blue eyes, and skin like milk. (2057)*

Reena does not internalize white society's standards of beauty which often, for most black women, leads to a negative self-image. Rather, she develops a critical consciousness which sees into the workings of a racist ideology that has always denied black women a sense of self-love and self-esteem:

> *We live surrounded by white images, and white in this world is synonymous with the good, light, beauty, success, so that, despite ourselves sometimes, we run after that whiteness and deny our darkness, which has been made into a symbol of all that is evil and inferior. I wasn't a person to that boy's parents, but a symbol of the darkness they were in flight from, so that just as they-that boy, his parents, those silly girls in the houseplan-were running from me, I started running from them [. . .].* (2057)

Reena's blackness rears its head on another occasion when she dates a white student. The relationship comes to an end when Bob insists that she meet his father who is almost repelled with disgust and horror at the sight of Reena:

> *I will never forget or forgive the look on that old man's face when he opened his hotel-room door and saw me. The horror. I have been the personification of every evil in the world. His inability to believe that it*

was his son standing there holding my hand. His shock. I'm sure he never fully recovered. (2058-59)

From then on, Reena uses her blackness as a weapon "to get at that white world" which denies her. Speaking at a college debate on McCarthyism, Reena foregrounds her blackness which she is proud of. Her hair, her clothing, her dignified posture--all represent Reena's self-acceptance and self-love. Paulie recalls the following:

Her color might have been a weapon she used to dazzle and disarm her opponents. And she had highlighted it with the clothes she was wearing [. . .] She wore her hair cropped short like a boy's and it was not straightened like mine and other Negro girls in the audience, but left in its coarse natural state [. . .] I remember she left the auditorium in triumph that day, surrounded by a noisy entourage from her college-all of them white. (2057)

After graduation from the college, Reena tries every newspaper office in town only to find out that "there were so many ways of saying 'no' without ever once using the word" (2059). Dissatisfied with her job as a social investigator for the Welfare Department, Reena starts on her master's in journalism at Columbia and takes up a job in "a private social-work agency in their publicity department" (2061). Now an unmarried professional Negro woman in her late adolescence "with a fairly decent salary", Reena realizes that there is a price she has to pay for being an intellectual, professional black woman with a degree in journalism: Loneliness. Her "intellectual or professional peers," if they marry at all, choose younger women "without the degrees and the fat jobs, who are no threat [. . .] or they marry white women" (2061). Reena deeply resents the fact that black women who have sought degrees and found well-paying jobs are really at a disadvantage. Reena and Paulie recite the reasons for their rejection by black men:

'Too threatening [. . .] castrating [. . .]'

'Too independent and impatient with them for not being more ambitious [. . .] contemptuous.'

'Not supportive, unwilling to submerge our interests for theirs [. . .]'

'Lacking in the subtle art of getting and keeping a man [. . .]'. (2062)

Reena and Paulie constitute a threat to black man's sense of power; they compete with men in the public arena rather than assume their womanly roles as wives and mothers in the domestic sphere. For the black man, educated, professional black women like Reena do not make suitable mates in marriage for they are the castrating matriarchs who deny black men to feel like a "man". As Patricia Hill Collins argues in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), like the racist-sexist images of the "Jezebel," the "welfare mother," or the "mammy", the image of the "Black lady" is another race-gender-specific controlling image referring to middle-class professional black women:

> *The image of the black lady builds upon prior images of Black womanhood in many ways. For one thing, this image seems to be yet another version of the modern mammy, namely, the hardworking Black woman professional who works twice as everyone else. The image of the black lady also resembles aspects of the matriarchy thesis-Black ladies have jobs that are all so consuming that they have no time for men or have forgotten how to treat them. Because they so routinely compete with men and are successful at it, they become less feminine. Highly educated Black ladies are deemed to be too assertive-that's why they cannot get men to marry them.* (80-81)

Reena's marriage to Dave, the talented and ambitious photographer, which finally ends in divorce, captures the combined effects of racism and sexism in black male-female relationships. Reena describes the early years of their marriage as intellectually and spiritually fulfilling, both sharing the same ideas about political and social issues, "the line of their allegiance reaching directly to all those trapped in Harlem" (2063). However, as Reena relates it, "something slip[s] in (their marriage) while they weren't looking and begin[s] its deadly work" (2063). That "something" which intrudes into their marriage is Dave's low self-esteem, and lack of self-confidence, his "diffidence" as to make choices about his career. It is Reena, who assures him of his talents and persuades him into opening his own studio. Despite the professional recognition Dave has achieved through various awards and photographic exhibits, he "also wanted the big, gaudy commercial success that would dazzle and confound that white world downtown and force it to *see* him" (2063). Reena realizes that playing the role of the supportive wife, trying to help her husband gain self-

confidence so that he could compete with the white man in the white man's world, has left her a woman "submerged into [her husband's] problems". When Reena takes up her old job which she had stopped after the second baby, Dave starts blaming her for his own inadequacies: "Dave saw it as a way of pointing up his deficiencies. [. . .] He would accuse me of wanting to see him fail in all kinds of responsibilities [. . .] After a time we both got caught up in this thing and an ugliness came between us [. . .]" (2063). Seeing that her radical, political self was giving way for a self defined in terms of her roles as mother and wife, Reena takes action "for [her] own sanity," preferring to be the black professional woman to the middle-class "lady."

At age forty, Reena divorces the husband who cannot accept her pledge to become a woman in her own right, begins a long-desired career in journalism (she is working on her thesis now). She is now planning to take her children, the third generation, to Africa so that they can see their history and heritage first hand. Reena affirms the continuity of her indomitable spirit in her children when she says to Paulie: "I will feel that I have done well by them if I give them, if nothing more, a sense of themselves and their worth and importance as black people. Everything I do with them, for them, is to this end. I don't want them ever to be confused about this. They must have their identifications straight from the beginning. No white dolls for them!" (2064).

Reena's telling herstory to Paulie at Aunt Vi's wake is symbolical. Aunt Vi's wake with its special African foods and drinks, with friends and relatives commemorating her place in their lives with gaiety and laughter becomes a celebration of the continuity of life and rebirth. So, Reena both enters the house of her past to connect herself to a viable and meaningful history, which has always proved to be sustaining, and affirms her historical connection to all those black women "who had to be almost frighteningly strong in order for them all to survive" (2062). From that mutual, meaningful past, Reena draws the strength and enthusiasm to go forward. Reena's herstory draws to a close as the dawn breaks in. Just like the dawn gives birth to a new day, Reena is presented to the reader as a woman giving birth to a new, empowered self:

> *Here I am, practically middle-aged, with three children to raise by myself and with little or no money to do it, and yet I feel, strangely enough, as*

though life is just beginning-that it's new and fresh with all kinds of possibilities. Maybe it's because I've been through my purgatory and I can't ever be overwhelmed again. (2064)

Reena is one of Mary Helen Washington's "black-eyed susans," who, through her strength, determination and hardiness, makes life meaningful to herself. Going beyond the definitions, the conventional roles, and the values of a white racist patriarchal society, Reena creates a world where her own values prevail: there are no white dolls in this world. Nor a husband, for Reena has already been there almost to the point of self-denial.

Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is another novel where we witness the empowerment story of a black woman. The novel explores Janie Crawford's individual triumph over the limitations imposed on her by sexism, poverty and racism. As the novel opens, Janie Crawford, the black female protagonist, is back to her hometown Eatonville after years of absence, and is telling herstory, her journey to find herself, to her best friend Phoeby. And as readers, we eavesdrop on Janie's story: her search for self, a sense of identity, and her voice long-suppressed by a patriarchal black community that has emulated the mores of the white man.

Raised by her grandmother Nanny Crawford in "the white folks' back yard", Janie is a mulatto girl of sixteen, with light-skin and long straight hair, who thinks of herself as a tree giving its "first tiny bloom" of womanhood and sexuality. Janie wants to be "pear tree-any tree in bloom," and wants "to struggle with life" yet it seems "to elude her" (183). An ex-slave with painful memories of the sexual exploitation (in fact, rape) of her daughter and herself, Nanny knows what sexuality means for a black woman in a male dominated, white supremacist society. Nanny recounts to Janie the struggles in her own life, saying, "Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman ought to be and to do. Dat's one of de hold-backs of slavery. [. . .] Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn't want mah daughter used dat way neither" (187). Nanny envisions Janie "sittin' on high" (187) on the pedestal reserved for southern white women, far from the servility that characterized Nanny's own life-the servility that has made the black woman "de

mule uh de world" (186). For Nanny, marriage is the only way to escape poverty and abuse. In order to prevent the same fate from befalling Janie, Nanny marries off Janie against her will to Logan Killicks, an old man whose sixty acres and a mule prove his eligibility. However, Killicks wants to make a mule out of her, what her grandmother wanted to protect her from becoming. Janie wants "things sweet with [her] marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree" (193) but her husband does not ever "mention nothin' pretty" when "he is in dere" (193), stops looking at her and saying rhymes to her. Instead, he goes to buy a mule for her to plough the fields. Janie learns from her first marriage that "marriage did not make love" (194).

Still longing for "a bloom time," Janie keeps looking "up the road towards way off" to the horizon where she could find and define herself beyond the roles appropriated for her by the male-dominated world. And she meets Jody Stark, who thinks of Janie as "a pretty doll-baby," who "is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan [herself] [. . .]" (197). Although Janie knows that Jody did not represent "pollen and blooming trees," she is seduced by his self-confidence, his "big voice," his visions for "change and chance" and for "far horizons" (197). At least, Jody wants "to make a wife outa [her]," and to treat her like a "lady" (198). Janie elopes with Jody, who, like the white man, wants to be the "ruler of things." And before long Jody starts ruling over a whole community of blacks as well as Janie. Consodilating his power as landlord, storekeeper, postmaster and mayor of the town, Jody has a house built and painted "sparkly white," in which Janie is to live like a white lady. The house in its sheer whiteness, like "the big house" of the white plantation owners, represents the white man's values which Jody has aspired to. To Jody, Janie is his property, like his store, his land, which marks the difference between townspeople and himself. That is why he does not "mean for nobody else's wife to rank with her. She must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang" (207). Jody, like the white man, puts Janie on a pedestal where he wants to see her as his obedient, submissive, chaste, elegant, and domestic wife. During the welcoming ceremony held out by the townspeople, Jody is the big speaker, orator who silences his wife: "mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (208). The "high-stool of do nothin'" life, which Nanny always wished

for her granddaughter, is but a "strain" for Janie. Perched on the pedestal of true womanhood, Janie is but a reflection of Jody's status, his showpiece, and she must be contended with what she has been made into, as Jody's bragging reveals: "Ah aimed tuh be uh big voice. You oughta be glad, 'cause dat makes uh big woman outa you" (211).

Just like she was barred from making speeches in the public, Janie is barred from the public sphere of the porch where men come together and tell jokes or stories, and where they enhance each other's masculine pride, talking how to beat or treat a black woman. Their camaraderie is mostly based upon their insistence on female submission and inferiority. Jody's class and gender consciousness isolates Janie from the Eatonville community, which she wants to be a part of. Janie cannot go to the communal mule-dragging because Mrs. Major Starks is not like the other black women who are "wid any and everybody in uh passle pushin' and shovin' wid they no manners selves" (222). "Dat mess uh commonness" is no place for a "white" lady (223).

Janie's place is in the house or in the store behind the counter with a headrag, which Jody forces her to wear to cover her beautiful abundant hair because of his jealousy. Janie's feelings of "coldness and fear" at Jody's determination to submit her to his will testify to her rejection of the gender roles allotted to her by virtue of her sex and class. The initial verbal lovemaking turns into verbal as well as physical assault as Jody wants to make Janie know her "place." As their marriage gradually wears off, Janie realizes that Jody has never been the "flesh and blood figure of her dreams. She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man" (233) because " the spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor. [. . .] The bed was no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in. It was a place where she went and laid down when she was sleepy and tired" (232). Yet, Janie never loses touch with her "inside," her dream to go to the "horizon" to create herself, to define herself, so she turns her back upon the image of Jody and "look[s] further to the "horizon" (233). Despite Jody's verbal and physical assaults, Janie learns to protect her inner self from corruption, believing that she will live that part of her sometime in the future, hence "things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where [Jody] could never find them" (233). After Janie achieves this new level of identity she becomes bolder to the point of challenging Jody in public. When Jody tries to humiliate and taunt her in the company of black folks

present in his store, saying that she is not a young girl but an old woman "with pop eyes" and a "rump hangin' nearly to [her] knees" (238), Janie claims her voice and self-respect, defying Jody's cruel verbal attack on her womanhood by robbing him of his manliness:

> *Naw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but then Ah ain't no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n you kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo'big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life*. (238)

Janie has her long-suppressed voice back now, and she uses it as a fatal weapon to defeat and disempower Jody. Janie announces to his male subjects that their all powerful, "big voice" Mayor is sexually impotent. In the wake of Janie's words, Jody's "vanity [bleeds] like a flood" and "his illusion of irresistible maleness" (239) is torn down in the presence of male folks who would "bend which ever way [Joe] [blew]" (214) but who are now laughing into his face. After more than twenty years, Janie comes to voice, silences Jody in public, using her tongue as a weapon against male domination. After this blow to this sense of manliness, Jody starts suffering from a kidney ailment, which soon brings his death.

Jody's death posits a break with Janie's past. Standing in front of the mirror just after Jody's death, Janie remembers that years before, " she had told her girl self to wait for her in the looking glass. [. . .] The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place. She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there" (245). Janie is a now a whole woman with her "inside" and "outside" selves integrated, and this means freedom which, according to Hurston's conception of it, "was something internal. The outside signs were just signs and symbols of the man inside. All you could do was give the opportunity for freedom and the man himself must make his own emancipation" because "no man may make another free" (*Moses*, 282). For the first time, Janie looks back and reflects upon her past, seeing that her grandmother had badly wronged her, and she deeply resents, in fact hates Nanny for "Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon [.

. .]" (247). Rejecting Nanny's definition of womanhood, Janie resumes her original quest: "She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of *people*; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her. But she had been whipped like a cur dog, and run off down a back road after *things*" (247).

Janie believes not in things, social status and material security, but in self-fulfillment, self-realization so she marries Tea Cake (Vergible Woods), a man much younger than she, guitar and piano player, a blues man, a sweet-talker, a fighter, a gambler, a have-not, a jook man, who became "a bee to a blossom-a pear tree blossom in the spring" (261). Teacake's unconditional love for Janie is the catalyst that helps Janie bloom into selfhood; it is also the love which also helps Janie break free from the society's imposed gender roles. Janie joins Teacake in the hitherto male activities of playing checkers, driving, hunting, going to baseball games, night fishing. Janie, who was forbidden by Jody to appear on the porch and join in the laughing, playing and story-telling, now "play[s] coon-can; play[s] Florida flip on the store porch all afternoon" (264). They move to Florida Everglades, where Janie, in her "blue denim overalls and heavy shoes", joins Teacake on the "muck," harvesting beans, and Teacake joins Janie at home to get supper ready. Their marriage is marked by a reversal of traditional gender roles.

Their shack on the "muck" becomes a magnet for all those black folks from all over the South and the Caribbean as well, who share and rejoice in their African folk culture. Janie "listen[s] and laugh[s] and even talk[s] some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest" (284), and indeed the story she tells Pheoby testifies both to her ability and her immersion into her culture. Whereas Jody excluded her from the "commonness" of her culture, Teacake acts as a cultural guide for Janie, giving her a chance to construct her self-identity within the context of her African culture, and thus to "utilize [herself] all over" (266).

The hurricane that strikes Everglades brings things to a different turn in the novel. Bitten by a rabid dog while trying to save Janie from the flood, Teacake falls seriously ill afterwards. When in his delirium he tries to shoot Janie, Janie kills him in self-defense. It is just after this that Janie goes back to Eatonville, is tried for Tea Cake's murder and tells herstory, upon acquittal, to her beloved friend Pheoby. Janie chooses

neither the white court room nor the store porch to tell herstory: for the white jurors "all the women are white," for the towns people "all the blacks are male." In both, Janie is an absentee. So, Janie, now a storyteller, tells it to Phoeby, whom she wants to relate it the townsfolk so that they can, like Janie, explore their horizons and "find out about livin' fuh theyselves" (332).

Janie refuses to live by the norms offered to her by Nanny, Logan and Jody. It is the white man's norms and values about women's roles in a patriarchal society. Having "lived Grandma's way, now [she] means tuh live [hers] (267). Janie refuses to be Logan's plow mule, and throws away her apron. She refuses to be Jody's "classed-off" mule, and throws away her kerchief. She moves from silence to articulation and action. With Teacake she explores love, and learns to love. She defies all societal scripts, and defines herself in roles other than those imposed by the white patriarchal society and emulated by the black society. She acquires self-knowledge through a self-affirming culture, which now enables her to tell herstory. Janie "done been tuh de horizon and back now" (332), and she shares her quest for self-fulfillment with Phoeby and asks her to tell her story to the rest of the community, hoping to bring change to Eatonville. Pheoby's response to Janie's story gives us the first implications of change in town: "Lawd! Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin' wid him after this" (332). The message she brought back to Eatonville was that "they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves" (332). Journeying from "can't to can," transforming her silence into a self-affirming voice, defying all prescriptions of how a woman ought to be, Janie gives birth a new self who now, in peace, "pull[s] in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see" the empowered black woman (333).

The image of the empowered black woman is also traceable in Alice Walker's second novel *Meridian* (1976), which explores the title character Meridian's search for wholeness during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Meridian's formidable struggle for identity, for psychic wholeness and self-autonomy starts when she, unable to live up to the standards of motherhood, joins the Civil Rights Movement and

becomes a political activist who constantly negotiates personal change with social change. At a time when black nationalist ideology was equated with the empowerment of black men, and submission of black women, Meridian moves from the private to the public sphere, destabilizes all conventions of femininity and heterosexual love sanctioned under marriage. She exemplifies Toni Cade's conception of black womanhood which she envisioned in the 1970s: "You find your Self in destroying illusions, smashing myths [. . .] being responsible to some truth, to the struggle. That entails [. . .] cracking through the veneer of this sick society's definition of 'masculine' and 'feminine'" ("On the Issue of Roles", 108).

Born to a lower-middle class black Southern family, Meridian, at the age of twelve, becomes aware of her sexual vulnerability when she is seduced by the local funeral parlor, whose "obesity" was "distasteful to her" (66). Nobody had told Meridian "nothing about what to expect from men, from sex. Her mother never even used the word [. . .] [she] only cautioned her to be 'sweet' [. . .] a euphemism for 'Keep your panties up and your dress down'" (60). Her first encounter with sex teaches Meridian that it is sexual conquest for man and sexual surrender for woman. Meridian's conception of sex is spiritual and erotic, not pornographic as distorted by Western patriarchy. In "The Uses of the Erotic," Audre Lorde writes that the erotic is an empowering source for women although it has been corrupted and distorted by Western patriarchy. Lorde defines the erotic as

> *a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings [and] an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves*. (*Sister Outsider*, 54)

From then on Meridian never enjoys sex; now she has it only when her lover Eddie wants it. Her pregnancy comes "as a total shock" (61). Meridian drops out of school, marries Eddie, and gradually gets distressed with her roles as wife and mother. Eddie remains in school despite his new roles as husband and father because "he had absorbed the belief, prevalent in all their homes, that without at least a high school diploma a person would never amount to anything" (62). Meridian's discontent with her

pregnancy and her marriage gradually amounts to the point of hatred for her baby son and total alienation to her husband. Her disinterest in sex and her ineptitude at house chores, which she is expected to naturally perform displeases Eddie:

> *The worries he was unable to hide were about small things that bothered him: the ironing of his clothes, and even her own, which she did not do nearly as well as his mother (who, finally, in the last stages of her daughter-in-law's pregnancy, began to collect their dirty clothes each Wednesday to bring them back on Friday stainless and pale from bleach); the cooking, which she was too queasy to do at all; and the sex, which she did not seem (he said) interested in*. (64)

Her mother and other women in the community try to dissuade Meridian from leaving her husband and her child. What else could Meridian expect? She had a "good" husband; "he did not 'cheat' and 'beat' her both" (65), the women would say to her, women who "seemed always to expect the two occurrences together, like the twin faces of a single plague" (65). These women do not understand that what frustrates Meridian has nothing to do with Eddie's being a good or a bad husband; they do not understand that there might be other roles to assume and other routes to take for a woman. Neither do they understand that the white patriarchal culture affords them only the suffocation and self-sacrifice of traditional wifehood and motherhood to escape from the specter of the sexually inhibited, lascivious black woman. Meridian cannot be a wife because this role demands erasure and denial of herself in pretended expressions of heterosexual love and marriage.

When Meridian gives birth to her child, she undergoes the same feelings as her mother Mrs. Hill did when she gave birth to her first child. Mrs. Hill "had spent the early part of her life scurrying out of her father's way. Later, when she was in her teens, she also learned to scurry out of the way of white men-because she was good-looking, defenseless and black" (123). However, Mrs. Hill was determined to be a school teacher, which, for her father was unnecessary because if she learned "to cook collard greens, shortbread and fried okra, some poor soul of a man might have her" (123). It was when Meridan's grandmother was pregnant with her twelfth child, and it was she

who paid for Mrs. Hill's education doing other people's laundry after "doing her own washing and work in the fields" (123).

Mrs. Hill valued her freedom more than anything else because when she was free "she was capable of thought and growth and action only if unfettered by the needs of dependents, or the demands, requirements, of a husband" (49). Her felicity and delight in her independence notwithstanding, Mrs. Hill cannot escape from the prejudices of a society conditioned to think that a single woman with a career is a lonely, pitiful creature: " Of course as a teacher she earned both money and respect. This mattered to her. But there grew in her a feeling that the mothers of her pupils [. . .] pitied her. And in their harried or passive [. . .] figures she began to suspect a mysterious inner life, secret from her, that made them willing, even happy to endure" (50). So, she married Meridian's father who was also a school teacher. It was her pregnancy which destroyed her sense of wholeness. Her mostly cherished independence was replaced by "the pressures of motherhood and she learned-much to her horror and amazement-that she was not even allowed to be resentful that she was 'caught.' That her personal life was over. There was no one she could cry out to and say 'It's not fair'" (50).

The new baby boy creates feelings of hatred and frustration rather than love and affection in Meridian, for whom either suicide or infanticide become the only means to pull her out of the dungeon she has been forced into: "It took everything she had to tend to the child, and she had to do it, her body prompted not by her own desires, but by her son's cries. So this, she mumbles, [. . .] is what slavery is like. Rebelling she began to dream each night, just before her baby sent out cries, of ways to murder him" (69).

Moving between her ancestral past and her present, Meridian tries to vision a future for herself. Meridian is thrilled by the fact that black women "were always imitating Harriet Tubman-escaping to become something unheard of. Outrageous." (108) And that "even in more conventional things, black women struck out for the unknown" (109). Meridian tries to know her self through the legacy passed on to her by southern black women. Yet, she is troubled by the historical myth of black motherhood which has, from slavery times up to the present, exalted the strength and endurance of black women to protect their children and their families:

> *Meridian knew that enslaved women had been made miserable by the sale of their children, that they had laid down their lives, gladly, for their children, that the daughters of these enslaved women had thought their greatest blessing from 'Freedom' was that it meant they could keep their own children. And what had Meridian Hill done with her precious child? She had given him away. She thought of her mother as being worthy of this maternal history, and herself belonging to an unworthy minority [. . .].* (91)

Barbara Christian points to the danger of the myth of Black Motherhood, noting that this tradition has always passed on the glorious stories of strong, sacrificial mothers:

> *[. . .]that tradition that is based on the monumental myth of black motherhood, a myth based on the true stories of sacrifice black mothers performed for their children [. . .] is [. . .] restrictive, for it imposes a stereotype of black women, a stereotype of strength that denies them choice and hardly admits of the any who were destroyed.* (*Black Feminist Criticism*, 89)

Meridian is replete with black women who are victims of this tradition of Black Motherhood. Mrs. Hill is one of them, who has been "buried alive, walled away from her own life, brick by brick" (51) and who has channeled her inner anger into her children's starched, "stiff, almost inflexible garments" (79). She performs her roles as the proper wife and mother. She has a "starched" house and attends church. Meridian's girlhood friend Nelda is another victim: Although Nelda wanted to go to college, she never finished high school when she got pregnant at the age of fourteen. Fast Mary's pregnancy results in infanticide and suicide; Wild Child, unable to carry her heavy belly fast enough to move out of the path of a car, is "hit by a speeder and killed" (37).

Alice Walker's poem "On Stripping Bark from Myself" portrays the inner conflicts of a mother who feels suffocated within the role she has been captivated. She rejects what Meridian rejects throughout the novel: "I could not live/silent in my own lies/ hearing their 'how *nice* she is!' /whose adoration of the retouched image/ I so despise" (*Good Night* 23). From the magazines she reads Meridian learns, "Woman was

a mindless body, a sex creature, something to hang false hair and nails on" (71). Determined not to fall prey to patriarchy's definitions of womanhood, Meridian, at the age of seventeen, faces the question of what to do with her life as well as her child's. In the summer of 1961, Meridian accepts a college scholarship from a white family that contributes to the movement by sending "a smart girl to Saxon College in Atlanta, a school this family had endowed for three generations" (86). She leaves her small Mississippi town to attend college in Atlanta, which marks the first stage of her journey toward wholeness.

The Saxon College, as the name implies, is a metaphor for the dominant culture's values that have been emulated by middle class blacks. To attend the college, Meridian, "the former wife and mother," has to hide her past and act "as an innocent Saxon student" (96) for "it was assumed that Saxon young ladies were, by definition, virgins. They were treated always as if they were thirteen years old" (94). Material success and the acquisition of ladylike behavior are the gods worshipped in this institution as well as the white man's God: "Each morning at eight all Saxon students were required to attend a chapel service at which one girl was expected to get up on the platform and tell [. . .] of some way in which she had resisted evil and come out on the right side of God" (94). In her vignettes of the life on campus, Walker reveals how black women are oppressed by the dominant definitions of womanhood, and how they are denied the right to define and actualize themselves in roles other than those appropriated by the capitalist, sexist, racist white order: "The emphasis at Saxon was on form, and the preferred "form" was that of the finishing school girl whose goal [. . .] was to be *accepted* as an equal because she knew and practiced all the proper social roles" (95). But Meridian is a "deviate," "on whom true Ladyhood would never be conferred. Most of the students-timid, imitative, bright enough but never daring, were being ushered nearer to Ladyhood every day. It was for this that their parents had sent them to Saxon College" (39). Meridian refuses public repentance in her elite college just like she used to do in her hometown church when Mrs. Hill forced her to accept "God as their master, Jesus their Savior" (29). As she refused as a high school girl to recite a speech "that extolled the virtues of the Constitution and praised the superiority of The American Way of Life" (121), Meridian never chooses conformity for self-

aggrandizement. Meridian knew that she had two enemies: "Saxon, which wanted them to become something-ladies- [. . .] and the larger more deadly enemy, white racist society" (95).

The magnolia tree named The Sojourner in the middle of the campus and its mythical stories passed from one generation of students to another stands as the only meaningful thing on the campus. The Saxon college, where young black women now learn "to make French food, English tea and German music" (39), was a Saxon plantation, where the slave Louvinie planted The Sojourner. A skilled storyteller, Louvinie unintentionally causes the death of her master's son with a tale. As punishment, Master Saxon cuts off her tongue which Louvinie buries under The Sojourner, and, as the story goes, "the tree had outgrown all the others around it. Other slaves believed it possessed magic. They claimed the tree could talk, make music [. . .] Once in its branches, a hiding slave could not be seen" (44). The magnolia tree named the Sojourner immediately conjures up the image of another black woman, Sojourner Truth, who defied a racist-sexist white society crying "Ain't I A Woman?". Both the mythic Louvinie and the real Sojourner Truth used their voices to rupture the white patriarchal and racist order. And it is these black women Meridian turns to for expression, inspiration, and creative living.

Just like Sojourner Truth saw how a racist-sexist society had defined black women outside the category "woman," Meridian sees the same devaluation of black womanhood when she joins the movement in Atlanta and meets the young activist/artist Truman Held, whose conception of what a woman is and ought to do are shaped by the dominant society. Truman thinks of Meridian as a lascivious black woman who "liked to fuck" because she was "beautiful, so warm, so brown" and "sexy" (114-15). Upon their first sexual intercourse, Truman understands that Meridian is not a virgin: "Afterward there was no blood and although she had not said she was a virgin, he had assumed it" (142). After learning that Meridian is a single mother, Truman is disturbed by her sexual history, for Meridian has disrupted the cardinal tenets of true womanhood: virginity and motherhood he was socialized to respect: "He had wanted a virgin, had been raised to expect and *demand* a virgin; and never once had he questioned this. He had eager to seduce and devirginize as they" (142). What Truman wants is a woman put

on the pedestal of true womanhood so he resorts to sleeping with white exchange students, especially the blonde ones although on his canvas he portrays triumphant black women, "magnificent giants, breeding forth the new universe" (168). In fact, these are the very black women whose roles had been defined by the masculinist black nationalist discourse in the 1960s America: that black women would be supporters of their men in their struggle for freedom (which was actually equated with black man's acquisition of his long-denied manhood), and would produce warriors for the posterity.

Meridian knows that Truman did not want Harriet Tubmans beside him: "Truman [. . .] did not want a general beside him. He did not want a woman who tried [. . .] to claim her own life. [Meridian] knew Truman would have liked her better as she had been as Eddie's wife, for all that he admired the flash of her face across a picket line-an attractive woman, but asleep" (110). Truman does not want women like Meridian, he wants "a woman perfect in all the eyes of the world, not a savage who bore her offspring and hid it" (142). So he marries Lynne, the beautiful, blonde exchange student who is not a threat to his sense of masculinity. Lynne is a virgin whom Truman paints as a bride sitting on the porch. Lynne's "shy, thin grace, her relative inarticulateness" makes her a woman "to rest in, as a ship must have a port. As a train must have a shed" (141). Meridian deeply resents the fact that the confluence of racism and sexism makes Lynne, the white woman, her superior. The myth of the "bad" black woman and the myth of true womanhood converge to make black women "whores" and white women "good" devoted wives and mothers: "[. . .] while white men would climb on black women [. . .] 'for the experience,' white women were considered sexless, contemptible and ridiculous by all. [. . .] They were clear, dead water" (107). Meridian knows that "she was black [. . .] [a]nd a female. (Not lady, not even woman, since both these words conjured up something larger than sex; they spoke of a somebody as opposed to a something)" (107). Like her marriage, Meridian's failed romance teaches her that as a black woman to realize and actualize herself, she should never give up her fight against the white patriarchal racist society. She has her child by Truman aborted, and her tubes tied: she is determined not to produce race warriors, determined not to be one of those "magnificent" black women Truman painted on his canvas.

Meridian leaves college and goes to New York, around 1966, to join her movement colleagues who force her to take a vow "to kill for the revolution" (27). The rhetoric of violence versus non-violence as alternatives to racism was a much debated issue during the during the Civil Rights Movements. As Melissa Walker states

> *Conflicts about whether violence is an appropriate response to racism divided members of the various civil rights organizations and [. . .] even brought to an end to effective coalitions among those groups. [. . .] By 1966, [. . .] the issue of non-violence versus armed self-defense had begun to divide the leadership of SNCC, and it was insistence on the importance of maintaining a stance of nonviolence that led to his resignation and to the rise of black power and its dominant advocates in SNCC [. . .] At about the time that Lewis took his stand and resigned from SNCC, Meridian was heading south, having taken the same stand with her colleagues in the movement*. (179)

Like many other civil rights activists who began to question "whether all the blood and the pain were worth it. For what really had changed?" (Giddings 297), Meridian returns to south to combat, through non-violence, the racism and the sexism of the white society. Meridian comes to Chicokema to get the impoverished and ignorant townspeople register for the vote, trying to persuade them to do so saying, "You have to get used to using your voice [. . .] You start on simple things and move on [. . .]" (205); she would lead townspeople "into a town meeting over which [. . .] the major presided" and would place beside the major's gavel the "decompos[ing] body of a small child, drowned because of public negligence (191); or she would lead an army of black children to see the Marilene O'Shay exhibit on a "whites only" day. The town's white segregationist army finds itself facing a hundred-pound "woman," with shaved head, wearing a striped white and black railroad worker's cap" (144). Meridian's outer appearance is that of an androgen who disrupts the Western patriarchal binary of femininity/masculinity.[8] Fitting into neither the category "man" or "woman," Meridian

[7] John Lewis was a civil rights activist, to whom the novel *Meridian* is dedicated for his nonviolent reformist activities in the South after he resigned from SNCC.

[8] Marie Richmond-Abbott defines "androgyny" as a "condition under which the characteristics of the sexes and the human impulses expressed by men and women are not rigidly assigned" (10).

rubs the terms masculine and feminine off their conventional meanings. The titles painted on the Marilene O'Shay wagon signify not only the white patriarchal order's standards for a "true" woman but also to the nationalist, masculinist rhetoric of the Black Power movement, which confined black women to the role of wife and mother. As Barbara Omodale, who was a participant in the Civil Rights Movement like Alice Walker, observes, "Among themselves, sisters balked at being mere supporters and complained of male chauvinism-while maintaining a united front with men against white racism" (166). Marilene O'Shay is the once "Obedient Daughter," "Devoted Wife," and "Adoring Mother" who has "Gone Wrong" when she had an affair with another man (19). The story of Marilene O'Shay as told by an old black townsman goes like this:

> *Just because he caught her giving some way, he shot the man, strangled the wife. Throwed 'em both into Salt Lake. [. . .] everybody forgive him. Even her ma. 'Cause the bitch was doing him wrong, and that ain't right! [. . .] Years later she washed up on shore, and he claimed he recognized her by her long red hair.[. . .] Thought since she was so generous herself she wouldn't mind the notion of him sharing her with the American public.* (22)

Marilene O'Shay's "mummified" body "drag[ged] (by her husband) around from town to town, charging a quarter to see her" (22) conjures up the image of the enslaved Saartjie Bartmann, the Hottentot Venus, as the Europeans called her, whose body was displayed over a five-year period in Paris and London. In her study on female sexuality in nineteenth-century Europe, Sander Gilman argues that the Hottentot Venus was the epitome of black woman's sexual lasciviousness. "The audience which had paid to see her buttocks and had fantasized about the uniqueness of her genitalia when she was alive could, after her death and dissection, examine both" (Gilman 179-80). So, the white patriarchy's message, transmitted by Henry O'Shay is that if white women dare to step out their confined roles, they become the mythical black "whore" whose body is turned into a profitable specular commodity in nineteenth-century Europe as well as on the auction blocks in the American South. Meridian defies all those roles imposed by the white as well as black patriarchy: She is neither the "Devoted Wife" nor "The

Adoring Mother"; she is a "womanist," in Alice Walker's terms, "black feminist," who is "committed to [the] survival and wholeness of [the] entire people, male *and* female" (*Gardens* xi).

As the novel comes to a close, we see Meridian as a black woman struggling for "the spiritual survival, the survival whole of [her] people" (Walker, *Gardens* 250). Yet, she feels that "Something's missing in [her]. [. . .] Something the old folks with their hymns and proverbs forgot to put in! What is it? What? *What*?" (27). That missing part of Meridian which she fails to name is her sense of connection to a collective past and its spiritual values. She acquires this self-knowledge in church, at a memorial ritual on the anniversary of the death of a young martyr of the Civil Rights Movement. This is not her mother's church with "the traditional pale Christ with stray lamb" (198) but it is the new black church with "stained-glass windows" painted with the portrait of a black artist who holds a guitar in one hand and a bloody sword in the other. There was neither "resignation" nor "despair" in this church. "No one bounced in his seat. No one even perspired," and "God was not mentioned except as a reference" (196). The minister, reminiscent of Martin Luther King, attacks President Nixon, admonishes the young man in the audience "not to participate in the Vietnam War," and tells young women "to stop looking for husbands and try to get useful in their heads" (195). The black church becomes a place of "communal spirit, togetherness, righteous convergence," where the congregationists weave their political stance "into the songs, the sermons, the 'brother and sister'" so that "[they] will be so angry [they] cannot help but move" (199). It is at this very moment that Meridian sees how African American people are bonded to each other with their collective, meaningful past, and sees herself as the preserver of that historical past and its spiritual values. Her "thorns of guilt" caused by her inability to live up to the legacy of her foremothers and by her betrayal of "Black Motherhood," are now replaced by a sense of wholeness and self-respect, which Meridian acquires through acknowledging her own heritage:

> *In comprehending this, there was in Meridian's chest a breaking as if a tight string binding her lungs had given way, allowing her to breathe freely. For she understood, finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any*

particle of it without a fight to the death [. . .] And that this existence extended herself to those around her because, in fact, the years in America had created them One Life. (200)

For Alice Walker, the duties of a revolutionary were "to create and to preserve" the black cultural heritage, to serve the people by "staying close enough to them to be there whenever they need you," and to see the unity of oneself with "The People" (*Gardens* 135,38). Acknowledging her essential Oneness with the black people, Meridian emerges as an empowered black woman who has created a definition of herself not out of Western tradition but rather from her meaningful heritage. She is the "revolutionary petunia" in Alice Walker's poem "The Nature of this Flower is to Bloom":

Rebellious. Living.
Against the Elemental Crush.
A Song of Color
Blooming
For Deserving Eyes
Bloooming Gloriously
For its Self. (*Petunia* 70)

Barbara Neely's novel *Blanche Cleans Up* (1999) portrays another empowered black woman in 1990s America. But this time the protagonist is a poor domestic worker, Blanche White, who despite her blackness, her poverty and her sex, subverts all stereotypical constructions of black womanhood as well as the white patriarchal society's ideological discourse on family, marriage and motherhood. Blanche lives in a ghetto section of Boston, Roxbury, which, with all its poverty, juvenile crime, drug addiction, teenage pregnancies, black on black violence, rape, homophobia, welfare mothers, single-headed households, dilapidated housing conditions, and with no federal funds to ameliorate its social and economic ills, represents the typical black ghetto living in the 1990s America.

As the American economy became global in the 1990s, stable industrial jobs fled from urban centers to cheaper labor markets abroad, which meant "the decline of labor unions and the erosion of the heavy manufacturing, blue-collar sector; the

shrinking payrolls and runaway shops [. . .]" (Jones 325).This economic recession had devastating effects for the African Americans: "One out of three black households was below the poverty line in the mid-1990s, and only one out of ten white families" (324). The overall structural unemployment and underemployment of black men undermined the durability of the black nuclear family as an economic unit. This inevitably led to an unprecedented increase in black female-headed households, more than fifty percent of which were poor (Jones 324). Once again, after twelve years of Reagan and Bush administrations, the old rhetoric of "claiming the victim" was being appropriated by Clinton's neoliberal policies. Neoliberalism was the new "racial project," which had no place for racial issues on its agenda, and yet "adopted the rhetoric of 'personal responsibility' and 'family values' which was so successfully utilized by the right" (Omi and Winant 150). So, the "new Democrats" exploited the same old "code words," the work ethic, family values, to blame the black "underclass" for their related problems of poverty, welfare dependency, teenage pregnancy, crime, and disintegration of families.

It is against this very backdrop of race, class and gender intersectionality that Barbara Neely constructs a black female protagonist like Blanche White, through whom we delve into various levels of black womanhood, motherhood, family, community, African spirituality and domestic employment. Although written in the mystery genre, *Blanche Cleans Up*, incorporates a variety of social, political, cultural and economic issues central to black civil society. By setting the novel in the interstructure of the oppressions of racism, classism, and sexism, Barbara Neely creates a feminist character like Blanche White, who survives this "multiple jeopardy" in a racist, capitalist and sexist America. Blanche becomes an agent of social change, who subverts all Eurocentric notions of womanhood, motherhood, family, sexuality, romantic love, and beauty.

Blanche White accidentally finds herself in the midst of a series of political scandals and murders which move from the white community to her own black community. The whole thing begins when she is asked by Cousin Charlotte to stand in for Miz Inez as cook-housekeeper to one Allister Brindle, a white Boston Brahmin politician running for governor, and her beautiful wife Felicia. As Blanche tries to

figure out, with her keen wit and intelligence, the truth behind the swimming pool death of a young black man, she finds herself entangled with a number of issues ranging from political corruption, teen pregnancy, homophobia, black male sexism and violence, community activism to child pornography.

Among the book's many outstanding features are not only its telling a story from the perspective of a contemporary black domestic worker whose voice is rarely heard in fiction but also the way it portrays a poor black domestic worker as upbeat, intelligent, witty, with a wry sense of humor, an independent spirit and a strong sense of self-respect and self-worth. Despite being a domestic worker, Blanche is not the stereotypical Mammy, the Aunt Jemima, who has always been represented as the docile, loving black female servant devoted to the white family. In this respect, the Mammy is one of the controlling images of the dominant ideology subverted by Blanche White. As explained by Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000),

> *Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all black women's behavior. By loving, nurturing and caring for her White children and 'family' better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group's perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male power*. (72)

Blanche is a domestic worker but intelligent and proud enough not to be the mammy to any white family: "One of the major reasons she chose to do day work was being able to pick up and drop clients as she saw fit. This meant she didn't have to take no mess from nobody, her preferred way of living" (3). When Blanche thinks of what Miz Inez said about the Brindles' love for her, she very well knows that treating a black domestic as "one of the family" was just another way of bringing her down to where the whites think she belongs:

> *In Blanche's experience, the more a person believed love was a part of what they got from their employer, the more likely it was that the person was being asked to do things that only love could justify. [. . .] Blanche thought about the woman down in Farleigh who routinely told her maid*

how much she loved her and insisted the maid call her Auntie- things the young maid had bragged about. But the woman also emptied her bowels in a slop pot so the maid could keep a written description of its contents. (6)

Blanche is aware that she is, to the white woman and the white man, a black servant viewed only in terms of her ability "to render services and to serve as a receptacle for white images" (Caraway 102). She knows that there could never be a sisterhood with the white woman whose race and class have always made her feel superior to the black woman. Therefore, when she sees Felicia Brindle, her white "mistress," with a "slack-faced look of someone who'd just had a serious shock" (22), she represses the urge to ask her what was wrong for she knows "she wasn't being paid extra for hand-holding" (22). Contrary to the modern image of the Mammy represented in the U.S. popular media as sharing and caring for the white children's as well as the white woman's personal troubles, Blanche has no intention of getting emotionally involved with her employers' personal affairs. Blanche has devised individual strategies to deal with her white employers. As Nancie Caraway states, "Their work, more than any other sort, has depended on the possession of intricate skills at maneuvering through white attitudes, adopting demeaning 'rituals of deference'" (101). Blanche talks back when Felicia threatens to fire her. She says she cannot be fired because it is Miz Inez's job. When Mr. Brindle calls her a liar for not telling the whereabouts of the tape stolen from his study, Blanche puts her hands on her hips, lifts her chin, and confronts Mr. Brindle with her stinging words. In her study on black domestic workers, Bonnie Thornton Hill states that "making the job good meant managing the employer-employee relationship so as to maintain their [black domestic workers'] self-respect. They insisted upon some level of acknowledgement of their humanity from the employer. They actively fought against the employer's efforts to demean, control, or objectify them [. . .]" (*Domestic Service* 50). Blanche is one of those black domestic workers who "makes the job good herself," by preserving self-respect and personal dignity.

Blanche is clever and witty enough to solve a series of murders, which contradicts sharply with the image of the black woman as a bodily creature, lacking intellectual prowess. Blanche plays the dumb and the deaf when she is in the Brindle house, and Allister Brindle, the neoconservative Republican now running for governor,

relies too much on a black domestic worker's "stupidity" and invisibility: He gives sermons in his library "about those homos, welfare mothers, and drug-dealing teenage gangsters who were ruining the Commonwealth and the country" (17), talks about "blacks, women, gays, Puerto Ricans, people in wheel chairs" as "*They* as though *They* lived on the underside of a public toilet seat" (10). Blanche uses her invisibility as a weapon to get at the white supremacist, sexist, capitalist order represented by Allister Brindle, a conservative Republican who believes in the inherent inferiority of blacks, and detests their "different" cultural values. Blanche also uses her invisibility to get at the black male power represented by Ted Sadowski and Reverend Maurice Samuelson, "blacks with positions and titles to support the latest cut in programs for the poor, or to amen some closet racist like Brindle" (16). Blanche transforms black woman's historical, cultural and political invisibility into a strategy with which she acquires access to the "hidden transcripts" of black and white communities (Collins, *Fighting Words* 7). Blanche is an absence when she serves white politicians and their Uncle Toms, black men with political influence, in the Brindle house: "Neither of the men spoke or even looked in Blanche's direction. She considered giving them a loud, bustling greeting that forced them to acknowledge her, but she knew the advantages of not being seen" (9). Due to her race, sex, and class, Blanche is represented by the dominant ideology at the outskirts of dominant culture: She is black, poor and a woman. However, Blanche claims her marginality as a site of resistance where she can generate oppositional knowledge. This captures one of the most important themes of black feminist thought: bell hooks asks,

> *Within complex and ever shifting realms of power relations, do we position ourselves on the side of the colonizing mentality? Or do we continue to stand in political resistance with the oppressed, ready to offer our ways of seeing and theorizing [. . .] towards that revolutionary effort which seeks to create space where there is unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is possible?* (*Yearning* ,145)

bell hooks insists upon claiming the margin, spaces of invisibility and silences, as "a site of resistance" within the culture of domination, where black women can "affirm and sustain [their] subjectivity" and self-worth (153).

Patricia Hill Collins uses the term "outsider within" to refer to how marginality can be used to replace "prevailing interpretations of how [black women] are supposed to view [themselves] with oppositional perspectives that not only redefine notions of marginality but reclaim marginal locations as places of potential intellectual, political, and ethical strength" (*Fighting Words* 5). Collins continues to argue that black domestic workers, because of their daily experiences between two different communities, are the "outsiders within," who, through their contacts with the seemingly private spaces of white households, could have an insight into the workings of a white supremacist order that has always justified unequal relationships via the oppressions of race, sex and class:

> *Such women knew that White supremacist ideology was just that-knowledge produced by members of an elite group and circulated by that group to justify and obscure unjust power relations. Such women routinely returned to their Black families with stories of how unsuperior White people actually were. [. . .] Black women had access to the private knowledges that groups unequal in power wanted to conceal from one another.* (*Fighting Words* 7)

Blanche is the "outsider within," and with her "insider knowledge" she generates a political consciousness of how unequal power relationships are justified through elite white male constructions of black inferiority. She knows that it is the system itself but not the "pathological" culture of poor black communities that keeps them where they are; she knows that all those "lazy, shiftless, don't-want-to-work black folks politicians and newspapers were always going on about" (248) have never been offered decent jobs to keep their families intact. "The last time black people had full employment in America was during slavery" (248).

Blanche never falls prey to white male constructions of femininity and beauty. Neither does she let her dead sister's daughter Taifa straighten her hair. When Taifa tries to persuade Blanche into wearing her hair straightened saying that she is the ridicule of her friends at school and that "race stuff" has nothing to do with her hair, Blanche confronts her shouting, "Look, if I had my way, every black person in the world would wear their hair in some kind of natural style instead of making themselves look foolish imitating whitefolks' hair" (38). Blanche very well knows that black hair

has got to do with racism and sexism. She is a black woman whose physical appearance contradicts white constructions of beauty: she is quite fat, wears kinky hair, has a big "ass," flat nose and thick lips. Yet, she loves herself and her body quite enough to look at her silhouette in the mirror and admire what she sees. Blanche clearly remembers her childhood years when

> *she had been wounded by blacks for being too black. She remembered when she would have done anything to make the teasing stop, to turn herself into a mid-range brown girl instead of being out on the extreme edge of her blackness. As a girl, she'd even tried rubbing her body with lemon juice because she'd heard somebody say it would lighten your skin. How old had she been when she'd learned to treasure her blackness in a way that made other people's negative comments about it sound just plain crazy?* (238-39)

The myth of the nuclear family is another white supremacist discourse subverted by Blanche in the novel. The white political and social science discourses have always linked the poor blacks' problems, whether they be crime, teenage pregnancy, broken families, poverty or drug addiction, to their "pathological" family forms deviating from white man's traditional family ideal. Headed by single mothers who work outside their homes, these families are accused of transmitting bad values to their younger siblings. Furthermore, black women working outside their homes have been stigmatized as matriarchs who emasculate their sons and their husbands, denying them the right to feel like a man. Because the heterosexual, patriarchal family ideal necessitates a father as the breadwinner and protector of the household, and a stay-home mother who takes care of the children, deteriorating family structures in black community have always been linked to the unnatural power wielded by African American mothers in black family households. In *Blanche Cleans Up*, Barbara Neely questions not only the mythical family ideal but also the concept of motherhood imposed by the dominant white supremacist, sexist ideology. Blanche lives with her two nieces, Taifa and Malik, whose mother died years ago. Although Blanche is not their biological mother, she is the "othermother" who has devoted all her strength to send Taifa and Malik to college, and

to prepare them to survive in a racist and sexist culture. As Patricia Hill Collins indicates in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000),

> *In Many African-American communities, fluid and changing boundaries often distinguish biological mothers from other women who care for children. Biological mothers, or bloodmothers, are expected to care for their children. But African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, othermothers-women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities-traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood*.
>
> *Grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins act as othermothers by taking on child-care responsibilities for one another's children. Historically, when needed, temporary child-care arrangements often turned into long-term care or informal adoption*. (178)

In *Blanche Cleans Up*, we are introduced to an alternative family model different from "normative," patriarchal norms of nuclear family. Yet, contrary to what is commonly held out, this black "family" is not "pathological." Nor is it, despite the absence of a male figure, " 'dysfunctioanal' for the raising of achieving and successful children" (Adams 174). Perhaps nothing other than Taifa's words could better explain how they feel about their household. When Taifa and Malik hug Blance to soothe her grief over Miz Inez's and her son Ray Ray's murders, Taifa says: "It is a family thing" (235).

Set against this black family is the white, upper-class, nuclear Brindle family, which, seemingly, completely complies with the mythical American family ideal and the American success dream. Allister Brindle represents the elite, capitalist, racist, patriarchal white male power. His delicate and beautiful wife stands for the "true" white woman, a wife and a mother who has power only over her house maids. However, it is the Brindle family, which is really deteriorating and "pathological" in the novel: Allister Brindle, who is ready to do anything to get his child pornography video-cassette to secure his governorship; Felicia Brindle, the stay-home mother, who tries to vitiate her loneliness and misery via her tea parties and her lesbian masseuse; and Marc Brindle,

the only son of the Brindle family, who commits suicide in front of the very eyes of her parents when he learns that Saxe Winton, his lover and her mother's special trainer, has been "screwing" them both. Blanche sends one copy of the tape to the "Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children," one other to the "Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals," and yet another to her wife Felicia. This is a fatal blow for Allister Brindle, the epitome of white racist, sexist, capitalist power.

The image of the sexually aggressive and inhibited black woman is another myth subverted by Blanche. She attacks "the culture of silence," the suppression of black female sexuality that has always been, from slavery times up to the present, represented as perverted, animalistic, wicked and deviant. Such denial of sexuality is deemed to be necessary for black women in order to confirm with the white middle-class values of womanhood, to eradicate the denigrating representations of black female sexuality, and thereby to construct positive images of black womanhood. For black women, stepping out of the "normative" borders of female sexuality means being trapped and objectified by a white, racist, sexist ideology that defines them as sexually deviant, as "hoochies" (whores) unworthy of respect and love. However, Blanche breaks through the silence that has always surrounded black female sexuality, and demythologizes the myth of black women as sexually perverted, deviant and immoral. She is a single woman who loves making sex, masturbates, revels in her body, and never feels intimidated to reveal her sexual feelings. She "admits that a part of her heartthrob is coming from lower down," and "let herself feel that sweet drum beating down there" (11). A sexually autonomous and liberated black woman, Blanche White defies hegemonic constructions of black female sexuality.

Blanche's religion is her ancestors. Whenever she feels troubled, she heads straight for "her Ancestor altar" in her bedroom. She "lit[s] a candle and a stick of incense" and talks to them: "She stared at the crouched ebony figure meant to represent her earliest ancestors back to the first mother, including all those lost to slavery. She spoke directly to them [. . .]" (146). Smells of black food and tunes of gospels, hymns, and blues fill the rooms of her house. Blanche's rootedness in her past and her culture is central to her sense of worth and identity.

Blanche is but a threat to the white racist-sexist order. She is a single woman who rejects constructing her identity within white patriarchal notions of womanhood and femininity. As an unwed woman, she violates one cardinal tenet of white, male-dominated ideology: She is a woman living alone. Blanche rejects the dominant "gender ideology's positing that a woman's true worth and financial security should occur through heterosexual marriage" (Collins 2000, 79). Although Blanche had times in her life "when her money was so low, her prospects so dim" (77), she has never considered marriage as a way of pulling herself out of the difficulties she has had to face as a single woman. For her, marriage is an institution where women exchange sex for material security: "She thought about the more than a handful of women she knew and worked for who talked about sex with their husbands [. . .] as though it were a price they had to pay for help with the cost of food or school clothes for their children" (77). For Blanche, sexuality is a source of empowerment, pleasure and agency, not something to be harnessed to the exigencies of female productivity and heterosexual marriage.

Blanche's stance towards homophobia in white and black communities alike also establishes her as a black woman who has gone beyond white male constructions of sexuality. Considering that the black lesbian, as the black lesbian feminist critic and poet Cherly Clark puts it, "has not only been absent from the pages of black political analysis but also that her image as a character and her role as a writer are blotted out or trivialized in literary criticism written by black women" (204), Barbara Neely's tackling the issue of homophobia is but a clarion call to the black civil society to relate and love each other through their differences. When Blanche makes friends with Mick, Felicia's black lesbian masseuse, in the Brindle house, Carrie, the other black maid treats Mick as if she were invisible just like the other black women in the black community do. Yet, Blanche does not see Mick as a "freak." The knowledge generated while sitting around the kitchen table in the Brindle house provides Blanche with a critical and political view about homophobia: "She'd figured black lesbians had a sisterhood strong enough to carry them through all the nastiness the straight world dished out to them. But why should all black lesbians be able to do what so many straight black women couldn't do, no matter how hard they tried?" (173). The way Blanche sees into the issue of

homophobia captures the basic premise of black lesbian feminist thought. As Audre Lorde tactfully argues in her essay "Age, Race, Class, and Sex,"

> *Despite the fact that woman-bonding has a long and honorable history in the African and African-american communities, [. . .] heterosexual black women often tend to ignore or discount the existence and work of Black lesbians.[. . .] Part of this attitude has come from an understandable terror of Black male attack within the close confines of Black society, where the punishment for any female self-assertion is still to be accused of being a lesbian [. . .] But part of this need to misname and ignore Black lesbians comes from a very real fear that openly women-identified Black women who are no longer dependent upon men for their self-definition may well reorder our whole concept of social relationships*. (538)

Blanche, through her "insider knowledge", comes to realize that heterosexism, like race, class, and gender, is an oppressive system which not only oppresses women but divides the black community along sexual lines. Even though other black women in the neighborhood treat Mick as if she were "evil or dirty," Blanche thinks of her friendship with Mick as a step taken in the way to stand against the dominant constructions of sexuality: "Breaking bread with a lesbian. A step in the right direction" (58). Blanche is a socially-responsible black feminist who believes that personal change and empowerment should also bring about change in the larger society: "She'd once heard a black historian say that hatred of homosexuals was taught to African slaves because slave babies could only be made by female-male couples. Somebody ought to tell gay-hating blacks that slavery was over and loving was about more than baby-making" (239). Blanche reminds all black feminist scholars, writers, radicals, nationalists and the black community that their liberation is possible only when they learn to unite, love and care for each other despite an all-encompassing racist, male-supremacist, heterosexist ideology that has been operating to politically divide black people.

In her novel *Blanche Cleans Up*, Barbara Neely portrays her black female protagonist Blanche White as the empowered black woman. Despite being a poor domestic worker, Blanche subverts all white racist-sexist constructions of womanhood,

marriage, sexuality and poverty (the "pathological" black "underclass"). Blanche, according to the white patriarchal norms of femininity, is not a "woman": she is a woman alone who refuses to define herself through marriage. She loves sex, but not for producing babies but to explore her sexuality and her body. Furthermore, she is not the mammy of the white employers, but a black women with dignity and self-respect who always knows how much to receive from and when to quit her white employers. She is a black woman who is able to attack a white supremacist, sexist, capitalist system from her "marginal" place, and make her voice heard, and her invisibility seen when she ruins Allister Brindle at the end of the novel.

In Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), we are introduced to another empowered black woman, Beneatha, the young medical school student. The play opens, as in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, with the classical lines from Langston Hughes's poem "Montage of a Dream Deferred" (1951): "What happens to a dream deferred?/ Does it dry up/ Like a raisin in the sun?" (1728). The play is about the "deferred" dreams of a black family living in Southside Chicago. The Younger family is looking forward to the insurance money, ten thousand dollars, which Mrs. Lena Younger (the Mama) is entitled to receive from her dead husband. Mama's son, Travis Younger works as chauffeur for a rich white man but this is not enough to pull her wife Ruth from the kitchens of white folks. Travis wants to be a "man," the provider and the head of the Younger family. Ruth, his wife, wants a decent home, not a rat hole like the one they are living in now, a home with a room for her son. Mama wants a home with a garden where she can raise flowers. Beneatha wants to be a doctor, which neither Ruth nor Travis can understand. For Travis, a black woman's trying to be a doctor is just something unusual, something not in compliance with the roles expected from a woman: " Who the hell told you you had to be a doctor? If you so crazy 'bout messing 'round with sick people-then go be a nurse like other women-or just get married and be quiet [. . .] " (1736).

For Mama and Ruth, a woman is a woman only when she gets married and becomes a wife and mother. The rich George Murchison, whom Beneatha has been dating for some time, is, for them, Beneatha's only route for self-actualization, self-definition and material security:

RUTH. You mean you wouldn't marry George Murchison if you asked you someday? That pretty, rich thing? Honey, I knew you was odd-

BENEATHA. No I wouldn't marry him if all I felt for him was what I feel now. [. . .]

MAMA. Why not?

BENEATHA. Oh, Mama- The Murchisons are honest-to-God-real-live rich colored people, and the only people in the world who are more snobbish than rich white people are rich colored people. I thought everybody knew that. . . .

RUTH. Well, she will get over some of this-

BENEATHA. Get over?[. . .] Listen, I'm going to be a doctor. I'm not worried about who I'm going to marry yet- if I ever get married.

MAMA and RUTH. If! (1742)

Just like Travis, Ruth and Mama, George Murchinson has internalized the dominant society's hegemonic constructions of gender. He finds Beneatha's devotion to a "male" profession "pretty funny." What George wants to see is not a black woman who competes with him but a "good, nice" girl who knows her "place." Beneatha's intellectual prowess and her insistence to make herself seen, heard and cared for via her "unwomanly" traits rather than traditional feminine roles constitute a threat to George's sense of manliness. For him, Beneatha's struggle to distinguish herself as an intellectual, independent, self-determined woman is futile because "the world will go on thinking what it thinks regardless" of what she does or thinks for it is a man's world where a woman's worth and "true" identity are sanctified only under white patriarchal constructions of womanhood. Back from one of their evening outs, George tells Beneatha what a woman is and what she is supposed to do:

BENEATHA. I am trying to talk to you.

[. . . .]

GEORGE. [Exasperated; rising] I know it and I don't mind it . . . The moody stuff, I mean. I don't like it. You're a nice-looking girl . . . all over. That's all you need, honey, forget the atmosphere. Guys aren't going to go for the atmosphere-they're going to go for what they see. Be

glad for that. Drop the Garbo routine. It doesn't go with you. As for myself, I want a nice-simple [Thoughtfully]-sophisticated girl [. . .] not a poet-O.K.?

BENEATHA. Why are you angry?

GEORGE.: Because this is stupid! I don't go out with you to discuss the nature of "quiet desperation" or to hear all about your thoughts . . .

BENEATHA. Then why read books? Why go to school?

GEORGE. [. . .] You read books-to learn facts-to get grades-to pass the course-to get a degree. That's all-it has nothing to do with thoughts. (1764)

What is to be discerned here is the fact that although class divides the assimilated Murchison and the poor Younger family, gender is the social axis through which they are connected. Both for the Murchisons and the Youngers, a woman's real worth and identity, no matter what degree she has, is to be judged against her ability to fulfill her womanly roles prescribed by the dominant gender ideology. Beneatha defies all white patriarchal transcripts for "true" womanhood in her struggle to claim the *I* :

BENEATHA. People have to express themselves one way or another.

MAMA. What is it you want to express?

BENEATHA. Me. [Mama and Ruth look at each other and burst into raucous laughter.] (1741)

Just like Meridian's mother Mrs. Hill, mama Lena Younger harshly attacks Beneatha for her failure to be a "good," decent girl fulfilling her traditional roles. As Mrs. Hill did with Meridian, Lena forces Beneatha to be a faithful Christian admitting God's will. Nevertheless, for Beneatha "there [. . .] is no blasted God-there is only man and it is he who makes miracles" (1743). Beneatha does not want to be man's "little episode in America" (1748). She is aware that it is the white man who writes history, and his-story does not include her-story, her voice except when she is defined through racist-sexist stereotypes. Beneatha wants to write her-story, to define herself out of the racist-sexist stereotypes of black womanhood. She knows men write novels, and she rejects to be one of those women molded into patriarchal discourse, which says that "For a woman it should be enough" (1748) to define herself through heterosexual love

sanctioned under marriage. George, who represents the white supremacist patriarchal ideal, is impatient with dating a "poet" but Beneatha wants to be a "poet" to write herself.

When Asagai, the Nigerian boy Beneatha meets on campus, asks her to go with him back to Africa to fight against all the ills inflicting his Yoruba village, "illiteracy, disease and ignorance" (1781), Beneatha wholeheartedly accepts his offer. Mama responds to Beneatha's enthusiasm for going to Africa with sheer indifference. For her, Travis's "com[ing] into his manhood" (1789) is more important than Beneatha's empowerment. Our last glimpse of Beneatha as the play comes to an end is that of an empowered black woman determined to go back to her roots, her mother country where she will taste "cool drinks from gourds," learn "the old songs and the ways of [her] people (1782). Beneatha's self-determination to be a woman in her own right, to exist and define herself in roles other than those imposed by the white supremacist patriarchal ideal, her sense of self-love and self-respect she draws from her blackness, and her decision to be a "poet" in Africa, where she could "write" herself in relation to her people establishe her as the empowered black woman.

The image of the empowered black woman studied in the literary works above is one of the recurring images of black women surfacing in black women's literary tradition. Although some black feminist critics like Barbara Christian and Mary Helen Washington have argued that images of black women as autonomous, independent selves started to fulfill the pages of black feminist writing more strikingly after the 1970s, the above examples verify that literary representations of black women as self-defined, independent individuals have always surfaced in black women's writing since slavery times. The empowered black woman, unlike the invisible black woman and the assimilated black woman, is not a loser in the face of a racist, sexist and capitalist white system, which has consistently denied African American women the right to speak out for and to define themselves. A black woman is empowered when she comes to voice, "talks back" to a racist-sexist white order in her attempt the define and realize herself in her own right; she is empowered when she gives voice to her centuries-long silence surrounding her struggles as a black woman; she is empowered when she develops a critical consciousness to see into the intricate workings of racism, sexism and capitalism

that oppress her, and thereby shies away from internalizing the dominant culture's constructions of black womanhood; and she is empowered when she defines herself in relation to her black community and culture, and to her ancestral past.

All the black woman characters studied in this chapter come from different backgrounds and belong to different social classes. The empowered black woman might be a slave like Linda Brent, a middle-class professional like Reena, a poor domestic worker like Blanche White, a lower-middle class Southern girl like Meridian, or a working-class Northern girl like Beneatha. Common to all is their defiance against the white racist-sexist oppression, their determination to express themselves as subjects as opposed to their historical racialized-sexualized objectification, and their resolution to make their voices heard when they cry out,

> *I am a woman and angry*
> *With a world that pigeon-holed me*
> *Into stereotyped roles that I do not fit into.* (Cobham and Collins, 21)

7. CONCLUSION

Ex-slave Sojourner Truth's legendary speech, "Ain't I a Woman," delivered at the Akron, Ohio, women's rights convention in 1851, is an eloquent statement of black feminist thought because of the subtle links it makes between race, class, gender in the lives of black women. Her words provide a "poetic cartography" of the historical and political location of African American women and foreground the urgency of black women's predicament in a white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal society. Truth's insight into the uniqueness of black women's experiences in the United States suggests with a precise force and poignancy the contours of African American women's experiences since slavery: experiences which are definable only in relational terms, experiences which can be understood only in terms of their embeddedness in the simultaneity and intersectionality of race, class and gender oppressions. And it is these contours which define the complex ground for the emergence and consolidation of black feminist politics and black feminist literature in the United States.

Proceeding from the premise that the theory of the simultaneity of oppressions is central to the study of African American women's literary tradition as well as to their history, this study has aimed to prove that three images of black woman have surfaced in the African American women's literary writing since slavery with regard to their political stances at the nexus of race, gender and class oppressions. These images were defined as the invisible, shrinking woman, the assimilated woman, and the empowered woman. The main goal in this consideration of three black woman's images was to foreground in the first place the recurring pattern of these images in African American women's literary tradition. Namely, these three images were explored and analyzed in a wide range of works written over a large canvas of time extending from mid-nineteenth to late twentieth century to prove that within the context of the simultaneity of "multiple" oppressions, black women's literary writing yields nuanced modes of black female identity, each representing a different level of political consciousness. The selection of the works by African American women was not confined to any particular

genre, literary or political epoch, or to any particular century to further strengthen my point. Novels, short stories, autobiographies, plays written over a wide spectrum of time were utilized to chart the typology of black women's images. Furthermore, the selections from the less-studied, less-known authors alongside the "canonized" authors within the African American women's writing aimed to further prove the pervasiveness and the recurring pattern of these images.

Another consideration has been to demonstrate that black women's lives are not uniform. More important, they have not developed in a vacuum, but, rather in a complex sociopolitical framework that includes interaction with black men, white men, and white women. The three images have thus also served to highlight the multiplicity and non-uniformity of black women's experiences, to prove that there exists no transhistorical black women's experiences. All the three images explored in a wide range of selections from African American women's literary writing illuminated how categories of class and sexuality cut and crosscut other axes of differentiation and stratification (race and gender), giving rise to different modes of existence and experience on the part of African American women in the United States. A third point of consideration in explicating the three images of black woman has been to underscore the centrality of the "multiple" oppressions to the multiple experiences of black women. That is to say, although the three images represented black women coming from different social, economic backgrounds with different sexual preferences, women located at divergent points in United States history and geography, this typology of images has proved the "multiple oppressions" to be the single, common axis of relationality among the diversity of African American women's struggles and experiences in the American context. These black women with divergent histories and social locations are linked to each other by "the political threads" of opposition and oppression woven at the nexus of race, gender and class.

Still another argument developed within the context of the typology of black woman's images has been the justification of the simultaneity and intersectionality of "multiple" forces as the only effective analytical to the study of black women's literary writing and historiography as well as to the American history. The explication and exploration of these images not as static entities but as political identities as inextricably

related, and produced at the nexus of race, class and gender oppressions under given political, economic and cultural conditions have invalidated ahistorical and reductionist approaches to the study of African American women's experiences. Charting this map of black women's images in African American women's literary writing has suggested significant questions for methods used to locate and chart African American women's constructions of identity and agency. It has established the intersectionality and simultaneity of oppressions as an analytical and political tool to recognize and analytically explore the links among the histories and struggles of African American women against racism, sexism, and classism.

This study aimed a re-construction of black women's history, which placed black women on the center stage of American as well as Black history, from both of which they have been persistently omitted. The first step taken in this direction was to provide a viable theoretical approach to the study and analysis of history and literature. The theoretical background was therefore intended to assess an assortment of race and gender theories, and to discuss their applicability to the historical, material circumstances of African American women. Within the contours of the theoretical background, post-structuralist conceptions of race and gender as socially constructed, non-essentialist, unstable, "decentered" categories, constantly reshaped within shifting socio-political contexts at certain historical conjectures were emphasized. In addition, post-structuralist theories of race and gender as discourses of difference and stratification produced to maintain relations and distribution of power between social groups were juxtaposed against reductionist, ahistorical, universal, totalizing conceptualizations of race and gender to validate racial categories and gender stratification as structures of domination. It is important to note that race and gender were discussed under separate sections merely for the sake of analysis because the explication of race as well as gender entails three interrelated domains of power: race, gender and class. Although studied separately, the intersectionality and simultaneity of race, and gender were highly emphasized at the end of each section.

The theoretical background ascertained race, class and gender as a set of overlapping discourses, intersecting differently under different sociopolitical circumstances to oppress African American as well as other women of color. As such,

mainstream feminist scholarship was criticized with regard to its color-blindness in theorizing gender, and the necessity for a theory to analyze African American women's history and literature was problematized. Finally, the "multiple" oppressions theory was established as the most effective analytical tool to be applied to the dissection and deconstruction of ideological constructions of black womanhood throughout the United States history as well as to the study of black women's literary writing.

The second step taken to write African American women as subjects and agents into the United States history was to explore and expose black women's divergent experiences and struggles starting with the American slavery. Therefore, the second chapter of this study titled "Black Women in White America: A Historical Overview" was intended to foreground that African American women's journeys starting with slavery in the United States have been from the very beginning marked by racism and sexism. The historical background documented the uniqueness of black women's experiences in the United States by drawing attention to how black women were politically marginalized and silenced in the course of nineteenth-century abolitionist, and feminist movements as well as in the twentieth-century black liberation and feminist movements. Although black women have been members of two subordinate groups, women and blacks, they have never been adequately addressed or represented either by black men in anti-racist, liberation struggles or by white women in both waves of feminist activism and scholarship, for the word "black" has always referred to black males and the word "woman" has always denoted white, heterosexual, middle-class women. The double exclusion of black women by virtue of their race and their gender was linked to the white, elite, male constructions of femininity and masculinity which have always been constructed and mobilized along racial lines: Black women share racism with black men but black men combine efforts with white men to oppress black women because they are men; Black women share sexism with white women but white women, by virtue of their race, collaborate with white men to oppress black women because they are white, and hence "All the blacks are men, all the women are white."

Besides, the historical background given in a culturally, politically and economically specific context proved how ideologies of racism and ideologies of gender have intersected with economic recessions and shifts in the United States history to

oppress Black women. The Cult of True Womanhood, which emerged in nineteenth-century America as a result of the rise of industrialization, was analyzed not only as a gender ideology to control white woman but also as a racist-sexist discourse which marked the boundaries between white womanhood and black womanhood in terms of purity, chastity, domesticity, and thereby legitimized black women's sexual as well as economic exploitation. Furthermore, tracing the shifting articulations of this gender ideology at certain historical conjectures in the United States (slavery, post-emancipation era, Second World War and after, Civil Rights Movement and after) up to the contemporary period served to demonstrate that we can conceptualize neither gender nor race in any transhistorical, unitary fashion. Moreover, it proved that the re-construction of African American women's history/histories requires reading against the grain of a number of progressive political discourses (white feminism, black nationalism), as well as the politically oppressive discourses of racism, sexism and capitalism.

Additionally, the historical background introduced how the early black feminists, Maria Stewart, Fannie Barrier Williams, Anna Julia Cooper, to name a few, with a sensitivity to race and gender issues challenged the hegemonic discourses of white, Western feminism due to its disregard for race, and the anti-racist black liberation discourse because of its gender-blind, patriarchal worldview. The words and thoughts of these foremothers were intended to show that black feminist thought did not emerge and develop in a vacuum but out of a historical political consciousness cognizant of what it means to be black and woman in white America. Finally, the historical background aimed to provide the reader with an overall understanding of the subtle, ideological workings of the "multiple" oppressions, intersecting differently under different historical conjectures to oppress and silence African American women. It also highlighted the unique experiences of black women in the United States, which would find voice and expression in what we would now call contemporary black feminism, a *political* platform, from which black feminist critics, scholars and historians have, since 1970s, waged their incessant battles against hegemonic constructions of black womanhood as well as black male sexism, white male racism and sexism and white women's racism.

The third chapter "Black Feminism(s) and The Birth of Black Women's Studies" aimed in the first place to give a sampling of an enormous body of explicitly feminist discourse which was generated through the 1970s into the 1990s. This sampling demonstrated African American women's continuing commitment to voice and represent black women's experiences and struggles in their own right, and their skepticism of mainstream white feminism and black nationalism, as well as their critical role in the development of feminist theory, though they would be marginalized in this history as well. Another point of consideration in this chapter was, as the title of the chapter explicitly demonstrates, to indicate the diversity of black women' s experiences in the American context that cannot be conceptualized by a monolithic, totalizing black feminism representative and inclusive of all black women, but by black feminisms theorizing from multiple political locations. Relatedly, another aim of this chapter was to foreground that despite the ferment of critical approaches and conceptualizations on which black feminist criticism rests, a consensus can be detected with regard to the principal tenets of black feminist criticism(s) and the politics and ideologies it entails: the uniqueness of being both female and black in a white-supremacist, patriarchal society; the importance of self-definition as a politically charged act of resistance in the face of controlling images of black womanhood which have persistently designated black women as objects of a racist-sexist discourse; the importance of self-definition in relation to black community, to black culture and to a heritage of oppression and struggle; the submersion of black feminist thought in the historical and contemporary realities of black women, that is, black feminist thought draws upon not from abstractions but from concrete lived experiences of African American women; rootedness in the past; the preservation and continuation of common cultural bonds to mobilize constituency; the centrality of self-respect and self-valuation to any considerations of subjectivity, and finally the simultaneity and intersectionality of oppressions in the lives of African American women.

The next chapter, "Triple Jeopardy," accounted for the parameters of the simultaneity of oppressions as the most important contribution of black feminist thought to late postmodern, post-structuralist criticism and theory. The first parameter defined race, class and gender as structurally related categories of analysis. In other words, race,

class and gender were invalidated as independent, autonomous sites of oppression. Historical specificity was determined as the second parameter of the "multiple" oppressions theory. This meant that race, class, and gender are articulated by the dominant ideologies in context-specific ways at different historical conjectures to oppress and marginalize black women. Rejection of reductionist approaches to the study of race, class and gender was offered as the fourth parameter. Still another parameter was specified as disregard for any additive models to account for the simultaneity of oppressions. Rather, a multiplicative model representative of the intersectionality of these axes of oppressions was offered. Finally, the "multiple" oppressions theory was justified as the most effective analytic approach to an analysis of black women's experiences in the United States, due to its explication of the links between everyday material experiences of black women and the political, economic and social structures inscribed within relations of power and its unequal distribution.

Proceeding from this argument, it was claimed that the "multiple" oppressions theory, when applied to African American women's literary tradition, yielded three different images of black woman with respect to their stances at the nexus of race, gender and class oppressions. These three different images of black woman were specified as the invisible shrinking woman, the assimilated woman, and the empowered woman, each representing a nuanced mode of black female identity, and political consciousness. Furthermore, it was argued that these images of black women have recurred in black women's writing since slavery times up to the present. To prove this, this study chose among a variety of works written over a period of time extending from the slavery times up to the contemporary period. More to the point, the selections were confined neither to a specific literary genre nor to a specific period. Literary materials as diverse as novels, autobiographies, short stories and plays have been utilized to chart the typology of black women's images in African American women's literary writing.

The first image was defined as the invisible, shrinking woman who represented the defeated black woman in the face of multiple oppressions. All the black female protagonists representing this image are victims of a racist, patriarchal system refusing them to define and realize themselves in roles other than those prescribed by the dominant society. Their inability to resist hegemonic constructions of femininity and

masculinity is the outright result of their internalization of elite, white, male constructions of black womanhood. The invisible, shrinking black women were also specified as unable to generate alternative modes of being, and to devise alternative sites of resistance from which they could strike at the white world. Therefore, these black women lacked the political consciousness to define themselves beyond roles appropriated by the dominant racist-sexist order. In most cases, poverty fell on these black women as an added burden, exacerbating their oppression, and making their escape from victimization all the more difficult. Defeat came in various forms for the invisible, shrinking women: homicide, infanticide, madness, death, suicide, self-delusion and alienation, confinement within suffocating, unfulfilling marriages. These black women were defined as invisible because they all lacked a sense of self, self-knowledge and self-worth to be able to exist and survive meaningfully and wholly outside the hegemonic constructions of femininity. For black women, lack of self-definition meant being defined in controlling images by the dominant racist-sexist white ideology, which has always rendered black women invisible and voiceless. Their withdrawal from life is the result of their defeat in the face an overarching system of oppressions as well as the result of their spiritual inertia.

The assimilated black woman was the second image to be introduced in this study. The assimilated black woman represented another black female identity constructed at the intersections of race, class and gender. Seeing her blackness as the only a signifier of powerlessness and marginalization, the assimilated black woman severs all her cultural and historical ties with her past and the black community, and chooses to assimilate into the "master's" system to cope with her "multiple" oppressions. In fact, the assimilated black woman represents a contemporary social and cultural phenomenon in the black community, which was diagnosed by W.E.B. Du Bois at the turn of the twentieth-century when he vehemently criticized black assimilation into the mainstream culture as the erasure of political of cultural identity. The assimilated black woman engages in a constant act of self-denial and self-negation by erasing her black racial and cultural identity, and valorizes the dominant culture's values and norms as the only viable route to empowerment. In order to overcome her feelings of low self-esteem and inadequacy, the assimilated black woman constructs her

identity within the "safe" confines of a materialistic, sexist white world where material success, white norms of femininity, beauty and sexuality become the only yardsticks to estimate her sense of worth. The assimilated black woman chooses the "master's tools" to legitimate and realize herself, which is in fact an act of self-erasure and self-obliteration.

The last image of the black woman was defined as the empowered woman who acquired the political and critical consciousness central to resisting the intersecting oppressions of race, class and gender. The empowered black woman was defined to be engaged in a constant process of negotiating her own internally defined images of self as an African American woman with the racist-sexist images of the dominant society. Therefore, the act of self-definition was appropriated as a politically charged fundamental to any considerations of empowerment. The black female protagonists studied in a variety of literary works in this chapter managed to construct their identities beyond elite white, male definitions of femininity, beauty, and gender roles. Moreover, they succeeded in opening up alternative sites of resistance from where they deconstructed and subverted dominant ideologies of black womanhood. The ability to generate a political and critical consciousness as well as self-knowledge was acknowledged as another aspect of the empowered black woman. Additionally, self-definition in relation to the black culture and the black community as well as to a collective historical and cultural legacy was defined as a politically resistant act of confronting and challenging the oppressions circumscribing black women's lives. And finally, coming to voice and "talking back" to a racist-sexist white order that has always represented black women out of their experiences was defined as another politically charged process of self-definition enabling the empowered black woman to shatter the silences surrounding her experiences, and thereby to speak up for herself.

This typology of black women's images in African American literary tradition was intended to prove that three images of black woman have surfaced in black women's literary writing since slavery in relation to their political stances at the crossroads of race, gender and class. Through an exposition and analysis of these images in a wide range of works by African American women, it was demonstrated that these images of black woman have surfaced in black women's literary tradition in a

recurring pattern, each representing a different mode of identity and political consciousness.

This typology of images also proved the diversity and non-uniformity of black women's experiences. All the three images analyzed in a wide range of works written over a period of time extending from slavery up to the present underscored how categories of class and sexuality crosscut race and gender, resulting in various modes of existence and practice. Still another argument explored within the context of this typology was to foreground the fact that despite their divergent histories, social and economic locations, all of the black female characters representing these three images were linked to each other through the common axis of "multiple" oppressions. Therefore, the theory of the simultaneity and intersectionality of oppressions was proved to be the most effective theoretical approach to the multiple experiences of African American women. And finally, the study of these images not as static entities but as political identities as interrelated, and constructed at the nexus of race, class and gender oppressions under given political, social and cultural conditions invalidated universal, monistic, essentializing, ahistorical and reductionist approaches to the study of African American women's historiography as well as literature.

I believe that this study suggests new maps of inquiry for feminist historiography, epistemology, literature and criticism, as well as points toward reconceptualizations of the methods used to locate and chart the dynamics of race, gender, and class as axes of differentiation and stratification in the formation of agency, subjectivity, and oppositional discourses. I hope that this study will serve some useful purpose for those concerned with history, women's literature and feminist historiography, making them revise their own partial conceptual maps, analytic skills and knowledge to develop and transform the way they understand questions of history, and literary criticism. From its very beginning, I have seen this study as a chance to reiterate how important it is to integrate questions of gender, race, and class into all of our historical studies as well as studies of literary criticism. I hope that this study will be a guiding source for each and every reader interested and doing research in Western or Third World feminisms, suggesting first and foremost that the intersectionality and

simultaneity of oppressions under specific historical conjectures should be central to any study in history and feminist literary criticism.

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ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Amerikalı siyah kadın yazarların edebiyat geleneğinde, ırk, sınıf ve toplumsal cinsiyet baskılarının kesişimi bağlamında siyah kadın imgelerinin bir tipolojisini vermektir. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma siyah feminist eleştiri ve düşünce tarafından geliştirilen ırk, sınıf ve toplumsal cinsiyet baskılarının eş zamanlılığı ve kesişimi teorisini, Amerikalı zenci kadın yazarların edebiyat eserlerini irdelemek için kullanmıştır. Tezde incelenen edebi eserlerde, ırkçılık, sınıf baskısı ve toplumsal cinsiyet baskılarına karşı duruşları bağlamında, üç farklı siyah kadın imgesi olduğu savunulmuştur. Bunlar sırasıyla, görünmeyen, yitik siyah kadın, egemen kültüre asimile olmuş siyah kadın ve güçlenmiş siyah kadındır. Tezde, önemle vurgulanan bir başka nokta, bu siyah kadın imgelerinin Amerikalı siyah kadın yazarların edebiyat geleneğinde hep varolduğudur. Bu amaç doğrultusunda, tezde kölelikten günümüze kadar uzanan çok geniş bir zaman yelpazesinden seçilmiş edebi eserler incelenmiştir. Bu üç siyah kadın imgesinin, Amerikalı siyah kadın yazarların eserlerindeki sürekliliğini ispatlama doğrultusunda, metin seçimleri herhangi bir yazar, dönem, edebi tür veya akımla sınırlandırılmamıştır. Bu üç siyah kadın imgesinin, Amerikalı zenci kadınların beyaz üstünlükçü, ataerkil ve sınıf ayrımcı baskın sisteme karşı duruşları ve/veya mücadeleleri bağlamında üç farklı kimliği ve politik bilinci temsil ettikleri ispatlanmaya çalışılmıştır. Bu üç siyah kadın imgesi, aynı zamanda, Amerikalı zenci kadınların deneyim, mücadele ve yaşantılarının farklılığını ve çoğulluğunu ortaya koyarak bütüncül, özcü, tarihüstü bir siyah kadın olgu ve deneyimini geçersiz kılmıştır. Sonuç olarak, farklı sosyal, kültürel ve ekonomik ardalanlardan gelen, farklı cinsel tercihleri olan, ve farklı zaman ve coğrafyalarda konuşlanmış Amerikalı zenci kadınlar, ırk, sınıf ve toplumsal cinsiyet baskılarılarıyla örselenmeleri ve bu baskılayıcı sistemler bütününe karşı verdikleri politik mücadele bağlamında birbirleriyle ilişkilendirilmişlerdir.

ABSTRACT

This study has aimed to chart a typology of black women's images in African American women's literary tradition within the context of the intersectionality and simultaneity of race, class, and gender oppressions. Proceeding from the premise that the theory of "multiple" oppressions is central to the study of African American women's literary tradition, this study has aimed to prove that three images of black woman have surfaced in the African American women's writing since slavery with regard to their political stances and struggles at the nexus of race, class and gender oppressions. These images were defined as the invisible, shrinking woman, the assimilated woman, and the empowered woman. These three images were explored and analyzed in a wide range of works written over a large canvas of time extending from mid-nineteenth to late twentieth century to prove that within the context of the simultaneity and intersectionality of "multiple" oppressions, black women's literary writing yields nuanced modes of identity, each representing a different level of consciousness. The three images have also served to highlight the multiplicity and uniqueness of black women's experiences, to prove that there exists no transhistorical, totalizing and monolithic black woman's experience. All the three images illuminated how categories of class and sexuality cut and crosscut other axes of differentiation and stratification, giving rise to different modes of experience and existence on the part of African American women in the United States. Still, this typology of images has proved the "multiple" oppressions to be the single, common axis of relationality among the diversity of African American women's struggles and experiences in the American context. These black women with divergent histories and social locations are linked to each other by the political threads of opposition and oppression woven at the nexus of race, class, and gender under specific historical conjectures.