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The Search for Selfhood in Selected Fiction Written by African- American Women Writers

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Dedication

My dissertation is dedicated to my family whose love, support, and encouragement have nourished me and given me the strength to move forward.

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Abstract

This study targets specific works written by Afro-American women writers. It analyses Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) from a Black feminist perspective. The research work adopts the reader-response theory approach focusing on the necessity of black women's struggle to challenge and overthrow racial and patriarchal injustices and limitations in order to generate an independent selfhood. The purpose of this thesis is to explore black women's quest for selfhood and desire to contrive stout identities despite the intersectional obstructions. This work explains the way these women writers highlight the female protagonists' persistent efforts to overthrow the limited constructions about black womanhood, defy the domineering patriarchal and racial forces, conceive various innovative means to pursue self-fulfillment, and change their state from being objectified and dominated individuals to individuals with a self-determining selfhood. Each woman character approaches her selfhood differently depending on her surrounding and the conditions she is living in. Because these writers focus on underscoring black women's unique experience, their works not only disrupt the myopic representations of black women, but mostly become the emblem of a rooted tradition that approaches black female women's selfhood as a rhizomatic rather than an arborescent entity. Though not all the novels are a confirmation of the women's ultimate victory, they all highlight their maturity, psychological and moral development. After all, the route towards emancipation and self-fulfillment is more important than women's eventual victory. These are all novels that explore and focus on the growth and maturity of women characters. They are novels of apprenticeship in the way they highlight the changing consciousness, personal growth, and profound comprehension of the female characters' inner selves and social surrounding.

Keywords: Afro-American women writers, black womanhood, black women, black feminism, oppression, patriarchy, selfhood

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Genral Introduction

What shall we call our "self"? Where does it begin? Where does it end?
It overflows into everything that belongs to us.
—Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*

Dating back to the dawn of time, women have been categorized according to biological and sexual essentialism. The latter is quintessentially related to a cultural determinism that imposes a forced social injustice and a systematic inequality between men and women. Gradually, however, women developed a nascent and growing awareness that created a sense of revulsion and resulted in serious attempts to make a change. Women's efforts eventually crystallized in what is often called "feminism". After a long odyssey of struggle and strife against gender and social injustices, women were finally able to confront their societies avowing their existence as equal participants within society. Due to their suffocating lives, many women have tried to revolt, if not publically, privately through exteriorizing their ideas through writing- a device that became to some a serious means of demanding their rights and even a vocation. Writing was, within women's stratagem of emancipation, one of the many invaded forbidden realms they penetrated. They used writing and the world of literature not only to prove their capacities, but most importantly to make of it a medium of mirroring their suffering, renouncing the attributed stereotypes and helping other women to trespass their

submissiveness. Women created a whole universe for themselves through literature. Furthermore, women writers went to investigate how literature was used by men to fossilize degraded views about them.

What is noteworthy is that women have not only been condemned for their sex, but also for their colour. It seems that there is a stratum to perceive individuals and their positions within society; the white man, the white woman, the black man, and ultimately the black woman. As such, if white women suffered from patriarchal injustices, black women were suffering from a more intricate and holistic torture as being seen mysterious exotic, and primitive creatures. Black women were at the bottom of the power chain. On the difference between the black and white woman and the androcentric injustice, a seventy-three year-old black woman explains in an interview with John Gwaltney (1980):

> My mother used to say that the black woman is the white man's mule and the white woman is his dog. Now, she said that to say this: we do the heavy work and get beat whether we do it well or not. But the white woman is closer to the master and he pats them on the head and lets them sleep in the house, but he ain't gon' treat neither one like he was dealing with a person. (qtd. in Collins, *Black Feminist* 114)

Similarly, Collins explains that "Pain, violence, and death form the essential content of these[black] women's lives. They are suspended in time and place; their life choices are so severely limited that the women themselves are often destroyed" (*Black Feminist* 93). Black women were simply "doubly marginalized" (Ward and Herndl 741). Likewise, Ann Ducille explains that black women "…are the last race, the most oppressed, the most marginalized" and "the most deviant" (22). Unlike white women who may fall in the

charade of sharing power with men, who are treated differently, and who appeared to have a broader range of choices, black women, Audre Lorde explains, have suffered from pervasive oppression (112).

Frances Beal in his “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female” explains:

> … [The] Black woman has been subjected to the worst kinds of exploitation and oppression. As a black, she has to endure all the horrors of slavery and living in a racist society; as a worker, she has been the object of continual exploitation, occupying the lowest place on the wage scale and resisted to the most demeaning and uncreative jobs; as a woman, she has seen physical image defamed and been the object of the white master's uncontrollable lust and subjected to all the ideals of white womanhood as a model to which she would aspire; as a mother, she has seen her children torn from her breast and sold into slavery, she has seen them left home without attention while she attended to the needs of the offsprings of the ruling class.…In addition, besides suffering the common fate of all oppressed and exploited people, the Afro-American woman continued to experience the age-old oppression of woman by man. In home, she becomes the "salve of a slave". (qtd. in Collins, *Black Feminist* 207)

Black women’s dire state of affairs delayed their unfettering and aggravated their traumas, but once they started voicing their needs and demands, they wrote the most perplexing and poignant descriptions of their abhorrent sufferings. They produced a literature of their own addressing needs such as strengthening their bonds, erasing stereotypes, and freeing themselves (hooks, *Talking Back* 56). Because “being Black and female in the United States continues to expose African-American women to certain

common experiences" and because "U.S. Black women as a group live in a different world from that of people who are not Black and female" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 23), it was necessary for them to produce a literature that tackles their specific concerns. Explaining the importance of writing to women of colour, Seodial F. H Deena, in *Canonization, Colonization, Decolonization: A Comparative Study of Political and Critical Works by Minority Writers*, discusses the responsibility of colored women who "had no alternative but to discover and define themselves through their writings in order to liberate themselves" and turn down the dual stigmas of racism and sexism (19).

For many black women, the attempt to fashion and maintain a positive sense of selfhood is virtually impossible. Accordingly, it is no surprise that self-definition preoccupies most black women writers. Because they suffer from dwelling in two worlds; their internal world where they aspire to have a self- fulfilling existence and the external world where they live according to the social dictates, selfhood formation becomes a challenge that needs considerable will and inner strength from black women. In their writings, black women, due to the patriarchal victimization, racial injustices, and "internalized oppression", make of the formation of identity, strengthening of selfhood, and "womanist consciousness" their major interest (Collins, *Black Feminist* 112).

It is this Womanist/Black feminist thinking that becomes the incentive for women's quest of self-assertion. By recognizing and condemning the interconnectedness of racial, gender, sexual, and cultural oppression, the ideals of black feminism offered black women and black women writers new possibilities and comprehensive visions of freedom. The black feminist agenda, just like the black women writers, prioritizes survival and self-sufficiency. Implementing the ideals, however, is challenging. Unlike

black men who are by their turns victims of racial segregation and "who hop trains, hit the road, or in other ways physically travel in order to find that elusive sphere of freedom from racial oppression" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 113), Audre Lorde explains that black women's journey takes "personal and psychological forms" and involves a gradual "transformation of silence into language and action" (40).

For black women, the process of liberation through writing must rely on awareness about their position and the system created, endorsed, and imposed by men. Never acting separately but being intersectional in nature, it is important for black women "…to address more than one form of oppression" and consider "the significance of how singular and multiple forms of oppression are organized" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 203). Being au fait with the contours of the heterogeneous oppressions is the first measure to be taken by black women in order to free themselves.

Bhabha's notion of the "self" and the "other" is very interesting when it comes to discuss the issue of identity vis-à-vis the marginalized entities- an idea that quintessentially applies to black women as being "the basis for the definition" of the "other" "in the American society" (Christian, *Black Feminist* 160). Designating the black woman as the "other" does not only deprive her of establishing her own sense of selfhood, but does also allow the man to equate her to an empty vessel that he can fill with all the attributes he wishes to ascertain his supremacy, authority, and positive sense of his masculine selfhood (Morris 14). From a binary perspective, black women are the objectified "other" and are considered to be mere objects to be manipulated and controlled. Dona Richards explains that the ultimate purpose of this objectification is the "despiritualization" of black women (qtd. in Collins, *Black Feminist* 70). As objects,

black women's reality and existence are defined and created by the others (hooks, *Talking Back* 42).

Barbara Christian, a black feminist critic, asserts that black women being the weakest section in society suffer from devaluation in real life and misrepresentation in literature. In that, she states: "My being from the Caribbean helps me to recognize that people invent their own forms…Those who control the society can control their cultural hegemony. What's published or seen as central has so much to do with the cultural reproduction of the powerful" (*Black Feminist Criticism* xiii). In a way, Christian is inviting women to take control and independently form their identities. Christian, relying on her own experience, knows that it is the strong who shape their own identity and control as well as manipulate the one of the weak. Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins affirms that black women have been the victims of intersecting oppressions. Accused of being "emotional" and "passionate", irrational and absurd, black women were condemned of being the dregs of the society (Collins, *Black Feminist* 71).

Though they have long recognized the social injustices imposed on them, it took black women a while to satisfy their longing to attain a self-conscious and a self-sustained selfhood. The long saga of suffering that black women were subject to fostered lingering but steady resistance. Taking the onus of vivificating other subdued women, a plethora of black women writers mirrored various forms of black women's endeavors to escape the derogated images and distressing conditions imposed on them. Some resorted to religion, female bonding, travel from place to another, or willingly kowtow just to escape the patriarchal hegemonic world they live in. Many other black women writers emerged with a defiant will and confidence in their abilities and rights to challenge the patriarchal and

racial limitations in order to establish a firm sense of selfhood and identity. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), due to the ubiquitous and shared racial, sexual, and androcentric injustices, provide a similar view about the necessity of black women's struggle to overthrow racial and patriarchal injustices and limitations in order to generate an independent selfhood.

Taking into consideration the fact that black women in America have always had to withstand the critical definitions of the patriarchal society, these novelists are keen on writing novels where black women speak out against all forms of psychological, physical, and racial oppression. These novelists have continued emphasizing the theme of black women fighting and struggling to dwell within a safe space - one that is free of an immediate, dominant patriarchal and racial code. Collins defines this space as, "...not only safe--it forms a prime location for resisting objectification of the 'other'" and provides these women with a location to safely establish their identities (*Black Feminist* 95). That "third space" and safe one does enable them to isolate themselves and assert their selfhood away from domineering powers and create independent identities that fight back the imposed limitations. It is this "new territory", as Seodial Deena labels it,that permits black women to escape and challenge the socially prescribed roles and assert their own authority (19).

These novelists' works, emphasizing the quest of selfhood and self-definition, came as a response to the stereotypical images that have distorted black womanhood. "Self-definition speaks to the power dynamics involved in rejecting externally defined,

controlling images of black womanhood" and relies on rejecting the distorted depiction of some of black women's traits "that threaten existing power arrangements" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 114-15).

The stereotypical limiting images about black women's selfhood go back to the era of slavery. They serve primarily to insure the continuance of slavery, nail down men's supremacy, and maintain black women's subordination. While white women, according to the cult of true womanhood, should aspire to possess the "four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domestic", "…African-American women encountered a different set of controlling images" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 72). bell hooks, in her *Ain't I a Woman,* identifies the various notions and definitions of black womanhood. Starting with matriarchy, hooks explains that black women who fulfill their roles as mothers, caregivers, or economic providers are often described as matriarchs. The latter imbues women with a certain feeling of authority- a thing that they lack in reality. Immersed in such a delusion, hooks explains, black women stagnate while their plain and basic tasks suffice them and deviate their attention from seeking broader prospects (hooks, *Ain't I* 72). Collins adds that the matriarch stereotype represents women who replace the conventional role of the submissive dependent mother by being "overtly aggressive, unfeminine", assertive and helpful to other women in need *(Black Feminist* 74-75). Failed by their emasculated husbands or partners, many black women, fulfilling their family's needs, find themselves accused of being matriarchs. The opposite of the matriarch is the welfare mother who fails to fulfill the needs of her family. The welfare mother, an unwed woman who violates the moral codes of the domineering white society and lacks financial support and stability secured only through marriage. Blamed not only

for her own poverty but also for not succeeding to pass on ethic work for her children, the welfare mother image fossilizes the dominant intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class (Collins, *Black Feminist* 79-80).

Another sexist and racist representation of black womanhood is by calling black women Amazonic. The notion Amazonic was created in order to widen the gap between black women and black men, induce black women about their animalistic nature and strength, and draw a utopian image of a society ruled by women and excluding black men (hooks, *Ain't* I 82). On the other hand, the mammy is the opposite of the Amazonic. The origins of the mammy, as being a docile and obedient woman, go back to the era of slavery. Besides being old, passive, asexual, she is above all the perfect servant that heartedly serves the whites and benefits from slavery. The mammy, in fact, was created not only to curb black women's construction of selfhood but also to embellish slavery (hooks, *Ain't I* 84). A more modern version of the mammy is the black lady. The black lady refers to women "who stayed in school, worked hard, and have achieved much. Yet, 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 hard as everyone else" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 80). Because they are absorbed in their time consuming occupations, black ladies tend to professionally compete with black men, become less feminine and more assertive, and disregard the idea of marriage (Collins, *Black Feminist* 80).

The Sapphire is another biased restrictive depiction of black womanhood. "As Sapphires, black women were depicted as evil, treacherous, bitchy, stubborn, hateful, in

short all the mammy figure was not. The Sapphire image had as its base one of the oldest negative stereotypes of woman-the image of the female as inherently evil" (hooks, *Ain't I* 85). Such a type of black women was condemned and rejected for being unruly, unconventional, and reflective. The Jezebel is another prescribed image about black women's selfhood. From this perspective, black women are seen as "sexually permissive, as available and eager for the sexual assaults of any man, black and white" (hooks, *Ain't* I 52). The Jezebel image, on the one hand, depicts black women as more powerful by being seducers who control men, and justifies the sexual assaults they receive because they overtly expose their sexuality on the other. Reducing the black woman into a creature driven by her bestial sexual desire is the ultimate disgrace a woman can experience. These bigoted representations of black women's selfhood are intensely challenged in Walker, Hurston, Morrison, Larsen and Naylor's fiction through novels that vividly capture black women's versatile experiences, display the complexity and diversity of black women's identity, and depict women's struggle for their selfhood against the established constructions.

Actually, the novels of these women writers may be considered as a distinctive social document about black women's lives in America. The uniqueness of these novels stems from the fact that they reflect, in a way or in another, the writers' problems as being black women who continually struggle to gain a social and intellectual niche as women writers. Of equal importance is the time in which these novels were written starting with the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s which is said to be the awakening of the black people, the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s where women just like men tried to firmly impose themselves within their societies, and the intellectual dynamics during the 1970s

which marked the establishement of a black feminist literature and a black feminist literary tradition. Though works by African-American women writers were constantly rejected and accused of being narrow in vision, one-sided, and biased, writers like Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor have not ceased devoting their works to express women's needs. And despite the fact that these women writers belonged to different periods, they all persisted on guiding black women towards their emancipation and providing their black women readers with hope to escape and challenge the prescribed roles, canons, and demands of their societies.

The selected novels of these women writers essentially portray unconventional black women pursuing their quest of their selfhood. The women characters reject the conventional images about black womanhood so as to establish an independent selfhood. The women writers, through their female protagonists, subvert the "dualistic thinking about good and bad. Making a space for the transgressive image" and "the outlaw rebel vision" as a call for justice and a plea for change (hooks, *Talking Back* 4).

Black women's oppression and struggle for attaining an emancipated selfhood and identity have been the interest of many writers who wrote books, articles, and critical essays. This may include: Elizabeth Abel's "(E)Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendships in Contemporary Fiction By Women." (1981), Clenora Hudson-Weems' *Africana Womanist Literary Theory: A Sequel to Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (2004), Barbara Christian's *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985-2000*(2007), Hazel V Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro American Woman Novelist* (1987), Carole Boyce Davies' *Black Women, Writing, and identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994), Mary Eagleton's *Feminist Literary Theory: A*

Reader (1986), and Barbara Christian's *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985). These books and articles are of great importance once discussing black women's hostile realities within society and the necessity to overthrow the intersectional forces that control their existence and shape their identities. They are also significant as far as black feminist criticism and black women writers' works are concerned.

In addition to the above-mentioned texts, some secondary texts that deal with views about black women's position in society and in literature and that call for the importance of black women's search for a vigorous identity are very interesting. A book of great importance is Roxanne Harde's *Narratives of Community: Women's Short Story Sequences*. It assembles a sequence of essays, based on Sandra Zagarell's "Narrative of Community", analyzing a collection of short stories written by women writers. It does not only deal with short stories, feminism, and genre theory separately, but relates them by arguing that women's writing establishes a thematic and narrative style that supports and calls for a women's centered community. It also calls for the appropriate positioning of early works by women writers and their focus on women's communion. The book examines the construction of women's identity within the domestic, social, and literary sphere.

Nina Auerbach's *Communities of Women: an Idea in Fiction* is, also, an interesting book that explores the idea of women's bonding and sisterhood. In order to distinguish women's bonding from the tradition of bonding of men, an analysis of numerous famous novels written by women and their depiction and perception of communities of women is employed.

Of equal importance is bell hooks' classic *Ain't I a Woman* which deplores the incessant devaluation and oppression of black women. Though black women's oppression goes back to slavery, hooks explains that it lasts for years later on taking different forms by white men, white women, and black men. Because they have never been considered as human beings, it was easier for white people to impose stereotypical images that control black women's identities and selfhood. The book, also, highlights the intricacy of race and gender as far as black women's selfhood is concerned.

Barbara Smith's essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" challenges the limited images of black women's selfhood and identity. She denounces not only the lack of the appropriate representation of black women in literature, but also the derogatory constructions and oppressive forces working to suppress black women's identities. Smith highlights the importance of establishing a literary tradition that seeks to create space for black women in literature and that tackles themes crucial to their own needs, identities, and lives.

Another significant book is Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.* It tackles important subjects such as work, family, black women's oppression, controlling images of the black woman within society, and the importance of self-definition. The book explores the ideas of famous black feminist thinkers and writers such as bell hooks, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, etc. Above all, the book is concerned with empowering black women and promoting their quest of a self-fulfillment and self-actualization - a major issue in my study.

Seodial F. H. Deena's *Canonization, Colonization, Decolonization: A Comparative Study of Political and Critical Works By Minority Writers* is a book of great value. The book, as a comparative study, explores the effects of canonization and colonization on racial, class, and gender basis. While the book focuses on works written by minority writers, it concentrates on targeting the African American women writers. It questions the limiting regulations on minority writers, on the hand, and valorizes the uniqueness of the literature produced by these writers on the other.

By examining selected works of Walker, Hurston, Larsen, Morrison and Naylor, this thesis seeks to reveal the unique experiences of African-American women as well as to highlight the varying ways through which these works defy the dual establishments of racism and sexism vis-à-vis black womanhood. In fact, the aim of this thesis is to discuss the crisis of black women's identity and selfhood starting with the various obstacles, oppressions, suppressions to the diverse attempts and mechanisms black women use to escape and/or defy their societies as a way to pursue a well-established selfhood. This thesis focuses on black women writers' endeavors to redefine and revision the restricted sense of black womanhood. It also depicts the way the selected novels challenge the limited constructions of black women's identities.

Although these women writers are not the only significant African-American women writers, their novels are highly representative of black women's struggle. These women writers, through their female protagonists, defy the social and literary bigoted views and representations of black women. The selected works reveal that the black woman's life is a real ubiquity of struggle and endurance. In that, the women writers depict their protagonists' persistent efforts to overthrow the limited construction of black

womanhood, defy the domineering patriarchal and racial forces, and conceive various innovative means to pursue self-fulfillment. As such, the search for selfhood, the construction of a multidimensional selfhood, and the amendment of the definition of black womanhood and selfhood form the quintessence of these novels.

The importance of analyzing the five novels together lies in the fact that they represent the continuum of black women writers' struggle and determination to undermine the prevailing constructions of black women's selfhood. So, the aim of this study is to fill the gap and trace the various patterns through which black women's selfhood has been violated by the hegemonic racial and patriarchal system, and approached as well established by black women. The uniqueness of this study lies in the fact that it does treat the protagonists' quest of selfhood not as unconnected and isolated process but as a continuous and predominant concern of black women through different times. The fact of having the novels written between the 1830s and 1980s accentuates the fact that black women's quest of selfhood can be said to be a tradition- a one that needs to be examined with regards to the approach used and its outcome.

It is interesting to see how these female writers consider the formation of selfhood. In fact, these writers depict female characters who subtly, gradually, or fiercely reject their patriarchal racist societies. Owing to the severe racial and patriarchal hegemony, these female characters may experience repressive angers and frustration, but ultimately display unconventional behaviors to spurn the revered social beliefs about the inability of black women to have a well-established identity. Though some female protagonists do not openly reject their social systems from the beginning, they try to approximate their freedom and establishment of their identity gradually. Some other female protagonists

experience a changed consciousness. This type of change, though internal and psychological, can be relieving to women who are subject to stern oppression encumbering them to act. Accordingly, Claudia Tate confirms that a woman's inability to act does not mean that:

> she is completely circumscribed by her limitations. On the contrary, she learns to exceed former boundaries but only as a direct result of knowing where they lie. In this regard, she teaches her readers a great deal about constructing a meaningful life in the midst of chaos and contingencies, armed with nothing more than her intellect and emotions. (*Psychoanalysis* xxiv)

This study focuses on the gradual change in the protagonists' attitudes as well as actions towards a one corresponding to a confident sense of selfhood. The protagonists of the selected novels appear at the beginning as either obedient females who suffer from identity suppression, disturbed women who feel lost and search for a sense of selfhood, unconventional women who prove to their patriarchal entourage their ability to sustain their identity through a variety of mechanisms, or determined women who end up furnishing an independent identity. After all, what is worth analyzing is their persistence and unconventional innovative strategies to quench their quest of selfhood. Eventually, what matters most is not only the realization of a stable sense of selfhood, but the change in women's attitudes vis-à-vis their societies and above all towards themselves. They may not gain an absolute emancipation, but at least they revision their sense of selfhood and subvert the normativity constructed by the dominant patriarchal social authority. It is their changed consciousness that enables them to transcend the intersecting oppressive forces and act subtly. In that, Kai Eriskon argues that what matters most in black

women's search for identity is that “turning point” and that “crucial moment” in which they seek “recovery, and further differentiation” (194). Similarly, these female characters struggle to detach themselves from the already set roles as conventional black women, and turn towards themselves to pursue self-fulfillment.

The diversity in treating black women’s selfhood is remarkable in these novels. By so doing, these women writers accentuate the black woman’s complex and diverse experience in real life. Though all women characters suffer from intersectional gender and racial oppression, each one reacts differently and perceives as well as approaches her selfhood in a different way. While Celie in *The Color Purple*, Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Nel in *Sula* start as victimized women, they eventually impose their self-fulfilled selfhood. Contrastingly, Sula in *Sula* and Helga in *Quicksand* seem to be bold enough right from the beginning to challenge the socially imposed codes. Besides the differences in their undertaken journeys towards selfhood, their vision of selfhood differs. Helga, exceptionally, understands that having a changed consciousness may lead to approaching a syncretic selfhood. Janie, Sula, and Nel perceive the importance of female bonding and absolute rejection of hegemonic order. Though triumphing eventually against patriarchal evils, Celie decides to merge her personal self within the larger self of the black community. From a more comprehensive and radical perspective, the seven women of Brewster Place come to understand the necessity of establishing an independent selfhood that can only be safeguarded by matriarchal communion.

All of the selected novels share the point of portraying their black women characters as undergoing a journey of search for selfhood relying on various means. In so doing, these women move from one place to another searching for the meaning of individuality,

choose to build and live in a tightly knit female community to develop strong and supportive relationships based on sisterhood and motherhood, change husbands in search for any kind of love, and challenge the social conventions that chain their liberties as individuals.

This research work is the result of a number of motivations. Despite the fact that black women's identity and selfhood has been the focus of many scholars and literary critics, yet up to my knowledge none of the studies reviewed on this topic have studied the five selected novels together or explored the protagonists' strategies to fulfill their quest of selfhood. Hence, main questions araise:

1. How do these novels analyse, perceive, and determine the meaning of black women's self-awareness and selfhood?
2. What are the strategies and steps that the women writers of the selected novels highlight to trace the quest of selfhood of their women characters?
3. How can black feminist writing disclose black women's experiences including inner feelings, silences, and repressions?
4. How can black feminist writing liberate and enlighten black women and readers?

Each female protagonist approaches her selfhood differently depending on her surrounding and the conditions she is living in. The protagonists not only fight back dogmatized views about black women, but also revision black womanhood and selfhood within a more liberated frame- a frame that allows black women to be transcendental in their quest of selfhood. Thus, this thesis traces the various means women characters resort to and the eventual results they reach. In order to do this, I will rely on the analysis

and interpretation of presented and gathered information. I will be using a textual analysis of the selected novels relying on the theoretical framework of black feminist criticism and specifically black feminist ideology and social thought. The reader-response theory is the essential method used in the textual analysis. Ideas of famous black feminist critics like: bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Christian, Claudia Tate, and Deborah E. McDowell are of great significance and use.

This thesis will consist of an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion. Besides the first chapter which presents definitions of important theories and relevant concepts, the organization of the chapters is by no means chronological; rather, it is based on a thematic perspective. Focusing on the concept of selfhood, this study analyses the black women writers' treatment of selfhood from the specific to the general, from the individual to the collective, and from the definite to the relative. The second chapter, thus, is devoted to the *The Color Purple.* The latter presents Celie's personal quest of selfhood and ultimate emancipation. The third chapter deals with Janie, as a less victimized woman who traces an exceptional path towards selfhood. The fourth chapter is about Helga, an initially bold and rebellious mulatta, who ends up to be temporarily satisfied with her changed consciousness hoping that it may lead to eventual absolute emancipation. The fifth chapter, about Sula and Nel, presents a different version of selfhood; a female mutual selfhood. Nel's ultimate epiphany, thanks to Sula's teachings, is the incarnation of self-fulfillment in the novel. The last chapter deals with the inclusive sense of selfhood merged in the collective female experience of the women of Brewster Place. The novel presents the lives of seven women to emphasize black women's

diversity and underscore the necessity of their supportive posture to create an independent selfhood that can only be safeguarded by matriarchal communion.

The first chapter will be dedicated to the theoretical foundations which form the basis of the analysis in this study. Thus, relevant and appropriate definitions and explanations of basic concepts will be included particularly the black feminist theory, black feminist criticism, and black women selfhood.

The second chapter entitled “From Silence to Voice: the Fight for Self-fulfillment in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*” is going to be devoted to the analysis of the protagonist’s quest of selfhood. The development of Celie, the protagonist of the novel, from being a dependent submissive woman into an outstanding, independent, and ambitious woman who turns towards herself rejecting the androcentric power and racial supremacy over her rather than toil to satisfy and fulfill her role as a woman and a wife is going to be highlighted. It is noticeable that Celie's emancipation and achievement of a self-actualizing selfhood is the result of the fusion of miscellaneous forces: the bonding between Shug, Celie, and Nettie taking the form of a *sisterhood* or *motherhood*, the liberation of Celie's body by Shug, and her ability to *speak* and confront her tyrant husband as a representative of the patriarchal society.

Entitled “From Defiance to Strategic Submission to Emancipation in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston”, the **third chapter** explores the struggle of the novel’s protagonist, Janie, to establish a subversive and emancipated selfhood. This novel explores the journey that Janie goes through until her identity comes into a full circle. Throughout the first half of the novel, Janie's voice often goes unheard or is stifled owing to the dominant forces starting with her grandmother, her husbands, and society in

general. I will argue that Janie's repetitive marriages do not guarantee her freedom, love or happiness, but do provide her with more opportunities and new horizons to push forward in her incessant search for selfhood. I will, also, explain the way sisterhood is important in helping Janie facing androcentric oppression and establishing her sense of selfhood. The latter is vested in the strong relationship between Janie and her best sister, Pheoby. Janie decides to tell her story to her best friend because she trusts her, and is sure that her story will never die. What is interesting about this novel is the association of women, in general and Janie is particular, with mules. While in the first part, mules dominate the novel, in the final chapters they totally disappear referring to the altered state of Janie from a subordinate and servile creature to an independent black woman. Eventually, her journey from mule to muliebrity is accomplished.

The fourth chapter is entitled “Helga Crane: a *Flâneuse* in Search for an Intersectional Self in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*”. It deals with examining the journey of Helga Crane, the protagonist of Larsen's *Quicksand*, and her continuous search for an identity. I will explain that Helga’s journey aims at ensconcing a unique selfhood- a selfhood that fits her status as being a mulatto. She is a character who endures discrimination in the black society as well as the white one. Though the reasons for such a misperception and refusal are numerous, the writer makes it clear that Helga suffers from being perceived as an outsider and an exotic object of a highly sensual nature- a point that reflects the stereotypical perception of black women in general. Helga opts for travelling to find a more tolerant and less domineering society. She moves from Naxos, Chicago, Harlem, Copenhagen, to a rural village in Alabama with the hope to find a niche for her complex identity. Her continuous desperate search for selfhood leads her to

end up married with many children and on the verge of madness. Though some critics perceive Helga's ending as a defeat, I will argue that Helga's quest, indeed, is a one that equates maturation, awareness, and new self-preservation mechanisms. Though Helga starts with a bold rebellious tendency towards social, racial, and gender regulations, she eventually learns how to subtly maintain her individuality. In the course of her journey, Helga's travel from one place to another makes her aware not only that no society would accept her complex character, but also teaches her how to deal with each form of oppression she faces. In that sense, *Quicksand* can be said to be a modernist novel in the way it accentuates more the significance of the journey Helga engages in as a complex modern individual.

"Nel and Sula: Mutually Burgeoning Selves-in-Relation in Toni Morrison's *Sula*" is the title of the **fifth chapter.** It examines the solid and often intriguing relationship between the two main characters of the novels, Sula and Nel, in order to highlight the importance of sisterhood not only in forming their identity but also in generating a feeling of stability, comfort, and healing in the face of failed mother/daughter relationships. Being totally different and complementing each other, the more Sula and Nel get closer the more their self-fulfilment gets stronger. The seemingly destroyed bond between Sula and Nel leaves the two women apart until Sula's illness when Nel decides to visit her. I will explain that during this visit Sula, even on her deathbed, insists on her pursuit of freedom and her desire to liberate Nel from the social limitations. I will maintain that Nel's moment of epiphany is the result of the continuous supportive and liberating teachings of Sula. While Sula has always stuck to her insurgent principals, Nel

finally is able to free herself from the social hegemony. It is only when Nel realizes her need for Sula and appreciates her guidance that she can start her own quest for selfhood.

"A Communal Selfhood in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*" is the title of the **sixth chapter** which explores the experience, struggle, and ultimate emancipation of seven women in Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*. I will explain that this novel celebrates women's communion and unity and calls for an inclusive selfhood. Writing about totally different seven women rather than focusing on one protagonist portrays Naylor's unique perception of selfhood and highlights her view about the necessity of women's unity despite their differences. This chapter also explains the important role of Mattie acting as a mother figure, a healer, and a unifying figure. Shared memories and dreams are of equal importance. Thus, I will explain how common dreams and memories enable women to dispose of their fragmented selfhood and achieve an emergent emancipated selfhood. By helping each other and experiencing a selfless love, the women transcend their tragic experiences and realities to come into a state of self-awareness and self-realization.

The conclusion will sum up the main points of the argument and present the results of the study highlighting the importance of pursuing the fulfillment of selfhood for black women in the selected works. It will shed light on the obstacles these women face as well as the techniques they use in order to achieve their objectives. This study highlights the various perspectives from which selfhood is viewed; as such, the conclusion will go over the similarities as well as the differences the writers of the selected works reveal while addressing the notion of the black women's selfhood.

Chapter One:

Theoretical Foundations

Introduction

This chapter presents the main notions and characteristics of the feminist theory and the black feminist theory. The theoretical part of this thesis will provide the ground for the textual analysis for the coming chapters. Black feminism, in the United States, came as a response not only to the gender and racial injustices but also to the limited vision of the Eurocentric white feminism and the civil rights movement controlled by Black men. This chapter explains the way black women fought to find a literary niche to voice their needs as women and artists. Since this thesis deals essentially with works written by black women writers and employs black feminist criticism, this chapter will provide an insight about the development of the black women's literary tradition and criticism.

Recasting the role of social structures in defining black selfhood and womanhood appears to be one of the primary concerns of black feminism. Thus, this chapter will trace the way black feminism and black literary criticism help black women to articulate their experiences and spur them to overthrow the intersectional forces.

Since selfhood is the core of this work, it is necessary to pore over the various conceptualizations about selfhood in general and black women's selfhood in particular. Relevant notions related to black women's selfhood including intesectionality and gender fluidity will be discussed.

I. Feminism and the Feminist Theory

Feminism, in a general, calls for the amelioration of women's status. It moves from being a social movement that aims at uplifting women's position to being a literary, political and economic ideology. Though feminism has a multiplicity of meanings depending on its social, economic, and legal implications, most thinkers agree on making gender inequalities the basis of feminism. Feminism, according to Baumgardner and Richards, describes "a social justice movement for gender equity and human liberation…[it]compromised the revolutionary ideas of freedom and ushered in an empty prescription for social equality." (50–51). bell hooks defines feminism as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (*Feminism Is* viii). Estelle Freedman maintains that "Because most societies privilege men as a group, social movements are necessary to achieve equality between women and men, with the understanding that gender always intersects with other social hierarchies" (7). Similarly, Gerda Lerner, in her *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: from the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy*, explains that feminism is based on

> the awareness of women that they belong to a subordinate group; that they have suffered wrongs as a group; that their condition of subordination is not natural, but societally determined; that they must join other women to remedy these wrongs; and finally, that they must and can provide an alternate vision of societal organization in which women as well as men will enjoy autonomy and self determination. (14)

From a literary/critical perspective, feminism establishes its assumptions on the socially constructed notion of sexed identities or gender. Gender does not only classify human beings according to their sex, but does also assign social roles according to biological terms. As such, because of this biological classification of male/female, women are placed in an inferior position as being the devalued unprivileged other sex in the social hierarchy. Furthermore, feminism denounces the fact that social, political, and economic ideologies are male-centered and exlcusive. Because of these prevalent injustices, feminism underlines the potentials of womanhood and condemns patriarchal regulations. Feminist literature and feminist literary criticism are the culmination of centuries of women's writing about women's minds, bodies, ideas, and living. It is the remarkable body of protofeminist writings that forms the basis of the feminist literary criticism and thought (Plain and Seller 2).

The very first attributes of the feminist thinking appeared during the late eighteenth and ninetieth century. It was based on rejecting the premises of liberalism of the time. Though liberalism sustained the importance of the individuals' freedom and equality, women were neither considered to be equal to men nor free to make their own decisions. In reality, the liberalism of the time privileged men while considering women as "irrational creatures" who should have no control over their own lives or anything else (Beasley 18). As such, feminism rejected and denounced the hypocrisy of the liberalist standards which were primarily androcentric. The feminism of the time did not only diagnose the problem of women's enquality in society, but in some cases proposed solutions. Books of this era include Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of*

Women, Olive Schreiner's *Women and Labour*, and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.

A different feminist perception appeared during the 1960s and 1970s- often called Second wave feminism. Countless documentaries, women's studies courses, newspaper and magazine articles, histories, memoirs, were produced concretizing the numerous contributions of women to this movement. It was a more radical feminism that called for the inevitable social change in general and women's status in particular. Second wave feminists explained that women have been unprivileged subordinates in a system of power governed by notions of patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality. They were concerned with the the "conditioning" and "socialization" of women. The latter explains their distinction between the notions "feminist", "female", and "feminine". In sum, second wave feminists' primary aspiration was to overthrow men's illegitimate authority over women, subvert women's marginalization, and call for women's emancipation and involvement in the social and political landscape (Barry 122).

Third wave feminists criticized the second wave feminists for their limited vision about women. They advocated equality of men and women yet emphasized the woman's existence as a free responsible individual rather than a victimized part in the society. While Second Wave feminism employed an inseparable part of the feminist politics, Third wave feminism focused more on culture. Second wave feminists attempted to overthrow cultural attributions about women and escape the trap of femininity, but Third wave feminists celebrated femininity and held tight to and attempted to subvert what once symbolized women's oppression. Third Wave feminism moved to exploring and celebrating the female outlook and world, restoring the lost or discarded records of

women's works, and consctructing a canon of women's writing. As such, "gynotexts" became the center of the feminists' interest (Barry 122-23).

Despite their differences, the different waves of feminism opened new horizons for women. It was these waves of feminism that spurred the establishment of a female literary tradition that expresses women's needs and the injustices they have been subject to and above all promotes new definitions and understandings about women and womanhood. It was the resurrection of the body of literature written by women that sets the ground for what is known as modern feminist literary criticism (Eagleton, *Feminist Literary* 20). The latter is based on rethinking the canon, revaluing women's experience, examining power relations, perpetuating anti-essentiaslist notions, and considering women writers as a literary communion with works that are worth formal analysis (Barry 133-34).

II.Feminism and the Black Woman

II.1. The Problem with Feminism: Its Failure to Women of Color

Because of focusing on a unified literary tradition that is concerned basically with women of European descent, feminism and feminist criticism fail to represent many other nonwhite women. Black women are one category of the many neglected women by feminism. While white middle class women have made significant strides within home and society, black women were still suffering from various forms of injustices with no voice to express their interests and needs. Feminism, intentionally, fails to understand or cover the racial, gender, social, economic, and sexual oppressions black women were subject to.

While Western feminism, seemingly intends to condemn and challenge men's hegemony as well as exclusive and elitist ideas, it ironically suppressed black women's ideas (duCille 119). In fact, western feminism has never intended to cover black women's peculiarities about "how race and class intersect in structuring gender" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 5). The feminist theory relied on suppression and omission of black women ideas and experience.

Some feminists called for the need of diversity but omitted colored women from their works, others expressed their inability and unwillingness to speak for black women because they are not themselves black, and others romanticized the black female experience. bell hooks maintains that instead of depicting the hideous impact of racism and sexism on black women, white feminists focus on black women's strength and ability to circumvent oppression by being strong- which is not the case. The latter is just a confirmation of the long-lasting stereotype about black women's inhuman and supernatural strength. When people talk about black women's strength, they refer to their coping and submission but never real strength because. After all, endurance never equals the power of resistance or transformation (hooks, *Ain't I* 6). In sum, western feminism seems to be in a "tenuous position to challenge the hegemony of mainstream scholarship on behalf of all women" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 5-6).

II.2. The Need of a Literature of their Own

Black women understood that "the only people who care enough about us [black women] to work consistently for our liberation is us." (qtd. In Guy-Sheftall 304). They found themselves in need of finding a niche within feminism and feminist literary criticism. Within that space, they would safely produce a literature of their own without the jeopardy of being excluded, disregarded, or criticized. Black women's intention "is to address the gaps in literature" (Neville and Hamer 438).

The "Revolutionary Black Feminism" theory by Neville and Hamer explains the importance of developing a black feminist literature and literary criticism. According to them, black women have unique experiences starting with various the racial, gender and sexual oppressions. They maintain that "Black women's experiences are, in part, shaped by a myriad of interlocking systems of oppressions that are framed within the context of the political economy of a given society" (Neville and Hamer 440). They were victims of "internal colonization", "dispossession", "slavery", economic and sexual exploitation, "cultural repression", "political disenfranchisement", "and genocide" (Cotton 14). These interlocking systems of oppressions place black women at the bottom of the social structure. Linda La Rue, a literary critic, explains that though both white and black women suffer from the patriarchal dogma, white women have better opportunities. "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" (La Rue 166). Thus, because of their differences, because feminism has failed them, and because black men have suppressed

them in their civil rights movement, black women need to produce their own literature addressing their own concerns. While the demands of mainstream/white feminism in general center around economic and social justice and the rejection of the totalitarian patriarchal rule as well as the cult of domesticity, Postcolonial feminism, in general, and Black feminism, in particular, condemns the white Eurocentric feminist gaze for neglecting and mismatching their needs (Plain and Sellers 283).

Black women's double marginalization obliges them to produce literary theories and writings that explore their lives and experiences and "suspend the variables of race, class, and gender in mutually interrogative relations" (Smith 318). bell hooks confirms this point arguing that black feminism and black feminist literature must exist apart from and as a part of the larger struggle to eradicate domination, racism, and exclusion in all its forms. She maintains:

> We are need of a more feminist scholarship which addresses a wide variety of issues in Black life (mothering, Black masculinity, the relationship between gender and homicide, poverty, the crisis of black womanhood, connections between health and our conceptions of the body, sexuality, media, etc.)- work that could have transformative impact on our future. (hooks, *Feminism and Black* 56)

Consequently, African-American women started "'talking quite a bit' since 1970 and have insisted that the masculinist bias in Black social and political thought, the racist bias in feminist theory, and the heterosexist bias in both be corrected" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 2).

II.2.a. The Social Movements Leading up to the Intellectual Dynamics of the 1970s

The civil rights movements and liberation movements during the mid1950s and 1960s start to change the social, political, and economic aspects of the American society. Interestingly enough, these liberation movements encouraged many of the deprived and oppressed groups to struggle against the racial, gender and economic oppressions maintained by the white patriarchal system. Black women were no exception; they aspired for being treated as normal human beings regardless of their color and gender.

But just like the white middle class feminism, these liberation movements which presumed to be comprehensive were male-oriented, sexist, and disregarded black women from their agenda. Black women, eventually, become obliged to theorize their own discourses of feminism (Murray 189). Black women felt that they had to choose between adhering to the sexist black men's movement or the racist white women's one. While some black women allied themselves with black men on racial grounds and some chose to join white women on gender grounds, there were those few who initially dared to react against both. bell hooks criticizes the social and sexist socializations that generated black women's initial attitude as a one that does not fully articulate black women's experience. She explains:

> We did not challenge, question, or critique; we reacted. Many black women denounced women's liberation as "white female foolishness." Others reacted to white female racism by starting black feminist groups. While we denounced male concepts of black macho as disgusting and offensive, we did not talk about

> ourselves, about being black women, about what it means to be the victims of sexist-racist oppression. (*Ain't I* 9)

Black men's liberation movements marked not only black people's first official struggle against racism, but also the first separatist attitude towards black women. Male activists draw clear boundaries for black women; if black women wanted to be accepted, they had to conform to roles assigned by men and embrace their obsequious position. In her "On the Issue of Roles", Toni Cade's discusses the gender injustices 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 alloted 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—and only if pressed to address themselves to the notion do they think of it or argue—is dependent on his defining his manhood. So the shit goes on. (qtd. In hooks, *Ain't I* 5)

hooks explains that black men strived to impose their masculine privilege and perpetuate the patriarchal system. “Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammed, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael, Amiri Baraka and other black male leaders have righteously supported patriarchy. They all argued that it is absolutely necessary for black men to relegate black women to a subordinate position both in the political sphere and in home life” (*Ain’t I* 94). It was on this assumption that black men were one step above in the social hierarchy, more accepted in the larger American society, and become representative of the entire African-American race (*Ain’t I* hooks 130). So, what has begun as a movement that calls for the freedom of all black people ended up with movement that instills black patriarchy. It is not surprising that these liberating movements fail black women. After all, they disregarded the fact that black women were dually victimized by racist and sexist oppressions.

In response to being treated as “Others” by both white women and black men, black women grouped themselves “as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face” (Guy-Sheftall, “A Black Feminist” 232). Initially, these groups and organizations were primarily political like the National Black Feminist Organization (1973) and The Combahee River Collective (1974). Most of these groups were created by black women who aimed to develop antiracist and anti-sexist politics and uplift black women’s status.

Simultaneously, black women started to penetrate the academic sphere in general and literary field in particular after a long period of exclusion. Many black women intellectuals, especially during the Harlem Renaisance, have previously labored in

isolation and obscurity ended with no trace and lied buried in unmarked graves (Collins, *Black Feminist* 2). These black women writers were crippled by the compulsion to conform to the black male dominated ideals of the Harlem Renaissance. Leading figures of this movement Such as Langston Hughes, W. E. B. Du Bois, and James Baldwin argued that the main responsibility of the black artist is to appropriately portray the suffering of the black working man, racial oppression against the black man, and racial uplift. The focus of black male writers was on depicting the black man's quest of self-actualization and struggle against social hardships to impose his manhood. Even when female characters were present in works written by black men writers, they were mirrored as mono-dimensional characters. In effect, their depiction was closer to the stereotypical images black women were denouncing and fighting. Black Women and black women writers were simply in the dark. They were expected to provide "loving maternal nurturance for the new movement and its artist, not to lead it" (Bomarito and Hunter 248). If black women expressed any reluctance or criticism of this imposed nurturing role, they would be accused of "betrayal of black values and solidarity" (Morris 176). Young women adherers not only often felt minimized and marginalized by the men of the movement, but also estranged from the working class they were supposed to represent and suffocated by the religious and social norms that obliged them to suppress their sexuality and freedom. And even when they produced fascinating literary works, they were still ignored by the academic sphere and most of their works discarded (Bomarito and Hunter 248).

Though their works were discarded, a black literary tradition difficult to be traced, and a black feminist criticism inexistent, black women's activism in the 1970s and 1980s

succeeded to make a change at different levels (Christian, *New Black Feminist* 8). It was the burgeoning black feminist political theory that empowered and spurred black women to write works that reflected their needs and examine works taking into consideration black women's experiences (Carby 8). Similarly, Collins maintains:

> Black women intellectuals have laid a vital analytical foundation for a distinctive standpoint on self, community, and society and, in doing so, created a multifaceted, African-American women's intellectual tradition. While clear discontinuities in this tradition exist…one striking dimension of their ideas is the thematic consistency of their work. (Collins, *Black Feminist* 2-3)

II.3. Moving Towards Black Feminism and Black Literary Criticism

II.3.1. Black Women's writing in the 1970s: an articulation of their experience

Most late nineteenth and early twentieth century writings about black women were laden with racist and sexist beliefs. Black men who wrote about black women did so in a sexist way, and white women misshaped black women's experiences. After all, writers' unwillingness to deal with black women in a critical and scholarly manner led black women to seriously write about themselves. Gradually, black women started to publish their works depicting the black women's experience within the sexist and gender confines.

The 1970s was a heady time for the development of African American women's literature. Certainly this generation of black women writers was not the first: Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sarah Wright, and others preceded them. It was this "lost generation" of black women writers that paved the way to future black women writers (Bomarito and Hunter 250). Their works provided a sort of social, historical and

aesthetic account for the coming generations of black women writers. In the late 1960s and 1970s, many works were revived, studied, and celebrated giving credit to their women writers and most importantly functioning as a reference. These recovered works bring their women authors back to life and shed light on black women's perpetual struggle. Never waning through time but gaining value, the literary works of the lost generation become the precursor of coming generations.

Yet, the atmosphere created by the political and social movements of the 1960s led up to intellectual dynamics that produced a context in which these writers could voice their interest and find an astute audience. This productivity did not emerge in a historical, political, or social vacuum. The historian Darlene Clark Hine notes that black women and black women writers of the time "searched for their place in the politics of race and gender" (201).

One of the most notable literary productions that marked the beginning of black women's literary tradition and serious attempt to articulate their experience is Toni Cade's *The Black Woman* (1970). Instead of reacting against black men's sexism or the white women's racism, the anthology is a serious attempt to explore black women's lives and experiences, their roles within their society, and their own aspirations and needs.

Black women writers of the time appear to be willing to place the black women's experience in the center of their writings and place their writings in a feminist framework. Black women writings are shaped by the legacy of racist and sexist domination besides awareness of the historical continuities. While initially black women's writers used autobiographies to explore the evils of slave-holding society and patriarchal family, after emancipation; they traced black women struggle to discover their

self-identity and search for freedom from traditional roles. According to the literary critic,Arlene R. Keizer, these writers composed female-centered works that address issues like the intersectional forces that curb the black woman's existence including the black man's oppression in the larger dominant and controlling rule of the white man and the black woman's copious defense mechanisms for "self-formation, self-recovery and self-expression" (154-55).

Despite their differences, black women writings during the 1970s articulate black women's experience and provide them with a voice and power to define themselves against the racist and gender distortions. This literary renaissance marks black women's control over themselves and their bodies.

> In the past and depending on who held the pen, black women have almost exclusively in terms of negative and regressive stereotypes... . Now black women are themselves in the front of reclaiming their own womanhood, and the arena where their invisibility and misrepresentation is played out is the novel. The novels, essays and poems of Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bambara, Zora Neale Hurston, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker and Sherley Anne Williams, with their powerful celebration of maternal presence, have been instrumental in opening up the historically and distinct world of black women. (Mirza 146)

The 1970s was a time that saw a literary boom by black women writers who expressed themselves in the novel, the short story, and the autobiography. Examples of these are Toni Morison's *The Bluest Eye,* Louise Meriwether's *Daddy was a Numbers Runner,* and Alice Walker' *The Third Life o Grange Copeland,* Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and*

Myth of the Superwoman and Mary Helen Washington's *Midnight Birds*, to name just a few.

Their writings marked a notable changed consciousness about black women's positions and prevailing definitions within their societies. Many writers suggested that black women must struggle against the stereotypical definitions and intersectional racial and social forces, and depicted an altered consciousness in their women protagonists. In her *Beautiful, Also, Are the Souls of My Black Sisters*, Jeanne Nobles explains that the black women writers of 1970, "by pass[ed] the popular theme of black reactions to a racist society", and insisted on depicting the black woman's experience (188). As such, black women writers implied their revisionist perspective while creating liberated women characters in an enterprise to uplift their gender and race. The outcome is not only greater complexity and vivacity for their women characters, but also greater artistic amelioration and possibility for themselves and for black women black women in general.

Thematically and stylistically, the works of the late seventies and the eighties continue to communicate the importance of black women's fight against intersectional oppression, black women's uplift and emancipation, and black women's search for selfhood. Examples of this are Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1978) and *Tar Baby* (1980), Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1980), Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Alice Walker's *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981) and *The Color Purple* (1982), Joyce Carol Thomas's *Marked by Fire* (1982), Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo* (1982), *Audre Lorde's Zami* (1982), and Paule Marshall's *Praise song for the Widow* (1983).

II.3.2. Black Feminism and Black Literary Criticism

Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, and many others marked the emergence of a growing feminist black literature during the 1970s. Their women centered-works explored “the dialectic of oppression and activism, the tension between the suppression of African-American women’s ideas”, and the lives of African American women and her struggle within their communities in general (Collins, *Black Feminist* 3). It was this burgeoning literature produced by black women writers that spurred the need to analyse the cultural and literary aesthetics and expressions inherent in these works in the form of Black feminist literary criticism. In that, Mc Dowell explains “although there is no concrete definition of Black feminist criticism, a handful of Black female scholars have begun the necessary enterprise of resurrecting forgotten Black women writers and revising misinformed critical opinions of them” (“New Directions” 154).

These women scholars began to construct a critical discourse that responds to the specificities of black women’s literary renaissance. In their endeavors, these black women scholars called for surpassing the obstacles of the white middle class feminism and male centered literary aesthetics. From the same perspective, Barbara Smith, a black feminist literary critic, in her seminal “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism” stressed the indispensability of developing a black feminist literary criticism that goes “far beyond the confines of white/male literary structures” (77). Similarly, Farah Jasmine Griffin, in her “That the Mothers May Soar and the Daughters May Know Their Names: A Retrospective of Black Feminist Literary Criticism” describes some practices that direct black feminist criticism:

> … critics charged themselves with locating, teaching, and writing about earlier "lost" works by African American women. Second, they created a critical vocabulary and framework for discussing works by African American women. Third, they theorized that body of work as well as the critical practices of black feminist critics. (488)

Much of the early theorizing about black women's writings was in the form of introductions to reissued works like the works of Deborah McDowell, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Claudia Tate. At this stage, the aim of black feminist criticism was to render black women's literature recognizable by providing "non-hostile and perceptive analysis of works written" by black women (Smith, "Toward a Black" 70).

Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" marks the beginning of established notions about black feminist criticism. She maintains that black feminist criticism seeks to connect "the politics of Black women's lives, what we write about and our situation as artists" ("Towards a Black" 71). She further adds that "a Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity" (Smith, "Towards a Black" 71-72).

Interestingly, Deborah E. McDowell's "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism" pushed black feminist criticism to new levels. In response to her call, black feminist criticism started to yield more academically sophisticated works. While McDowell criticizes black feminist criticism for being theoretical, lacking sophistication, and "have been marred by slogans, rhetoric, and idealism" (New Directions, 154), she ends up to admit that black feminist criticism can never exist without the ideological and theoretical

aspect. She states: “I was fairly harsh in my judgment. I faulted [Smith] for allowing ideology to inform critical analysis, but now I know there is no criticism without ideology” (McDowell, “The Changing” 23). From the same perspective, Hazel Carby insisted on the incorporation and implementation of the ideological and stylistic aspects in black feminist criticism, but adds that black feminist criticism should be “regarded critically as a problem, not a solution, as a sign that should be interrogated, a locus of contradictions” (15).

Carole Davies Boyce and Valerie Smith focused on different aspects and viewed black feminist criticism differently. They both focused on the rejection of monolithic visions of black women’s identity and simplistic visions about oppression black women are subject to. Davies explains that black women’s writing and literary criticism:

> should be read as a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing. In cross-cultural, transnational, translocal, diasporic perspectives this reworking of the grounds of ‘Black Women’s Writing’ redefines identity away from exclusion and marginality (4).

Smith, on the other hand, focuses more on determining and interpreting the significance of the various oppressive forces. She maintains that black feminist criticism should rely on a mode of reading and analysis that took into consideration the “intersections of constructions of race, gender, class and sexuality” (*Not Just Race* xiii).

Hazel Carby, Barbara Christian, Beverly Guy- Sheftall, bell hooks, Nellie McKay, Valerie Smith, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Hortense Spillers, Eleanor Traylor, Gloria Wade-Gayles, Cheryl Wall, Audre Lorde, Sherley Ann Williams, Jennifer DeVere Brody, Kim

Hall, Daphne Brooks, Patricia Williams, to name just a few, are pillars of black feminist criticism starting from 1980s. Despite their differences these cadre of black feminist scholars have provided a safe place for black women's literature addressing the invisibility and silence of black women in dominant critical discourses. These founders succeeded in resurrecting the writings of earlier artists and establishing a black feminist literary tradition, valuing the works of contemporary black women writers, and providing a method of analyzing works by black women writers taking into consideration the intersectionional forces of race, class, and gender. Because black feminist criticism departed from the belief that literary criticism deals solely with the aesthetic evaluation of women's centered works and because it aimed to bring social change, it becomes an enriching force as it deals with identity, authority, and society.

III. **Self, Selfhood, and Black Women's Selfhood**

III.**1. The Self and the female Selfhood**

The Self is perceived as a physical entity that is composed of one's personal experience and personal perceptions and thinking as well as actions. Many theorists, according to William Fitts, distinguish between two levels of self: self as object or structure and self as process (14). The combination of both results in the self as perceived by the individual himself/herself. Furthermore, theorists valorize the individual's perception and conceptualization of the self. The individual's perception and attitudes take shape in his/her actions. They are very important in the way they allow the individual to gather knowledge, solve problems, memorize information, differentiate between the inner self and external world, and master social interaction (Gergen 22).

This definition of self applies to women and women's quest of the self. The latter involves a process of differentiation and self-awareness. It is an awareness based on the distinction between the self and the outside world- known as the "Other". Women seem to be preoccupied with the search for their sense of selfhood. A "full identity will be conceived in terms of adopting their subject position for oneself, asking the question 'What am I?'"(Waugh 24). In literature too, female selfhood engrosses many women writers. Their growing awareness of the women's heterogeneity corresponds to their awareness about the male oppression and perception of women as objects. As such, in their quest of selfhood, women and women writers engage in a series of negotiations about the socially constructed positions available to them. Eventually, women should strive to understand the social concepts, find their inner essence, and dispose of the socially imposed roles. "A potentially free, autonomous, self-directing, noncontradictory, consistent essence" forms women's selfhood (Waugh 25).

Women started to manifest a growing awareness about the social and cultural dogmas and manipulations, reject to remain obedient and silent, and turn towards themselves to explore and establish a harmonious sense of selfhood. Many women writers shared the same interest making it the center of their works; their works reflected their buried ambitions, their silenced voices and insights, and their determination to quest, unleash and impose their own sense of selfhood. According to Carol Christ, there are two types of women's quest of selfhood: the spiritual and social one. While "women's spiritual quest concerns a woman's awakening to the depths of her soul and her position in the universe", "women's social quest concerns women's struggle to gain respect, equality, and freedom in society—in work, politics, and in relationships with women, men and

children" (Christ 8). Though she maintains that the spiritual quest supports and undergirds the social one, she overrates the spiritual quest.

Unlike Christ, Kathy Ferguson perceives society, or the social quest, as a prerequisite in the process of self-formation. She explains that women's selfhood and emancipation result from understanding of social paradigms, "principles of domination", and "structural inadequacies of existing institutions" (7). The self is by no means a private or self-contained entity, but it is a one that develops by "responding to the perspectives and attitudes" of those around the individual (Ferguson 24). As such, selfhood is entirely social as it results from the interaction between the individual and society.

From this perspective and according to feminists, women's selfhood have been shaped and controlled by society. They have been denied the right to establish their sense of selfhood and identity freely. Feminists focus on seeking an internal liberation that gradually leads to an independent self-identity. One, however, cannot deny that selfhood comes within but exists in its relation with others in a social context. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* provides a psychological and ideological analysis of the female selfhood where she places self-other relations at the center of selfhood formation. Ferguson highlights de Beauvoir's vision of duality between the man and the woman as the self and other. After all, in order to fulfill one's self, one should recognize the existence of another. But "because the [male] subject must define himself in terms of an alternative existence, one that is both separate from and identical to his own" (Ferguson 141), women are seen as the other to be possessed and dominated. It is this logic that created and perpetuated women's economic dependence, social and legal inequality, and above all inability to freely define their own identity and selfhood (Ferguson 145).

Because it is men who define the “generalized other” including values and standards, women find themselves obliged to define themselves in relation to the established masculine view (Ferguson 156).

III.1.1. Black Women’s Selfhood

Being subject to centuries of racial and gender abuse, black women strive to form a stout sense of selfhood. While black historians aimed at condemning the racial injustices they have been exposed to, promote racial pride and self-respect, and set the pillars of the black identity, black women were ignored and forced to perceive the world and themselves through a male’s gaze (Lerner, *The Creation* xvii). Michele Wallace explains that it is assimilation which generated denial of black men and women’s history of struggle and stripped them of their identity and selfhood. As far as gender relations are concerned, black men emulated their white counterparts and adopted white values about gender, sexuality, and women (*The Creation* xix). Unfortunately, “this did more than make it inevitable that black men would be sexist or misogynistic: it also made inevitable black women's completely dysfunctional self-hatred” (Wallace xix).

Based on the black woman’s experience and history, black women’s selfhood is reduced to a series of stereotypes. Black women have been victims of essentialist social stereotypes or “social identities”. The latter, Alcoff explains, refers to the “social markers of identity that our culture employs, which are most importantly race, gender, sexuality,…” (59). Similarly, Collins explains that these controlling images are a reflection of the ideological dimension of oppression inherent in the American society. Referring to the body of ideas serving the interests of a group that is generally in power, the ideology about black women in the American society instills sexist and racist

qualities that demean the black women and perpetuate them to the "degree they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal, and inevitable" (*Black Feminist* 5). "From the mammies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture", negative stereotypes applied to African-American women have been fundamental to black women's definition of selfhood and womanhood (Collins, *Black Feminist* 5).

Black women, thanks to their experiences within their families and communities, started to approach their womanhood differently. They strived to construct and concretize their own conceptions about black womanhood. When these ideas found collective expression, black women were able to "refashion African-influenced conceptions of self and community" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 10). Black women's attempts to impose their self-defined womanhood aimed at resisting demeaning racial and gender stereotypes as well foster and instill black women-centered world views and tradition. Black women writers have also been concerned with black women's struggle to form positive self-definitions and cast away debasing stereotypical images of black womanhood. Women writers have not only portrayed and chronicled the various forms of black women's internalized oppression and objectification, but have also depicted the various forms of their resistance, attempts to escape the derogated images about their selfhood, and process of personal growth and positive self-definition (Collins, *Black Feminist* 93-94).

According to black women writers, black women's selfhood and womanhood speak to the power dynamics involved in rejecting controlling images. And in order to overthrow these derogative images about black womanhood, women should engage in a journey of

self-exploration. Their journeys may be internal leading to forging a voice, or physical based on geographical mobility (Collins, *Black Feminist* 113).

III.1.2. Finding a Voice: Black Women Resolve the Contradictions

For many black women, a positive self-definition equates finding a voice. Collins explores the importance of black women's self expression and self-definition. She explains that the theme of finding a voice to express one's needs, impose a self-defined selfhood and express a collective black women standpoint form the core of black feminism, black feminist criticism, and black feminist thought. For Collins, self-definition is important because along this process black women not only struggle to transcend racial, economic, and gender injustices, but also because they engage in a series of negotiations to propitiate their internal desires and social obligations. Black women have to reconcile the two lives, the one for them and the one for their society in order to live. Similarly, Karla Holloway, on black women's multidimensional struggle points out that "the reality of racism and sexism means that we must configure our private realities to include an awareness of what our public image might mean to others" (qtd In. Collins, *Black Feminist* 100).

Collins maintains that resolving contradictions requires an immense strength and determination from black women. They must survive, resist and transcend the frames and limitations the androcentric society has set for them. Collins, further, explains that finding a voice and a positive self-definition necessitates a "realm of relatively safe discourse" (*Black Feminist* 101). This safe space forms the prime realm for resisting objectification and constructing a positive image of one's self. Sandra O'Neale explains the workings of these safe spaces:

> Beyond the mask, in the ghetto of the black women's community, in her family, and, more important, in her psyche, is and has always been another world, a world in which she functions—sometimes in sorrow but more often in genuine joy . . .—by doing the things that 'normal' black women do. (qtd. In Collins, *Black Feminist* 101)

She continues that, in these spaces, black women:

> observe the feminine images of the 'larger' culture, realize that these models are at best unsuitable and at worst destructive to them, and go about the business of fashioning themselves after the prevalent, historical black female role models in their own community . (qtd. In Collins, *Black Feminist* 101)

Collins maintains that black women's safe spaces are not only intrinsically internal and psychological, they can, in large part, be external and socially constructed. These spaces may be located in empowering black women's relationship like friendship, sisterhood, and motherhood, academic and artistic movements, or in more formal black women's organizations. In all cases, their aim is to construct individual and collective voices and self-assertive positive selfhood (*Black Feminist* 102).

III.I.2.1. Double Marginalization/intersectionality, Gender Fluidity, and Black Female Selfhood

Black women's independent voices and self-assertion often entail recasting socially assigned gender roles- roles that are often defined according to sexist and racist grounds. This double marginalization, often, equates what Kimberle Crenshaw labels as "intersectionality"- a concept that examines the way various oppressive forces work together. Crenshaw explains the way black women are intersectionally oppressed:

Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. ("Demarginalizing the Intersection" 149)

As such, black women's intersectional oppression is different from the one of black men or white women. Because black men suffer only from racism and white women from sexism, they often analyze oppression within a "single-axis frame" and ignore the multiple form of black women's oppression (Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection" 139).

By being subjects to intersectional oppressions, black women's identity and selfhood, often, become subject to the same multiple oppressions. As women, black women have to be obedient to both black and white men, and as black women; they have to be inferior to white men, white women, and black men. Black women's acts and roles are often defined according to limiting racial and gender basis. Similarly, McCall in her "the Complexity of Intersecionality" explains that intersectionality creates social identities that often entail

gender limitations. It is no surprise that black feminists make of women's social location - within the frames of intersectionality- and their gender the center of understanding selfhood mechanisms. In that, Collins states that black women selfhood must be understood in the context of power relations embedded in social identities.

In response to the socially defined identities imposed on black women, many women scholars suggest gender fluidity as a solution for a self-assertive selfhood. Eric Calhoun Davis, in his "Situating "Fluidity": (Trans)Gender Identification and the Regulation of Gender Diversity" explains that defining gender fluidity as an escape and refusal of gender constraints is very simplistic (101). After all, gender fluidity comprises one's ability to accept masculine and physical traits and ability to act without being concerned about being accepted on gender basis. From the same stance, Judith Butler explains that one's gender should not determine his/her acts and behaviors. "when the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender becomes a free-floating artifice", and so becomes selfhood (Butler 9). As such, gender fluid people reject to fit into gendered stereotypes.

As far as black women are concerned, gender fluidity politics seem to be contradictory. On the one hand, black women's acts and selfhood are defined according to racial and sexist regulations. On the other, black women are not subject to traditional female roles. As Crenshaw points out, "Black men and women live in a society that creates sex-based norms and expectations which racism operates simultaneously to deny; Black men are not viewed as powerful, nor are Black women seen as passive" (155). One example of these reversed roles lies in the work force. While gender ideology argues that men should be the providers and women should take care of the household, black men

were denied “access to employment while offering black females a place in the service economy” (hooks, *Ain’t I* 8). Interestingly, such type of gender fluidity is the outcome of black women determination to survive. Black women employ gender fluidity as a means of survival and challenge to the racist and gender policies. Despite being often criticized for their gender fluidity and despite the white and black males attempts to thwart black women’s gender fluidity by creating stereotypical images about black womanhood, black women seem to be keen on celebrating their differences, revolting against intersectional oppressions, and asserting their selfhood by manifesting gender fluid behaviors.

Conclusion

Fundamentally, feminism is concerned with recording female experiences, overthrowing patriarchal practices, forging a voice for the silenced women. Though, theoretically, inclusive and representative of all women, feminism has failed black women. Black women saw the necessity to speak for themselves and create their own literary tradition. Their desire heightened especially because of the social movements and the intellectual dynamics during the 1980s.

Black feminism and black feminist criticism insist on surpassing the obstacles of the white middle class feminism and male centered literary aesthetics. Furthermore, one of their major concerns is fighting essentialist images about black womanhood and selfhood. In fiction, black women writers took the onus of spurring black women to engage in a quest for selfhood, resist the limitations of the androcentric society, find a voice, and liberate themselves. Black women scholars maintain that the route towards self-assertive selfhood is a thorny one as it involves casting the intersectional forces, employing gender fluidity, and generating safe spaces.

Chapter Two

From Silence to Voice: the Fight for Self-fulfillment in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Introduction

This chapter examines the change that Celie, the protagonist of *The Color Purple*, experiences along the novel. I will explore the journey of Celie's defiance of the hegemonic codes of her society and her ultimate emancipation. Living in a stern society that deems men's superiority over women, Celie remains obedient to everyone surrounding her, but secretly yearns for a change – a change that can only happen with the help of others. These "others" are by no coincidence women. In order to understand the course of change, it is necessary to trace and understand each factor that leads to Celie's liberation. At beginning of the novel, Walker armors her protagonist only with writing to record her painful experiences. Celie writes letters to her sister Nettie, but it is only Shug, her husband's mistress who can help her get her sister's letters. Thus, I will explain the function of Shug in the novel in the way she nurtures her, helps her discover her body, know the meaning of love, and disregard her destructive rage. Shug's conduct towards Celie can be encapsulated as sisterhood and even motherhood. I will also explain Celie's shift from writing to direct oral self-expression. The latter helps her to unfetter herself from her oppressor, her husband. In the novel, men's power is associated with the one of God. Therefore, I contend that Celie's embracement of a new vision of God is necessary in order to accomplish her pursuit of freedom. I will, also, explain the importance of economic independence for Celie. For that, Celie is aided by Shug who discovers her talent of sewing. At this stage, Celie becomes a fully emancipated woman who knows her value within her society, and above all has achieved a sturdy and strong sense of selfhood. Eventually, she becomes strong enough to the extent that she propagates sewing, which seems at the first place an emblem of a pure feminist

discourse, to be used even by her husband. I argue that the novel culminates with a new portrait of a community that is more lenient in terms of socially gendered roles, but most importantly portrays the strength of a woman who has survived all forms of abject abuse and finally is able to liberate herself and assert her selfhood.

I.Locating *the Color Purple*

Alice Walker is one of the many women authors who took the onus of presenting black women's ordeal and helping them in defying males' abusive forms of authority. Through her various novels, she tries to shed light on female characters living in phallocentric societies and suffering from being both female and black. As Ikenna Dieke argues "walking into peril is exactly what most of Walker's characters and personae are doing as each seek to navigate their own path of fulfillment, a crooked path of gravid with dangers, possibilities, changes, personal adventures, triumphs –big and small- and, of course, occasional setbacks" (4).

Alice Walker describes black women as creatures oppressed almost beyond recognition even oppressed by everyone (*In Search* 33). They have been twice if not thrice prostrated; by white men, black men, and occasionally by white women. Actually, *The Color Purple,* written by Walker, is a novel that perfectly depicts the black feminist discourse attempting not only to expose women's suffering but most importantly to subvert the patriarchal dominance. As such, I argue that *The Color Purple* is a novel about the protagonist's journey, Celie, from a state of subordination to the biased male authority to a state of defiance and self control. Celie is a woman who lives submissively for years under the shades of all man in her life, but gradually learns how to accept and celebrate her existence as well as break down the chains of male authority imposing her own rules. The latter is by no means an easy process. Celie's ultimate rejection of patriarchal authority as well as her new emerging independent self is due to a mélange of various intricate factors.

Beyond doubt, there was no consensus about *The Color Purple* when it was first published in 1982. It attracted much acclaim and denigration. Many literary critics, like Robert Towers, have condemned Walker for creating an idealistic and romantic plot and story especially in the way her heroine completely unchained herself from males' authority and also in the way concord and harmony between men and women reign eventually (qtd in. Proudfit 12). Others, like Phillip Royster, accuse Walker of being very harsh and amplifying in rendering all men as evil and cruel (qtd in. Proudfit 12).

It is no surprise that *The Color Purple* won the American Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize in fiction in 1983. After all, to think that Walker is unrealistic or even chauvinist is to a certain extent an overstatement because Walker portrays her society and at the same time tries to provide a possible image of a society where women trespass the gender biased roles imposed on them. From the same perspective, Davis M. Thadious upholds: "Walker writes best of social and personal drama in the lives of familiar people who struggle for survival of self in hostile environments" (143). She "sees into the life of African Americans living in the Deep South as she picks up on the rhythms of life she came to know in her own youth" (Slomski 3). Furthermore, Walker makes sure that "the characters' level of consciousness has been raised, and the seeds of feminism and liberation have been planted" (Slomski 3). One of Walker's central concerns in her works is the "search for understanding and truth" (Brantley 6). Focusing, however, on this aspect and overlooking the other subjects and ideas diminishes the essence of Walker's *The Color Purple.* In fact, the various interpretations of the novel reveal the book's depth. "As with all good literature, *The Color Purple* can be examined from many contexts: moral, cultural, political, historical, aesthetic, and spiritual. That so much

richness comes from the mouthpiece of a character as naive as Celie is evidence of the power of honest storytelling" (Brantley 6).

In fact, Walker's title of the novel is a one that perfectly foreshadows the essence of the novel: pain, suffering, and struggle. One of the connotations of the colour purple is pain. It is no surprise that purple becomes a motif that accompanies most women in the novel starting with Celie's private parts due to sexual violation, Nettie's description of African women as blue-black suggesting their suffering, and even to Sofia's beaten face whose color is like the one of the eggplant. Interestingly enough, the pain and suffering that Walker tackles in her novel is not barren, but it is a one that generates resistance and struggle. Thus, the color and marks of trauma become proofs of survival of these women. Shayn Fiske maintains that in Walker's novel, "shades of pain" and suffering are also colors of triumph and survival. Fiske adds that it "…is the articulation and validation of that suffering that grants the sufferer her self-transcendence" (153). Walker, however, does not abandon her female characters alone in the middle of their suffering, but makes of her novel an example of how to fight back oppression and suffering and to attain one's emancipation relying on several means. This conception is clearly vested in Celie who transcends her suffering and pain through the help of other women, and moves from being a victim to a heroine and object to human in the way she struggles against the existing sexual and cultural paradigms.

II.Shug and Nettie: Experiences of Motherhood and Sisterhood

Walker paves the way for her protagonist's gradual acquisition of her own carte blanche. The latter starts by the help of Shug, the lover of Celie's husband, who teaches her how to have self-esteem and believe in sisterly love. From this perspective, Alice Walker is applying one of the most important concepts in black feminist politics which is that of sisterhood. It is, generally, associated with all biological or non biological female liaisons that facilitate emotional, psychological, and physical survival of a woman. It is this female bonding that "enables Celie_ a depressed survivor- victim of parent loss, emotional and physical neglect, rape, incest, trauma, and spousal abuse- to resume her arrested development and continue developmental processes that were thwarted in infancy and early adolescence" (Proudfit 13).

In fact, Shug is the one, besides Celie's sister, who took the liability to emancipate Celie. She is the only woman in Celie's surrounding that exhibits distinguished tenderness and power Celie needed. Although, Celie's sister, Nettie, is an illuminating source for her, she does not possess the authority over men, glamour, and economic independence that Shug has. Celie before knowing Shug longed to see her because of what she heard from the others. "I just be thankful to lay eyes on her", Celie says (33).

When Celie finally met Shug it was to nurse her. Celie expresses her puzzlement about Shug. She explains that a kind of mysterious chemistry soon emerges between them, a chemistry that resembles the one between a baby and his mother. In that, Celie explains:

> come out in my comb…I work on her like she a doll or like she Olivia_ or she like mama. I comb and pat, comb and pat. First she say, hurry up and git finish.

> Then she melt down a little and lean back against my knees. That feel just right, she say. That feel like mama used to to. Or may be not mama. May be grandma. (57)

Shug continues, along the novel, to stupefy and fascinate Celie. Cheri Register contends Shug belongs to the kind of "women who are self-actualizing, and whose identities are not dependent on men"(171). And It is Shug's independent and bold nature that attracted Celie.

Ama Ata Aidoo in her play *Anowa* says that "someone should have taught me how to be a woman"(qtd. in Davies 68). In saying so, she is adhering to and describing the kind of woman Walker talks about in her Womanism- a resistant, courageous, and independent woman. In *The Color Purple*, it is Shug's role to teach Celie how to be a woman. Shug's significance for Celie is not limited to mere admiration, but to one of emulation and learning.

Deprived of a nurturing mother in her childhood, Celie spends a long part of her life as a submissive and powerless woman. Interestingly, Daniel Ross explains that a person shapes his identity through the identification with someone else usually the mother- an essential entity that Celie lacks during her childhood (77). The presence of Celie's mother was more of shadow than a real person. Her mother, who is never named in the novel and who is barely present physically, is never emotionally present for her daughters. Collins adheres to Ross' view about the importance of motherhood, yet she underscores black mothers' critical position and crucial mission. Living in a sexist and racially biased society, black mothers should ensure their daughters survival while

providing them with varying techniques and necessary knowledge to adapt themselves and aspire for a brighter future (Collins, *Black Feminist* 184). Black mothers, however, may often fail their daughters, and it is the case of Celie's mother. She neither serves as a role model for her daughters, nor provides them with knowledge and teachings necessary for their survival.

After all, Celie's mother cannot be blamed for that absence because her mind was never able to recover after the lynching of her innocent husband. For years, she awaited her husband who left the land barren and the children starving. While she plunged in a deep grief for her husband's death, "the neighbors…shunned her more and more… because her attachment to the past was pitiful" (181). At the mean time, a stranger appeared and married her. Every year, she was pregnant, weaker, and more mentally disturbed until she dies. Consequently, due to her mental unrest, Celie's mother never performed her role as a "good-enough mother". She was neither able to create a strong relationship with her children nor provide guidance to her children to form a "True Self" (Winnicott, *Playing* 10).

It is not only Celie who feels the absence of her mother but her stepfather also did. Thus, he wanted someone to fill his wife's shoes, and he found Celie who would do what her mother could not do (11). Ironically, Celie was operating in the place of her mother; taking care of her mother, brothers, and her stepfather. Being immature, untutored, and oppressed, the unfitting role Celie was acting out devours any sense of a nascent identity.

Shug, according to Walker, is modeled after the black "maternal ancestors" in the way she "nurtured and shaped" Celie (Christian, "Alice Walker" 470). In *Mothering of the*

Mind, Ruth Perry and Martine Watson Brownley explain the process of mothering where "an infant first experiences itself in the process of and in relation to the mother or primary care taker who holds it, feed it, cleans it and so on" (5). Celie lacks the sense of self for she missed the sense of belonging and caretaking that her own mother should have provided. Celie's formation of selfhood is further delayed because of the separation between her and Nettie.

Shug, however, does not take care of Celie literarily, but she does psychologically. She inaugurates and transfers Celie from a state of ignorance and submission to a one of consciousness. Celie says that all what she can do is "to stay alive" but does not know "how to fight" (26) because nobody has ever taught her to do so. Though Nettie compels Celie to fight, she never teaches her how. On the other hand, Shug was "intercepting the world, conferring unconditional approval, regulating the environment, supplying missing psychic elements, and mirroring certain aspects of the self" (Perry and Brownley 5). Shug, in fact, represents the "good-enough mother" for Celie that Donald. W Winnicott identifies as a primary factor for the formation of a stable selfhood. She edifies Celie gradually just like a mother does with her baby. She leads Celie to speak out her mind, puts herself as a model, asks Celie to act in a specific manner, and finally leaves her when being sure that her mission is done. She reassures her telling her "Girl, you on your way" when she felt that Celie is progressing (188).

Celie discloses her sorrowful experience to Shug because she is a woman; "I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them" (15), Celie explains. Unlike men, Celie finds in women, in general, a source of safety, comfort, and succor. In fact, relationships "…between women" Ruth Sherry explains "can be characterized by openness , trust,

intellectual stimulation, and long term stability which women frequently find difficult to achieve in relationships with men" (7).

II.1. Celie's "Soul Murder"

In "La Revue a l'Ecriture", Madelaine Gagnon explains: "We have never been the masters of others or of ourselves. We don't have to confront ourselves in order to free ourselves. We don't have to keep watch on ourselves, or to set up some other erected self in order to understand ourselves. All we have to do is let the body flow, from the inside. …"(qtd. in Jones 229). In fact, Gagnon is explaining how integral it is for women to initially free their bodies if desiring any sort of freedom. Females' bodies have always been a source of abuse and exploitation. In fact, male's aggression, malevolence and beastliness targets the Black female body considering it the weakest and easily accessed part that enables them to shatter women's identity and very existence (Ross 70). Interestingly, hooks explains that the exploitation and abuse of black women's bodies is rooted in history and has deep psychological significance and impact. She states that any sort of physical brutalization is to inspire terror and submission. African female slaves often suffered from constant torture and physical abuse to regulate and subdue them. Thus, the black female body becomes a constant reminder of the woman's sexual and social vulnerability (*Ain't I* 18).

In her "Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker's Revisionning of Rape Archetypes in *The Color Purple*", Martha J. Cutter explains that the most common practice by men to subdue women is rape which is "a central trope…for the mechanisms whereby patriarchal society writes oppressive dictates on women's bodies and minds, destroying

both subjectivity and voice"(162). As a result, many women, simply, hate their bodies and consequently hate themselves. Celie, due to her stepfather's continued assaults and rape, detests her body. Even, during her marriage with Mr___, she never knew the meaning of being sexually satisfied remaining "still a virgin" (79). All physical contact with men was a source of pain and torment for Celie.

Allen Jeffner explains that the emblem of male's infringement and domination of a woman's body is pregnancy. The shape of the pregnant woman's body is not only a stamp of males' virilescence, but it is also a sign of a woman's tameness and forced assimilation in the androcentric world (322). Sadly, Celie is stamped through the most gruesome manner; a carnal abuse by her stepfather that resulted in two thrown away children. Celie's very first letter to God mirrors how lost, depressed, and traumatized she feels at the age of fourteen after being raped by the man whom she thought was her father: "Dear God, I am fourteen years old. I am I have always been a ~~good girl~~. May be you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (11). Celie scratches out "a good" because she thinks that she is no longer a good girl and thus deserves what is happening to her. As such, her stepfather's rape generates a deep sense of remorse, blame, and silence.

Being threatened by her stepfather never to tell any anybody, Celie becomes ashamed of her body and of herself and resorts to soliciting God's help. Her father furthers his abuse by forcing silence over Celie telling her: "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (11). The violation of Celie's body and voice reflects the socio-linguistic censorship that demotes the black woman to an objectified position. Celie's state as an abused, raped, and silenced woman is an example of the many black

women who suffer within the American society. Evelynn Hammonds in her "Towards a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence" explains that black womanhood and black women's sexuality are often associated with "speechlessness" and "void" (qtd in. Collins, *Black Feminist* 124). The silence shifts from being a forced one to being voluntarily embraced. Abused black women's silence is "the silence of the oppressed-that profound silence engendered by resignation and acceptance of one's lot" hooks explains (*Ain't I* 1).

Celie plunges in a long state of grief and silence. This tragic portrait of Celie is often the source of critics' denigration of the novel as being unrealistic and exaggerated (Harris 155-56). The truth, however, is that Celie suffers from "Soul, or psychic murder". Leonard Shengold explains this soul murder as:

> trauma imposed from the world outside the mind that is so overwhelming that the mental apparatus is flooded with feeling. The same overestimated state can result as a reaction to great deprivation. The terrifying too-muchness requires massive and mind restoring defensive operations for the child to continue to think and feel and live. The child's sense of identity is threatened…What happens to the child subjected to soul murder is so terrible, so overwhelming, and usually to recurrent that the child must not feel it and cannot register it, and resorts to massive isolation of feeling, which is maintained by brainwashing (a mixture of confusion, denial, and identifying with the aggressor). A hypnotic living deadness, a state of existing "as if" one were there, is often the result of chronic early overstimulation or deprivation. (24-25)

As such, Celie's tragic state is but a portrayal of this "soul murder". Along the novel, especially at the beginning, Celie seems to be extremely submissive, detached and emotionless especially towards her oppressor. One example of this state is what happens with Celie each time her husband Mr.___ asks her to bring him his belt to punish her. Celie explains: "It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree" (30). In fact, this passivity and withholding of emotions stand as a survival strategy that Celie resorts to. Although repression of emotions and silence can be a survival strategy, it is also the outcome of repeated abuse on the person suffering from soul murder. Celie suppresses her feelings because she has no possibility of manifesting her anger or expressing herself. She reflects on her state saying that "I think? I can't even remember the last time I felt mad, I say… Then after a while every time I got mad, or start feel mad, I got sick. Felt like throwing up. Terrible feeling, Then I start to feel nothing at all" (47).

II.2. Repossessing the Body and Facing Unspeakable Trauma

Shug's presence changed Celie's dire state of silence and suppression. Noticing how innocent, naïve, and inexperienced Celie is, Shug starts first by making her know her body. "At this stage, Shug's initiation of Celie to the body is one of the primary functions of mothering in the mirror stage" (Ross 77). Essentially, identification with the mother figure should be established as soon as possible resulting generally in the girl's acceptance of her physical entity and sexual organs. After the initiation to the body and in the case of the acceptance, the self and the identity of the girl are properly modeled and attained (Ross 77). This function of mothering is equated with what was previously labeled as a "good- enough mother"- a role that is performed at this stage by Shug. So, by

being a “good- enough mother”, Shug has to provide the “holding environment” in which Celie can forge her selfhood. “In bonding with Shug” Charles L. Proudfit suggests that Celie is able to “complete her previously stymied psychological development”(25).

While performing her mothering role, Shug intends to break the silence of Celie. She starts to question Celie gently about how things go with her husband -Mr__. For the first time, Celie speaks to someone about what happened and is still happening to her. Celie then describes the scene between her and Shug: “Oh, Miss Celie, she say. And put her arms round me. They black and smooth and kind of glowy from the lamp light. I start to cry too. I cry and cry and cry. Seem like all come back to me, laying there in Shug arms. How it hurt and how much I was surprise” (108-109). Determined to mend Celie from the “soul murder” she suffers from, Shug succeeds to make Celie speak, feel the pain and withstand it, and above all experience a sensation of relief

At that moment too, Shug starts to teach Celie how to know and explore her body. Donald W. Winnicott in his *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment* deems that knowing and appreciating the value of the body is crucial in the process of self-formation. Winnicott contends that “it is only when the infant experiences himself alone (that is to say, in the presence of someone) that the infant can discover his own personal life” (34). Shug, thus, asks Celie to explore her intimate parts. And just like a little ashamed child Celie takes a mirror, runs to the room, locks the door, and looks at her intimate parts for the first time (79).

This act of physical initiation is not merely sexual, but most importantly has a psychological significance. Celie, for the first time experiences how something could be

hers, “It mine” (80), she says. Celie was made to believe that she owns nothing; even her body is not hers. This is not only related to Celie’s dispossession, but also to the imposed prescribed image of her body. It was her stepfather and her husband who determinedly described her body as “ugly, black, and pore” (87)- a stereotype that Shug obliterates with her teachings. Convincing Celie about the beauty of her body and intimate parts, Shug tells her “It a lot prettier than you thought” (79). Shug’s approach towards Celie’s body echoes the feminist ideals par excellence. Just like the feminists who challenge sexist categorizations of the female body, Shug instates Celie’s self-love by casting away stereotypes about her body. On the patriarchal reduction of the female body and feminists’ celebration of the female body, hooks explains

> Challenging sexist thinking about the female body was one of the most powerful interventions made by contemporary feminist movement. Before women's liberation all females young and old were socialized by sexist thinking to believe that our value rested solely on appearance and whether or not we were perceived to be good looking, especially by men. Understanding that females could never be liberated if we did not develop healthy self-esteem and self-love feminist thinkers went directly to the heart of the matter – critically examining how we feel and think about our bodies and offering constructive strategies for change. (*Feminism Is* 31)

Eventually, Celie comes to understand that her private parts are an “enjoyable part to complete self. …She now recognizes and reclaims the fragmented parts of her body, taking pleasure in that reclamation” (Pifer and Slusser 48-49). By telling Celie to look at

her private parts and saying “it mine”, Shug continues the restoration of Celie’s body and the erasure of the imposed sense of dispossession she had before.

When threatened by her stepfather to keep her rape a secret, Celie obeys him, a point that impairs her life and spoils her existence. In fact, women often avoid speaking about male’s abuse and violation of their bodies for these incidents generate humiliation, disgrace, torment, and shame. In that case, consciousness raising and encouraging the abused woman to speak is necessary to retrieve what is repressed but affecting the woman’s daily life (Humm 116).

More than that, Collins maintains that consciousness raising enhances black women’s awareness about sexist oppressions and fosters their resistance against gender, racial and social injustices. Regardless of whether consciousness raising is considered as a therapy or as a political action, it is valuable for the victimized, maltreated, and subdued women (*From Black* 164).

Functioning initially as a therapist, Shug is the only person capable of making Celie speaks out her torture. Celie in a moment of frenzy speaks about the entire ordeal she has gone through:

> It hurt me, you know, I say. I was just going on fourteen. I never even thought bout men having down there so big. It scare me just to see it. And the way it poke itself and grow….After he through, I say, he make me finish trimming his hair…I start to cry too. I cry and cry and cry. ... How it stung while I finish trimming his hair. How the blood drip down my leg and mess up my stocking. How he don't never look at me straight after that… After a while mama finally

> ast how come she find his hair in the girls room if he don't go there like he say. That when he told her I had a boyfriend. Some boy he say he seen sneaking out the back door. It the boy's hair, he say, not his…My mama die…My sister Nettie run away. Mr.___ come and git me to take care his rotten children. He never ast me nothing bout myself. He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged. Nobody ever love me. (108- 109)

As if under a spell, Celie remembers every horrible and tiny detail of her bête noire from her mother's passivity, her father and husband's savagery, and her feeling of loneliness and repudiation. “It was also in this bedroom scene that the two women become lovers…. After unburdening herself with words and tears, and unable consciously to recall the love of her preoedipal parents” (Proudfit 26), Celie says “Nobody ever loves me”. Shug, astonished and impressed by Celie's courage and endurance, found herself but condoling with her asking her not to cry, kissing her, and assuring her that she loves her. Shug says: “I love you, Miss Celie”. Then, Celie carries on: “And then haul off and kiss me on the mouth. Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one f my lost babies mouth” (109). In fact, this is a bizarre experience for both women. This first sexual contact, though generating jouissance, is more of a psychological significance. Celie's feeling of pleasure, ultimately, is not just a sort of regeneration rather it is an entrance into to the new world of affection and tenderness similar to the pleasure and comfort that the child finds in the contact with his mother (Ross 72). According to Andrienne Rich “the lesbian experience is like motherhood”. It is “a profoundly female experience, with particular meanings, and potentials we cannot comprehend as long as we simply bracket it with other sexually

stigmatized existence" (24). Celie explains that her relationship in general and this experience with Shug in particular generate compassion and comfort similar to the one by motherhood. "It feel like heaven this is what it feel like", Celie continues (110).

Through the *Color Purple*, readers are given insights on male's physical and psychological oppression of women, and women's ability to overstep their hideous conditions but only with the help of other women. As such, neither Shug's attitude nor Celie's pleasure can be interpreted as lust. It is rather a putsch against the patriarchal sadist rule. All what Shug desires is the emancipation of Celie's body and accordingly her soul. In fact, womanism culminates the in novel through this sexual experience (Lauret 19).

II.3. Nettie's Teachings: Writing Letters Expressing a Hidden Self

Shug is not the only one who cares about Celie; she appears, actually after the departure of her sister Nettie. Within *The Color Purple*, one can notice the tightly knit rapport between women. This simply refers to the existing sisterhood between them. In 1970, the radical feminist Robin Morgan edited a book entitled *Sisterhood is Powerful*, explaining how amazing the power generated by women supporting each other is (qtd in. Gamble 298). As a biological sister, Nettie, too, performs the same role. She anchors Celie spurring her to fight all forms of patriarchal tenets and teaches her how to write. Even Mr.___ knew that "Nettie mean everything in the world" to Celie (114)." "…Nettie steady try to teach me what go on in the world", Celie says (25). Besides the psychological support that Nettie offers to Celie, she most importantly teaches her how to write. Writing becomes, after Nettie's departure, the only refuge for Celie from her

wretchedness. In fact, the act of writing letters does not make of Celie a super heroine, but portrays her ability to conceive the surrounding injustices leading her towards a new state of mind and autonomy (Eagleton 9). Furthermore, black feminists explain how writing is integral in mirroring black women's suppression, bringing them together, and helping them get their freedom (Humm 178).

As a matter of fact, the feminist critics argue that “another language, that, in its new would be closer to woman's lived experience, a lived experience in the center of which the body is frequently placed” is necessary (Editorial Collective of Questions Feministes 233). As such, Celie's choice of writing letters is by no means by chance, but it is a one that enables her to record her intimate painful experiences secretly. Through using the epistolary novel, Alice Walker emphasizes the sense of isolation, detachment, and suppression of Celie. Though Celie resorts to letter writing because she finds in that a sort of discretion and safety, letter writing remains a subtle form of rebellion against the patriarchal regime which gags women's free expression. Christian Froular, in a psychological reading of *The Color Purple*, perceives Celie's letters as “a breaking out about abuse” (qtd. in Lauret 97). After being “told to be silent about the rape, she confides the details in her journal, structured at first as letters to God. In these letters Celie begins to create a resistant narratological version that ultimately preserves her subjectivity and voice” (Cutter 166). When Celie starts to recount her story with her stepfather, she says: “ He start to choke me, saying you better shut up and git used to it. But I don’t never git used to it” (11). In pointing up that she will never get used it, Celie underlines the fact that she never surrenders and will find a means of survival and

resistance. The latter was through writing. In a way, using writing stands for resisiting " the father's narratives" and for her determinatation to survive (Cutter 166).

Celie's writing is not in itself a manifestation of liberation, but it funtions as prepatory phase and a means that facilitates her ultimate emanicpation used when all else fails. Writing letters serves as a record of her living. According to Wendy Wall, writing "acts as a second memory, a projected body that precariously holds [a] hidden self" (84). Celie's letters appear like a memoir that chornicles and eternalises her experiences and affirms her existence. Similarly, Toni Morrison explains how writing is significant in recording and recalling memories as well as affirming one's existence ("Memory" 385). When Celie, through the empowerment of Shug and Nettie, decides to stop remaining "the other woman and the silenced partner" (Showalter 214), she goes to read the letters she sent to Nettie to fuel her with power to confront Mr.____. It is Shug who told Celie that Mr.____ was hiding Nettie's letter leading her to believe that Nettie was dead.

II.4. Hysteric Transformation through an Embodied Voice

Unlike Celie's letter writing, "speech… is a practice of communication, a call which only functions if elicits a response" (Lauret 102).As such, It is only when Celie starts to talk that she attains her freedom. *The Color Purple,* in this sense, is a story of "Celie finding a voice" within the men dominated society she dwells in (Lauret 102).

People, in general, evince a great veneration and awe to the power of words. It is believed that the better the person speaks, the more powerful, superior, knowledgeable and respected he is. According to Annette Van Dyke, "it is the responsibility of the individual to use equally the power of words" to locate his position as an independent

individual within a wider society (44). Such power of words that Celie lacked at the beginning is generated by the abiding help and assistance of Shug. Along the process of Celie's consciousness raising, Shug moves from being a therapist to an active agent that triggers Celie's ultimate ability to speak, rebellion, and emancipation.

Shug illumines Celie's life; teaching her self-esteem, helping her to find Nettie's letters, urging her to challenge Mr.____, and imbuing her life with determination and hope. Celie reaches the pivotal moment when discovering that her husband has despoiled her from her raison d'être which is corresponding with her sister. At that moment, an audacious voice emerges enabling Celie to abruptly subvert her husband's tyrannical control over her. On Celie's change, Catherine A. Colton argues that in *The Color Purple* in general "It is evident that female voices have the power to dismantle the hierarchal oppositions that ultimately oppress every one and to create a new order in which time-worn theories about male and female natures vanish because they are useless for describing qualities of people" (40).

The magical expression that metamorphoses Celie's life is "I curse you" (187). She is, in fact, rejuvenating her ancestors' *voodoo*. It is believed that the latter is a practice, chiefly, used by helpless and weak women to empower themselves, punish their enemy, and restore order and justice (Colton 35). At the moment of the curse, Celie says that she was not herself connoting that she was haunted by her ancestors' spirits. Through them, she discerns and uses the power of words over the world. It is this understanding of the complexity of the world and the immense injustices that allows Celie to rise up. Confronted by the stubborn rejection and the repugnant sarcasm of Mr.___, Celie, confident and trustful of her ancestral powers, carries on:

> I curse you, I say…I say, until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble…Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail…Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice, I say. Then I say, You better stop talking because all I'm telling you ain't coming just from me. Look like when I open my mouth the air rush in shape words…The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot, I say. (187)

Shug, being conscious and aware of the powers supporting Celie, advises Mr.___ to stop talking because he is just making it harder to himself. It is only when following Shug's teachings that "Celie is able to conjure up more than words-words that can activate the power of her new interconnected , more African world view- and throw them at Mister" (Colton 37). This puissant womanist potency climaxes Celie's emancipation and opens new vistas for her. Alice Walker argues that "only justice can stop a curse", and eventually this happens (qtd. in Baker 81). It seems that this curse is the key that opens the doors of Celie's new life.

II.5. From Christianity to a Re-envisioned Spirituality

Celie's curse starts to work liberating her not only from her husband's domination but also from the deaf creature she thought it was God. Celie's liberation is the result of various and intricate factors among which her freedom from traditional Christianity (Humm 184). At the beginning, God was for Celie white and old "like some white man work at the bank…big and old and tall and gray bearded and white…He wear robes and go barefooted" (165). "It is Celie's strict adherence to traditional Christianity to God…Which keeps her locked in the cycle of male jurisdiction" (Hankinson 322).

Having such peculiar attributes, Celie is definitely obedient to God. So, as a good girl, she executes God's orders and commands blindly regardless of her own desire and will. When she suffered from her stepfather's sexual abuse, for instance, she did not tell anybody not only because he ordered her to do so, but primarily because God says to "honor father and mother no matter what" (39). From this perspective, Stacie Lynn Hankinson expounds:

> From early adolescence into adulthood Celie associates the biblical God with men she knows-men who have been oppressive and cruelly insensitive to her. The male-bullying and domination begin for Celie at fourteen when the man she thinks is "Pa" rapes her on at least two occasions, rendering her unable to ever again bear children…. This assault develops into an oppressive view of men, particularly of the father figure, for Celie. In the same way that Celie wonders whether her father killed her vanished children (4), she also begins to associate God the Father with the murderer of her children…. Subtly and at an early age, Celie's notion of monotheistic, biblical God also begins to be affiliated with fear and violence, mirroring her conception of her father, and next of Mr. (321)

Celie has allowed herself to be a slave to this God, expecting him to help her through always proclaiming "with God help" (42). She thought that God was the only one that could help her. Thus, in times of distress and grief, she turns to God imploring his help through her letters. Unfortunately, He never responds to her. This God, simply, seems to be the patron of the patriarchal society that has always persisted on oppressing her. Because of Celie's naivety, innocence, and lack of knowledge about real life, a tutor or a proselytizer is necessary to deliver her; this role is performed first by Nettie and

completed by Shug. Nettie's letters tell Celie that Jesus is by no means a white man "with hair like lamb's wool" (126). Interestingly enough, Celie's vision of God changes completely after knowing all the truth about her family; her true father was assassinated, her mother was crazy, and Pa was her step father. At that moment, she expresses her bewilderment to God saying: "You must be sleep" (183). While writing to complain about all the pain and suffering she went through starting with her stepfather and her husband's cruelty, her mother's passivity and absence, to God's silence, she expresses her odium and determination to write to Nettie and never again to God. Celie explains: the God "I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgitful, and lowdown" (175). Consequently, Shug responds to her explicating that one should have a personal image and conceptualization of God because it "ain't a he or a she but a It" (177). Celie's relinquishment of fundamentalist Christianity echoes the black feminists' belief about the necessity "to re-envision spirituality" (hooks, *Feminism Is* 106)

Shug's concept of God makes Celie realize that love, freedom, admiration and enjoyment of the beauty of the world, and happiness form the essence of life. Thus Celie casts away the patriarchal God and turns to admire nature and life. In her last letter, Celie writes, "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God" (249). This long heterogeneous list reveals not only her rejection of the old God, but also gives insight about her newly embraced religious belief. In that, Hankinson contends:

> When Shug teaches Celie that God is in everything, including the flowers, wind, and water (204), and God is in her, and she is inherently connected to

> everything (203), her sense of fear and of being judged dissolves. Celie learns that she should focus on the creation, not the person of God…. Celie's newfound religion links God with the power of the universe, a very pantheistic notion, and often associated with godess religions…The novel emphasizes Celies's discovery that God is in everything, and therefore everything is holy, a concept that defies any sense of hierarchal structure. (327)

What Hankinson labels as celie's new godess religion, hooks names it as goddesscentered spirituality. hooks maintains that this feminist spirituality aims at rejecting "outmoded belief systems", restoring "respect for the sacred feminine", and liberating individuals from any form of oppression (hooks, *Feminsim Is* 109).

Celie's new belief simply equates "a version of animism"- an animism that impels her to subvert the phallocentric domination, empowers her to curse Mr. ____, urges her to love herself, and culminates her emancipation through an economic success (Humm 184). Celie's new conception of God as being in everything and everywhere opens her eyes to the outside world, and thus revives her. She realizes that the new God exists in her providing with a spiritual and physical power and prowess. When Celie discovers that she is a part of "the creation" and that she fits into the natural order of the world, actual redemption occurs.

II.6. Economic Self-Sufficiency and Self-assertiveness

Ikenna Dieke argues that: “Walker's writing is graced with characters who undergo inner development and maturation, and in the process they abandon their old attitudes and assumptions. Other characters simply leave their former empty, wretched existence and embrace an entirely new lease of life” (4). Interestingly, Celie epitomizes such a situation. Besides the psychological and religious changes, Shug continues to anchor Celie in consummating her self-fulfillment and self-determination through economic independence and success. In order to help Celie get on her feet, Shug took Celie to her “big and pink” house in Memphis” (188). By so doing, Shug “provides Celie with a literal and psychological womblike ‘holding environment’ in which Celie flourishes” (Proudfit 27).

After regaining her father's heritage and while being in Shug’s house, Celie finds out about her exceptional talent as a stylist of pants. Thus, she starts her own business of pants. To emphasize her autonomy, dethronement, and challenge of the patriarchal norms, Celie chooses to make pants for both men and women, though the standards at these times were classifying pants as being for men. Being jovial with what she has attained, Celie writes to Nettie: “Dear Nettie, I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends, and time” (193). Celie needed to utterly unshackle herself and thus economic independence becomes as important as any other aspect to fulfill her quest of selfhood. Similarly, Collins explains that a black woman’s economic independence entails respect. Economic self-sufficiency is a prerequisite for self-reliance and respect. Collins notices that “respect, self-reliance, and self-assertiveness” are all intertwined and are necessary for a black woman’s self-fulfilling selfhood (*Black Feminist* 117).

Celie realizes economic independence thanks to her talent of sewing. And it is again Shug who helps her to discover and refine it. The moment when Celie was mad because Mr.___ was hiding Nettie's letters is a crucial one. At that moment, Celie was infuriated and thought of killing Mr.___ with his razor, until Shug intervenes and suggests making a pant together. In acting as "an auxiliary ego" for Celie (Proudfit 27), Shug offers Celie's insightful and overpowering moral "a needle and not a razor in my hand…" (137).

In moments of anger, Celie resorts to sewing in order to disentangle herself from the detrimental anger and hysteria she feels. Interestingly enough, the needle, the means of sewing, is as powerful as the phallic emblem of supremacy, the pen in this case. Both pen and needle have "a phallic shape that can rip and rend" (Cutter 173). But above all, the needle, unlike the pen, "remends, re-members, and remakes" (Cutter 173).

This needle becomes the emblem of the victory of the feminist discourse in the novel. The needle and the act it generates, which is sewing, grow to be a "conversation, a language that articulates relationships and connects and reconnects networks of individuals to create a community" (Cutter 172). Sewing becomes an intact system of communication that can express the various intricate human sensations and thoughts. Celie, for instance, uses sewing as a means of expressing her love for Nettie : " Nettie, i am making some pants for you to beat the heat in African. ... Every stich i sew will be a kiss" (191).

Effectively, Walker excels in creating an affluent feminist discourse in this novel. She merges writing, sewing, and speaking to portray Celie's changing state from subordination to defiance. What is noteworthy, however, is the inventive way in which

Walker renders sewing a vivid manifestation of Celie's emancipation and emerging potentials. In that, Cutter asserts:

> Sewing functions as an alternative methodology of speech that cannot be separated from Celie's acquisition of an alternative spoken and written language. … Walker's language of the sewn denies binaries and hierarchies of the hegemonic world, such as those between oral and written language, between informal and formal diction, between art and language, and between discourse and "craft". (176)

Conflating sewing and writing makes Walker, unlike some critics' views, realistic and non- fanatic in admitting that even the pen, men's phallic symbol, can be used by a woman to liberate herself. And, on the other hand, sewing can be used by men. This temperance extends to the fact that Walker goes to create an image of a society in which the feminine and the masculine discourse can coexist. The latter is clearly manifested in the change that happens to Albert, Celie's husband, when desiring to sew. Sewing, for Albert, reminds him of his mother: "When I was growing up, he said, I used to try to sew along mama cause that's what she was always doing. But everybody laughed at me" (236). By declaring his love of sewing, Albert becomes a part of that larger community where strict binary oppositions of the feminine and the masculine become more and more indistinct. His "…reintegration with community is not restoration as the patriarch, but as a de-centered companion to Celie in a new gynocentric culture in which the originally abused and marginalized becomes the new loci for order and spirituality" (Brogan 189). The latter can be best seen when Celie introduces Albert along with Shug to Nettie as "my peoples" (248).

Actually, Celie ends up embracing and loving herself the way she is. She becomes determined to prove to her surrounding, in general, and men, in particular, that this black and ugly woman liberates herself, effectuates change, and amends her surrounding. She becomes successful and effective inside and outside the domestic sphere.

Celie's ultimate change is a response to her society's unremitting devaluation in general and men's debasement in particular. Celie's torment from all men in her surrounding is the outcome of the ideals of her misogynic society. In Leonard Schein's "All Men Are Misogynists", he argues that society encourages men to hate and abase women. He explains:

> …Psychologically, we objectify the people we hate and consider them our inferiors… A second situation which feeds on, deepens, and solidifies our hatred of women develops a little later in time. We begin to realize our privileged position in society as males…. Subconsciously we intuit that our privilege can only be maintained if women are kept "in their place." So we live in constant fear, as the threat to our power is everywhere…. (qtd in. hooks, *Ain't I* 102-03)

hooks further maintains that black men's fear about their leading position and hatred towards black women are exposed through the "increased domestic brutality" and "their vehement verbal denouncement of black women" (*Ain't I* 102). It is within this ideological frame that Celie's husband insists to humiliate and subjugate her. While describing Celie as "You skinny, you shape funny…you black, you pore, you ugly, you a

woman…you nothing at all", Celie's husband aims to annihilate Celie's intellect, self-respect and femininity (175-76).

Ultimately, however, Celie, succeeds to affirm her own existence. Imbued with determination and pride, Celie states, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly …But I'm here" (187). It is Celie's emerging self-esteem and appreciation that engender her self-fulfilling selfhood. Similarly, Claudia Tate maintains that women must develop and strengthen their self-esteem by appreciating and loving themselves. The latter, Tate explains, will ensure women's emancipation and self-actualization (*Black Women* xxiii).

When affirming that she is poor, black and ugly, Celie surprisingly is accepting Albert's insults. On that, Davis M. Thadious explains that repeating these insults:

> Echoes the words of Langston Hughes' folk philosppher, Jesse B. Semple (Simple): "I'm still here…I've been underfed, underpaid… I've been abused, confused, misused… I done had everthing from flat fleet to flat head… but I am still here… I'm still here." Celie's verbal connection to Hughes' black everyman and the black oral tradition extends her affirmation of self, so that it becomes racial as well as personal. (119)

David Guy explains that Celie is able to disengage herself from oppression and assert her selfhood only when accepting herself for what she is, recognizing her talents, rejecting the biological determinism attributed to her, challenging her previous oppressors, and finding a useful vocation to support herself (7). Celie becomes a woman only when she determinedly fights for the realization of her own integrity, self-fulfillment, and emancipation (Dieke 5).

III. *The Color Purple* as a Celebration of Walker's "Womanism"

Melanie Harris in her *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics* explains that the "womanist ethical approaches are constructive in that they consistently replant justice, opening avenues by which justice can be served, and create (and re-create) virtues and values that promote justice and optimal strategies for living" (53). Actually, Harris' description of the womanist goals summarizes *The Color Purple'*s ending. Poetic Justice is attained, the curse stops, and patriarchal authority is overthrown. Celie becomes a successful confident woman, her husband becomes a sympathetic man that Celie likes to speak to, and Nettie returns with Celie's children. Now Shug's mission is consummated. She can leave Celie after providing her with all the love, support, and protection she needed. Celie becomes aware that with or without Shug, she is "now enough of a woman that she can survive on her own" (Dieke 63).

Alice Walker explains that the spiritual survival of her people is one of her concerns, but the most important one for her is about "… exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, the triumphs of black women" (qtd. in O'Brien 192). As such, she makes of Celie a heroic figure who acquires her emancipation and selfhood through a long saga of misery, affliction, and torture softened by supportive and encouraging liaisons with other women. Celie's life moves from psychological and spiritual nullification to a state of renascence.

Moving from being a mere object to being the idol of her fellow women, Celie mirrors the black woman as unruly and resistant to categorization. The latter is vested in Celie's ultimate ability to overturn the patriarchal authority over her and fulfill her quest of

selfhood. Instead of surrendering to the patriarchal dominance, Celie ends up imposing her own womanist discourse.

This happy ending subsuming individual emancipation and family reunion is not only an apogee and atonement for Celie's life, but also a one of Walker's womanism. In describing the black woman as a one “committed to survival whole of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically” (Walker, *In Search* xi), Walker, in a way, is describing Celie's entente with herself and her surrounding. Furthermore, this harmony between the individual and his surrounding forms the quintessence of the womanist vision of a balanced community. It is based on valuing and honoring “the humanity of all people and fight for the full liberation and justice of women, children, and men of African descent as members of the global human community living in the fullness of Creation” (Harris 51).

Interestingly enough, Walker’s vision of the black female selfhood is quite outstanding in the sense that it promotes women’s independence and social advancement. Her vision of black woman’s self-definition is similar to Paule Marshall and Sonia Sanchez’ conception of black women’s selfhood. All of them celebrate the importance of a communal sense of selfhood. While Marshall defines it as “one’s continuity with the larger community” (qtd. in Washington, “I Sign” 159), Sanchez explains that it constitutes the fusion of the “personal self” and the “self of the black people” (qtd. in Tate, *Black Women* 134). From the same perspective, While the route of a black woman’s self-fulfillment may be thorny and challenging and the change required may be radical, Walker insists on depicting her female protagonists as rebels who fight for and attain

their autonomous selfhood but still strive to advance their communities and be supportive of the survival of both black men and black women.

Conclusion

Though *The Color Purple* starts with a gloomy and forlorn atmosphere crowded with scenes of sexual abuse, dehumanization, and profanation, it ends with a female centered yet inclusive, balanced, and tolerant society built on mentorship and mutual respect. In a way, this novel donates a sparkle of hope to all despondent black women through giving the example of Celie the poor girl who harshly achieves her emancipation as well as self-control and is able to defy the phallocentric authority via a mélange of intricate factors. Relying on nurturing women bonding, facing unspeakable trauma, decolonizing the body, expressing the self through writing, forging a voice, rejecting the conventional religion, and realizing economic sufficiency are but some of the techniques used by Celie to alter her state from a one of silence and oppression to one of voice and emancipation.

In *the Color Purple*, Walker counters the history of black women's sexual and social abuse by creating a narrative of liberation. Her novel provides a model for black women's potential move towards liberation that is both a personal affirmation and a proclamation for social revolution. To initiate this revolution, Walker highlights the return of the repressed, of the body, of the voice, and of the womanist discourse into the center.

Chapter Three:

From Defiance to strategic submission to Emancipation in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston

Introduction

If I am so perpetually terrified
of being called a bad girl,
So eternally blown about
by the winds of my inner judges,
That I must cling to any authority that grants me marginal Approval,
then I risk that might never, ever,
turn towards that within me
that guides and orders my existence,
that lets the truth of my life emerge.
Oh grant me courage to be myself!

-Judith Duerk, *Circle of Stones: Woman's Journey to Herself*.

In this chapter, I will argue that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a novel that celebrates a woman's victory and emancipation from the patriarchal as well as cultural confinements. To prove my point, I will explain the way Hurston excels in vividly portraying the social, cultural, and historical limitations the protagonist, Janie, suffers from. I will explain that Janie's journey is not a journey of a young woman who desires excessive freedom and romantic relationships, but rather a journey of searching for her autonomous selfhood. To confirm this, I need, first, to refer to the difficulties Janie undergoes as being a mulatto and for coming from a lineage of rape. The latter aggravates Janie's grandmother's fears and obsessions to control her and make of her an ideal woman. Janie, however, contradicts her grandmothers' orders, leaves her house, and establishes her first contact with the external world. Since memory, imagination, and storytelling are means that the protagonist resorts to, I will explain the use of each. I will, also, explain the way sisterhood is important in helping Janie facing androcentric

oppression and fulfilling her quest of selfhood. The latter is vested in the strong relationship between Janie and her best friend, Pheoby. Janie decides to tell her story to her best friend because she trusts her, and is sure that her story will never die. During her journey, Janie got married to three men. I will argue that each man, on the one hand oppresses Janie, and on the other teaches her how to be immune to the specific way he has oppressed her. Similarly, I will contend that Janie resorts to different strategies with each man; she moves from defiance to strategic obedience to finally get her emancipation. Once, she is an independent, self-assertive, and mature woman she goes back to her town to prove that a woman can be free and can subvert the based gender, historic, and cultural stigmas imposed on her.

III.Locating *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) gained a widespread popularity. However, especially before Alice Walker's revival of the novel in 1970, many critics and readers criticized it harshly for the extravagant sentimentalism and some old folk tradition it bears. Mary Helen Washington, for instance, explains in her "Forward" to *Their Eyes were Watching God* Richard Wright's view about the novel:

> …Wright excoriated *Their Eyes* as a novel that did for literature what the minstrel shows did for theater, that is, make white folks laugh. The novel, he said, "carries no theme, no message, no thought," but exploited those "quaint" aspects of Negro life that satisfied the tastes of a white audience. By the end of the forties, a decade dominated by Wright and by the stormy fiction of social realism, the quieter voice of a woman searching for self-realization could not, or would not, be heard. (VIII)

Hurston, thus, was criticized for not responding to the concerns of the current literary and cultural movements. While most of the literature produced between the 1930s and 1940s reflected economic and realistic concerns of the African-American community, Hurston's story of a young woman who is searching for selfhood via moving from one man to another seems to be irrelevant and outdated. Furthermore, Hurston was an avant-garde in the way she manipulated the concept of writing and the writer's authority over the text- a point that bewildered and annoyed her fellow writers. Wishing to revolutionize the world of literature by disregarding the literary conventions of her time and granting readers authority to interpret her text, Hurston was accused of losing her authorial power and received the other writers' disdain. Ryan Simmons on that issue sustains:

> In sacrificing traditional notions of authorship, one gives something up in the hope of leading to something better- a strategy that, at best is no guarantee of success. And the success Hurston realized in producing this book has come, for the most part, after many years and great personal sacrifice for the writer herself. For decades a nearly forgotten figure of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston died in obscurity, and the importance of her writing has been recognized only by means of a long and complicated process of recovery. (182)

Obviously, Hurston's novel portrays her vision of a colored woman's self-fulfillment within an oppressive community- a vision that can be validated only by readers. She avoids dictating her own standpoint about womanhood because doing so will be a regeneration of the same oppressive system she is denouncing. Thus, she presents Janie's peculiar and unconventional quest of selfhood, and leaves the room for readers to interpret and evaluate Janie's journey.

Thirty years later, Alice Walker directed critics' attention towards Hurston and her *Their Eyes were Watching God* allowing the novel to gain a place within the academic sphere, and most importantly rendering the novel to become the threshold of the black feminist movement emerging around the 1960s. "Not surprisingly, questions about its worth have become more frequent and insistent" (Miller 74). It is one of the most inventive, original, and compelling novels that have ever been written by an African-American woman writer.

II.Janie: an Avant-garde Black Female Protagonist

Despite Walker's revival of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the novel still raises controversy. Though there is a general consensus about the novel as being an apology for harsh gender segregation, a pioneer in black feminist literature, and the best example of a woman's quest towards self-fulfillment, the novel's protagonist remains the focal point on which much disagreement raises (Pondrom 181).

Interestingly, Margaret Marquis, in her "'when de Notion Strikes Me': Body Image, Food, and Desire in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*", provides some critics' views about the novel's protagonist, Janie. Susan Meisenhelder, for instance, explains that "the frames at the…end of the novel further suggest neither a broken nor a deluded woman… [Janie] strides into Eatonville, Hurston suggests, a strong and vigorous woman committed to life and experience" (qtd. in Marquis 84). Dissatisfied with Janie's journey, Jennifer Jordan explains that "Janie's struggle for identity and self-direction remains stymied. She never defines herself outside the scope of her marital or romantic involvements." (qtd. in Marquis 82). Regardless of the controversy about Janie's journey and the various interpretations of Janie's liaison with men, I argue that she goes through a journey to explore her self and the world resulting in her personal growth and self-assertion. I also argue that Hurston makes men catalysts for Janie's emancipation. Janie, gradually, learns to defy social and cultural requirements starting with rejecting her grandmother's orders and ending with declining her husbands' control. At the end of the novel, Janie is strong and proud of her survival. The latter makes of her more of a heroic figure who trespasses physical, emotional, and social obstacles. Hurston succeeds in making "Janie's quest for

self-actualization moves beyond scope of the feminist or African-American heroine and into the realm of the heroic" (Marquis 84).

Janie, at an early age, is forced to marry Logan Killicks who endeavors not only to control her, but also to make her work for him. Attempting to escape the repressive life she has with Logan, Janie once seeing Joe Starks decides to escape with him and quickly marry him. Unfortunately, Joe Starks proves to be another oppressor who desires to control Janie and above all intimidate her to prove his superiority. Janie, however, decides to resist and confront him. Shortly after, Joe Starks dies and Janie moves to another young, life loving, and easygoing man. Janie, with this man named Tea Cake, discovers new spheres; she explores new dimensions of her own sexuality and the world surrounding her. In fact, with Tea Cake, Janie departures from her role as a conventional subordinate wife to a new one where she is ready to take risks and tempted to try the new. Janie tries to answer the recurrent questions she has in mind: "Did marriage end the cosmic loneliness of the unmated? Did marriage compel love like the sun compels the day?" (21). At a certain point in the novel, Janie, however, discovers that marriage has not responded to her expectations. Thus, she realizes that she has to find her own way for achieving happiness, satisfaction, and emancipation. It is only when Janie, using Duerk's words, discovers that she is the one who "guides and orders her existence" and "...lets the truth of her life emerge" that she is able to "become herself" (78).

III.“Mah Tongue is in Mah Friend’s Mouf”: the Significance of Memory, Personal Recollections, Storytelling, and Sisterhood

In the first passage in the novel, the narrator says: “So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead… It was the time to hear things and talk.” (1). As such, the novel starts with the ending of Janie’s story which is referred to by the use of the words “come back” and “burying the dead” implying Janie’s victorious ending on the one hand, and the use of the verbs “hear” and “talk” suggesting the importance of storytelling in the novel on the other. It becomes evident that the novel is about a story to be told- told by Janie who should first remember her own adventure and report it to her friend Phoeby. “In Hurston’s text, we find that Janie relates to Phoeby, with surprising pettiness, the crucial details of her life, relying on a nostalgia that recalls telling moments and turning points of her life” (McKnight 87).

Just like a knight in his journey, Hurston aided her protagonist through her journey with several means that may help her in dealing with the curbing social forces. One of these is memory. In fact, remembering some scenes like when she was a young girl sitting under the pear tree helps Janie to be determined to free herself from the bonds of matrimony and of the life in Eatonville once Joe Starks is dead. Similarly, her memory of Tea Cake enables her to move confidently to a state of peace with her independent and mature self in Eatonville. Janie’s reminiscence, nostalgia, and memory do “not arrest her in the past. Through a mature, discerning narrative based on a backwards glance, Janie finds reparation for and, more than that, significance in her life’s traumas” (McKnight 87).

Janie's dilemma seems to be more complex than a one of being obliged to respond to her patriarchal surrounding's dictates; she has to obey each and everyone around her because she is "the mule of world". Janie's society is a one that, par excellence, suffocates its dwellers, especially women. Janie, as a young colored girl, is controlled by her grandmother's notions of the ideal woman. Furthermore, Nanny, Janie's grandmother, is too protective and afraid that Janie may be sexually abused. To avoid this, she urges Janie to marry Logan Killicks who makes of her his servant. Then, she moves to Jody Starks to see how it is to live with a power maniac. Jody Starks proves to be an arrogant selfish man who adores control as well as possession and considers Janie to be one of his properties. Details of Janie's miserable life are recounted relying on flashbacks and memory:

> She was a rut in the road. Plenty of life beneath the surface beneath the surface but it was kept beaten down the wheels. Sometimes she struck out into the future, imagining her life different from what it was. But mostly she lived between her head and her heels, with her emotional disturbances like shade patterns in the woods-come and gone with the sun. (118)

This excerpt mirrors Janie's restlessness and longing for freedom and internal peace. The latter is because of her manipulative husband who controls the way she dresses, moves and talks to others. Hurston, however, does not leave her protagonist helpless, but she endows her with an intense memory and imaginative skills. Janie appeases her agony through resorting to her fertile imagination when explaining that she "sometimes struck out into the future, imagining her life different from what it was" (118). Janie's

imagination delivers her from the pitfalls of her reality and helps her to adapt herself and survive the sordid conditions she is living in.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is a novel that relies on recording experiences and resorting to memory through personal narratives. The very beginning of novel emphasizes this idea:

> It was time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. (1)

This passage explains that the novel is not just a record of Janie, but rather a one of the people surrounding her. It reflects the narrator's vision of the black and colored people, including Janie, as unprivileged, deprived, and silenced creatures who eventually become the lords of themselves and are able to speak. These individuals who are finally able to speak are the porch-sitters who witness the events that happen to Janie as she moves from a state of subordination to one of emancipation.

When describing the porch-sitters as "tongueless, earless, eyeless...", Hurston refers to the lack of communication and rigidity of conceiving others' differences. After all, the porch-sitters seem to be other agents of the gender biased system. Their talks at the beginning of the novel were a "mass of destruction"; "they made statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs" (10). These laughs and questions were for Janie; they scrutinized her and questioned every act and reaction she committed.

Following the traditional call- response oral tradition, the porch-sitters expected an answer from Janie, but she never does. Janie, however, trusts only her friend Phoeby. And referring to the fact that she refuses to interact directly with the porch speakers, she tell Phoeby, “mah tongue is mah friend’s mouf” (17). Janie, through this statement, emphasizes the fact that she trusts the sisterly relationship she has with Phoeby, and most importantly, that she knows that Phoeby will respond the porch-sitters. Maureen McKnight, in her “Discerning Nostalgia in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*”, explains that while the traumas Janie goes through and the troubles created by others help her in forging her sense of selfhood, it is resorting to telling her story to Pheoby that causes the survival of Janie’s story. McKnight then adds:

> Janie not only discerns what is important to her, but through her transmission of affect to Phoeby, she also narrates how useful and fulfilling this kind of nostalgia can be. After her return, in telling her story to Pheoby, Janie is not looking backward but forward. Her homecoming is not reluctant or shameful but triumphant. She returns of her own accord, master of her self and her future. Hurston’s text, then, is not minstrelsy but something new – a new epistemology that recognizes and is affected by cultural issues, but that emphasizes the personal development that can be experienced through traumas. (88-89)

More than that, the speech between Janie and Pheoby reflects a newly created female space. That space eliminates the social myth of using language and having a voice as a patriarchal prerogative. Furthermore, it articulates women’s relocation from dispossession to possession of voice and thus of power. Janie’s ability to speak and to

locate her tongue in her friend's mouth equals what hooks names "the right speech of womanhood" (*Talking Back* 6).

Their Eyes Were Watching God is a novel that privileges memory, imagination, and personal recollections. The novel relies from the very start on the story being told through Janie's personal recollections as well as memories and ends in the same manner. However, Hurston makes Janie's story an immortal one because a story that is retold by a good teller is a one that never perishes; and Janie choose Phoeby, her best friend to retell her story. McKnight avers:

> Pheoby, meanwhile, helps Janie know herself. Her "hungry listening helped Janie to tell her story. So [Janie] went on thinking back to her young years and explaining them to her friend in soft, easy phrases while all around the house, the night time put on flesh and blackness"(10). Since Janie's "tongue is in [her] friend's mouf" (6), Janie's nostalgia confronts directly, with both personal and cultural import, the social exigencies of her time. This is not simple reminiscence. What happens after Janie tells her story matters because she can share it with others and serve as a model. Janie knows this too. (89)

Janie is very careful in choosing her storyteller. After trying life with three men, she is sure now that only a woman can be trusted- a good friend like phoeby can save Janie's fondest memories and report her journey. Their relationship is rooted in an "intimate" sisterhood (14). Phoeby devotedly defends Janie when the townspeople start gossiping about her while she was absent. Though many readers may think that it is the experience Janie gains with her husbands that forges Janie's emancipation, it is Phoeby who plays an

immense role in describing and framing this freedom. Without Phoeby, neither readers nor the people of Eatonville could have ever heard about Janie's story.

Given the importance of relationships among black women in the African- American society, female bonding is highlighted in the novel. In that, Barbara Christian explains that "Hurston was clearly concerned with the peculiar characteristics of the relationship between black women" and "that she rarely moved outside it" (*Black Feminist* 43). This is clearly portrayed in Phoeby and Janie's relationship; Pheoby is Janie's witness, confident, and defender. An example of this complicity and trust is when Janie tells Pheoby, as response to the neighbors' gossip: "Ah don't mean to bother wid tellin' 'em nothin', Phoeby. 'Tain't worth de trouble. You can tell 'em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat's just de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf" (6). This passage emphasizes Phoeby's importance to Janie in the way she donates and binds her voice to Phoeby.

VI."de nigger woman is de mule uh de world: Janie Refusing to be a "Culture Bearer"

The racial and patriarchal limitations are not the only source of Janie's distress; being an orphan and coming from a lineage of rape also deepen her suffering. In an attempt to explain her sense of non-belonging and loss to Phoeby, Janie says: "it's hard to know where to start at", then continues: "Ah ain't never seen mah papa […] Mah mama neither" (7-8). Janie's lineage aggravates the social animosity towards her on the one hand, and intensifies her perseverance to locate herself and assert her independent selfhood on the other. This excerpt underscores the myopic recurrent vision of black women in general and Janie as a mulatto in particular as the mule of the world. In that,

Julie A. Haurykiewicz in her "From Mules to Muliebrity: Speech and Silence in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" explains that:

> like a mule, Janie is the product of mixed parentage. Her mother, Leafy, was raped by a school teacher. Janie is the offspring of this union, continuing the legacy of rape which can be traced to Leafy's birth as the result of Nanny's rape by her white master during the last days of the slave era. Both the school teacher and the slave owner might be likened to the jackass in the mule lineage, while the black women are like mares whose equine heritage is corrupted by the rapes. The Sexual sterility of mules may represent a form of silencing, as we see that Janie's ability and desire to communicate is frequently linked to sexual satisfaction while her silence is an indication that her sexual desires are missing or thwarted". (46)

Janie's repression starts at home with her own grandmother. Nanny, Janie's grandmother, seems to be haunted by the white hegemony. Being herself a victim of the white man's abuse, she thought to instruct Janie to escape this kind of exploitation. A feeling of terror from racial and gender biases haunts nanny. She warns Janie of the powers of the white man and woman recounting her story: "It was de cool of de evenin' when Mistis come walkin' in mah door. She throwed de door wide open and stood dere lookin' at me outa her eyes and face … 'Nigger, whut' yo' baby doin' wid gray eyes and yaller hair? She begin tuh slap mah jaws ever which a'way," (16-17). Despite the fact that her master has fathered her baby, he never appears to look after that baby.

This passage describing the violent confrontation Nanny has with the powerful mistress and the way her master abandons her mirrors one aspect of the suffering that

black women experience as slaves. This suffering generates a whole displacement and chaos in favor of the whites over the black woman. In that, Hortense Spillers explains that "the stunning reversal of the castration thematic… becomes an aspect of the African-American female's misnaming" ("Mama's" 66). In other words, imposing matriarchy on the African-American society allows the whites to strengthen their dominance and control over the blacks. Nanny expounds this situation:

> …de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as ah been able tuh find out. May be it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick (23).

From this perspective, Nanny feels coerced to warn Janie about the expected role from her in the world of male -female relationships.

On the one hand, Nanny's convictions and speech with Janie limit the use of family and family relationships as a space able to redefine the hegemonic order. On the other, she passes on the social reductive vision of black womanhood. Collins points out the importance of the family as an "ideological tool" that may construct, mask, alter or amend power relation within society (*From Black* 31). Instead of inducing Janie towards altering her position as dominated colored woman, Nanny misuses family as being a useful revolutionary ideological tool and continues to use family as tool for normalizing gender, social, and class hierarchies (Collins, *From Black* 39-40). Unfortunately, Nanny passes on the perpetual "devaluation of black womanhood" resulting from "the sexual exploitation of black women during slavery" (hooks, *Ain't I* 53). Nanny perpetuates the radicalization and sexualization of the black woman's identity. The latter is highly

condemned by Carolyn Martin Shaw in her *Disciplining the Black Female Body.* She maintains:

> From outside my community, my body was racialized in pernicious ways. Inside the black community, it was again the body that defined me—this time in terms of gender and sexuality. Management of the black female body was at the core of my identity.
>
> My subjectivity, my sense of myself as a person, and my existence as a subject in the world were constructed through the conjunction of ideas, meanings, images, discourses, and actions emanating from different social and cultural domains. (103)

Nanny's commentary on the nature of black-white and male-female relationships is intended to prepare Janie for what she sees as an inevitable legacy. She has seen the way the racial and social hierarchy works to pass "'de load' from white men to black males to black "women folks". …But Nanny does not really provide a space for alternative roles for black women. Because she invokes the idea that "de nigger woman is de mule uh de world," Nanny limits Janie's possibilities in regard to what womanhood or muliebrity might mean" (Haurykiewicz 52). What nanny does is the upholding of misogynic and racist beliefs that oppress black women- a social phenomenon that hooks deems as destructive vis-à-vis black womanhood. hooks explains:

> American women have been socialized, even brainwashed, to accept a version of American history that was created to uphold and maintain racial imperialism in the form of white supremacy and sexual imperialism in the form of patriarchy. One measure of the success of such indoctrination is that we

> perpetuate both consciously and unconsciously the very evils that oppress us. (*Ain't I* 120-21)

Along the novel, Nanny has been just another unprivileged black woman who surrenders to social regulations. This is evident in her indoctrination of Janie. Being afraid that Janie will be raped just like her and most black women, Nanny obliges her to "marry off decent like" (13). In so doing, she is not protecting Janie, but she is perpetuating the long held belief about black women's subordination. This is what Toni Morrison labels as "culture bearers" describing the burden of black women obliged to perpetuate certain social beliefs (qtd. in Stepto 488). Janie's problem can be summarized through this concept. Unlike other grandmothers and women in her community, Janie rejects being a "culture bearer" and seeks to overthrow the constructed images of womanhood. She rejects social norms requiring her to be a docile woman and wife and pursues her journey towards fashioning herself.

Besides the social requirements and obligations, Janie suffered from an identity crisis for being neither white nor black. Instead of helping and guiding her granddaughter, Nanny did just fossilize her feeling of loss. Describing her feeling of confusion, Janie explains that she "didn't know [she] wuzn't white" until she was six years old" (11). Janie decisively rebels against all the racial dictates that imprison her within the barriers of racial and gender essentialism. After all, Nanny seems to be Janie's first oppressor that she has to get rid of.

One factor that prompts and at the same time impedes Janie's search for selfhood is her repudiation of her ancestors' cultural heritage and values. Sandra Pouchet Paquet, for instance, explains that it is only through overthrowing "ancestral roots" that one can

achieve “conventional notions of success” (500). Actually, the novel foregrounds the tension that arises between the older underprivileged blacks that revere the patriarchal authority and fear the whites’ rule vis-à-vis Janie’s unconventional defiant posture. Janie decides along the novel to overcome the racial and gender stereotypes using her own codes of resistance and formation of selfhood. Explaining her philosophy to Pheoby, Janie says:

> Ah done lived Grandma’s way, now Ah means tuh live mine … She was borned in slavery time when folks, dat is black folks, didn’t sit down anytime dey felt lak it. So sittin’ on porches lak de white madam looked lak uh mighty fine thing tuh her. Dat’s whut she wanted for me – don’t keer whut it cost … So Ah got up on de high stool lak she told me, but Phoeby, Ah done nearly languished tuh death up. (23)

The tension between Janie and her grandmother is the outcome of Janie’s craving for social amendment. She strives to object to the communal pressures of patriarchy, tradition, conformity, and hierarchy. Though Janie’s awakening is, seemingly, sexual in its nature, it is essentially the first step permitting her to come into contact with the external world. Janie’s journey towards a “conscious life” started when she tries to have a “gaze on a mystery” (10). This desire to experience the essence of life is never satisfied “in her grandma’ house” (10). Consequently, she decides to detach herself from her grandmother’s constraints limiting her chances to fulfill her quest of self-fulfillment. The only means she thought of was “springtime” love. She admits to Nanny: “Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think” (24). Janie

ends up with three marriages enabling her to acquire emotional and psychological maturity.

V. From Capitalist Subjugation to Strategic Liberation

Their Eyes were Watching God highlights an intricate system of oppression not only through exposing a colored woman's entrapment because of some patriarchal and traditional codes, but also via highlighting how class and materialistic issues deepen this oppression. The latter is explained by Stuart Hall who states that materialism, race, and class are interconnected because of their very nature in functioning as an oppressive force (56). Similarly, Both Collins and hooks prove the same standpoint concerning the impact of the U.S. capitalist economic relations on black women's status. While hooks maintains that "changes in the American capitalist economy have had the greatest impact on the status of women" (*Ain't I* 105), Collins further specifies that the capitalist class relations have always targeted black women's bodies (*Black Feminist* 132). Collins maintains:

> …First, Black women's bodies have been objectifies and commodified under U.S. capitalist class relations…. Commodified bodies of all sorts become markers of status within class hierarchies that rely on race and gender…. A second feature of U.S. capitalist class relations concerns how Black women's bodies have been exploited. Via mechanisms such as employment discrimination, maintaining images of Black women that construct them as mules of objects of pleasure, and encouraging or discouraging Black women's reproduction via state intervention, Black women's labor, sexuality, and fertility all have been exploited. (*Black Feminist* 132)

These views about the impact of the materialistic and capitalist system on black women become relevant to Janie especially during her marriages where she happens to be subject to a complex patriarchal materialistic burdensome system. “Janie’s first marriages”, Henry Louis Gates explains, “are thoroughly bourgeois, characterized by a logic of accumulation and possession: Killicks owns the only organ in ‘amongst colored folks; Joe Starks is a man of ‘positions and possessions’” (186). On one hand, Nanny wanted to save Janie from physical abuse; but on the other, she drowns her in a more repugnant form of materialistic exploitation where all is permitted. Being married to men whose most important interest is power and materialistic gain, Janie, who escapes her grandmother’s regulations, ends up subject to a more convoluted, domineering, and exploitative system.

V.I. Logan Killicks’s Work Ethics and Janie’s Lost Dream

In fact, the way Janie’s husbands try to manipulate her reflects the materialistic ideology of each. Logan Killicks, Janie’s first husband, marries women only to work in the field for him. Logan warns Janie to get rid of the childish attitude she has, and clarifies that he marries her only to work for him. He reminds her of the expected role from her – a role that his late wife performed. He says: “mah fust wife never bothered me ‘bout choppin’ no wood nohow. She’d grab dat ax and sling chips lak uh man. You done been spoilt rotten” (26). Janie dwells in a society that requires from women to work as men, but never considers them as equal to men; women are the mules in men’s world. Logan orders Janie to work both in the kitchen and in the field. For that, he buys a mule for her. “Ah needs two mules dis yeah. …Ah aims tuh run two plows, and dis man Ah’m

talkin' 'bout is got uh mule all gentled up so even uh woman kin handle 'im", Logan explains to Janie (27).

Logan's vision of women and work depicts the prevalent belief about black women's work. In the American society, work is relevant to black women's status. Collins divulges that by examining the variety of works available and performed by black women; one can easily comprehend black women's position within the capitalist system. She asserts that black women perform all types of labor that are "economically exploitative, physically demanding, and intellectually deadening". Even inside the house, black women's exploitation continues with the never ending chores of wives, mothers, and daughters. Paid or unpaid, outside or inside the house, black women perform works that are associated with their status as "mule" (*Black Feminist* 48).

On Logan's obsession with work, Todd McGowan explains that "the idea of work ethic predominates Logan's consciousness and is the driving force in his domination of Janie. It leads him to demand her obedience" (111). Logan, for instance, orders her: "you ain't got no particular place. It's wherever ah need yuh. Git uh move on yuh, and dat quick" (30). According to Jerome Thornton, Logan considers "the role of a woman as synonymous of that of the mule" (qtd. in McGowan 112). Understanding that she been reduced to a mule, Janie's dreams about marriage vanish. It is no surprise that Nanny stopped Janie when saying "ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think. Ah…" because she knew the essence and codes of marriage.

> By forcing Janie into the role of the mule, Logan shutters Janie's imaginary identification: he desecrates the pear tree, Janie's ideal of love and marriage. This alienation, however, marks Janie's birth as subject, her full entry into the

> symbolic order… Janie's relationship with Logan destroys her romantic conception of love" and destroys her dreams too (McGowan 112).

Eventually, "She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (24). As such, being a woman equals dismissing dreams and ambitions. Imagination, dreams, and creativity contradict the social requirements of being a docile woman. Yet, Janie starts to emerge as a subject only through the loss of her dream.

Janie needed to experience this loss of dream and confront reality in order to find a means to resist the harsh circumstances around her. Logan's domination and harsh treatment seem to be necessary in the way it triggers the sense of loss and detachment from the object of imagination - which is her dreams and the peer tree- and consequently becoming a subject within the symbolic order. Jacques Lacan explains that "there is no subject without, somewhere, *aphanasis* of the subject, and it is in this alienation, in this fundamental division, that the dialectic of the subject is established" (221). As such, Janie's marriage to Logan is not merely an initiation towards the world of oppression, but most importantly, it is a trigger that spurs Janie to pursue her quest of selfhood. Once Janie becomes a woman and realizes the essence of her social surrounding, she immediately decides to find a way out and leave her oppressor, Logan.

V.2. Joe Starks a Monopoly Capital

After her experience with Logan, Janie needs a man who "spoke for far horizon" a man who "…spoke for change and chance", and it was that "citified, stylish dresses man" named Joe Starks who represents these things (29). "For Janie, the arrival of Joe Starks indicates her liberation from Logan and the ideological force of his protestant work ethic. After leaving Logan, Janie feels a sense of ecstasy…This is the ecstasy of liberation, but Janie soon learns that she has been liberated into a new kind of domination" (McGowan 113). Still naïve, Janie does not pay attention to or understands Joe's words or tone with her. Joe Starks describes Janie as a "pretty doll baby", and then declares: "you ain't never knowed what it was to be treated lak a lady and ah wants to be de one tuh show yuh" (29). Clearly, Joe Starks is fascinated by Janie's physical appearance and wishes to seize this chance. He perceives Janie as a valuable object that will embellish the image he has in mind about his own town. Unlike her previous husband, Joe Starks does not force Janie to labor, but dominates her by turning her into an object and a commodity.

For Joe, Janie is fine piece to be possessed to ornament his position as a mayor. He charms Janie with the life they will have together, but never states that this life centers on him. Celebrating the occasion of Joe being the mayor of Eatonville, people asked to listen to Janie giving a word, but Joe responds manifesting his egoism and obsession with power:

> Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin.' Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home." Janie's response proves significant: "Janie made her face laugh after a short pause, but it wasn't too easy … It must have been the

> way Joe spoke out without giving her a chance to say anything one way or another that took the bloom off of things". (40-41)

By specifying Janie's function and place, Joe reveals much about black males' attitude about black women. Black women's objectification functions at varying degrees. Similar to Janie's silencing and sequestering at home by her husband, many black men activists and political leader who called for Black Nationalism and the elevation of all black people demanded that their women have subordinate roles. hooks, for instance, described black men's subordination of their women by giving the example of the black feminist Mary Church Terrell and her husband who was an activist and lawyer. Terrell complained that "he treated her as if she were a fragile glass object in need of constant protection" and that he minimized her contact with the world outside for fear that her "femininity would be 'tarnished'" (*Ain't I* 90). Similarly, Collins gives the example of the famous activist Amiri Baraka and his biased gender ideology that places black women at home in his 1970 article "Black Woman" (*From Black* 107).

By firmly locating and confining Janie to a particular position, which is home, Joe proves his obsession with strict boundaries and organized structures. As such, if Logan embraces protestant work ethics, Joe sustains a "monopoly capital" attitude. Rudolf Hilferding explains that "monopoly capital detests the anarchy of competition and wants organization" (qtd. in McGowan 113). Furthermore, this ideology liberates the subject from the stress of work and imposes the stress of organization. This is exactly what happens to Janie. Joe dupes Janie's with her new position of being a lady, and at the same time regulates her conduct in terms of that new role. He does not allow her to speak in

public, show her hair, attend the mule's funeral, or be on the porch of the store. The way Joe treats Janie shows that he wants her to be "a thing" and "not a person" (Carr 197).

Interestingly, symbolism has a paramount importance in the novel and some symbols even reach the level of motifs. Early in the novel, Nanny described "de nigger woman" as "de mule uh de world" (14). Hurston makes this image become more and more relevant along the novel especially with Joe who appears similar to Logan in treating Janie as a mule. When Joe makes fun of the mule on the occasion of its death, Janie feels sorry and sympathizes with it. "Starks led off with a great eulogy on our departed citizen, our most distinguished citizen and the grief he left behind him, and the people loved the speech. It made him more solid than building the schoolhouse had done. He stood on the distended belly of the mule for a platform and made gestures," (57). This scene demonstrates symbolically the manner in which Joe stands upon others, specifically Janie, to maintain his discursive power. Janie's affinity and sympathy towards the mule validates the association of women with mules. For Joe, Janie may be anything but a human being equal to him.

Joe Starks is not only a symbol of the capitalist regime but evidently a one of the androcentric system. Joe takes his superiority for granted because he believes that "simply by having been born male, he has an inherent right to power and privilege" (hooks, *Ain't* I 100). Beyond that, he thinks that he is special and superior even to other men. He states this clearly to Janie "…Ah told in de very first beginnin' dat ah aimed tuh be uh big voice" (47). Indeed, he has a mysterious control over the people surrounding him.

> There was something about Joe Starks that cowed the town. It was not because of physical fear. He was not fist fighter. His bulk was not even imposing as men go. Neither was it because he was more literate than the rest. Something else made men give away before him. He had a bow-down command in his face, and every step he took made the thing more tangible. (48)

Because Joe is the incarnation of authority, no one in Eatonville dares to challenge him. And despite the fact that the source of his power is mysterious, the residents of Eatonville obey him. Interestingly however, it is the others' weakness that feeds his authority. Joe's sham power resembles the one of the symbolic father in Lacanian terms. Just like the symbolic father who uses the "phallus" to amplify his symbolic authority, Joe is weak without people believing in his power. Similarly, Slavoj Zizek in *Enjoy Your Symptom!* explains:

> When authority is backed up by an immediate physical compulsion, what we are dealing with is not authority proper (i.e., symbolic authority), but simply an agency of brute force: authority proper is at its most radical level always *powerless*, it is a certain 'call' which cannot effectively force us into anything, and yet, by a kind of inner compulsion, we feel obliged to follow it unconditionally. (94)

Joe's authority, in this sense, is just an illusion that can fade away only when people surrounding him cease to abide by his regulations and confront him with his weakness.

While Janie initially has "a feeling of coldness and fear" towards Joe's power and gradually "learned to hush", she finally starts to perceive Joe's nature as an empty vessel

who is filled by others' fear and submission. The narrator explains the way Joe's slap changes Janie:

> Janie stood where he left her for unmeasured time and thought. She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams over…She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about…She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew now not to mix them. (72)

The moment Janie learns how not to mix her inside and outside is the key to her defiance and ultimate emancipation from Joe. She starts to discern and carefully scrutinize Joe to find his Achilles' heel. Janie notices that Joe noticeably got old and weak. "Jody must have noticed it too. Maybe, had seen it long before Janie did, and had been fearing for her to see" (77). So, Joe, the father in the symbolic order, starts to look for defense mechanisms to protect his phallus and consequently preserve his authority power. "The more his back ached and his muscle dissolved into fat and the fat melted off his bones, the more fractious he became with Janie. Especially in the store. The more people in there the more ridicule he poured over her body to point attention away from his own" (78). Janie, this time however, decides to face him and chooses to overthrow his dominance by referring to his impotence. When Janie ultimately decides to challenge Joe, She resorts to demolishing his symbolic power. Instead of directly denouncing his egoism and cruelty, she turns to annihilate the symbols of his power and masculinity: "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" (79). In so saying, Janie, symbolically and realistically emasculates Joe's authority- an illusionary authority that he wields through the phallus. This is the moment when Joe's symbolic authority wanes and peters out and the moment he loses his social position. The narrator carries on explaining the impact of Janie's words on Joe:

> …She had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed, would keep on laughing. When he paraded his possessions hereafter, they would consider the two together. They'd look with envy at the things and pity the man that owned them. When he sat in judgment it would be the same. Dame and Lum and Jim wouldn't change place with him. For what can excuse a man in the eyes of other men for lack of strength? Raggedy- behind squirts of sixteen and seventeen would be giving him their merciless pity out of their eyes while their mouths said something humble. There was nothing to do life anymore. Ambition was useless. (80-81)

Janie's words are so powerful because they reveal Joe's very weakness and most importantly overthrow his authority. "The seeds of Joe's destruction are sown by Janie's oration, however. As numerous critics point out, Joe's death from kidney failure immediately follows, and even seems prompted by, Janie's signifying rebuttal to Joe's insults" (Simmons 185). Interestingly enough, despite the townspeople's hatred of Joe's control over them, Janie was the only one able to activate his downfall, albeit she is doubly marginalized for being a colored woman and being his wife. After managing not to mix things and show some things and hide others, Janie becomes able to tactically choose the means to fight back Joe's oppression. Consequently, the more Joe's body and

power wither, the more Janie approaches self-fulfillment and emancipation. In the end, "Joe's downfall, thus, is a kind of poetic justice, a repudiation of all that he has been" (Pondrom 191). Once Janie achieves self-control, she feels it important to force Joe to see the new woman she becomes:

> ah ain't goin tuh hush. Naw you goin tuh listen tuh me one time befo' you die. …You ain't tried tuh pacify nobody but yo'self. Too busy listenin tuh yo' own big voice…. All dis dowin' down, all dis obedience under yo' voice_ dat ain't whut ah rushed off down de road tuh find out about you (122).

This passage explains that Janie is not only resistant to Joe but to all forms of oppression. By clearly stating that she has not deserted Logan's manipulation to find another form of domination, Janie reveals her decisiveness to be an autonomous, self-assertive, and an unconventional woman.

V.3. Tea Cake's Pathological Narcissism and Janie's Other Way to Try

After Joe's death, Janie, surely, is free. But to accomplish this sense of freedom, she yearns for experiencing something new. She wishes to find a "third way" where "…she is willing to risk uncertainty in resisting confinement" (Simmons 188). After Joe's death, she was told "Uh a woman by herself is uh pitiful thing" and that she "needs uh a man" to take care of her (90), but Janie totally refuses the idea. Janie divulges, however, to her friend Phoeby "'Tain't dat Ah worries over Joe's death, Phoeby. Ah jus' loves dis freedom" (93). Afraid about her friend from social criticism, Pheoby warns her to keep her feelings to her. But Janie, this time, seems to be determined: "Let 'em say whut dey wants tuh, Phoeby" (93). Despite Janie's ability to overthrow Joe's power and relieve her

surrounding from his domineering attitude towards others, the townspeople, like most black people's attitude in real life, condemn her for demeaning the masculine status and express their hostility and contempt for being non-submissive (hooks, *Ain't I* 102). In the eyes of the townspeople and because of defacing the masculine status, Janie becomes unworthy of the protection Joe has provided for her; she becomes the pariah of the society. The latter is best explained by Collins while describing the primacy of black manhood. She elaborates that "If protecting Black women becomes conflated with the construction of Black manhood, any woman who is seen as unworthy of this type of protection becomes a threat to the entire community and is thus open to group censure" (*From Black* 112).

Janie's desire of emancipation, this time, is strong enough to incite her to seize the right opportunity. And the "third way" that permits her to take risks and experience the change, presents itself another time in a man. But this man, Tea Cake, seems to be totally different. In that, the narrator explains that during their first meeting Janie feels something completely new:

> …She found herself glowing inside. Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play. That was even nice. …May be this strange man was up to something! Tea Cake wasn't strange. Seemed as if she had known him all her life (95-99).

One aspect that disturbs most readers and critics is the way Hurston makes Janie pursue selfhood through various relationships with men- especially her relationship with Tea Cake. It is not only Janie's "exaggerated submissiveness" that is disturbing, but mainly giving the example to other women "…to enjoy an occasional violent outburst"

just like the way Tea Cake does with Janie is disturbing (Spillers, “A Hateful” 63). Hortense J. Spillers rejects the eccentricity of Hurston’s depiction of Janie’s autonomy and emancipation, and even goes to condemn Tea Cake to be another oppressor.

Hurston, initially, makes Tea Cake appear different form the men Janie knew before. For Janie, Tea Cake is totally different from Joe and Logan. She tells Phoeby “Tea Cake ain’t no Jody Starts” and their relationship “ain’t no business proposition, and no race after property and titles. Dis is hu love game” (105). It becomes evident for Janie that Tea Cake is her liberator from the mistreatment and the bounds of classification that Joe imposed on her. The latter becomes clear when Tea Cake invites Janie to play checkers and asks her to move with him to the muck. He tells her “Folks don’t do nothin’ down dere but make money and fun and foolishness. We must go dere” (119). This new “fun and foolishness” seems new and captivating for Janie because she was familiar with the strict dull organization of Joe (McGowan 118).

However, Tea Cake’s urging desire of having fun is not a quality as Janie, or readers, may think. It is similar to what Christopher Lasch describes as “acquisitive in the sense that his carvings have no limits, the new narcissist does not accumulate good and provisions against the future,… but demands immediate gratification and lives in the state of restless, perpetually unsatisfied desire” (XVI). All along the novel, this is exactly the nature of Tea Cake who makes of the dictum “carpe diem” his way of life. At first, he sadly contaminates Janie with his excessive looseness. The latter becomes Tea Cakes’ means of dominating Janie. It is not by imposing organization or regulations, but through nurturing Janie’s lust for liberty and hedonism that Tea Cake subtly manipulates her.

Janie becomes suspicious when she finds that Tea Cake has taken her hidden two hundred dollars. Tea Cake's intention was not to steal Janie, but he took it "out of curiosity" and because "he was excited and felt like letting folks know who he was" (120). He proves to be careless and inconsiderate when he took Janie's money for gambling. Janie sinks in a terrible fear not for losing her money, but much for losing her love. "Janie dozed off to sleep but she woke up in time to see the sun sending up spies ahead of him to mark out the road through the dark … But it was always going to be dark to Janie if Tea Cake didn't soon come back … She dwindled down on the floor with her head in a rocking chair" (115). Tea Cake, however, comes back and is easily forgiven by Janie. This act exposes Tea Cake's egotism; after all, he does not seem to care about Janie's opinion, the woman that he purportedly loves, but cares only about his own pleasure. Tea Cake is a "pathological narcissist" par excellence (McGowan 120).

Gradually, Tea Cakes' attitude towards Janie moves from a one based on generating freedom, to a one based on jealousy and possession. The narrator sates:

> When Mrs, Turner's brother came and she brought him over to be introduced, Tea Cake had a brainstorm. Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss. (140)

Eventually, Tea Cake is by no means different from the authoritative Joe; he wants to let Janie know that he is the "boss" and that is in control (140). What is astonishing this time is that Janie is totally obedient and never contradicts Tea Cake. Just like Joe who

becomes hysteric about Janie's humiliation to him in the store, "struck Janie with all his might and drive her from the store" (76), Tea Cake becomes so jealous, slaps Janie with no clear reason in front of the people to show his supremacy, and implicitly warns Janie that she can never leave him for another man. But while Joe's violence generates more hatred, Tea Cake's one does not because he "pets" and "pampered" Janie soon after- a thing that leads her to become more helpless to him (140).

Tea Cake's violence towards Janie proves that he is not only threatened by her nascent freedom and strength but also that he is like other men in insisting to be the boss and having absolute power. On black men's obsession with dominance over black women hooks explains: "For most men in sexist society, being the boss is synonymous with having absolute power…. Another bonding element was the black male's acknowledgment that he, like the white male, accepted violence as the primary way to assert power" (*Ain't I* 79-90).

Deleuze and Guattari in their *Anti-Oedipus* wonder "how could the masses be made to desire their own repression?" (qtd. in Seem XVI). This question best describes Janie's attitude towards Tea Cake. She seems to be delighted with his oppression. By the time she marries Tea Cake, Janie has learned the true source of power in marriage. According to Joseph Urgo, "power, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is rooted in one's sense of vulnerability" (41). And in order to gain that power, "Janie must first subdue her fighting spirit" (Miller 83). Hurston has been criticized for creating a feminist heroine who does not fully resort to her fighting spirit in order to subvert patriarchal dominance. In " 'Some Other Way to Try': From defiance to Creative Submission in *Their Eyes Were Watching God"*, Shawn E. Miller maintains that Hurston relies on the already present literary

tradition especially the slave narratives in the way freedom can be gained not through defiance, but through comprehending the difficulty and obligations of the current situation. Miller sums up:

> In short, this strategy may be characterized as uncle-tomming with a purpose. It is not radical, therefore, to suggest that Hurston used a pattern of power through submission already available to her in literature dealing with race and applied it to her own story of gender and power in marriage.(85)

It is this strategy that enabled Janie to free herself.

Janie's subtle strategy enables her to get the best of Tea Cake and at the same time prevents her to be engulfed by his lure and eccentricity knowing exactly when to stop. Once Tea Cake is bitten by the rabid dog, he becomes explicitly jealous and starts to threaten Janie. She is not totally astonished or devastated, but keeps calm and ensures her own survival. She is certain that "Tea Cake's character change after the storm is little more than intensification of the growing jealousy which he had been feeling before the storm" And "the jealous violence of the mad Tea Cake is prefigured by the jealous violence of the Tea Cake who slaps Janie around" (Cassidy 264). Reaching this level of self-confidence, self-control, and awareness, Janie realizes that Tea Cake's fear of losing control compels him to literally desiring to kill her newly acquired sense of selfhood. "Janie continues with her strategy of pacification to the verge of oblivion, but here Hurston is able to draw the line where submission must end" (Miller 90). Janie decides to end her submission and stop Tea Cake's threat immediately by shooting him. While with Joe Janie learns to find her voice and defend herself for being humiliated, with Tea

Cake she learns how to firmly act. According to McGowan, it is Janie's determination to finally kill Tea Cake that culminates her quest of selfhood. In that, he explains:

> Killing Tea Cake frees Janie from the loss of her self in her "self-crushing love" and points her toward an existence outside of both domination and liberation, and existence not predicated upon flight. In this way, the end of Janie's relationship with Tea Cake is far different from the end of her first two relationships. In both of those cases, Janie moved from one form of domination to another; after her relationship with Tea Cake, Janie goes only to her self. (122)

By killing Tea Cake, Janie ends her subjectivity to the narcissistic love Tea Cake provided her. She wants to make an end to the "self-crushing love" she has to him. Janie, finally, is able to free herself from her oppressor. Even when Janie reminisces about Tea Cake, she is certain that she has made the right decision because after all selfhood and emancipation are her most important concerns.

VI. Janie's Emergent Selfhood

After killing Tea Cake, Janie has to be on trial. Surprisingly, Janie neither explains the reasons for killing tea Cake nor defends herself leaving readers with much confusion and disappointment. Is Janie losing her voice again? Does she feel sorry for her beloved and wants to sacrifice herself? Or does she want to purge her soul? All the questions seem to be interesting, but none is truly relevant. Unlike Mary Helen Washington who thinks that "…that silence reflects Hurston's discomfort with the model of the male hero who asserts himself through his powerful voice" ("Forward" xii), Janie is silent on a purpose because

her case is over; she has subverted the phallocentric dominance over her and has established her emancipated self. Janie does not speak not because she cannot speak but because she does not want to; after all, it is not the right audience for her. The court, dominated by the white discourse, does not seem to be the perfect realm for Janie. Her quest is fulfilled, she has an autonomous selfhood, and she has a voice. Janie becomes powerful enough that even when silent she attains justice, and the court sets her free. She keeps silent not because she is looking for a voice, but because she is looking for a listener capable of hearing that voice and responding appropriately to it (Kaplan 132). Knowing that only a good friend can be the perfect listener, Janie keenly chooses Pheoby to tell her story to the whole community. From a similar stance, Collins highlights the importance of speaking and having a voice for black women, but "the act of using one's voice requires a listener"- generally a woman. "Because only Black women know what it means to be Black women", they often choose one another to voice their needs and thoughts. A good listener is the most able to rejuvenate black women to their state as human beings rather than objectified entities (*Black Feminist* 104).

The novel's climax is when we read the final lines of the Janie's thoughts:

> Of course Tea Cake wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see. (183-84)

Janie in these lines is by no means talking to anyone one; she speaks to her soul. She is confident enough, self-assertive enough, and strong enough to start a new life on her own without the help or the lessons of anyone just relying on her newly acquired sense of selfhood. So, the novel's climax as well as its end lies in Janie's ultimate persistence on relying on herself imposing her discourse- a feminist vigorous discourse that trespasses gender and racial oppressions.

It is interesting to see how each husband in the novel takes Janie to a different place. This point highlights the fact that her husbands, despite their domineering nature, enrich Janie's experience and help her to fashion her selfhood. It seems that Hurston in her narrative makes of her protagonist an African American migrant, par excellence, in the way she moves from one place to another. Farah Jasmine Griffin explains that The African-American migration narrative is often

> marked by four pivotal events: an event that propels the action northward, a detailed representation of the initial confrontation with the urban landscape, an illustration of the migrant's attempt to negotiate the landscape and his or her resistance to the negative effects of urbanization, and a vision of the possibilities or limitations of the Northern, Western, or Midwestern city and the South. (304)

Though Janie's struggle is not against the effect of landscape itself, her moves from one place to another impinge on her quest of selfhood. Just like the African-American migrant, the various landscapes offer Janie disparate opportunities, various experiences, and endow her with knowledge and awareness.

Both Joe Starks and Tea Cake introduce Janie to new places. When Janie meets Joe at the beginning, “It was a citified, stylish dressed man with his hat set at an angle that didn’t belong in these parts … The shirt with the silk sleeve holders was dazzling enough for the world. He whistled, mopped his face and walked like he knew where he was going … Where would such a man be coming from and where was he going?” (26). It was Joe’s stylish and urbanized look that attracted Janie’s attention. But while he planned to seduce and dominate Janie, he fueled Janie’s curiosity for discovering the world behind him and her craving for emancipation. And it was the same inquisitiveness that drove Janie towards Tea Cake; “She looked him over and got little thrills from every one of his good points” (91-92). As such, both men attract her each in his own ways; Joe the modern classy man who can take her away from the rural landscape, and Tea Cake is the flaneur who fuels her desires for adventure and freedom. Yet, Janie knew how to seize these opportunities; she knew when to obey and when to revolt.

It is no longer these men who steer Janie or control her life. Each man with his inherent patriarchal beliefs makes her learn something. Men, for Janie, become catalysts for her emerging subversive selfhood but never its masters. Neither her body nor her unruly soul could be controlled within marital confines. Janie’s demeanor resembles the one of many black feminists who see that marriage and monogamy reinforce the idea that the female body is the property of her male partener. Thus, they warned women of the dangers of marital and monogamous bounds (hooks, *Feminsim Is* 79).

Moving from one man to another enables Janie to enter new spheres and realms. In fact, they become a part of her life and of her journey. Her experiences with them enable her to face various forms of obstacles, difficulties as well as oppressions and thus fashion

an intersectional selfhood. The latter enables Janie to develop and use a compelling and forceful discourse once coming back to Eatonville to tell her story.

Conclusion

In *Their Eyes were Watching* God, Hurston mirrors the devastating impact of marital confines on Janie's self-assertive selfhood on the one hand, and the defense mechanisms she devolps in response to these marital confines on the other. She, also, portrays that a woman's selfhood can be forged within a marital relationship, but is never completely dependent on it. Janie, tacticly, moves from one husband to another until she fulfills her quest of selfhood. Most of all, Hurston maintains that no marriage can sustain and encompass the newly forged sense of selfhood of woman who has endured what Janie did. Janie is finally able to subvert the racial and patriarchal dominance over her, albeit her docile appearance. After all, no men can protect or accept neither Janie's body nor her voice. Thus, Janie's final successful narrative is the outcome of her decisions, actions, and entire journey of struggle.

Hurston makes her protagonist a true heroine in the way she defies racial, social and patriarchal regulations. Careless about the townspeople during her return, Janie tells Phoeby: "let 'em consulate theyselves wid talk". "Know thyself" becomes Janie's motto, and she even declares to Phoeby, "Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves" (181). After accomplishing her quest, Janie returns home after an almost two-year absence. She is fortyish, thrice married, financially independent, and strikingly unruly. Ultimately, she has come into her own. Moving from strategic submission to defiance, Janie casts away the social reduction of her selfhood into a mule and asserts her muliebrity.

Chapter Four

Helga Crane: a Flâneuse in Search for an Intersectional Self in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*

Introduction

This chapter examines Helga Crane's journey of selfhood. I will explain that Helga's journey aims at establishing and maintaining a unique selfhood- a selfhood that fits her status as being a mulatto. Helga moves from Naxos, Chicago, Harlem, Copenhagen, to a rural village in Alabama with the hope to find a social niche for her complex identity. Helga's quest, indeed, is a one that equates maturation, awareness, and new self-preservation mechanisms. Though Helga starts with a bold rebellious tendency towards social, racial, and gender regulations, she eventually learns how to subtly maintain her individuality. Thus, I will argue that the novel's ending is by no means a tragic one mirroring Helga's failure in attaining the intersectional self she has always longed for. Though, ostensibly, Helga seems to abandon her quest and sink in a new imposed phallocentric role, Nella Larsen exquisitely endows her protagonist with determination to pursue her quest differently. In the course of her journey, Helga's travel from one place to another makes her aware that not only no society would accept her complex character, but also teaches her how to deal with each form of oppression she faces. In that sense, *Quicksand* accentuates the importance of the journey Helga goes through rather than the outcome she obtains.

I.Locating *Quicksand*

Because of *Quicksand'*s polyvalent nature, literary reviewers disagree about classifying the novel as a racial, feminist, or a psychological one. The literary critic Claudia Tate, for example, explains that the novel "proved somewhat problematic for black reviewers because they discovered that the novel departed from transparent renderings of racial protest" ("Desire and" 238). Furthermore, Arthur Davis in his *the Dark Tower: Afro-American Writers 1900- 1960* disapproves of the argument that the novel is about a mulatta's tragic ending owing to her inability to find a social niche and he adds that "blaming everything that happens to her on racial grounds" is "not the sole cause of Helga's tragedy" (96). Instead he argues that what is part of Helga's dilemma is "her inability to make decisions" and her "own vacillating inner self" (Davis 96).

Interestingly enough, the difficulty of locating and understanding the novel is not only due to its content or the ending of the protagonist, but more because of the personal touch of Larsen's life in her novel. The latter is best explained in George Hutchinson's biography of Larsen entitled *In Search of Larsen* where he explains that "Larsen herself", just like her protagonist, "felt like a shadow through much of her life. She did not long inhabit the sort of place in which she could feel at home" (1). A child of a white Danish mother and a black Danish West Indian father who abandoned her mother, Larsen spent her childhood with her mother, stepfather and half sister with a mounting feeling of misplacement and non-belonging. Her state is but an instance of the many biracial children who suffer in the American society. Describing the hideous realities of biracial children, Collins states that they "do not fit neatly into any existing racial/ethnic category, nor should they" (*From Black* 51). More importantly, she explains that their existence

challenges and endangers the "understandings of family purity and bloodlines advanced by the American family ideal" (Collins, *From Black* 51). Interestingly, Collins' historical and social survey about biracial children echoes Helga's state as a mulatta whose white and black families are ashamed of her, who tries to fit into a racial category and preserve a self-fulfilling selfhood, and who is rejected by both racial groups.

Despite the controversy about the novel and despite falling into obscurity soon after its publication, *Quicksand* finds its place especially thanks to feminist critics who revitalized it and brought it to the center of feminist literature celebrating its excellence as a protest against colored women's repressed freedom and aspirations (Tate, "Desire and" 239). Today, Larsen is categorized as one of the pillars of the Harlem Renaissance along with Langston Hughes and Zora Neal Hurston. Furthermore, Larsen is considered to be one of the African-American writers who played an essential role in revolutionizing the aesthetic and literary treatment of racial and class issues that characterized the Harlem Renaissance (Lunde & Stenport 228-229). Deborah E. McDowell, for instance, contends that the novel demonstrates middle class black women's misfortune in trying to express and preserve their sexuality ("Introduction" xxi). She, also, adds that *Quicksand* is about "female sexual confession and…racial uplift", and insists on "liken[ing] marriage to death for women" ("introduction" xxi). In so doing, McDowell closes her eyes on a more macro oppressive system present at various levels and in different degrees targeting the black womanhood in the novel. In that, Larsen at the end of the novel describes Helga's feeling as an omnipresent feeling of oppression that differs only in degree: "this feeling of dissatisfaction, of asphyxiation. Something like it she has experienced before. In Naxos. In New York. In Copenhagen. This differed only in degree" (Larsen 134).

Regardless of this controversy, "Larsen's liminal novel", Jessica Labbé contends, enabled her to contribute in "the construction of New Negro Womanhood and in the creation of one of the earliest and finest examples of the black flâneuse draw[ing] distinctly feminist concerns into a larger discussion of race, politics, and creativity in 1920s American literature and culture" (83).

II.The Tragedy of the Mulatta: Helga Crane's Search for a Safe Liminal Zone

The controversy about *Quicksand* originates from the fact that most literary critics do not perceive the novel's intersectional nature. According to Hazel V. Carby, *Quicksand* is a multifaceted work in which "Larsen represented the ideologies of consumerism, of capitalism, and of sexuality as intimately connected, and in the process of this critique she revealed the inability of the structure of the romance to adequately express the experience of women" (173). Helga, the novel's protagonist, is the epitome of intersectionality and complexity in the way she struggles to find a place that safeguards her multifaceted personality. Helga's tragic ending is by no means a failure. It is, in reality, her resistance to let go parts of her intricate sense of selfhood that resulted in such an end. Through her protagonist, Jessica J. Rabbin maintains,

> Larsen explores how race, gender, and nationality interact in liminal zone named Helga Crane. Strategically employing the journey motif, Larsen looks at the relationship between physical movement, psychological space, and personal identity. *Quicksand* offers a strong heroine… but whose individuality cannot withstand the downward pull of such social influences as assimilation, racism, and misogyny. Helga is continually born again, but she is never permitted to engage in the life-sustaining strategy of 'dwelling in possibility'. (123)

Through the character of Helga, Larsen envisions a safe liminal zone that disregards racial, social, and gender differences. By imagining such a zone that prompts mending, fusion, and connection, Larsen re-defines the notion of place and home. The latter is confirmed by Helga's continuous travels hoping to preserve her intersectional and multifaceted personality. The idea is thoroughly explained by Carole Boyce Davies in her *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migration of the Subject.* This book is of great significance when discussing the impact of biracialism on Helga and the significance of her travels. Just like Helga's journey that challenges the traditional notion of home, seeks to cross racial and gender boundaries, and seeks new opportunities, Davies describes her mother's travels:

> My mother's journeys redefine space. Her annual migrations, between the Caribbean and the United States, are ones of persistent re-membering and re-connection. She lives in the Caribbean; she lives in the United States; she lives in America. She also lives in that in-between space that is neither here nor there…. Hers is a deliberate and fundamental migration that defies the sense of specific location … In each home place, she sets up a network of relationships based on kin, community, spirituality and a fundamental presence organized around service and disruption of the very specific norms of that community…
>
> My mother migrated in search of opportunity… She is also a member of a number of overlapping communities which, with each departure, are instantly hurled into a movement of exile and return which is so fundamentally inscribed in "New World" post-/modern identities. (1-2)

I assume that Larsen's aim is to denounce the limited constructions about black womanhood. She contends, in her novel, that black women's selfhood is a rhizomatic entity. What is interesting about *Quicksand* is that it demonstrates the hideous impact of pursuing to belong to a particular social group at the expense of an autonomous selfhood. Helga Crane is by no means a run of the mill tragic mulatto who suffers solely from black/white identity confusion. She further suffers from essentializing her selfhood. As such, the novel is clear condemnation of essentialism and absolutism- a point that makes the novel belong to the large body of literature produced by black women writers that aim to redefine the notion of selfhood for the marginalized entities. Based on "cross-cultural, transnational, translocal" grounds, Davies explains that the writing of these black women writers "redefines identity away from exclusion and marginality" (3). Similarly, Jeanne Scheper explains that Larsen "represents and critiques the raw reduction of identity the subject experiences when circumscribed by the negative limits by specific communities, racial ideologies, and class localities" (679). Through the ending of Helga Crane, Larsen depicts the perils of adhering to the monolithic visions about black womanhood. Due to social forces and her desire to fit into a unique and well framed social identity, Helga finds herself, ultimately, loosing parts of her compound identity.

The novel is a clear warning about the detrimental impact of essentialist notions of identity and selfhood. Helga's tragic ending is but the outcome of essentialist and categorical beliefs about identity and selfhood. After all, Helga exists as "complex representation of the world in which there is no such thing as blackness, whiteness, masculinity, femininity" (Hostler 36). This complex representation corresponds to what Gloria Anzaldua in her *Borderlands/La Frontera* describes as "the new mestiza

consciousness" (qtd. in Davies 11). While this consciousness advocates "crossing over" and "plural personality", it opposes "dualistic thinking" and "unitary paradigm" (Davies 11). Whether motivated by what Anzaldua labels "the mestiza consciousness" or being herself what Hostler describes "the complex representation of the world", Helga strives for crossing cultural, racial, social, geographical boundaries.

Larsen, however, goes beyond exposing a woman's failure in facing her social surrounding. She gives much importance to the process of selfhood formation that Helga goes through. Larsen ultimately contends that Helga's quest for selfhood and voyages enable her, subtly though not discernibly, to draw near her identity. At the end of the novel, Helga gives readers a glimpse of hope of becoming stronger not only for herself but for her children too.

Not desiring to adhere to the stereotype of the tragic mulatta, nor sticking to the image of the victimized black woman, Larsen creates Helga Crane as an incessant explorer searching for a social niche that preserves her intersectional selfhood. By so doing, Naylor sheds light on the difficulty of maintaining a self-sufficient selfhood within gender, social, and color boundaries. Only after the four lines of the skillfully chosen epigram, an excerpt from Langston Hughes' "Cross", readers understand that Helga is a mulatto, without parents and anxious about the future. Mastering "the craft of fiction", Larsen summarizes her protagonist's story right from the beginning (Baker 84). Roaming in black and white societies, Helga tries to fit in but eventually chooses to preserve her selfhood.

III. Helga's Journey an Affirmation of her "Differential Consciousness" and an Attempt to Decoding Essentialism

The journey motif is so pertinent in the novel. It transcends the state of being a simple lifestyle to being a surviving strategy and a defense mechanism. Helga relies on traveling to escape the domineering social and racial forces, but most importantly to nurture her "differential consciousness" that depletes the socially imposed "unitary self" and fosters a "mobile identity" (Sandoval 23). While Davies explains that journeying implies "mobility", "transformation", and "link[age]" (34), Chela Sandoval meticulously explains that journeying breeds "differential consciousness"(23). According to Sandoval, "differential consciousness" comprises "an opposition to repressive authorities" requiring an "emotional commitment to shattering of the unitary self as the skill which allows *a mobile identity to form* takes hold" (23).

The first community Helga dwells in is Naxos. Helga, there, feels so suffocated by the rigid regulations about clothing, general conduct, and social conventions. She feels guilty for participating in manipulating her students' minds by obeying to the system's dictates- a system that is set, sponsored and imposed by the whites and embraced by the blacks. While "Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them" (37), Helga at the beginning longed for acceptance but never at the expense of her individuality and selfhood. Thus, she soon leaves Naxos.

With her growing dissatisfaction with Naxos and longing to find comfort in her childhood's place, Helga decides to return to Chicago. It was Helga's assumption that her uncle who was "fond of her" that lead her to think that he would help her because it "would strengthen his oft-repeated conviction that because of Negro blood she would

never amount to anything" (41). Her uncle's wife, however, smashes Helga's expectations by rejecting Helga telling her: "Well, he isn't exactly your uncle, is he?" (Larsen 61). Besides financial distress and lacking references for employment, Helga finds herself faced with another familial rejection.

Society never ceases to fail Helga. In Chicago, she suffers from racial and gender limitations. It becomes very hard for Helga as an educated colored woman to find a job. She is denied both middle class positions and domestic ones. After many rejections, Helga is finally employed by Mrs. Hayes-Rore despite their different ethical convictions. Helga helps Mrs.Hayes-Rore with her speeches about racial uplift even if she is not convinced of that case. Though feeling estranged at the beginning because of her mixed origins, Helga starts to feel socially accepted until the day Mrs. Hayes-Rore tells her: "by the way, I wouldn't mention that my people are white, if I were you" (74). At this moment, Helga recognizes that the black community is as racist as the white one. Just like her uncle's wife who rejects her because of her black father, Mrs. Hayes-Rore promises to help her only if she denies her white origins. Mrs. Hayes-Rore racist and pigeonholing insinuations deepen Helga's hatred of social injustices condemning her for being a mulatto, treating her "like a criminal", and seeking to break up her identity (74).

Escaping the social and gender biases in America with the hope to find "Someplace where at last she would be permanently satisfied", Helga decides to go to Copenhagen (88). For a moment, Helga is enamored by the freedom and luxury she enjoys in Copenhagen. And instead of being an outcast, Helga's racial origins become a blessing for the first time. Her uncle and aunt in Copenhagen insisted on exhibiting Helga's beauty and difference by dressing her in bright colors and outlandish guise. Becoming an

object of curiosity and a valuable inspiring source, Olsen, a talented artist, becomes fascinated by her appearance and proposes to her. Helga, however, becomes aware of his motivation and refuses his proposal. Interestingly, she becomes aware of all her surrounding's opinion about her- an opinion that she becomes certain about after a circus performance by some blacks. Helga, finally, realizes

> How absurd she had been to think that another country. . . could liberate her from the ties which bound her forever to these mysterious, these terrible, these fascinating, these lovable, dark hordes. Ties that were of the spirit. Ties not only superficially entangled with mere outline of features or color of skin. Deeper. Much deeper than either of these. (125)

Soon after, Helga leaves Denmark and returns to America where she marries a black preacher. Her state deteriorates due to repeated labor and depressing life in an impoverished town in rural Alabama. Meanwhile, Helga immerses in her role of motherhood that happens to be, paradoxically, a source of her greatest pleasure and ultimate depression.

Moving from one place to another is just a means for Helga to come within reach of her selfhood. However, her quest is not fulfilled for no community or class can tolerate or embrace her complex nature. Similarly, Ann Hostetler states that Helga's inability to belong to a particular social environment "emphasizes the narrowness of place defined by race in the United States in the 1920s" (38). Such narrowness is further accentuated by gender, class and religious limitations. However, the more the biased social regulations attempt to model Helga into a more socially acceptable individual, the more she insists on preserving her selfhood. Being a middle class mulatto opens for Helga larger horizons

enabling her to shift from one society to another freely. But being unidentifiable disturbs the social boundaries. Helga is aware enough of the restrictedness society imposes on her, and thus rejects all the socially imposed roles.

Through Helga, Larsen aims to shed light on colored women's experience in the 1920s. Despite the different places and the seemingly various roles Helga plays; teaching at Naxos, searching for a job in Chicago, moving to Harlem, escaping to Copenhagen and finally coming back to rural Alabama immersed in her role as a mother and wife- the novel reveals how limited are options available for colored women at the time. By exposing such restrictions, Larsen brings colored women's problems into the center of Harlem Renaissance concerns. The principal problem of colored women, according to Larsen in her *Quicksand*, is the various social constraints that limit their positions and sanction them in case of defiance or nonconformity. In the same way, Helga has to adhere to societal regulations to secure social acceptance or she is to be considered the pariah in her community. Defiantly, Helga engages in a journey to achieve self-fulfillment and tranquility, yet she has to pay the price of her non-conformity.

III.1. Familial Uprooting

Larsen explains that being a mulatta complicates Helga's journey towards selfhood. Being a mulatto implies, in the novel, a state of "mixedness" (T. Davis 243). The latter is pertinent along the novel compelling a sense of loss, uncertainty, and ambivalence. In order to appease this feeling of loss, Helga resorts to traveling which enables her to survive forced social and racial marginality. "Travel means crossing", Jessica G. Rabin explains (111). "Crossing has multiple connotations, including geographical movement, hybridization, breaching of boundaries, and religious piety" (Rabin111). Helga's sense of loss starts within her family. According to George Hutchinson, Larsen alludes, in her narrative pattern in *Quicksand*, to a classical myth which is about a labyrinth created to hide a mixed creature that is half man half bull. In Helga's case, she is that mixed creature coming from a white mother and black father and it is her who is being hunted down by racial and gender limitations as mutated form of the labyrinth (227)[1]. The labyrinth, so to say, is further complicated by Helga's social environment.

Trapped in her mixed skin, Helga is not accepted by both white and black people. At the beginning, her white family sends her to a school for Negroes because they think she brings them shame. It is at this stage that Helga starts to resent her father who was a

[1] The narrative pattern to which Larsen alludes by opening of Quicksand in Naxos is that of the labyrinth. The latter stems from classical mythology where Ariadne, a Cretan princess, helps Theseus to escape from the labyrinth built by his father, King Minos. Eventually, Theseus flees to the far island of Naxos. Meanwhile, Theseus sails to Delos and brings about a dance named the Geranos, the "Crane", labeled after a birth whose movements resemble the spinning and turning of the labyrinth. As such, the labyrinth may be associated with the social and racial confinements that Helga suffers from all along the novel. Originally the labyrinth was built to hide a mixed and appalling creature called the Minotaur. After having an intercourse with a bull, queen Pasiphae is punished by her husband king Minos. In this sense, Nella Larsen intends to compare Helga to the hybrid creature who wishes to escape the labyrinth designed for her.

"gambler" and "was deserted my [Helga's] mother" (55). Her father, the "gay suave scoundrel", left her and her mother to a life of "poverty, sordidness, and dissipation" (56). It is because of his irresponsibility and escape that Helga suffers from psychological and social instability. She becomes in the eyes of her white family a stamp of shame and the fruit of a long-lasting ruinous relationship, and thus must be sent away to a school with people of her own color. Though temporarily, in this Negro school and for the first time, Helga "could breathe freely" (11). *Quicksand*, in this sense, represents the labyrinth that Helga is ensnared in. Helga throughout the novel is controlled by a chain of disturbing spatial and bodily conditions (Tanner 185). The narrator points up this: "the feeling of smallness which had hedged her [Helga] in, first during her sorry, unchildlike childhood among hostile white folk in Chicago, and later during her uncomfortable sojourn among snobbish black folk" (46). Correspondingly, Lawrence Rodger, in his In *Canaan Bound: The African-American Great Migration Novel,* states that Helga's problems stem from the "absence of a stable past" mainly a past with her family or family members she can go back to and rely on. He adds that because Helga has "neither real nor surrogate family to sustain and guide her, she is unable to imbed herself within a stabilizing, unified, progressive community" (qtd. in Wagner 133). Being a mulatto whose parents were probably not married and who was rejected by her stepfather as well as the rest of her family leads Helga to have identity problem from her early childhood. The narrator vividly explains this:

> No family. That was the crux of the whole matter. For Helga, it accounted for everything, her failure here in Naxos, her former loneliness in Nashville. It even accounted for her engagement to James. Negro society, she had learned, was as

> complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society. If you couldn't prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn't 'belong.'You could be queer, or even attractive, or bad, or brilliant, or even love beauty and such nonsense if you were a Rankin, or a Leslie, or a Scoville; in other words, if you had a family. But if you were just plain Helga Crane, of whom nobody had ever heard, it was presumptuous of you to be anything but inconspicuous and conformable. (8)

III.2.Naxos: "a Big Knife with Cruelly Sharp Edges"

The first working experience through which Helga tries finally to forge and shape her sense of selfhood and that soon ends because of her surrounding is in Naxos. Helga's vision of work and teaching is peculiar in the sense that she wished to instill humanistic ideals and guide her students to form an identity clear of the racial prejudices and social classifications. However, rapidly, Helga's ambitions fade away in the face of the manipulating conformity in Naxos. The more Helga struggles to realize her dreams the more the fanatical Naxos system toughens. Helga discovers that the strength behind the system in Naxos is owing to its white founders. While Helga is familiar with the racial inequality of the whites, she experiences this time racial injustice of the blacks. "The conformity enforced by Naxos does violence to African American identity and, ultimately, fails the students" (Labbé 91).

Her dreams of orientating her students to form an autonomous sense of selfhood and liberating their manipulated spirit soon vanish when realizing that the educational system is robust enough to shape students' identities from their early age. While expressing her pity about these students, Helga states "No, it wasn't the fault of those minds, the general

idea behind the system…the aim was bad, the material drab, and badly prepared for the purpose" (4). Such a situation is one example of Helga's defying and resisting attitude against the prevalent indoctrinations around her.

While the preacher in the school blames students for their negligence explaining that "if all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the book of Naxos and conduct themselves in the manner of the Naxos products, there would be no race problem, because Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them. They had good sense and they had good taste. They knew enough to stay in their places" (4), Helga defends the students and blames the system for molding their identities and decimating their differences and ambitions. For Helga, the Naxos educational system was "a big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthless cutting all to a pattern, the white man's pattern. Teachers as well as students were subjected to the paring process, for it tolerated no innovations, no individualism" (4). The Naxos school is but a miniature of the larger public American education of the time that Collins describes as a system that instills racial segregation and unfair treatment of students. This system obliges "the large numbers of working-class and poor African American children remain warehoused in poorly funded, deteriorating, racially segregated inner-city schools" (Collins, *From Black* 48).

While the system and Helga's social surrounding may have imposed its regulations in school and on the students, Helga thinks that she can still express her liberty and exhibit her individuality differently. The moment Helga fails in her role as a teacher in helping her students escape the catch of the manipulating system, she insists on challenging the Naxos codes of appearance and clothing. Helga's rejection to conform to Naxos' standards is an example of her rejection to "conform to myriad societies' expectations of

her" (Labbé 92). "black, grey, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people' [but]…something intuitive some unanalyzed driving spirit …told her that bright colors *were* fitting and that dark-complexioned people *should* wear yellow, green, and red" (17-18). Helga's distinctive search for selfhood and determination to impose her own individuality, as well as her compelling spirit, as Meredith Goldsmith explains, are related to her rejection of "the white ideals supported by Naxos' dress and style regulations" (qtd. in Labbé 270). While one may think that this is a superficial and an inefficient mode to accentuate one's individuality, for Larsen it is a strategy that "allows her combine one of women's few forms of self-expression in the period" (Labbé 92)[2]. Jessica Labbé elaborates on the significance of Helga's defiant attitude:

> Helga's "lack of acquiescence" is an open refusal to submit and consent to the dominant ideology of Naxos; in essence, Helga repudiates her socially prescribed role in the matrix of domination. … to those in power—refusing to allow them to write one's script—is a declaration of authority. Therefore, this comment makes clear her burgeoning pride and Even the language of "making over" suggests that any changes Naxos might make to her would be superficial as they would not alter Helga's core beliefs. …Refusing to submit certainty in her own identity, though Larsen problematizes this status throughout the novel. (94)

Helga's unconventional and eccentric appearance and clothing is not her only means to assert her own individuality. Once she witnesses the rigidity of her surrounding, Helga

[2] This passage in the novel is related with Larsen's life at Fiske. Owing to notable defiance and violations of strict clothing codes and general look, students voted that Larsen along with a group of students should not be allowed to return to university the next year .

isolates herself in order not to be contaminated by her society's dogmas. Unlike, her colleague James Vayle, for instance, who has quickly conformed and easily integrated to the Naxos system, Helga remains isolated and secluded -something that annoys and even frightens her social milieu. In that, Helga's colleague Margaret in an attempt to approach Helga and solve her enigma admits that she is "a little afraid of Helga, nearly everyone was". And she adds: "you never tell anybody anything about yourself" (13). Being detached and obscure is a feature that rebuffs most people surrounding Helga from her. The latter spurs her yearning for completing this lack. The growing feeling of "her need of something" devours Helga along the novel and seems to be always "vaguely familiar" in the way it generates constant angst and restlessness (47). Interestingly, people are afraid of Helga because it is not easy for them to categorize her. Though she herself may be annoyed by this point, it is in essence a privilege that Helga inholds. It is her hybridity and others' inability to locate Helga within social boundaries that disturb her surrounding. Being a mongrel enables Helga to freely move across racial and social boundaries defying all the social constructions about colored women's identity. Helga's identity is a multifaceted composition and any attempt to fit to one social group or prioritize one personal aspect at the expense of another will damage Helga's selfhood.

What vexes Helga and makes her more determined about her posture is that Margaret, hypocritically, claims that her colleagues love having her in Naxos. Margaret says that, talking about Helga, they "need a few decorations" (14). Margaret's attitude and words do not only mirror the profound hypocrisy of Naxos, but also reflect their callousness in rejecting all what is different from them when humiliating Helga and reducing her to a decorative object. At this moment, Helga is persuaded about the inevitability to leave

Naxos to preserve her individuality. Though, she recognizes the coming difficulties including “Red Tape. Money. Other work” (10), Helga prefers to go to Chicago.

III.3. Helga’s Misplacement in Chicago

Once in Chicago, incongruity, ambiguity, and contradiction harass Helga. She has mixed feelings of belonging and non-belonging to the society surrounding her: “And, oddly enough, she felt, too, that she had come home. She, Helga Crane, who had no home” (30). Helga was looking for a home that may embrace her complex identity and comprehensive selfhood. She thought that Chicago is her new home where she could enjoy her individuality and her social entourage would welcome her. While Helga wishes that Chicago would be her promised land, she still prioritizes her individualism and uniqueness. Once in Chicago, “She didn’t, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people. She was different. She felt it. It wasn’t merely a matter of color. It was something broader, deeper, that made folk kin” (55). With “a queer feeling of enthusiasm” (30), Helga expects help by her unique living family member, Uncle Peter. The latter is married to Mrs. Nilssen who “plainly wished to dissociate herself from the outrage of [Helga’s] very existence” (29). When Helga goes to ask for help from her uncle, Mrs. Nilssen warns her: “you mustn’t come here anymore…. And please remember that my husband is not your uncle” (28–29). Helga was not really wishing to establish family liaisons either with her uncle or with other members of her family; all she needed is financial support until stabilizing her situation and gaining her total autonomy. In that great moment of desperation, Helga goes to the church seeking solace

but she is ignored and rebuffed- something that leads Helga to “distrust…religion more than ever” (34).

Though Helga is frustrated by the obstacles her surrounding imposes on her, she is determined to support herself and satisfy her craving for individuality. Society never stops to drag Helga down. While walking in the street after the rejection she received in the church, a “well-groomed and pleasant spoken” white man “accosts” her (29). “Built into Larsen's word choice is his desire: to "accost" someone is, in one definition, to solicit sex from him or her” (Labbé 95). During her desperate need for a job, “a few men, both black and white, offered money”. With much pride and tenacity, Helga alleges that “the price of the money was too dear” and that she “did not feel inclined to pay it” (34). Helga with such a determination to withstand her financial crisis, social pressures, and wanton offers switches her role from a mere object to and active subject imposing her individuality. The various offers Helga receives and the few seduced men are a vivid depiction of the sexual harassment many colored women lived on daily basis. Black women in general and mulattoes in particular received special attention because of their skin color. Furthermore, the longstanding belief about “black women’s availability to white and black men”, as well as their perception as controlled objects and “sexual savages” made of them easy preys (Collins, *Black Feminist* 70-92; hooks, *Ain’t I* 65).

Helga’s earliest job rejection in Chicago occurs at the local library where she is told that “library training” and “library school” are the first requirements besides many others to get the job (31-32). Regardless of Helga’s inadequacy for the job, what repels her are the characteristics of work which resemble the repulsive conditions in Naxos. Not only does the work depend on “classification” and “cataloguing”, but the whole library is an

"ugly, gray building where was housed much knowledge and a little wisdom" (31). It is evident that Helga, because of her appearance and lack of experience, could not have been accepted in the work, but what is more interesting is her rejection of the job due to the restrictions and limiting atmosphere despite her atrocious financial need. Helga's rejection of the job is but a manifestation of her rebellious mindset and clinging to individuality.

While in Chicago, Helga suffers mainly from the limited options available for black women. The difficulty of finding a job makes of Helga another colored woman who suffers from the racial and gender biased American society. On this issue, Collins maintains that all African-American women suffered from having their works and lives controlled by intersecting racial, gender, and social oppressions (*Black Feminist* 66). Despite her education and her middle class appearance, she is even denied working class opportunities because this "…kinda work wouldn't do for" Helga, the woman at the employment offices "… keeps repeating at the end of each of Helga's statements" (35). The woman presumes that Helga does not fit in the domestic sphere because of her education and lack of references. Hutchinson explains the problem Helga faces as a common problem for black women of the time when it comes to work opportunities. In that, he states:

> The jobs that single white women could get without high school diplomas—as saleswomen, clerks, stenographers, and the like—were almost entirely closed to Black women. Employment agencies assumed they would work as domestics in seedy hotels and brothels. They were commonly insulted and sexually harassed even in those few bookkeeping or stenography positions they might manage to

> pick up. Black women with a secondary education, presumed unfit for domestic work, faced the greatest barriers of all. (75)

Despite the hostile environment and recurrent rejections, Helga succeeds in finding a job. Helga's work with Mrs. Jeanette Hayes-Rore seems to be a good opportunity. Her work consisted of helping Mrs. Hayes-Rore, the "prominent race woman" (37), in getting her "speeches in order, correct, and condense them" (36). While at the beginning, Helga is impressed by Mrs. Hayes-Rore's gumption and thinks that she has devoted her life to racial injustice and uplift, she discovers that her ideas are "merely patchwork of other's speeches and opinions"(38). Helga notices that "ideas, phrases, even whole sentences and paragraphs were lifted bodily from previous orations and published works of Wendell Phillips, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and other doctors of the race's ills" (38). Mrs. Hayes-Rore thought that her speeches needed simple correction, but Helga sees the opposite. An integral change is necessary not only for Mrs. Hayes-Rore's speeches but most importantly for her whole convictions and convictions. Mrs, Hayes-Rore seems to be another black woman who follows the dictates of the androcentric community she is living in. Never expressing original ideas or addressing peculiar interests and distinct concerns, Mrs, Hayes-Rore is like many black women acting under the shadow of authoritative men within what is known as the Harlem Renaissance. Similarly, Labbé maintains that:

> Mrs. Hayes-Rore, who clearly feels she must parrot the ideas of leading black men in the field in order to be accepted into this traditionally masculine public role, cannot help but reinforce such restrictions on a fellow woman. After all, if Helga "misbehaves" by writing a truly unique thought on the race issue, then

> Mrs. Hayes-Rore will be rebuked—perhaps even ostracized—along with her. (98)

Furthermore, while Mrs, Hayes-Rore has “burning hatred” for white people, she “apes their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living” (48). For Helga, this job is not “as intellectually unsatisfactory as all her previous jobs”, but what is special about it is that it “exposes how black female workers were domesticized in non-domestic employment even within the African American community itself” (Labbé 97).

Gradually, Helga realizes not only Mrs. Hayes-Rore’s insincerity vis-à-vis her beliefs about social uplift and racial injustice but also about Helga herself. For Mrs. Hayes-Rore, Helga fits the position of a secretary because she is a young attracting woman, and because she thought that Helga may be easily manipulated. After a while, Mrs. Hayes-Rore asks Helga about her excessive freedom especially when it comes to travelling without the objection of her “people”. Helga answers that she has no one and says: “you see, there’s only me”. Astonished, Mrs. Hayes-Rore answers her: “if you didn’t have people you wouldn’t be living” (Larsen 38). Helga reveals the truth of her family thinking that Mrs. Hayes-Rore may console her. Surprisingly, however,

> It was almost as if they had slipped on masks. The girl wished to hide her turbulent feeling and to appear indifferent to Mrs.Hayes-Rore’s opinion of her story. The woman felt that the story, dealing as it did with race intermingling and possibly adultery, 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)

Later on, Mrs. Hayes-Rore informs Helga that she must hide the truth that her mother is white to get the acceptance of black folks- a connection that she previously describes indispensable to anyone's existence. Mrs. Hayes-Rore advises Helga to say that her mother is dead. Helga finally comprehends that "the price of acceptance into their society is a sort of "passing" that causes suffocation and self-contempt" (Hutchinson 229). Never accepting to dispose of parts of her past, origins, and identity, Helga leaves Chicago to move to Harlem.

III.4.(Be)Longing in Harlem

Once in Harlem, Helga has "a magic sense of having come home"- a home that "welcomed her and lulled her into something that was, she was certain, peace and contentment" (43). Furthermore, her friend Anne Grey presents her the kind of black society she has always wished to see; people with "sophisticated cynical talk" who "elaborate parties" that "appealed to her craving for smartness" (43). Most importantly, this new social clique in Harlem

> Looked with contempt and scorn on Naxos and all its works. This gave Helga a pleasant sense of avengement. Any shreds of self-consciousness or apprehension which at first she may have felt vanished quickly, escaped in the keenness of her joy at seeing at last to belong somewhere. For she considered that she had, as she put it, "found herself". (43-44)

Finding concord with her social surrounding while preserving her individuality and even being encouraged to nourish it is what Helga has always looked for. She, finally, thinks that she has found her promised land. Yet, the prevalent misfortune that controls

Helga's life appears this time too. Back to the part in the novel where the narrator states that Helga "was certain", one can assume that this is ironic and strange in the sense that Helga has never been certain of anything so far. She has always doubts and never reaches absolute truth- a reason behind her continuous journey. Though Helga moves to Harlem pursuing her freedom and individuality, she eventually and unsurprisingly "felt shut and trapped". (47).

Helga's opinion about the Harlem bourgeoisie changes. She no longer admires Harlem's contempt towards Naxos, nor is attracted to Anne's life style and principles. While both Anne and Helga where in a club in Harlem, they saw Audrey Denny whom Helga finds very attractive, autonomous, and unconventional. Anne, however, warns Helga that Audrey "ought to be ostracized… because she goes about with white people…and they know she's colored" (60). But Helga becomes more attracted because Audrey "had the assurance, the courage, so placidly to ignore racial barriers…" (62). Audrey represents the unruly woman with the intersectional character Helga has always looked up to. Regardless of the historical evidence of white men's sexual exploitation of black women, resisting the social dictates about not being in contact with white men demands astounding determination and courage- a characteristic that Audrey possesses. The social limiting barriers between white men and black women is used to control "black female sexual behaviors" and "restrain the freedom of black females" (hooks, *Ain't I* 67). Because she is aware of these social and sexual paradigms, Helga admires Audrey's behavior and attitude towards society.

Meeting Audrey does not only reawaken Helga's longing for distinctiveness and freedom, but most importantly does expose Anne's deceitful and hypocritical nature, just

like the remaining of the Harlem society. While Anne "hated white people with a deep and burning hatred…, she aped their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living" (48). At this moment too, Helga recognizes that society's acceptance depends on hiding her mother's identity. She despises this sense of conditional belonging and acceptance at the expense of her own integrity. "In a deep recess, crouched discontent …. She felt shut in, trapped" and needed to escape this manipulative and racially biased society (47).

III.5. Helga in Denmark: a Transgressive Creature Delineating Unspoken Racialized Paradigms

With Helga's mounting hatred and estrangement from Harlem society, miraculously her uncle sends her money to go to Copenhagen and visit her aunt Katrina. It was a valuable opportunity for Helga to carry on her journey and move to a totally new and different society that may be more tolerant and may accept her craving for distinction and freedom. Being a colored middle class woman in Copenhagen seems to be a gain for Helga, unlike in Harlem and Naxos. She enjoys the freedom she was deprived from in America starting with her eccentric clothing, her "individualism", and her attitude of "retain[ing] that air of remoteness which had been in America so disastrous to her friendships" (74). While in Denmark, Allison Berg contends, Helga

> fashions the 'family' that makes her visibility possible. With these new bonds, Helga experiences a sense of belonging that no family has ever evoked, as demonstrated by the description of Helga settling into the material comfort provided her in Denmark: 'She took to luxury as the proverbial duck to water. And she took to admiration and attention even more eagerly' (67). (120)

Helga, finally, seems to satisfy her desire to assert her individuality and uniqueness. Her aunt Katrina prompts her to accentuate her difference through her appearance and eccentric choice of clothes. Charmed by that fancy atmosphere, Helga feels that this "was where she belonged. This was her proper setting" (67). Helga finally is able to impose her individuality positively; "she makes an impression", "enflames attention and admiration", and she is "seen, gaped at, desired" (74).

Helga's admiration of Copenhagen's openness ends once she sees the degrading stereotypical primitive representation of the blacks on stage. More precisely, she is upset because "their[the vaudeville black actors] constant slavish imitation of traits not their own" and "their constant begging to be considered as exact copies of other people" resemble her own "transformed existence" (83). At this point, Helga has "an intense feeling of alienation from those around her, along with a growing feeling of connection with the father she has locked away, and a desire to reclaim her blackness" (Hutchinson 234).

In fact, both the vaudeville actors and Helga feign and amplify characteristics that are already parts of them. While in Naxos, Helga may have repressed, to some extent, some of her whims and desires like her love of colors, once in Copenhagen she exaggerates in exteriorizing all her repressed desires. Though Helga has the oomph and attention she has always dreamed of, she has to pay the charge of having the whites restrict her freedom and manipulate her notions of selfhood starting with her aunt Katrina. In that, Lunde and Stenport explain:

> *Quicksand's* depiction of Helga as not only an anomaly, but also a prize trophy of her wealthy Aunt Katrina and Uncle Poul indicates an intriguing perspective

> on Larsen's part. As a surrogate daughter, the twenty-three-year-old Helga becomes the toast of the town's social elite. Larsen reveals, however, an unspoken racialized tension around Helga's presence in Denmark. While Katrina and Poul Dahl love their niece, they also exploit her as a tool to "advance their social fortunes" (98). The novel stresses Helga's exoticism, and her costuming, make-up, and jewelry are all strategically selected by her aunt to show Helga off to the best possible effect in high society. As Katrina tells her: "you're young. And a foreigner, and different" (98). (236)

Another aspect that changed Helga's vision about the freedom offered in Copenhagen is Axel Olsen's attitude towards her. Olsen, a Danish artist, seems to be fascinated by Helga's posture and asks for her permission to paint her. Olsen's portrait corroborates Helga's mounting doubts about how people in Denmark consider her. While Helga states that the portrait portrays a creature that was not "herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her features" (89), Axel Olsen with certainty states that "I think that my picture of you is, after all, the true Helga Crane" (88). It is at this moment that Helga understands that the Copenhagen society in general reduces her to an entertaining exotic creature, and that Axel in particular sees her as "having the warm impulsive nature of an African but the 'soul of a prostitute' selling herself to the highest bidder" (Hutchinson 234). Axel clearly states his opinion about Helga when she ignores both his attempts to have an affair with him and his official proposal.

Helga becomes aware of the fact that in Copenhagen she is seen "like a veritable savage"- a feeling "intensified by the many pedestrians who stopped to stare at the queer dark creature, strange to their city" (69). Even in parties, she is reduced to "some new and

strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited" for being "attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost in a savage way, but she wasn't one of them. She didn't at all count" (70). What Helga experiences in Copenhagen is objectification as the other. According to Collins, the other's objectification is a necessary action to separate the self and control the other. As a privilege for being the more powerful racial group, the objectified other is easily exploited and manipulated. Describing Helga as "attractive", "unusual", and "exotic" confirms Collins' idea of reducing black women to "less human", "animalistic", and "primitive creatures" (*Black Feminist* 70). Regardless of the different portrayals and labels, Helga's reality as an object becomes "defined by other" and her "identity created by others" (hooks, *Talking Back* 42).

In sum, Helga's eagerness to celebrate her difference and individualism as well as her satisfaction in living in Copenhagen end up soon when realizing that she is experiencing another form of repression. Copenhagen "does not offer freedom from racism; it merely displays a different kind of racism" (Hutchinson 235). It is no surprise that Helga's mother, Karen, refuses to leave her daughter in Copenhagen for she knows that she would be a mere object of entertainment. Recognizing that she is trapped in the image of the exotic black woman, Helga's feeling of despondency and desolation levitate. Finally, her "growing dissatisfaction with her peacock life" leads to her to consider going back to American (81).

By examining Helga's stay in Copenhagen and Naxos, one can understand the dreadful impact of the limiting and myopic social definitions of identity on an individual's search for selfhood. Such social definitions disregard the complex nature of colored women's identity. Each time, the colored woman is required either to denigrate

her black origins or white ones (Sheper 692). Similarly, Sahar Badia Ahad explains Helga's situation stating that: "each social environment she[Helga] inhabits appears more invested in reifying Helga's blackness than in acknowledging her complex interracial and intercultural subjectivity" (42). While moving from one place to another, Helga explores hidden parts of herself and discovers that in some places she has to conceal some parts of her identity while in others she has to overstate them.

Due to the harshness and immutability of social regulations, Helga is exasperated by the idea of adhering to subscribed stereotypes about selfhood. The latter makes her restless and in constant search for a place that may tolerate the multifaceted nature of her identity. With the mounting nostalgia for her father and black people in general, she prefers to go back to New York. Once in Harlem and due to her unruly and fluctuating nature, Helga likes the "gorgeous care-free revel" of Harlem to her previous "stately life in Copenhagen" (96). Interestingly enough, Helga's journey has never been useless or non-constructive; on the contrary, the more she travels the more she enriches her complex character. Her stay in Copenhagen, for instance, teaches her how to lure her surrounding and amuse herself.

> Her courageous clothes attracted attention, and her deliberate lure- as Olsen had called it-held it. Her life in Copenhagen had taught her to expect and accept admiration as her due. This attitude, she found, was as effective in New York as across the sea. It was, in fact, even more so. And it was more amusing too. Perhaps because it was somehow a bit more dangerous. (98)

III.6. The End of a Geographical Journey and the Beginning of a Psychological One: Towards "Dwelling in Possibility

Helga comes back to Harlem with a new libertine attitude as a form of rebellion against her previous state in Copenhagen as a passive sexualized object. Aware of this change, Anne avoids all contact between Helga and her husband Dr. Anderson for she knows that Helga produces in him "…shameful impulse, that sheer delight, which ran through his nerves at mere proximity to [her]" (95). For a moment, Helga reflects on what would have become of her if she has stayed in Harlem and married Anderson. Unsatisfied, Helga thinks that she would be "working everyday of her life. Chattering about race problem" (81). Although Helga has never had serious intentions towards Anderson, she has "riotous and colorful dreams" after his kiss to her (105). She prepares herself for social denigration, but never for Anderson's playful attitude reducing her once more into a passive sexualized object. Helga, for the first time, wants to wield power over men and challenge social propriety, but Anderson's "surprising, trivial apology loom[s] as a direct refusal of the offering" (109). At this point, Helga seems to be moving from a state of pursuing her selfhood to confidently a one of contesting the communal regulations. Unfortunately, she does not seem to be prepared enough for rejection and unexpected repudiation. It is no longer a gender, social or a racial rejection, but it is highly a personal one; Anderson rejects Helga for who she is as a woman.

During a rainstorm and while roaming in the streets to forget about her sorrow, Helga finds herself entering a storefront church. She is tempted to enter the church where she is "possessed" by the "weird orgy" that has "penetrated" her more than the Holy Spirit (113). During their prayers for Helga's salvation, the parishioners start stripping Helga of her coat and "tearing off their clothing" (113). Interestingly, the whole scene of Helga's conversion is weird in the way it is described in a sensual rather than a spiritual language. She is not a subject to the rigid revered religious rules, but she is more like participating in collective sensual experience. Though she may seem submissive to the parishioners, she is very dominant when it comes to her contact with Reverend Green. Helga in an attempt to exert control over Rev. Green insists on "press[ing] her fingers deep into his arm until a wild look appears on his face" (115-16). She is determined to control Rev. Green the "naïve creature" that is not able to "hold out against her" (117).

Helga soon marries Reverend Green and just like him and his church the whole community initially accepts her. Being accepted seems to be very strange and even frightening to Helga. At this stage, readers perceive a different Helga. Helga's enthusiasms for social, gender, and racial uplift seem to disappear. "With the obscuring curtain of religion" Helga "was able to look about her and see with shocked eyes this thing that she had done to herself"(130). Consequently, she develops a "born angry bitterness and an enormous disgust" (130). Being ensnared by her new role of being a mother of five children and even seeming miserable, Helga attracts the pity but chiefly the loathing of readers because of her deviance from her quest of selfhood. Throughout the novel, Helga seems to be the perfect "resisting agent against social categorizations and preset rules" (Grosz 3). And what seems to "bother Helga the most", according to

Elizabeth Grosz, “is reducing her to a mere sexual object” responsible for giving birth to as many children as possible- an image that she alters at the end of the novel (3).

Interestingly enough, Helga’s ending is by no means of a tragic hero. Though she is seemingly trapped in her new role, she is still able to decide on how to end things. At the end of the novel, Helga’s body is too frail owing to giving birth to many children in a short period of time, yet her mind is not consumed. In that, the narrator explains: “She [Helga], who never thought of her body save as something on which to hang lovely fabrics, had now constantly to think of it” (123). While this quote states that Helga’s body is tired and may negatively affect her mind, essentially it refers to “her awareness of her body, new functions of her body, and her alert and analytical mind” (Grosz 3). After all, Helga’s strength seems to reach its peak. Helga’s awakened mind despite her fragile body and her newly gender based functions denote her growing consciousness about the phallocentric and racial oppressions. The feeling of “dissatisfaction” and of “asphyxiation” that engulfs Helga this time “wasn’t new... Something like it she had experienced before. In Naxos. In New York. In Copenhagen. This differed only in degree” (134). By comparing her current feeling of dissatisfaction to previous states, Helga is one the hand “rejecting phallocentric notions of female body as “passive and “inert”, and she is reducing and minimizing the impact of patriarchal and gender rules over her on the other (Grosz 3). After all, Helga’s feeling of dissatisfaction and her feeling of “‘lack’ within herself ultimately liberates her because it means that she has achieved some amount of self-realization, which revives her sense of power” (Labbé 94).

Helga’s trance and stupor are by no means signs of her downfall or defeat; they are rather “a means of transcending the bounds” of her sordid reality (Rabin 120). She learns

a new defense mechanism- a mechanism that she could have never resorted to without attaining a distinguished level of maturity. As such, "*Quicksand* can be considered a coming-of-age novel, and one which emphasizes psychological and relational aspects of attaining maturity" (Rabin 120-21). Furthermore, what contributed to Helga's maturation and so to say consequent achievements is her recurrent travels. As Jeanne Scheper states:

> Despite the fact that moving often places her[Helga] in precarious circumstances, Crane also finds something, some identity, some meaning, in being a woman-in-motion. She represents a modernist type…who sees the possibility of refusing to conform to the fixed narratives set out for a woman of color… The results are painful, even unhappy and times, yet freeing. (686)

It is only after attaining enough experience and maturity that Helga ceases to exist as a flâneuse who changes her location each time the community she moves to tries to manipulate her. This time, she decides to stay and face reality. It becomes crystal clear for Helga that the various communities she has visited inflict disparate forms of oppression yet all strive to strip Helga off her individuality and selfhood. Helga is aware that no community will embrace or accept her rich, complex and intersectional character. While both black and white communities reduce Helga to an objectified other, she needs a "syncretic articulation" of selfhood- a concept developed by Marcos Becquer and Jose Gatti in their "Elements of Vogue". Their perception of the self as a syncretic entity opposes Bahbha's differential and divisional notion of "self" and "other". For Becquer and Gatti, selfhood is based on "the partial presence of the other within the self" and

"traverse[s] sexualities, genders, races, and class in performance"- a point that Helga strives for all along her journey (qtd. in Davies 35).

Helga, duping her surrounding, decides to have rest while performing her conventional role of motherhood enjoying "that serene haven" and "that effortless calm where nothing was expected of her" (128). Helga states: "I'm still too weak, too sick. By and by, when I am really strong, I'm back". But "In some way she is determined to get herself out of this bog into which she had strayed" (135). Helga is taking "a sort of modernist vacation" that will enable her to come back with force to impose her individuality this time (Rabin 130). This mental and physical vacation imbues Helga with sufficient strength and willpower to assert her selfhood and help her children face the social and racial cruelties. Though reader may find that Helga "couldn't desert" her children because of her weakness and defeat, this is indeed a proof of the strength, responsibility, and conscientiousness she has (137). As such, the end of novel is in no way the failure of Helga or the end of her quest. The novel's ending implies the beginning of a possible different form of struggle characterized with forte and cunning for Helga and for her children. Helga this time seems to be mature enough to decide to stay but only to impose her own intersectional personality and anchor her children. She, ultimately, chooses to resist the quicksands of gender and racial injustices in a different way. A black woman in an interview with John Langston Gwaltney describes the various obstacles challenging black women's endeavors towards establishing a self-sustaining selfhood. She goes on to explain the many techniques they use as black women to resist and survive gender and racial bigotries; one of which is as she calls it "acting". She states: "We have always been the best actors in the world. . . . I think that we are much more clever than they are

because we know that we have to play the game. We've always had to live two lives—one for them and one for ourselves" (qtd. in Collins, *Black Feminist* 97). The black woman's declaration and the technique she describes is similar to the one Helga eventually resort to. Just like the black woman who states that many black women choose acting, Helga decides to act and play the game.

Conclusion

Interestingly, Larsen's novel is deus ex machina. She ends her novel in an unexpected way especially when it comes to Helga's attitude towards her social surrounding and quest of selfhood. Larsen, acutely, illustrates the appalling impact of various social limiting forces like biased educational system, racial and gender prejudices, and marital and religious confines on Helga, but she does not depict her as either a heroic character or a victimized one. While Helga insists on securing a social niche that safeguards her intersectional selfhood, she ends up understanding that no society can accept her complex identity. The novel's end suggests Helga's credible growing maturation, changed consciousness, and possible imminent triumph.

The novel's ending confirms Helga's differential consciousness and insistence on a mobile identity. While critics often argue that, unlike black men, black women's journeys are internal and psychological, Helga proves to be as dynamic and active as black men. But due to the importance of developing an inner personal elusive sphere, Helga finally resorts to be motionless on the outside but very active inside. Helga's changed tactic confirms Claudia Tate's analysis of black heroines' resistance and quest of selfhood through self-knowledge, silence, and changed consciousness in black women's literature. In that, she states:

> In Black women's literature this type of change . . . occurs because the heroine recognizes, and more importantly respects her inability to alter a situation. . . . This is not to imply that she is completely circumscribed by her limitations. On the contrary, she learns to exceed former boundaries but only as a direct result of knowing where they lie. In this regard, she teaches her readers a great deal

> about constructing a meaningful life in the midst of chaos and contingencies, armed with nothing more than her intellect and emotions. (Tate, *Black Women* xxiv)

Infact, the novel's ending broadens its scope from being a novel that denounces gender and racial limitations to a one that celebrates an individual's complex journey. While the novel's end mirrors Helga's redemption, Helga's whole journey represents the complex life of the modern alienated individual.

Chapter Five:

Nel and Sula: Mutually Burgeoning Selves-in-Relation in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

Introduction

This chapter examines the change that Sula and Nel, the most important female characters, experience along the novel. I will argue that these two women characters rely on each other to form their selfhood. Thus, it is interesting to examine the impact of each character on the other. This chapter starts with scrutinizing Nel and Sula's lives from their early childhood. In a phallocentric and racially biased society, the two girls find refuge in one another especially with their mothers' deviant and extreme natures as well as their distorted love. I will argue that Sula and Nel's sisterly love and bonding enable them to survive the lack of their mothers' affection. Being totally different and complementing each other, the more the two girls get closer the more their self-fulfilment gets stronger. I will explain the way this bonding, however, wanes gradually once the two girls get older and take different paths. Though the seeming cause of Nel and Sula's separation is Sula's affair with Nel's husband, I will contend that their separation is due to social hidden forces. Long after their separation, Nel finally decides to visit Sula on her deathbed. I will tackle Sula's insistence, during Nel's visit, on her pursuit of freedom and her desire to liberate Nel from the social limitations. Once Sula is dead, Nel starts to perceive the truth not only about herself but about her controlling surrounding too. I will argue that Nel's moment of epiphany is the result of the continuous supportive and liberating teachings of Sula. While Sula has always stuck to her insurgent principles, Nel is finally able to free herself from the social hegemony. It is only when Nel realizes her need for Sula and appreciates her guidance that she can start her own quest for selfhood.

I.Locating *Sula*

Though, ostensibly, *Sula* written in 1973 seems to be a continuance of Toni Morrison's most appealing and important themes, it surpasses all expectations and even challenges readers and literary critics. This novel makes many critics, including Karen Carmean, think of Morrison as existing as a writer only after publishing her *Sula.* The novel "assures Morrison's literary reputation" due to its "depth, and stylistic innovation" (149). Accordingly, *Sula* heralds new literary and critical insights not only as a text written by an Afro-American woman, but also as a text belonging to the Afro-American literary tradition as a whole. While the "Black Aesthetic movement called for positive representations and role models", Morrison created Sula as a "young black woman without any attachments or feelings of responsibility.… Morrison was determined to undermine the stereotyping as well as the false idealization of black characters" (Suranyi 20).

Sula is a novel that rejects traditionalism and conventionality par excellence:

> It begins by disappointing the reader's expectations of a "realistic" and unified narrative documenting black/white confrontation. Although the novel's prologue, which describes a community's destruction by white greed and deception, gestures toward "realistic" documentation, leads the reader to expect "realistic" documentation of a black community's confrontation with an oppressive white world, that familiar and expected plot is in the background. (McDowell, "The Self" 61)

In *Sula*, Toni Morrison is clearly concerned with issues of racism, social ethics, conformity and discrepancy, female bonding, and above all the quest for individuality and selfhood. Transcending the social and literary conventions, Morrison's *Sula* encourages readers to think of a new image of selfhood- a selfhood of a black women in-relation. *Sula* is revolutionary in the way it "exemplifies the *dérèglement* of Western conceptions of the self, of patriarchal social arrangements, and of bourgeois American culture itself" (Richards 272). Having its title after the name of the most important female character in the novel, Morrison suggests that the novel centers on Sula and her pursuit of self-fulfillment. Yet, Morrison never ceases to brawl conventionality. The latter is best described by Deborah E. McDowell in her "'The Self and the Other': Reading Toni Morrison's *Sula* and the Black Female Text" in which she highlights the fact that Morrison's intention is to challenge a whole literary tradition the conception of protagonist, hero, and central character. McDowell maintains:

> Morrison's transgression begins with questioning traditional notions of self as they have been translated into narrative. She implicitly critiques such concepts as "protagonist," "hero," and "major character" by emphatically decentering and deferring the presence of Sula, the title character. Bearing *her* name, the narrative suggests that she is the protagonist, the privileged center, but her presence is constantly deferred. We are first introduced to a caravan of characters: Shadrack, Nel, Helene, Eva, the Deweys, Tar Baby, Hannah, and Plum before we get any sustained treatment of Sula. Economical to begin with, the novel is roughly one-third over when Sula is introduced and it continues almost that long after her death. ("The Self"55)

By differing Sula as the central character and by focusing on other women in the novel, Morrison advocates that her concern is not about a unique woman but about the struggle of black women in general.

Women's bonding as well as sisterly love and affection are central issues in Toni Morrison's *Sula.* Actually, the novel delves into the impact of the presence and the absence of this bonding within the community in general and on women in particular. More precisely, the novel focuses on the relationship between Sula Peace and Nel Wright highlighting how important it is especially for their developing selfhood and self-fulfillment. Unlike Walker's *The Color Purple,* Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* or Larsen's *Quicksand,* Morrison's aim is to pore over a more complex vision of selfhood: a selfhood that can be forged and sustained only by mutual female support and bonding. While the previously discussed novels are devoted to impart the journey of struggle against clear debilitating forces, Morrison additionally makes her novel discuss the importance of female bonding to forge a sense of self-fulfillment. Despite the fact that Sula and Nel do not reach emancipation the way the previous female characters do in the other discussed novels, their pursuit of selfhood and realization of the importance of their sisterhood is in itself liberation. According to McDowell:

> The narrative does not only deny the reader a central character, but it also denies the whole notion of character as static *essence,* replacing it with the idea of character as *process.* Whereas the former is based on the assumption that the self is knowable, centered, and unified, the latter is based on the assumption that the self is multiple, fluid, relational, and in a perpetual state of becoming.... Morrison's reconceptualization of character has clear and direct implications for

> Afro-American literature and critical study, for if the self is perceived as perpetually in process, rather than a static entity always already formed, it is thereby difficult to posit its ideal or "positive" representation. ("The Self"55-56).

Despite the fact that the novel's title implies that the novel is primarily about Sula, both Sula and Nel, as being girls and later on women, form the essence of the novel's story and plot. The fact of coming from totally different backgrounds makes the girls cling more and more to each other. Maggie Galehouse's reading of *Sula* "asserts that the friendship between Sula and Nel makes *Sula* a feminist novel in which the two women complement or complete one another, generating two halves of a personality that combine to form a whole psyche" (350). Desiring to complement one another, the two girls' love of what each other has reveals that together they can create one complete, impregnable, and independent individual.

By examining the friendship between these two women, Morrison's aim is to erase the stereotype of dealing only with men's relationships which "are often the subject of fiction" (Furman 23). She moves from exploring the nature and importance of "women's strongest bonds", to "test[ing] its endurance", and affirming "the necessity of their collaboration" (Furman 23). Thus, after Sula and Nel's exceptional childhood friendship, Morrison separates the two girls to test their friendships' endurance in the face of external forces. With time and because of social regulations and responsibilities, the two girls get separated each taking her own path. Sula wants to feed her craving for freedom and curiosity to explore the world and realize her independent self, and Nel wants to form a family, be the ideal woman, and conform to the social prerequisites. After leaving the

Bottom for studying and exploring the world, Sula comes back ten years later bringing with, as her society assumes, evil. Nel, on other hand, is chuffed to see Sula until she betrays her by having an affair with her husband, Jude. Feeling betrayed, Nel speaks to Sula only on her deathbed. A moment of epiphany occurs to both women realizing the importance of their relationship. Though Sula dies, Nel is still alive and can pursue her sense of self-empowerment and growth.

II. Daughter's of Distant Mothers: Sula and Nel Repairing the Damage of their Mothers

Sula depicts the power of female bonding in procuring relief, consolation, and empowerment. The relationship between Sula and Nel provides them with a chance to forge a new self assembling both of their personalities to brazen out the failed mother-daughter relationships they suffer from during their childhood. Furthermore, their companionship and closeness help them to face racial and gender oppressions. The friendship that emerges between the two girls is exactly what Obioma Nnaemeka describes as a "process to reinvent themselves" in an attempt to "appropriate and refashion oppressive spaces" (19). "Their friendship was intense as it was sudden. They found relief in each other's personality" (43). All in all, they were like "two throats and one eye" (135), and they were really "fortunate" because their friendship "…let them use each other to grow on" (43). Their liaison "was so close, they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one's thought from the other's" (83). In fact, Nel and Sula's relationship during childhood resembles what Clenora Hudson-Weems describes as a bonding among women that cannot be broken-

> a reciprocal one, one in which each gives and receives equally. In this community of women, all reach out in support of each other, demonstrating a tremendous sense of responsibility for each other by looking out for one another. They are joined emotionally, as they embody emphatic understanding of each other's shared experience. Everything is given out of love, criticism included, and in the end, the sharing of the common and individual experiences and ideas yields rewards. (*Africana Womanist* 65)

Relating Hudson-Weems' concept of "genuine sisterhood" to Sula and Nel's relationship, it is no surprise that one remarkably discerns the way Sula and Nel share every moment of happiness and distress, power and frailty, criticism and praise. "In those days a compliment to one was a compliment to the other, and cruelty to one was a challenge to the other" (73).

The novel starts with the description of the Bottom in Medallion. The whole atmosphere is charged with violence, death, and problems. Readers, then, are introduced to Nel's mother, Helene Wright, who "loved her house and enjoyed manipulating her daughter and her husband (20). All what Helene cares much about is order and strict organization. This point did not deprive Nel from self-love, on the contrary she proves to be a very loving and caring person especially when establishing a strong friendship with Sula. Sula, on the other hand, comes from a more chaotic background where her grandmother Eva manipulates everything. And just like Nel, Sula's mother, Hannah, does not really love her. It is clearly stated in the novel that the only love that Sula can see in her family is the one of men. In the middle of this confusion and contradiction, a strong friendship between the Sula and Nel emerges.

Motherhood and the mother-daughter relationships are of great significance in the African-American society, black women's literature, and in this the novel in particular. Collins describes the mother/daughter relationship as one of the most important existing relationships among black women. The latter is mainly because of black mothers' role in teaching, guiding, and empowering their daughters to survive the myriad of obstacles and bigotries they face within their societies (Collins, *Black Feminist* 102). It is the black mothers' task to

> demonstrate varying combinations of behaviors devoted to ensuring their daughters' survival—such as providing them with basic necessities and protecting them in dangerous environments—to helping their daughters go further than mothers themselves were allowed to go. They remain simultaneously visionary about what is possible, yet pragmatic about what it might take to get there. (Collins, *Black Feminist* 184)

However, black mothers and their mothering role is not always equivalent to power. Unlike Collins who highlights black mothers' might, Davies holds a more relative view about black motherhood because of its existence within a patriarchal society. She explains that "its very definition in patriarchal culture provides a complex mixture of meanings, ranging from annihilation, to creation, to changing given statuses" (Davies 104). From this spectrum, black motherhood is very demanding; black mothers have to empower their daughters but still ensure their survival. Many black mothers, unfortunately, fail to serve their daughters appropriately. Challenged by the intersecting oppressions, some black mothers either pass on some of the domineering ideologies to their daughters or completely abandon their mothering role.

Sula and Nel's mothers seem to belong to the above mentioned category of black mothers. Eva, Hannah, and Helen are mothers who never stand for their daughter as role models; they are either very authoritative and conservative or too loose and riotous. Therefore, Sula and Nel turn to each other looking for what their mothers have deprived them of. Deeming that Sula and Nel's friendship is the quintessence of the novel and the reason for their survival and self-contentment, Maureen T. Reddy in her "The Tripled Plot and Center of Sula" explains: "The Sula/Nel couple, the two sides of a 'junaus' head' that together would make one woman, are the centre of the plot about female friendship and female development and represent the effects of internalized racist stereotypes and the multiple oppression of black women" (31).

This startling friendship enables the two girls, primarily, to compensate for their mothers' deviant and extreme natures and motherly distorted love. While Nel's mother is too traditionalist and conformist and Sula's mother is too unconventional and libertine, both girls find refuge and balance in each other. "Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers, they found in each other's eyes intimacy they were looking for" (51).

Haunted by her mother the prostitute, Helene, Nel's mother, is very conventional and conservative adopting the values and codes of her society and insisting to dispatch them forcibly to her daughter in order to grow as the pious and good woman the community expects. Being afraid that Nel may inherit her grandmother's immoral conduct, Helene imposes onerous rules that make Nel compliant and inert.

Any enthusiasm or passion demonstrated by Nel "were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (18).It is no surprise that "during all of

her girlhood the only respite Nel had had from her stern and undemonstrative parents was Sula" (72). All in all, it was Nel who paid the price of the "matrilineal line that suffers from an Eve/ Mary bedrock of feminine duality, the whore/Madonna polarity" (Demetrakopoulos 79).

Sula's mother, Hannah, and even her grandmother, however, are extremely free and unconventional vis-à-vis the social codes and morals starting with their vision about relationships with men to the way they raise Sula. It is by no means an exaggeration if one says that Sula was not even raised by her mother, but grew on her own. "Neither Eva nor Hannah", Wilfred Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems argue, "served as a positive role model who enforced or exhibited a lifestyle of domestic tranquility or security" for Sula (36). In fact, Sula suffered mainly from her mother's unconcern and apathy towards her. When seeing the way her mother cared about her lovers, Sula knew that she will never receive any guidance, love or attention by her mother.

Being suffocated by the imposed social codes and being neglected and abandoned without any set of ethics or values, both girls find what they lack in each other: self-determination and nurturing care. Similarly, Diane Gillespie and Missy Dehn Kubitschek explain that "the friendship between Sula and Nel in many ways nurtures both girls by supplying the lacks in their mother-daughter relationships" (40). Sula and Nel's relationship is so magical in the way it generates solace, strength, safety, and constancy. Due to the pain caused by her mother's rejection, Sula plunges in deep sadness and sorrow, but Nel's presence is enough to restore Sula's happiness. The narrator explains: "She [Sula] only heard Hannah's words, and the pronouncement sent her flying up the stairs. In bewilderment, she stood at the window fingering the curtain edge, aware of a

sting in her eye. Nel‘s call floated up and into the window, pulling her away from dark thoughts back into the bright, hot daylight” (57). Sula, on the other hand, helps Nel to deal with and confront her insistent and tough mother. The relationship that exists between the two girls proves to be “the most important relationship in their lives” (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 44).

III. The Dynamics of Sula and Nel’s Bonding: Support, Solidarity, and (E)Merging Identities

Besides the confidence and security that Sula and Nel’s friendship generates, their friendship also triggers new visions about selfhood. One of the concerns of Morrison in her novel is the way girlhood friendship affects selfhood and identity. An instance of that is the incident of the train that happens to Nel during her trip with her mother. It was the first time that Nel goes to New Orleans and the first time too she discovers racism. Unlike the manipulative and strong attitude she has always seen in her mother, Nel for the first time sees that her mother is so weak and thus decides to work hard to form her own identity and impose her selfhood. While entering the part reserved for the whites in the train, Nel’s mother is humiliated both by the bus driver and the black soldiers who were there. Nel, once seeing that scene, “…resolved to be on guard-always. She wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly” (13). Seeing her mother despised by men both black and white, Nel becomes aware of the consequences of being a black woman, and for the first time realizes the difficulty of being a woman in a male dominated and racist society.

Consequently, Nel becomes more cognizant about her sense of selfhood and identity. She becomes aware of the importance of shaping her identity away from the mother's regulations and authority. In that, she asserts: "'I'm me,' she whispered. 'Me.' Nel didn't quite know what she meant, but on the other hand she knew exactly what she meant. I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me'" (26). In order to fulfill her quest for freedom, Nel thinks seriously of leaving the town. "Leaving Medallion would be her goal. But that was before she met Sula, the girl she had seen for five years at Garfield Primary but never played with, never knew, because her mother said that Sula's mother was sooty. The trip, perhaps, or her new found me-ness, gave her the strength to cultivate a friend in spite of her mother"(28).

This new found me-ness is, also, crystal clear in the way Nel declines her mother's directives about reshaping her nose and straightening her hair. Having an identity crisis, Nel's mother blames Nel for her black skin, flat and big nose, and crimped hair and tries to change them according to white standards. Fortunately, "after she met Sula, Nel slid the clothespin under the blanket as soon as she got in the bed. And although there was still the hateful hot comb to suffer through each Saturday evening, its consequences – smooth hair- no longer interested her" (55) for she finally has found someone who accepts and loves her the way she is. Interestingly, "Sula's preservation of her self allows Nel to limn boundaries between herself and her mother" (Gillespie and Kubitschek 41).

The more Nel draws boundaries between herself and her mother, the more she fortifies her relationship with Sula. This burgeoning concord between Nel and Sula is further

strengthened in the way they complement each other and are attracted to their different family backgrounds. The narrator explains:

> Nel, who regarded the oppressive neatness of her home with dread, felt comfortable in it with Sula, who loved it and would sit on the red-velvet sofa for ten to twenty minutes at a time. . . .As for Nel, she preferred Sula‘s woolly house, where a pot of something was always cooking on the stove; where the mother, Hannah, never scolded or gave directions; where all sorts of people dropped in; where newspapers were stacked in the hallway, and dirty dishes left for hours at a time in the sink, and where a one-legged grandmother named Eva handed you goobers from deep inside her pockets or read you a dream. (29)

Each girl finds in the other's house what she lacks in her own house. This not only reinforces their relationship but also makes them rely on each other to be complete. Kubitschek, on this complementary relationship between the two girls, affirms:

> Sula and Nel provide one another with support crucial to establishing and maintaining their identities in somewhat hostile contexts. Nel escapes her mother‘s stifling conformity to middle-class norms in the less conventional Peace household. With Nel, Sula experiences the sense of order and control not present in the Peace home, as well as the love that her mother cannot offer her. (52)

Sula and Nel's relationship trespasses the personal and the familial level to the social one. Their relationship "…represents the effects of internalized racist stereotypes and the multiple oppressions of black women" (Reddy 3). The two girls have to survive the racist and patriarchal injustices. Born and raised in a community that started as a joke by a

white man, the two girls feel harassed by the racial and gender restrictions and bigotries realizing their limited chances. As a result, they realize that only a strong friendship may help them face such oppression. Right from the beginning, the two girls recognized the importance of their friendship. The narrator explains: “So when they met, first in those chocolate halls and next through the ropes of the swing, they felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be” (52). This something else is their friendship that permits them to fashion and protect their selfhood. Through their friendship, Nel and Sula not only confront the social and racial injustices but most importantly learn how to survive and nurture each other. “They confide in each other and willing share their true feelings, their fears, their hopes, and their dreams. … with such love, trust and security,” it is difficult to imagine Sula and Nel’s identities jeopardized or controlled by social forces (Hudson-Weems 65-66).

One example of the two girls mutual protection and love is when Sula cut her finger to protect Nel from the Irish boys’ harassment. This act of self-sacrifice against this racial and gender threat reveals the intensity of the protective tendency the girl’s friendship bears. By cutting her finger, Sula proves to her friend that she is ready to do whatever it costs to protect her and their friendship in the face of any external danger.

Another instance of Nel’s support to Sula is when she shared the responsibility of killing Chicken Little by keeping her friend’s secret. Nel stashes away the long held beliefs about morality as well as right and wrong in order to prove her loyalty to her friend, Sula. On this incident Kubitschek expounds: “When Nel and Sula silently agree to

keep their involvement in a playmate‘s drowning a secret, their reliance on each other is confirmed. For each, the other is the only person who knows her completely” (52). Even after the incident and during the boy’s funeral the two girls felt very comfortable and relaxed because they have confidence in each other and in their growing solidarity.

> By providing Sula and Nel with the secret of Chicken Little‘s accidental death, and specifically by having Nel provide the strength and support Sula needed at the moment, Morrison further united them in a manner that would bond them for eternity. Although the action was Sula’s, the involvement, as Eva would later point out, was clearly theirs together. (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 45).

Nel and Sula are sure that this incident will always remain their shared secret. The narrator describes the scene of the Sula and Nel during the funeral:

> Nel and Sula stood some distance away from the grave, the space that had sat between them in the pews had dissolved. They held hands and knew that only the coffin would lie in the earth; the bubbly laughter and the press of fingers in the palm would stay above ground forever. At first as they stood there, their hands were clenched together. They relaxed slowly until during the walk back home their fingers were laced in as gentle a clasp as that of any two young girlfriends trotting up the road on a summer day wondering what happened to butterflies in the winter. (66)

Chicken Little’s death is of a paramount importance for Sula because it not only reminds her of some significant memories, but also because the incident permits her to mull over them again. One of these memories is when hearing her mother saying that she does not like her. This event, in fact, “taught her there was no other” she can count on

since her own mother does not like her (117). Her mother's attitude towards her suffused her with skepticism and distrust. Hannah's deceptive posture created a confusion in Sula's developing sense of selfhood leaving her daughter with "no center, no peck around which to grow" (118). But after seeing Nel's protective attitude during the incident of Chicken Little, Sula realizes that she can rely on her.

A similar example of this supportive and stabilizing effect the girls generate for each other is when Sula helps Nel to confront and free herself from her mother starting with "her mother's incredibly orderly house" functioning as a microcosm of social "confinement and restriction" (51). Sula helped Nel in distancing herself from her mother and in pursuing her nascent "me-ness". On their complicity Roberta Rubenstein explains:

> In Morrison's narrative of a female friendship, Sula and Nel initially discover their own essences and begin to grow through their reciprocal connection; each girl seems to have, both materially and metaphysically, what the other lacks. While Sula needs Nel as 'the closest thing to both another and a self,' Nel needs Sula to act out the denied dark forces in her being (134).

Their friendship continued to offer support and happiness until their early adulthood.

IV. Shocked into Separateness

Despite their strong relationship, Sula and Nel have to be separated taking two different paths. Sula, remaining alone after Nel's marriage, decides to go to college and carry on her quest of self-fulfilment and freedom. And Nel decides to get married and form a family. Sula and Nel's friendship soon goes to wreck and ruin. Unlike during their childhood and even adolescence where they could create their own world away from external forces, once adults Sula and Nel's friendship is affected by the sullying impact

of the intersectional social and gender regulations. The latter operates in a subtle and hidden way, but still weakens and undermines Sula and Nel's union.

IV.1. Jude's Emasculation and the Need to adopt "a Man's Role"

The apparent cause of Sula and Nel's friendship disintegration is Sula's affair with Jude, Nel's husband. Though, Jude seems to be an obnoxious patriarchal figure who seizes Sula's weakness to demolish the bonding that exists between her and his wife, a deeper analysis is necessary. In fact, Jude, like most men in the novel and in the American society, is affected by evils of segregation. He is shorn of the construction job on the New Road simply because he is black. "It was after he stood in lines for six days running and saw the gang boss pick out thin-armed white boys from the Virginia hill and the bull-necked Greeks and Italians and heard over and over, 'Nothing else today. Come back tomorrow', that he got the message"(82).

Through the example of Jude, Morrison portrays an aspect of the American segregationist economic structure which forces black men to be unemployed or accept menial jobs. hooks discusses the connection between black men, employment, and their masculinity in America. She explains that already disturbed by the bigoted and racist white policies, black men turn to work to realize self-fulfillment, self-worth, and manliness, but are usually disappointed (*Ain't I* 93). Most of them are either upset by the low paying menial jobs offers, or simply find none. While Myron Brenton describes that work for the American male is "fraught with-dehumanizing-i.e., unmanning- influence" (qtd. in hooks, *Ain't I* 93), hooks specifies that black men suffer from performing menial jobs with "bosses and supervisors harassing and persecuting them" and from the

"monetary rewards for their labor rarely compensated for the indignities they were forced to endure" (*Ain't I* 94).

As such, Jude himself seems to be a victim of the white patriarchal biased system. By depriving him of work, Jude feels to be stripped off his manhood because after all work for him has more value than the money it gives. According to Cedric Gael Bryant , "For men like Jude, manhood and self-worth are inextricably bound with meaningful work and male bonding, which, as signifiers, have greater meaning than does mere money" (735).

Instead of fighting back the racial oppression to restore his manhood, Jude resorts to another form of patriarchal oppression and another easier target- he chooses to marry and control Nel. Jude like most frustrated black men expresses his rage and imposes his manhood by being a dominant figure in a conventional heterosexual relationship. hooks maintains that it is the subjugation and submission black men gain from their female partners that assuage their hostility towards the white male power and their emasculation. These men "hoped to gain public recognition of their "manhood" by demonstrating that they were the dominant figure in the black family" (hooks, *Ain't I* 94).

Jude sees in Nel an opportunity after losing his chance in work. "...It was rage, rage and a determination to take on a man's role anyhow that made him press Nel about settling down..." (84). For Jude, having a wife who is inferior to him would reinstate his superiority and worth, and above all, being with Nel who is very docile and submissive would bolster his authority. Though he "wasn't really aiming to get married" (80), "the need to adopt a 'man's role' drives Jude to marry" making sure to choose a woman like Nel who "relinquishes the active portion of herself … to adopt a purely female complementary role" (Abel 428). Furthermore, "the mothering Jude expects from Nel is

of a more complicated variety...” Maureen T. Reddy explains (34). “Jude marries Nel when his hopes of proving his masculinity through building the New River Road are dashed by racist hiring policies...when he realizes that he is permanently barred from such work due to race, he turns to Nel for solace” (Reddy 34).

Nel accepts Jude’s insecurity, pain, and need for another person to take care of him. Interestingly, “the need to soothe and mother draws Nel from Sula to Jude” (Abel 428). After Sula’s departure, Nel needed to take care of someone and fill the emptiness Sula left. Thus, she provides Jude with all the encouragement and support he needed, but he fails to appreciate that. “This new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly” was charming for Nel (84). This charm soon vanishes once she knows the intentions of Jude. He wanted to manipulate her, and he succeeded in doing so. After all, “her parents have succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or sputter she had” (83). “...Nel marries Jude because she realizes that he needs her; that is, she colludes in the eradication of herself in a marriage in which she is meant to be a part of Jude” (Reddy 34). During Sula’s ten year absence, Nel developed a great sense of dependence, submissiveness, and relatedness leading her to envision her importance and “worth on the basis of the ability to care for and protect others” (Gillespie and Kubitschek 21). The latter is a direct outcome of Helene’s forced teachings about a black woman’s role. Helene succeeded in infusing her daughter with the “sexual politics” that compel black women to “uncritically accept the glorified ‘mammy work’ and make them “become willing participants in their own subordination” (Collins, *Black Feminist* 183). Collins describes black women’s own subordination as a phenomenon that results from adhering

to the belief of “gender hierarchies” and glorification of the heterosexual family- an idea that Nel reveals along her marriage with Jude (*From Black* 39-40).

For Jude, their “union is made because Nel is a tool for his ego” (Bakerman 552). He becomes more and more desperate and insecure until he commits adultery, a consequence of his lack of manhood. This incident not only exposes Jude’s ingratitude and masculine egotism, but also ravages Nel and Sula’s friendship and sanctions patriarchal oppression to infringe their life. While Nel thought that marriage may give her a feeling of contentment and peace, it just distances her from her friend Sula, and thus from herself. After years of dependence, the return of Sula was Nel’s unique chance to get her freedom back because Sula was the sole woman in her entourage who spurns the constraints of marriage and motherhood, but this unique chance vanishes (Stein 147). Similarly, Reddy explains that the devastating effect of Nel’s marriage and Jude’s adultery are just examples of patriarchal oppressions: “The death of Nel’s inner self and the death of her friendship with Sula are both attributable to externally imposed limitations on black women‘s lives” (4).

IV.2.Nel: A Victim of Marital Confines

Nel’s marriage with Jude disrupts her pursuit of self understanding. Instead of being “someone sweet, industrious, and loyal” (83), Nel’s progress after marriage halts while performing matrimonial and social obligations and becoming one of the women with husbands who “had folded themselves into starched coffins, their sides bursting with other people’s skinned dreams and bony regrets… Those with men had had the sweetness sucked from their breath by overns and steam kettles” (122). “She ends up harassed by

the community's supreme morals about good and evil that lead to her separation from Sula- her only savior" (McDowell, "The Self" 56).

Eventually, Nel blames Sula for disloyalty and for ruining her marriage. Nel denies that she has always been a tool for Jude to prove his manhood, and that her real loss is her friendship with Sula. Forgetting about the teachings of Sula and going back to the dictates of her authoritative mother, "Nel's response to Jude's shame and anger selected her away from Sula. And greater than her friendship was this new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly" (84). "Being needed by someone who saw her singly" becomes Nel's priority at the expense of her friendship. And once, she lost that feeling, she lost steadiness over her life. The narrator explains Nel's desolate state: "For now her thighs were truly empty and dead too, and it was Sula who had taken the life from them and Jude who smashed her heart and the both of them who left her with no thighs and no heart just her brain raveling away" (110).

At this point, the narrator refers not only to her state after Jude's departure, but to her sexuality as well. Without Jude, Nel describes her thighs, standing metaphorically for her sexuality, as "empty and dead". Her sexuality does not exist without Jude because it is "harnessed to duty and virtue in a simple cause/effect relationship. ...Because Nel's sexuality is harnessed to and only enacted within the institutions that sanction sexuality for women- marriage and family- she does not own it" (McDowell, "The Self" 57). Her sexuality is embedded in possessiveness. Nel's limited sexuality is an outcome of her vision about goodness and uprightness. Just like McDowell, Collins explains that this limited sexuality is the product of the social delusion of the good women who should be sexually active only within marital confines (Collins, *From Black* 109). Being obsessed

with what is “Wright” as her name suggests, Nel makes herself the victim of “sexual faithfulness, self-abnegation, and the idealization of marriage and motherhood” (Mc Dowell, “The Self”59).

Nel goes back to her prior state of submission imposed by her mother’s regulations and social dictates. She winds up having no “sparkle or splutter”, just a “dull glow” (83). As if to blame Sula or herself, Nel isolates herself, devotes herself to raising her children, and stops talking to Sula. Subconsciously, Nel blames herself for allowing Jude to humiliate her. She reproaches herself for being reduced to a tool for Judes’s ego. The latter engenders a feeling of great remorse, frustration, and disgust. Bonnie Daniels in her “For Colored Girls…A Catharsis” perfectly summarizes Nel’s state. She asserts: “we have been and are angry sometimes, not for what men have done, but for what we’ve allowed ourselves to become... I’ve learned …that being less than what I am capable of being to boost someone else’s ego *does not help either of us* for real” (qtd in. Collins, *Black Feminist* 153).

Nel’s excessive protection and love for her children was like “bear love” (119). It was, in Gillespie and Kubitschek words, “destructive because of its dishonesty”. Her love for her children “…enables Nel to evade her responsibilities toward understanding her own experience; consequently she preserves an immature and incomplete saintly self-image based on a denial of her real self” (21). In order to preserve her saintly self-image, Nel represses all her needs and urges resulting in the formulation of a gray ball of fur that she insists on ignoring. “It was so nice to think about their [her children’s] scary dreams and not about a bal of fur…It just floated there for the seeing, if she wanted…But she didn’t

want to see it, ever, for if she saw it, who could tell but what she might actually touch it, or want to, and then what would happen…" (94).

In sum, she becomes what her mother and society has always wished her to be like. Because Nel is good enough to be the only person in town willing to visit Sula, she goes to talk to her on her deathbed but still holding on to her illusion of goodness. Nel says to Sula: "I was good to you, Sula, why don't that matter?" (124). Sula's reply exposing the truth about goodness: "It matters, Nel, but only to you.... Being good to somebody is just like being mean to somebody. Risky. You don't get nothing for it" (124-25). But a conventional woman like Nel always expects something for her goodness – a goodness that only takes away her best friend, her husband, and her selfhood (Gillespie and Kubitschek 21).

Sula never ceases to impel Nel towards self-fulfillment and rejection of social conventions. In attempt to free her friend from the lie of the saintly self-image and from the gray ball of fur that feeds on Nel's repression, Sula tells her: "About who was good. How you know it was you? . . . I mean maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was me"(126). By asking this question, Sula, on the one hand, queries the social categorizations and stereotypes, and on the other, imparts Nel with qualm and suspicion about the socially imposed codes she has always believed in.

It is only at that moment that Nel realizes that she missed Sula and herself but never Jude. As such, the novel is a clear warning for women about making the right choices and properly arranging their priorities in life. By giving the example of Nel's failed marriage, the author implies that women should reject the idea of being trapped in a patriarchal establishment like marriage due to its disproving effects on their quest of selfhood.

Neither Nel's marriage nor Sula's excessive liberty replace the perfection their friendship spawns. Sula felt that Nel's decision to get married is a perfidy for their friendship, and thus quickly decides to leave town and completely change her life. Sula thinks that by avoiding marriage she is independent and autonomous.

> Viewing marriage as compounded of convenience and caution, Sula avoids such ties. While her repudiation of these bonds renders her an outcast in the eyes of her community, she perceives herself as free, and therefore able, as none of the other women are, to be honest and to experience life and self fully. Her journey is the enactment of that freedom. (Stein147-48)

IV.3.Sula: Dangerously Free

Unlike Nel and the other women in her community, Sula pursues her selfhood rejecting all the conventional notions that define a woman's life. She perseveres in pursuing self-government and living according to her own terms.

Stirred by defiance and boldness, Sula has a clash with her grandmother, Eva, and decides to put her in an old folk's home, opposing the Bottom principles. In an attempt to tame Sula, Eva assails her with questions and engages in a blistering conversation with her:

> ". . . When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you."
>
> "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself."
>
> "Selfish. Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man."

"You did."

"Not by choice."

"Mama did."

"Not by choice, I said it ain't right for you to want to stay off by yourself. You need . . . I'm a tell you what you need."

Sula sat up. "I need you to shut your mouth."

When Eva replies that God will strike her down, Sula angrily replies:

"Which God? The one who watched you burn Plum. . . . Maybe one night when you dozing in that wagon flicking flies and swallowing spit, maybe I'll just tip on up here with some kerosene and—who knows—you may make the brightest flame of them all." (92)

Sula's conversation with her grandmother reveals her philosophy and her outlook about living. As a woman without man and without children and being armed with education, Sula threatens all conventions of her society. Similarly, Collins explains that according to the social binary logic, there are good girls and bad girls. While good girls adhere to conventional views that regulate black women's sexuality, bad girls conform to none. Bad girls engage freely in sexual and non-sexual relationships with men and often decide to remain childless. Deemed of "being selfish, hoarding resources, being overly aggressive and unfeminine, and thinking only of themselves, these bad girls are usually ostracized (*From Black* 69-109).

While the women of Bottom, like Nel, think of sexuality more of an act to satisfy their men, Sula considers it a one of self-exploration- an attitude that the community scorns her for. She "went to bed with men as frequently as she could" (122), but never thought

of sex as an act of loving men or spawning mutual pleasure. It begets “misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow” and a sensation of “her abiding strength and limitless power” (122-23). As such, sex for Sula is a sensory experience that leads her towards “the postcoital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony” (123). By embracing such a conviction about sex and rebuffing any commitment to her community, Sula is the “new world woman” that the Bottom is not yet ready for (Galehouse 341). While Sula’s surrounding sees her as the incarnation of evil, bell hooks explains in her *Ain’t I a Woman* that “evilness’ of a given black woman may merely be the façade she presents to a sexist-racist world that she realizes would only exploit her if she were to appear vulnerable” (86).

The gap between Sula and Nel becomes wider especially after Sula and Jude’s treason. In fact, Sula becomes obsessed with the idea of imposing and freeing herself until she becomes so egocentric and self-centered. The latter renders Sula “dangerously free” imperiling not only society’s order, but most importantly her only friend, Nel (145). Because of her disorderly and feral freedom, Sula feels no shame or fault in sleeping with her best friend’s husband. After all, it is not only Nel who conforms to her mother’s rules, Sula, by sleeping with Jude, also proves to be a copy of her mother.

Sula’s freedom, however, turns to be destructive. Though she is free from social restrictions and free to act liberally, she is never satisfied. She becomes a roaming ghost that nourishes from others fears and hatred. Despite this change, Nel still saw in Sula her old faithful and closest friend - an image that at full tilt disappears when Sula has sex with Jude. Due to her idiosyncrasy, Sula thought of having sex with Jude, her best friend’s husband, another manifestation of their sharing. Nel tells Sula “you didn’t love

me enough to leave him alone…You had to take him away" (145). And Sula responds, "I didn't kill him, I just fucked him. We were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?" Then she adds: "there was this space in front of me, behind me, in my head. Some space. And Jude filled it up. That's all. He just filled up the space" (144-45). While Nel considers that Sula's affair with Jude is the result of Sula's disregard for her feeling and for their friendship, Sula considers it a mere act of satisfying of her hollowness. Due to Sula's peculiar vision about men as mere tools of satisfaction and self-exploration, she thinks that Nel would not mind helping her through using her husband. Still believing in the exceptionality of their friendship, Sula thinks that using her friend's husband is permissible.

Conversely, after seeing Nel's distress, she comprehends for the first time that they are not one but two different selves. In that the narrator explains: "She had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both an other and self, only to discover that she and Nel were not one and the same thing. She had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude. They has always shared the affection of other people", but "now Nel was one of them"(119-20).

Sula could never understand that it is owing to her detrimental freedom that she hurts her friend. Due to Sula's disloyalty, Karen F. Stein maintains that "Nel remains aloof, although she thinks of her friend often. ... Nel's life contracts even further, narrowing into a loveless round of duties and responsibilities, to job and church" (148).

V. Disconnections from Gender Hegemonies: Reconciliation, Redemption, and Healing

V.1. Sula's Persistence

Sula and Nel's final meeting does not only reveal the differences between the two women's beliefs, but also confirms the fact that even during Sula's death she persists on transmitting her vision of freedom to Nel. Interestingly, even during their separation they still share something- death. Although Nel visits Sula who is the one who is dying, Nel is dying with her too. While Nel forewarns Sula of the social limitations and of her immorality, Sula teaches her how much one should live and confidently states that she is dying fulfilled:

"You can't have it all, Sula."

"Why? I can do it all, why can't I have it all?"

"You *can't* do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like a man. You can't be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't."

Sula exclaims:

"You think I don't know what your life is like just because I ain't living it? I know what every colored woman in this country is doing."

"What's that?"

"Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world."

"Really? What have you got to show for it?"

> "Show? To who? Girl, I got my mind. And what goes on in it. Which is to say, I got me."
>
> "Lonely, ain't it?"
>
> "Yes. But my lonely is *mine*. Now your lonely is somebody else's. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain't that something? A second-hand lonely." (143)

Having an affair with her best friend's husband is another reason for which the community blames Sula and considers her as the incarnation of evil. Besides many previous attempts, this was the occasion for the community to separate the two women not only because their friendship endangers the social control and regulations, but also because members of the society needed someone to put the blame on.

The narrator asserts, "Nel was the one person who had wanted nothing from her [Sula], who had accepted all aspects of her" (119). But this did not last for a long time because of Sula's eccentric behavior and harsh social judgment. With their conviction of Sula's evil, the people of Medallion's treatment of Sula is perplexing. She was"the source of their personal misfortune", but "as always the black people looked at evil stony-eyed and let it run" (113- 17).

Because of Nel's decision, the community this time witnesses and enjoys Sula and Nel's separation. Despite their separation and even at the moment of her death, Sula thinks of telling Nel how it is smooth and painless. The narrator describes Sula during her death: "Well, I'll be damned,' she thought, 'it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel.'" (149). Welcoming death peacefully and thinking of Nel during her death are but a proof of Sula's attachment and peculiar love for Nel as well as a confirmation of her individuality.

“Dead finally of a mysterious wasting disease similar to those that punished unconventional nineteenth- century heroines, Sula is the hero of the novel, a solitary seeker trying to make her own self” (Reddy 45).

VI. Nel’s Epiphany

The survivor and the mature Nel who works hard trying to patch up her life and above all continuing to do the right thing, decides to visit Eva as a benevolent act. Once Nel introduces herself to Eva, the old woman reminds her of Chicken Little’s death, suggests her guilt, and asks her:

> “Tell me how you killed that little boy.”
> “What? What little boy?”
> “The one you threw in the water ...”
> “I didn’t throw no little boy in the river. That was Sula.”
> “You, Sula. What’s the difference?” (169)

Nel gets very troubled not only when Eva identifies her with Sula, but also when she insists on the fact that Nel was watching the incident with pleasure: “All these years she had been secretly proud of her calm, controlled behavior when Sula was uncontrollable. ... Now it seemed that what she had thought was maturity, serenity and compassion was only the tranquillity that follows a joyful stimulation” (170). Nel also remembers “the good feeling she had had when Chicken’s hands slipped” (170). She recognizes that, after all, she is as evil as Sula is. Immediately after this recognition, still thinking of preserving her righteousness, and being afraid of letting out her long repressed feelings, Nel turns to condemn Eva as a despicable woman.

In spite of Nel's attachment to her virtue and uprightness, this time she feels the urge of viewing things differently. She decides to visit Sula's grave. Once there and for the first time, the "soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze" (174). This moment of epiphany enables Nel to discard the illusion of social morals and perceive the essence of life. Finally, Nel realizes that she lost the very valuable relationship of her life; her friendship with Sula. With Eva reminding her of Chicken Little's death incident and her visit of Sula's grave, Nel not only remembers nostalgically every detail and every moment she has spent with Sula, but also remembers the power, freedom, and joy their bonding generates. According to Reddy, "Nel finally does reach self-understanding, and it is Sula who leads her to it; her recognition of her true feelings provides her with that speck around which to grow" (10). Sula and Nel's empowering relationship falls within the tradition of black women's bonding. The relationships among black women provide them with "safe spaces" to form and maintain independent selfhood (Collins, *Black Feminist* 102). It is only after recognizing the importance of her relationship with Sula that Nel liberates herself from the loads and the frustration caused by her mother's dictates and her husband's subjugation.

As such, Nel finally recognizes that the feeling of emptiness that devours her was not due to Jude's absence, but owing to Sula's absence and their demolished friendship. She realizes that severing her relationship with Sula is the biggest blunder she has ever committed:

> 'All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.' And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. 'We was girls together,' she said as though explaining something. 'O Lord, Sula,' She cried... It was a fine cry-

> loud and long but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow (174).

Recognizing finally that losing her connection with Sula means losing herself, Nel laments the years she spends away from her friend. She also comprehends that they have been the victims of their mothers' defective raising, her marriage, and social pressures in general. Nel's epiphany is a turning point in the novel. It enables her to gain consciousness again and carry on the search for selfhood that Sula begins. It is no coincidence that Nel's moment of awareness and spiritual reconnection with Sula happens in the cemetery. It is there that she buries the shadows, the circles of sorrow, and the soft ball of fur that paralyzed her for years. Similarly, Mc Dowell maintains:

> The 'circles and circles of sorrow' "she cried at the narrative's end prepare her for what Sula strained to experience throughout her life: the process of mourning and remembering that leads to intimacy with the self, which is all that makes intimacy with others possible. … that process begins with realizing the static and coherent conception of self and embracing what Sula represents: the self as a process and fluid possibility". ("The Self" 59)

As such, Morrison aims to shed light on the complexity of black womanhood as a convoluted process. Maureen T. Reddy asserts that "Nel may now grow, freed from the lies in which she has held herself prisoner, and may discover the inner peace that has thus far eluded her" (38). Such awareness, as Toni Morrison explains, is the outcome of women's friendship and sisterhood: "sisterhood was so critical among black women because there wasn't anybody else. We saved one another's lives for generations" (qtd. in Nance 5).

Being bound by false crippling codes and circumscribed environment, Nel, twenty-four years after Sula's death, discovers the truth about her community. She realizes the hypocrisy, waste, and narrowness in living just for others. She, at last, understands the essence of Sula's last words:

"How you know?" Sula asked.

"Know what?" Nel wouldn't look at her.

"About who was *good*. How you know it was you?"

"What you mean?"

"I mean maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was me." (143)

She is au fait with the fact that these notions of right and wrong are mere social codes that curb black women's freedom and thwart their quest of selfhood. The novel ends with Nel's nascent understanding that the social values she believed in during her life have deluded and led her away from selfhood. Thanks to Sula, Nel understands that self-discovery is the outcome of venture, exploration of possibilities, and experience. Sula once told Nel: "I don't know everything, I just do everything" (143). Sula is an adventurous woman who "discovers the terror and thrill of the free fall into life through her own creative capacity for invention" (Carmean 160).

While Sula dies satisfied with her journey and achievement, she prods her friend to go after her own pursuit for selfhood. Like most women characters in literature produced by black women writers, Nel's epiphany and new conception of her surrounding occur gradually and at different and lengthy stages. The latter echoes McDowell's perception of black women's move from "victimization to consciousness" as the outcome of a personal and psychological journey ("New Directions" 157). It is Sula's influential teachings and

constant motivation that altered Nel's consciousness, and above all, it is Nel's readiness to perceive her surrounding differently that makes a change. Nel's ultimate change confirms Collins' idea about black women's empowerment. She states that "the power to save the self lies within the self. Other Black women may assist a Black woman in this journey toward personal empowerment, but the ultimate responsibility for self-definitions and self-valuations lies within the individual woman herself" (*Black Feminist* 118-119).

Conclusion

Morrison in her *Sula* delves into the complex process of women's construction of selfhood. But unlike most afro-American women writers who write about a victimized black woman who struggles against evident abusive patriarchal and racial forces, Morrison creates a more convoluted story. Through the relationship between Nel and Sula, Morrison highlights the intricacy and the various obstructions that hinder black women's union and search for selfhood.

While readers may tend to classify Sula as the villain and Nel as the virtuous character, Morrison's intention is to overthrow social essentialism and stereotypes. In fact, reading the novel while trying to classify Sula and Nel is very simplifying and distorting of the novel. By depicting the fascinating outcome of Sula and Nel's union, Morrison emphasizes not only the fact that evil is as useful as good, but also the point that one may not really define what is good and what is evil.

Because the union of both women menaces the social clout, Sula and Nel's bonding lasts only for some time until it is suspended. By depicting Sula and Nel after their separation as desperate women without any sense of self-affirmation or joie de vivre, Morrison associates women's bonding with the quest of selfhood, survival, and existence. Though she creates Sula and Nel as characters that embody two extremes of black womanhood, she challenges these limited constructions in the way the two women mutually pursue their search for selfhood. Their quest of self-fulfillment is never accomplished without their fusion and merger. The subtle and intricate gender standards manage to momentarily interrupt Sula and Nel's union, but never effectively succeed in

confining their spirit or halt their search for selfhood. Actually, Morrison does not only outshine in portraying the empowering impact of women's sisterhood and bonding, but also in warning women about the despoiling impact of social standards on black women's quest of selfhood.

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Chapter Six

A Communal Selfhood in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

Introduction

In this chapter, I will argue that *The Women of Brewster Place* is a novel that celebrates women's communion and its impact on the fulfillment of their quest of selfhood. I will explain the way the novel rejects the restrictive sense of selfhood and calls for a more inclusive selfhood merged in collective experience.

Dealing with a group of women characters rather than one protagonist portrays Naylor's awareness about the diversity of the black women and their struggle on the one hand, and accentuates Naylor's outlook about the importance of the unity of women despite their differences on the other. Naylor's vision of selfhood is quite unique in the sense that she declines the notion of the female selfhood relying on separating oneself from the others. Thus, I will explain that the women of Brewster Place fight back the intersectional restrictive forces and celebrate their liberation only when they rely on each other and form a tight communion. To prove my point, I will explain the seven women's individual journey, failure, and eventual recovery and fulfillment only with the help of other women.

What is noteworthy is that Mattie, a sort of mother figure in the novel, is present in most of all the seven stories. Thus, special attention will be given to her role in the emancipation of the women in the novel. All of the women's stories have, to a certain extent, a satisfactory ending, except for the one of Lorraine. Lorraine, one of the two lesbians in the novel, is rejected by the other women and ends up raped and ruined. Naylor, however, inserts a sort of poetic justice for Lorraine by killing Ben, the tenement janitor. Through her immediate response to the pain inflicted on her, Lorraine enacts her determination to survive and resist the atrocities of the male dominated society she lives

in. While Naylor depicts the positive impact of women's support and union through the stories of the other women, Lorraine's rape portrays the appalling impact of this lost union.

Eventually awakened, the women come together after Lorraine's rape. Her rape does not only lead her to get the sympathy of the rest of the women, but mostly does trigger the women's consciousness about the necessity to unite against the gender and racial oppressions they suffer from. Naylor crystallizes the women's alliance through a dream- a point that disturbs many critics and reader. However, I will maintain that that Naylor's deferred dream implies her vision of selfhood as a thorny, demanding, and relative issue needing constant strength and exertion.

I will also explain that shared dreams and memories play a central role in women's unity and fulfillment of selfhood. They function as a healing device and a mechanism that activates their collective consciousness and enable them to challenge pain, accomplish communal alliance and fulfill their quest of selfhood and emancipation. Eventually, the women collectively break the wall that stands for their seclusion and misery. They come to understand the power of their communion stemming initially from their shared memories and dreams. They also come to understand that only a selfhood born within a communal frame can survive and challenge the cycle of abuse they are subject to.

I.Locating *the Women of Brewster Place*

Growing up during the Civil Rights and feminist movement, Gloria Naylor, a celebrated African-American writer and author of six novels, gradually becomes aware of the absence if not disregard of literary works written by African American women writers in her college courses. The latter prompted Naylor to produce works that depict the African American life in general and black women's "multifaceted" nature and struggle in particular. In that, Naylor in one of her interviews with Charles H. Rowell asserts: "We were all working with benign ignorance of what was out there in Black America…And I realized that I had been deprived through benign ignorance of knowing about this literary history. I decided that, if I had one book in me, I wanted it to be all about me, and the me in this case was a multifaceted me" (qtd. In Vinson 1).

Accordingly, all of Naylor's works underscore the African American rich and complex history, bring the African American interests to the center of literature, envision a new black community, and celebrate black women's existence as well as struggle. Years after her graduation, Naylor becomes more acquainted with black women writers whose works were a source of inspiration. "At one point, we were taught that American literature was only a task for white-middle men", Naylor asserts, "When I finally discovered writers like Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston, it was like a whole hidden world opened up to me" (DiConsiglio 3).

Being influenced by some women writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison (Karunesh & Somveer 1), it is no surprise that Naylor produces her *the Women of Brewster Place* as a novel that not only responds to the wide-ranging concerns of black women writers but most notably does respond "to patriarchal society's devaluation of

women by revalorizing female values" (Christian, "Naylor's Geography"118). Barbara Christian asserts that Naylor strongly retorts "the Western patriarchal emphasis on the individual" by focusing on the "necessity of honoring female values" ("Naylor's Geography"118). To some critics like John DiConsiglio, Morrison and Walker's influence on Naylor is just a starting point in her literary career- a starting point that permits Naylor's fiction to surpass even the one of Morrison and Walker. Outstandingly, Naylor's fiction in general and *The Women of Brewster Place* in particular, surpassing Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and Morrison's *Sula* (1973), focus more on place and shared memories with characters that revere the strength generated by empathy and union of women to face racial and androcentric oppression (DiConsiglio 4).

Yet, like most works written by an African American woman writer, *The Women of Brewster Place* has received criticism, denigration, and even disparagement. The novel has been reproved for lacking unity and objectivity. It was described as "a short story sequence, a contingent novel, a composite novel, short story composite, anthology novel, integrated short-story collection, a hybrid novel" (Nicosia 193). The novel was even accused of being unoriginal presenting characters that are often described as "archetypal, stereotypical, or flat" (Labin 2). After all, in its essence, the novel presents interconnecting stories in which all the women of the novel, being stereotypes of the African American woman and her daily struggle, rely on each other and eventually come together celebrating the power of women's communion in forging their sense of selfhood. Interestingly, the novel highlights the strength generated by women's communion, on the one hand; and the fulfillment of the quest of selfhood by one's sense of belonging and harmony with community, on the other.

II. The Colored Daughters of Brewster Place: A Story of Seven Women

The novel brought Naylor great acclaim because of its intersectional nature in treating race, gender, and class issues. Most of all, it is unique in the way it breaks the tradition of focusing on a unique protagonist- a point that makes the novel worth analyzing. *The Women of Brewster Place* tells the diverse stories of seven women who eventually have to come together and form a tightly knit society that enables each and every woman of them to achieve her selfhood. Focusing on a group of women characters rather than one is in itself a form of resistance against the male dominated standards of canonized literature- a genre that Sandra Zagarell calls the "narrative of community" (454). The latter, Nina Auerbach maintains, is a genre that defies the individualistic male ethos and "the solitary woman living for and through men, attaining citizenship in the community of adulthood through masculine approval alone" and replaces them by idolizing the communion and unity of women (5).

The Women of Brewster Place, composed of seven stories, portrays the life of desperate, poor, abused, abandoned, bright, strong, and firm black women belonging to different backgrounds and classes but live together in the imaginary street of Brewster place. The latter is sequestered by a wall embodying the various limitations the denizens suffer from. On the diversity of women characters in her novel, Naylor in an interview with Kay Bonetti explains:

> One character, one female protagonist could not even attempt to represent the richness or diversity of the black female experience**.** So, the women in that work you find consciously differ, beginning with something as simple as their skin color, and they differ in their ages, their religious backgrounds, their

> personal backgrounds, their political affiliations, even their sexual preferences. (qtd. In Vinson 1)

Interestingly, the novel portrays the women's craving to quench their search for selfhood. Preys of social, sexual and racial bigotry, the women struggle to survive the woeful circumstances they live in, and most importantly endeavor to form a firm sense of selfhood. Though each woman struggles "like an ebony phoenix, each in her own time" (Naylor 5), I argue that they transcend the sordid surrounding they live in, impose an unyielding sense of female black selfhood, and celebrate radiantly liberation only when they rely on each other and form a firm communion. Actually, Naylor's vision of selfhood is quite unique in the sense that she declines the notion of selfhood relying on separating oneself from the others. On the contrary, Naylor assumes in her novel that selfhood hinges on "the connectedness among individuals" that "provides Black women deeper, more meaningful self-definitions" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 113). In that, Naylor provides instances of women who fail in forming their selfhood when relying solely on themselves and separating themselves from the women in their community but ultimately reach an unwavering selfhood when connecting with, helping, tolerating differences and communicating with other women.

Believing that the individual black woman has received, to a certain extent, enough attention, Naylor creates her *The Women of Brewster Place* to deal with a whole community formed by black women. Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* Celie in *The Color Purple*, Helga in *Quicksand*, as well as Sula and Nel in *Sula,* are just examples of individual women who struggle to achieve their selfhood, who are abetted by other women, and who reach satisfactory endings. Nevertheless, and despite of their focus on

black women's search for selfhood, none of the previous novels underline the power of the group in forming a woman's identity and selfhood or break the tradition of the unique female protagonist and at the same time celebrate female communion. After all, for Naylor, a woman may slake her quest of selfhood but the latter is maintained and strengthened only by the support of other women by forming a matriarchal communion. *The Women of Brewster Place* is worth examining for it stands as an umbrella that covers some of the issues treated by the previously mentioned novels, and above all tackles a new aspect which is that of the necessity of women's liaisons in forming selfhood. Interestingly enough, the novel rejects the restrictive sense of selfhood and calls for a more inclusive selfhood merged in collective experience.

Brewster Place, "The bastard child of several clandestine meetings" (1), is the setting that gathers various women with different stories but each is linked to others in one way or another. "These women come from a variety of backgrounds, with individual goals and dreams; they experience, fight against and sometimes transcend—the fate of the black women in America today" (Naylor, Book Cover). Based on these women, the novel consists of seven narratives telling the stories of Mattie Michael, Etta Mae Johnson, Lucielia, Kiswana, Cora Lee, Lorraine and Theresa by recounting their past through flashbacks and portraying their present situations. The novel presents an unconventional love story- a love story between women. The women's love and care becomes a defense mechanism against men's absence and abuse, racial bigotry, and poverty.

The first woman who is devastated by men is Mattie Michael. After Butcher Fuller's escape and her pregnancy as well as her father's wrath, Mattie is solaced by her friend Etta Mae Johnson and Miss Eva. Miss Eva has always said to Mattie that she is spoiling

her son, Basil, but Mattie insists on being too protective until he becomes selfish and offensive. Basil's crime and carelessness lead Mattie to be homeless again finding herself in Brewster Place. And it is Etta Mae again who helps Mattie in finding a house in Brewster Place. Etta Mae Johnson, a constant wanderer who loves temporary liaisons with men, ends up lonely after her deception with the preacher Moreland Woods. The latter leaves Etta Mae in distress, but she ultimately finds "love and comfort" in her friend Mattie. The novel, then, moves to a more vigorous and less victimized woman, named Kiswana Browne, who tries to find and assert her female black selfhood. Kiswana believes in social upgrade and women's support, and she implements that with Cora Lee, a young woman obsessed with babies. Lucielia, another victim of men's capriciousness, irresponsibility, selfishness, and domination, is saved from her throbbing despondency by Mattie. The novel, ultimately, presents the story of two lesbians, Lorraine and Theresa, who try to escape the heterosexism they suffer form. Lorraine is the victim of Baker's machoism and androcentrism who brutalizes and rapes her. It is only after this event that all the women are united and act together, even if it is only in Mattie's dream. The women demolish the wall that isolates Brewster Place and represents the social and sexual injustices imposed on them. The novel's ending celebrates the healing power of women's union not only in fighting back injustices, but mostly in fulfilling their quest of self-fulfillment and self-assertion as the outcome of one's sense of belongingness.

Though the novel recounts stories of different women, it does relate them by their residence, Brewster Place. The latter is cut off from the rest of the world by a wall. Each woman "will somehow relate to that wall" as Naylor explains it to Bonetti (qtd. in Vinson 5). As long as this wall exists, each woman will continue to exist not only individually

but also collectively. Brewster Place becomes the only home the devastated women could find. “Brewster Place became especially fond of its colored daughters as they milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make it a home” (4). Trapped in that dead-end street, the women share certain details of their lives; they experience “the birth and the death of their dreams” (Labin 2). These dreams center on fighting back the sexism and social injustices as well as asserting their selfhood in the face of social prejudices.

II.1.Mattie Michael: a Sapphire and a Welfare/Unfitting Mother

A uniting figure in the novel whose story marks the beginning of women’s saga of suffering and struggle in Brewster Place is Mattie Michael. The problems in Mattie’s existence stem from the men she knows- her father, Butcher, and her son. They prove to be disquieting, manipulating, and egocentric patriarchal figures. If not causing trouble and sorrow, these men abandon Mattie in greatest moments of need; Butcher forsakes Mattie and his responsibility as a father, her own father tortures her and selfishly blames her, and her son deceives her by escaping prison causing the loss of her house. These repeated deceptions and assaults transmute Mattie and egg on her quest of selfhood. Auspiciously, she becomes a leading character, a mentor, and a mother figure for many women once in Brewster Place.

Before going to Brewster place, Mattie spent her early years in Tennessee under the over protective and severe authority of her father. Her father’s oppressive surveillance and exaggerated care made of Mattie a compliant and docile creature willing to accurately follow the orders she receives. By dominating Mattie and strictly molding her behavior instead of orienting and raising her awareness about her society, her father created a daughter who does not only obey his orders but the ones of everyone seeming

convincing and imposing. She becomes the victim of social isolation, lack of communication with the external world, and manipulation of her conduct.

Though she knows that "her father would kill her if he heard she had been seen walking with Butch Fuller", she is easily deluded by the convincing and charming words of Butch Fuller (10). Recognizing that Mattie is the kind of a young woman who is easily manipulated, Butch Fuller firmly tells her: "now that I done gone through all that, I hope I can get what I came for," he said slowly, as he looked her straight in the eyes." (9). When feeling that Mattie is hesitant and afraid of her father and after "reading her[Mattie's] thoughts", Butch skillfully makes Mattie change her mind after telling her: "of course, now, if a big woman like you is afraid of what her daddy might say?" (10). Finally, Butch got what he "came for" leaving Mattie facing her father's wrath and society's cruelty.

Once Mattie breaks the rules of her father and behaves in a liberated way, she suffers from his fury. After knowing his daughter's pregnancy and feeling that his venerable patriarchal authority has been violated, Samuel Michael beats mercilessly the daughter he claims to cherish but who "had chosen this man's [Butch] side against him". "… he tried to stamp out what had hurt him the most and was now brazenly taunting him_ her disobedience" (23).

Samuel Michael's reaction and violence towards his daughter is but the outcome of his socially inherent authority over his family and his daughter. Within patriarchal families, husbands should control and have authority over their wives and children, Collins explains (*From Black* 41). Even violence within familial frames is considered to be

natural. “For women with spouses who batter and children with abusive parents, domination becomes intertwined with love” (Collins, *From Black* 41).

Not chastising or even rebuking the true convict and womanizer Butch Fuller proves the patriarchal hypocrisy and bias through curbing women’s freedom and manipulating evidence. As such, just like any other androcentric figure, instead of consoling his daughter in her quandary, Mattie’s father puts all the blame on his daughter to satisfy his own mannish vanity. He ruthlessly beats his daughter turning her into a “pile of torn clothes and bruised flesh on the floor” (24). Used to obedience, “instinctively her body cried to obey” (22), but did not only to protect her baby.

It is thanks to the nurturing and protective love Mattie’s mother offers to her that Mattie evades her father’s cruelty. She determinedly defies her husband saying: “Hit my child again and I’ll meet your soul in hell!” (24). She turns to her daughter placating her:

> Ain’t nothing to be shamed of. Havin’ a baby is the most natural thing there is. The Good Book call children a gift from the Lord. And there ain’t no place in that Bible of His that say babies is sinful. The sin is the fornicatin’, and that’s over and done with. God done forgave you of that a long time ago, and what’s going on in your belly now ain’t nothin’ to hang your head about—you remember that? (20)

Though it is difficult for women to resist family practices that oppress them (Collins, *From Black* 41), a growing consciousness and thoughtfulness prompts Mattie to mull over her current life and future possibilities. Her father’s aggressiveness and Butch’s vile nature make her see herself and her life differently. She is no longer that naïve obedient girl who can be easily controlled. The experience she has gone through makes of her a

decisive responsible woman who wants to have life in hand. Mattie's metamorphosis towards her life in general and men in particular marks just the beginning of her quest towards selfhood. The starting point of her journey is her decision to leave home and go to Ashville. Mattie becomes determined to maintain her self- assertion as well as economic independence to raise her son Basil appropriately. However, she has never expected that her own son will betray her and will turn into selfish and manipulative man. "Sugar cane and summer and Papa and Basil and Butch. And the beginning- the beginning of her long, winding journey to Brewster" (8). This quotation summarizes Mattie's source of trouble and the beginning of her struggle.

"We don't take children", "where's your husband?", and "This is a respectable place!" become a part of Mattie's daily life (29-30). Despite the callous social criticism and rejection she suffers from, Mattie struggles to fulfill her son's needs. By presenting Mattie's daily fight against the economic and social ordeals, Naylor is speaking for all the black women of her time who endure abuse and maltreatment for being single mothers. Mattie along with many black single mothers represent what Collins names as "unfitting mothers" (*From Black* 55). Collins maintains that there are two types of mothers: "'real' mothers and "unfitting mother". While "'real' mothers" are "affluent, married, white, and holding American citizenship" and "fit cultural criteria for idealized motherhood", "unfitting mothers" belong to "other categories of women of the wrong social class, marital status, race, and citizenship status" and "are judged to be less fit and less worthy to be mothers" (Collins, *From Black* 55). It is within this social atmosphere and dogmas that Mattie, the "unfitting mother", struggles to survive and ensure a better life for her son.

In one of Mattie's worst moments of agony, after having no money or place to go to, and while "she was so tired that she couldn't think, and her legs were starting to tremble from lack of sleep and the heavy load she had carried around all the day", Mattie finds an old woman named Eva Turner who becomes a surrogate mother for her. "Mattie followed her[Eva] up the stone steps, trying to adjust her mind to this rapid turn of events and the nameless old woman who had altered their destinies" (32). With Eva's constant help for her, Mattie finishes by finding a job in a book bindery to provide for her son.

While Mattie has been developing a growing strength, an eminent sense of responsibility, and an exaggerated protective attitude towards her son Basil, her son was developing an egocentric nature, a repugnant undependable nature, and a careless attitude. In a way, Mattie falls in the stereotype of the welfare mother who fails to properly raise her children as being responsible, mature, and endorsers of work ethic (Collins, *Black Feminist* 79). Noticing how Basil is growing indolent, selfish and taking advantage of his mother's excessive love for him since his young age, Eva advises Mattie to be firm with her "little spoiled nigger" (39). Mattie, however, disregards Eva's advice until she later regrets the "void in his being that has been padded and cushioned over the years, and now that covering had grown impregnable" (52). Mattie's problems with Basil is just an example of the majority of single black mothers as conducted in a study by Ladner and Gourdine who found that these mothers "complained about their own unmet emotional and social needs. They appeared to feel "powerless in coping with the demands made by their children. They comment frequently that their children show them

no respect, do not listen to their advice, and place little value on their role as parents" (qtd. in Collins, *Black Feminist* 63).

Expectedly, Basil fails his mother. Though he was assured that he will be acquitted, he is afraid of the idea of enduring a trial and thus runs away. Besides his spoiled nature, Basil's actions with his mother are representatives of the many black men who rarely, if not never, feel compelled to care for black women and who prioritize "self-preservation" (hooks, *Ain't I* 35). It is this instinct of "self-preservation" that propels Basil to abandon his mother and ruin her life. Furthermore, it is Mattie's sense of selflessness that intensifies Basil's egoism and sense of self preservation. Collins both in her *From Black Power to Hip Hop* and *Black Feminist Thought* maintains that African American women are victims of their own adherence to the social belief about the necessity of being self-sacrificing. These expectations of sacrifice often border on exploitation. As such, many black women and black mothers pay the cost of neglecting their own needs expecting that their children may provide solace and love (*Black Feminist* 196-97; *From Black* 143).

Having only faded memories, Mattie "tried to recapture the years and hold them for introspection, so she could pinpoint the transformation, but they slipped through her fingers and skid down the dishes, hidden under the iridescent bubbles that broke with the slightest movement of her hand" (53). After losing her house and her son, Mattie ends up lonely in Brewster Place. Interestingly enough, Mattie, this time, experiences a salient awakening. Thinking that the moment she defied her father and left Tennessee was the greatest change and fulfillment of her life, Mattie realizes now that it was but a first step in her struggle against social injustices and patriarchal abuse; her son's cruelty and

mischief become the substantiation. Mattie's metamorphosis starts when she recognizes that Basil is not her cherished son but a man like all the men she suffered from in her life. Starting a new life, asserting her selfhood, fighting back social and gender injustices, and helping other women surrounding her become the aspiration of Mattie. On this new life, Mattie states that "All the beautiful plants that once had an entire sun porch for themselves in the home she had exchanged thirty years of her life to pay for" just like her "would now have to fight…"(7).

II.2.Etta Mae: Refusing to Play by the Rule

Just like Mattie, Etta Mae is the victim of the predominant sexist and racial ideologies that restricted black women's life and their notion of self-definition (K. Walker 63). Etta spent her youth in Rock Vale which was not ready for her "blooming independence" (60). In her early days, Etta suffered from white men's control and injustice. In spite of that, she insisted on displaying her rebellious nature. Her persistence on "just being herself" and her untamed demeanor were disturbing to her surrounding (60). "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" (60). Once she rejects the sexual advances of a white man, her father paid the price by having his properties destructed. Gloria Naylor explains:

> But Rutherford County was not ready for Etta's blooming independence; and so she left one rainy summer night about three hours ahead of dawn and Jonny Brick's furious pursuing relatives. Mattie wrote and told her they had waited in ambush for two days on the county line, and then had retuned and burned down

> her father's barn. The sheriff told Mr. Johnson that he had gotten off mighty light-considering. Mr. Johnson thought so too. After reading Mattie's letter, Etta was sorry she hadn't killed the horny white bastard when she had the chance. (60)

Interestingly, Naylor, through the life of Etta Mae, depicts the abusive social conditions that impel black women to move from the south to the north pursuing a selfhood beyond canonized and preconceived ideals. Unlike Mattie, for instance, who decides to assert her selfhood by eliminating all relationships with men in her life, Etta pursues defying social codes and fulfilling her spirit of independence through roaming from one city to another and establishing ephemeral relationships with men. Etta's attempt to pursue her freedom through relationships with men reflects the limited choices she has. The latter is based on the flawed conceptions of being a black woman (K. Walker 63). Though Etta thought that her frivolous liaisons would challenge the predominant sexist and racial ideology, they just fossilize the stereotype of the black woman as being a "sexual savage" who is "available and eager" for relationships with men (hooks, *Ain't I* 52).

Etta gradually understands that her strategy is by no means a liberating one due to the nothingness she plunges in. Consequently, she becomes convinced that she should try the other "stereotypical" image of the "good woman" (Ball 2). She becomes convinced that she cannot disregard adhering to the norm, having stability, and getting married. Etta's emergent desire echoes Collins' description of the conventional idealized family. The latter is "a well-functioning family" that "protects and balances the interests of all its

members", Collins asserts. "Held together by primary emotional bonds of love and caring", conventional assumptions, view family as "a private haven from a public world" (*From Black* 39).

Finding a preacher named Reverend Moreland Woods, Etta thinks that she has found the appropriate man to settle down with. But like all other men, he seduces her and then abandons her. Etta's feral and unruly nature betrays her; Reverend Woods easily knew that "Etta was the type of woman who not only knew which way to turn, but, more often than not, had built her own roads when nothing else was accessible" (68). The Reverend's view about Etta resembles most black men who claim that they could not get along with black women because they were loose, uncontrollable, even evil (hooks, *Ain't I* 85). He by no means sees in Etta a future wife, and Mattie easily recognized what "he's got in mind" (69). Mattie tries to warn her friend but Etta falls in the Reverend's trap. The relationship between Etta and Reverend depicts the countless deformed black female/male relationships. Commenting on the prevalent type of relationships between black men and women, hooks maintains that that black women "rarely experience natural love". She further explains that "the love quality, plus the quality of respect for females is impoverished by the pimp/whore syndrome imposed for so long" (*Ain't I* 116).

After her affair with the Reverend and her abysmal deception, an "uncanny fear" haunts Etta- the fear of never being able to rise up again. But then, she is relieved by the idea of having Mattie to console and anchor her. While coming back to Mattie's house, she is reassured that "…someone [Mattie] was waiting up for her". She "laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps toward the light and the love and the comfort that

awaited her" (74). The serenity that Etta feels stems from her friend's presence. She is certain of Mattie's constant backing for she has always been there for her in moments of grief and joy. In sum, Mattie is a refuge for Etta.

Even when Mattie is hurt by Etta's words, she resorts to their memories to justify her attitude: "they shared at least a hundred memories that could belie those cruel words. Let them speak for her" (70). Mattie is a confidant, a mother figure, and a guru. The narrator explains that "Sometimes being a friend means mastering the art of timing. There is time for silence. A time to let go and allow people to hurl themselves into their own destiny. And a time to prepare to pick up the pieces when it's all over" (70). Mattie masters all of these skills. She never ceases to support Etta even when she keeps on being wrong. Knowing that Etta's itinerary has taken the wrong direction, Mattie persists on orienting her towards a more efficient strategy to attain selfhood.

Basically, Mattie relies on sororal love, the power of memories, and communal strength. After Mattie and Etta's fight, Mattie resorts to her memories with her friend and Etta is reassured of having her friend caringly waiting for her. According to Linda Wells, this incident depicts Mattie's appeasing impact and "ennobling power of love" in sustaining her friend (qtd. in Vinson 7). Furthermore, Mattie insists on showing Etta the power of sharing and the power of belonging to community when taking her to church. Though Etta concentrates more on seducing the minister, she gradually comprehends the power inherent within a community. She "looked at her[Mattie], at them all, and was very envious"- envious of the power they gain once together (64). Gradually, as she sits with the church congregation, she sees "the scenes of her life reeled out before her with

the same aging script; but now hindsight sat as the omniscient director and had the young star of her epic recite different brilliant lines" (64). As such, Mattie successfully incites Etta to muse about her selfhood in relation to her past, her present, her future and relate it to the community. The latter enables Etta to become conscious of her "identity through time" (Vinson 7). Instead of finding stability and a permanent place with a man, Mattie helps Etta in finding a home in Brewster Place as a community of black women asserting their "…humanity, specialness, and right to exist" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 102).

II.3. Kiswana: a Committed Activist

While Mattie and Etta were forced to leave their homes and found Brewster Place as their unique refuge, Melanie Browne, a young educated woman coming from a rich family, deliberately decides to go to Brewster Place. Though Mattie is the mother figure and the savior of other women in Brewster Place, Melanie proves to be also influential in uplifting women in her community. Before coming to Brewster Place, Melanie lived in Linden Hill where she felt that she is deracinated of her identity and origins. For a woman like Melanie who cherishes her origins, living in an aristocratic racist white community is her greatest torment. Defiantly, she leaves her home, changes her name and lives in Brewster Place. By adopting the African name "Kiswana", she intends to celebrate and assert her African roots.

Unlike her haughty mother who talks about the people of Brewster Place with a degrading tone describing them as "these people", Kiswana angrily answers her mother: "what do you mean, *these people*. They are my people and yours, too, Mama – we're all Black. But maybe you've forgotten that over in Linden Hills" (83). By presenting both

Kiswana and her mother and their conflicting beliefs, Naylor highlights the intersectional nature of the oppression black people are subject to besides gender, class, economic and racial discrimination impair the lives of black women. Kiswana rejects the very truth that her parents' money and social status strengthen her position in defending her people. She also rejects the "bourgie" school and the future influential job her parents' money will insure believing that it will encumber her quest for selfhood and individuality. Kiswana's social and racial views are similar to Collins' beliefs about the common fate and oppression of black people and black women in particular. Collins maintains that all black women are one way or another all affected by intersecting oppressions regardless of their social class or other differences among them. Living in a society that has always demeaned African-American women, black women inevitably face similar challenges and hardships (*Black Feminist* 25). Similary, hooks explains that "Within the institutionalized race, sex, class social system in our society black females were clearly at the bottom of the economic totem pole" (*Feminsim Is* 40)

Defiantly, Kiswana tells her mother: "my place was in the streets with my people, fighting for equality and a better community" (83). It is in Brewster Place that Kiswana believes she can be self-assertive, incite other black women to assert their selfhood, and uplift her black people. Refusing to be "a white's man nigger who's ashamed of being black" like her mother whose chief purpose is survival, Kiswana insists on struggling with her people and sharing as well as experiencing their misery (85). Embracing feminist and liberation ideals, Kiswana social uplift "lies with a vision of social change which challenges class elitism" (hooks, *Feminsim Is* 43).

Kiswana's mother tries to indoctrinate her daughter telling her: "you constantly live in a fantasy world- always going to extremes turning butterflies into eagles, and life isn't about that. It's accepting what is and working from that" (85). Kiswana had high expectation and thought that her goals would be easily achieved, but at one moment her mother seemed right and the conditions once in Brewster Place proved to be very challenging. In her "Autonomous, but Not Alone: The Reappropriation of Female Community in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Housekeeping*", Karen Walker explains that "Kiswana comes to Brewster Place with good intentions of uniting the community in a campaign to improve living conditions there, but her efforts instead highlight the alienation of the women in the community, as well as the cycle of male oppression that forces that position" (64). Despite her young age and her previous luxurious life, Kiswana succeeds in raising the awareness of the women of Brewster Place and uniting them to fight their tyrant white landowner. By bringing the community together against their landlord and helping other women, Kiswana defies not only her mother but also the social regulations proving that survival does not require submission or acceptance of the imposed social codes.

II.4. Cora Lee's Deviated Motherhood

One of Kiswana's achievements is helping Cora Lee with properly raising her children, liberating her from sexual exploitation, and fulfilling a self-sustained selfhood. Cora Lee, an obsessed woman with babies, makes of having babies with the numerous "shadow" men her preferable occupation. Just like in her childhood when she "was an easy child to please" (108), Cora Lee once a woman becomes an easy prey for men who "showed her the thing that felt good in the dark" (113). In that, the narrator explains: "the

thing that felt good in the dark would sometimes bring the new babies, and that's all she cared to know, since the shadows would often lie about their last names or their jobs or not having wives. She had stopped listening, stopped caring to know" (114).

Accordingly, Evelynn Hammonds explains that black women's body and sexuality is often associated with speechlessness, silence, void, and darkness. Such associations underscore black women's bodies as mere controlled vessels of their subjugated souls (qtd. in Collins, *Black Feminist* 123-24). An example of this manipulation and abuse is Cora Lee's submission to men because they dominate her body. The narrator explains the infuriating obedience Cora Lee presents to one of the men she knew:

> …she had almost learned to cope with his peculiar ways. A pot of burnt rice would mean a fractured jaw, or a wet bathroom floor a loose tooth, but that had been their fault for keeping her so tied up she couldn't keep the house straight. But she still carried the scar under her left eye because of a baby's crying, and you couldn't stop a baby from crying. Babies had to cry sometimes, and so Sammy and Maybelline's father had to go. (113)

By giving the example of Cora Lee, Naylor seems to expose and condemn social views about black womanhood and motherhood. The latter is best explained by Collins in her *From Black Power to Hip Hop.* According to Collins, more often than not, ideological constructions engender myriad degrading views about black women. African American women are seen as bad "'unfit' mothers", "sexually irresponsible", "abusive mothers", and "welfare queens" (68). Collins, just like Naylor's depiction of Cora Lee's tragic routine, amends black womanhood and motherhood by explaining that because of

the segregationist policies and their inaccessibility to educational and proper social assistance and knowledge, black women often fail to perform their responsibilities (*Black Feminist* 195). Actually, it is this lack of education that aggravates Cora Lee's situation. Her parents noticed that their daughter was different and suffered from something, but they never tried to know what was wrong with her nor attempted to protect her. Cora Lee, who seems to be psychologically unstable, finds it difficult to resist men's beastliness or take care of her children.

In all the chaos and abuse Cora Lee lives, Kiswana arrives bringing hope, optimism and change in her life. Kiswana saw the desperate life Cora Lee was having and was passing on to her children. Thus, she decides to help Cora Lee by awakening her motherly love and aspiration for a self-contained selfhood. By so doing, Kiswana, as a successful black activist, implements her liberating ideology in empowering Cora through inciting and fostering a sense of self-reliance (Collins, *Black Feminist* 219).

Kiswana does not rely only on consciousness raising to alter and uplift Cora Lee, but also relies on performing her role as an "othermother". Similar to Collins views about "othermothers", Stanlie M. James in "Mothering: A Possible Black Feminist Link to Social Transformation?" explains how crucial the othermothers' role is in assisting "blood mothers" in their responsibilities. James adds that othermothers's role vary from serving to relieve blood mothers from the stress and frustration resulting from the external pressures and their inability to meet their children's needs, to acting as role models for children (46).

By helping Cora Lee, Kiswana metamorphoses Cora's family life, and fulfills her desire of uplifting others around her. Kiswana's intentions and acts towards Cora are primarily triggered by her love of her community, and "there is no better place" bell hooks explains, "to learn the art of loving than in community" (*All about* 129). Kiswana's love of Cora's children prompted her to invite them to watch a play- an act that becomes a turning point in Cora's family. It is thanks to Kiswana's love and support that Cora Lee's self-esteem, as an individual and a mother, is restored and intensified. She starts to perceive her children differently thinking about the necessity of taking care of them and preparing them for a possible bright future. Cora's newly acquired energy is directed not only towards her children's education but also towards establishing a firm sense of selfhood. Kiswana takes Cora Lee out from a state of lethargy to vitality, evasion to confrontation, and surrender to desire to fight. In that, the narrator closes Cora Lee's story with an unusual description: "She[Cora] then went through her apartment, turning off the lights and breathing in hopeful echoes of order and peace that lay in the clean house" (127).

In the miserable environment the women of Brewster Place live in, Support, consolation, and succor never cease to exist. Examples of that are Mattie and Kiswana's support of other women in the novel. Still, it is Mattie who triggers nearly all the motion in the novel. Linda Wells explains that Mattie is "the central connecting force in the text", "the foundational matriarch", "the primary agent of female coalescence", and "the moral agent in the novel" (qtd. in Vinson 6-7).

II.5. Ciel: From Fantasy to Reality

Lucielia Louse Turner (Ciel) is one of the survivors thanks to Mattie's healing powers. Through the story of Ciel, Naylor depicts black men's irresponsibility and apathy towards women's suffering. Ciel, a young beautiful girl, is married to Eugene, "a tall, skinny black man with arrogance and selfishness", and has a baby (93). When she is pregnant again, Eugene, unable to support his family, forces her to abort. Eugene, like most men in the novel, is the incarnation of the abusive egocentric male figure. An example of that is one of the conversations with Ciel where he tells her: "I'm fucking sick of never getting ahead. Babies and bills, that's all you good for" (94). Eugene's words reveal how careless he is about his family and how frustrated he is about his inability to improve his economic status. Eugene's attitude towards his family and economic status correspond the cases of many black men in the American society. Collins and hooks' examination of black men's status is worth mentioning in this case. While hooks states that black men not only objectify and underestimate black women's suffering but also resent and accuse their wives and children for their failure (A*in't I* 76-101), Collins specifies that these black men become dangerous to those closest to them (*Black Feminist* 158). Indeed, Eugene ends up by inflicting psychological and physical pain on both his wife and daughter.

Besides the adrocentric bias she suffers from, Ciel's desperation is furthered by her inability to confront neither her past nor her husband. She creates a secluded world where she passively buries all her painful memories and darkest thoughts. It was because of this hidden world that she "found it difficult to connect herself up again with her own world"

(95). Once again, when Eugene threatens to leave her, she tries to explain to him the painful memories of her abortion, but does not because “that would require that she uncurl that week of her life, pushed safely up into her head, when she had done all those terrible things for that other woman who had wanted an abortion”(100). Ciel searches “desperately for the right words” to exteriorize her fears and harrowing experience but fails (100). While Ciel was begging Eugene to change his mind about his selfish decision to leave them, their daughter, Serena, dies because of an electrocution. Serena’s death propels Ciel into a total state of oblivion. The feelings of “numbness and bleakness”, as Kai Erickson explains, that haunt Ciel are the “classical symptoms of trauma” (183-84).

Along Ciel’s journey of agony and suffering, it is Mattie who spurs her to change her life and overthrow the idealistic vision she had about her life and Eugene. Trying the defend Eugene and justify her love for him, Ciel says:

> “Oh, Mattie, you don't understand. He's really straightened up this time. He's got a new job on the docks that pays real good, and he was just so depressed before with the new baby and no work. You'll see. He's even gone out now to buy paint and stuff to fix up the apartment. And, and Serena needs a daddy” (91-92). But Mattie firmly tells her: “You ain't gotta convince me, Ciel”. (92)

Trying again to embellish Eugeune’s portrait, Ciel proudly says that her daughter loves her father and always repeats his name. But Mattie brings her back to reality by telling her: “Better teach her your name. …She’ll be using it more” (92). Ciel’s insistence on ignoring Mattie’s advice and embellishing Eugene’s image echoes Collins statements about the numerous women who reject advice that promote self-preservation at the

expense of their relationships with men. Because they see that self-preservation ideals as feminist principles and because they see that these principles are “anti-family and against Black men”, they often “do not want to give up men- they want Black men to change” (*Black Feminist* 152).

Mattie, being herself a survivor of men’s baseness, perseveres in enlightening Ciel and reinstating her to reality. According to Demetrice A. Worley, being realistic, sharing knowledge, and supporting each other are the means by which black women ensure survival and self-assertion. “Only overt and covert knowledge, passed from one generation of African American women to the next directly aids the survival of African American women” (1). Consequently, Mattie evokes the truth about Eugene because “fantasy has no chance of survival in Brewster Place. Mattie bursts the bubble of Lucielia’s dream world” (9). Furthermore, Mattie triggers Ciel’s reasoning by being sometimes implicit in her words. When Ciel accuses Mattie of hating Eugene, Mattie calmly responds “May be I just love you too much” (95). Such an answer does not only confirm Mattie’s love for Ciel and her daughter, but does also question Eugene’s feelings towards them and insinuate that Ciel needs someone who truly deserves and loves her. Mattie’s persistence on making Ciel see the truth gradually becomes fruitful. In that, the narrator explains that Ciel gradually becomes aware that whenever she defends Eugene, “she wasn’t talking to Mattie, she was talking to herself. …Ciel's mouth flew open to ask her what she meant by that, but she checked herself. It was useless to argue with Mattie. You could take her words however you wanted. The burden of truth lay with you, not with her" (92).

Mattie's words compel Ciel to see the reality of things and look beyond the surface meaning of words. In her *Talking Voices*, Deborah Tannen asserts that a good speaker should make the listener take part in the conversation, and most importantly incite his/her critical thinking. She adds: "by requiring the listener...to fill in unstated meaning, indirectness contributes to a sense of involvement through mutual participation in sensemaking" (23). Every time Lucielia has to fill in the "unstated meaning of Mattie's words, she is helping herself make sense of her world" (Tannen 23). Similarly, on the power of words, the speaker, and the interaction between speaker and listener, Stephen Tyler maintains: "…an utterance speaks more than it says, meditates between past and future, transcends the speaker's conscious thought, and creates in the mind of the hearer worlds unanticipated" (qtd. in Tannen 24). This is exactly what Mattie does with Ciel. Every time she speaks to Ciel, she enables her to confront her past, mull over her state of subordination and current life with Eugene, and reflect about her future.

Despite Mattie's constant guidance and support, Ciel's reveries about the life she wished to have with Eugnene engulfed her until the death of Serena. Eventually, it is Mattie again who saves Ciel from her sorrow and "the closing off the spirit" she undergoes (101). Advising and sharing "interpersonal memories of loss" seems to be ineffective with Ciel (Vinson 9). The latter is crystal clear when a neighbor woman tries to comfort Ciel:

> A neighbor woman entered in studied certainty and stood in the middle of the room. "Child, I know how you feel, but don't do this to yourself. I lost one, too. The Lord will ..." And she choked, because the words were jammed down into

> her throat by the naked force of Ciel's eyes. Ciel had opened them fully now to look at the woman, but raw fires had eaten them worse than lifeless—worse than death. The woman saw in that mute appeal for silence the ragings of a personal hell flowing through Ciel's eyes. And just as she went to reach for the girl's hand, she stopped as if a muscle spasm had overtaken her body and, cowardly, shrank back. Reminiscences of old, dried-over pains were no consolation in the face of this. They had the effect of cold beads of water on a hot iron—they danced and fizzled up while the room stank from their steam. (102)

While at the beginning Mattie relies on retrieving Ciel from her unrealistic world, she later on employs a more effective strategy which is that of connecting Ciel to the collective history and memory of women. Thanks to Mattie, "Ciel's experience moves from an exclusive individual pain, to a pain endured by centuries of women" (Vinson 9). Ciel is no longer that forlorn abandoned woman who lost her daughter and is betrayed by her husband. Mattie helps her feel, Wells explains, that she belongs to a large tightly knit community of other miserable abused women "…Who too had to find a way to exercise the pain" (qtd. in Vinson 10). Interestingly, Ciel, just like the community Mattie inserts her in while rocking her, learns how to confront her memories of agony, externalize them, and disregard her pain. Ann Fowell Stanford describes the rocking scene as "a movement from a larger unframed history of women's brutalization and, oppression into the specific frame of her [Ciel's] own life" (qtd. in Vinson 10). Thanks to Mattie, Ciel falls into a trance and experiences a mystical rebirth as Mattie rocks her. Mattie rocks Ciel

> into a blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time. She rocked her over Aegean seas so clean they shone like crystal, so clear the fresh blood of sacrificed babies torn from their mother's arms and given to Neptune could be seen like pink froth on the water. She rocked her on and on, past Dachau, where soul-gutted Jewish mothers swept their children's entrails off laboratory floors. They flew past the spilled brains of Senegalese infants whose mothers had dashed them on the wooden sides of slave ships. And she rocked on. She rocked her into her childhood and let her see murdered dreams And she rocked her back, back into the womb, to the nadir of her hurt, and they found it—a sligh 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 huge hole, which was already starting to pus over, but Mattie was satisfied. It would heal. (103)

Mattie baths Ciel and puts her to sleep after the extraordinary rocking scene. Released from her pains and restored "to the world of the living" (Puhr 520), Mattie, the healer, is sure that Ciel is ready for the "morning that would come" and bring change with it (105). Mattie's demeanor with Ciel equates the one of the many black women who engage in consciousnessraising activities. The latter, hooks explains, relies on women bonding and creating sites where women "uncover and openly reveal the depths of their intimate wounds" (hooks, *Feminsim Is* 7-8). Ultimately, women are not only healed, but also gain strength to challenge social oppressions. Similarly, Ciel survives determined to lead a

life based on self-assertion. Thus, she leaves Brewster Place and goes to San Francisco where she finds a promising job and a reliable supportive man.

II.6. Lorraine and Theresa: Victims of Conservative Gender roles

Unlike the previous stories in the novel that deal with the struggle of a unique woman against the Intersecting gender and racial forces that thwart her sense of selfhood, the story entitled “The Two” depicts the fight of two women, Lorraine and Theresa, to protect their love and existence. As lesbians, they fight the conventional social codes that smother their liaison. Theresa is self-sufficient and satisfied with herself as being a lesbian, but Lorraine is mortified of being a lesbian and constantly seeks the acceptance of others. Despite their differences, Lorraine and Theresa represent the ultimate stanchness and love of a woman to woman. Their move to Brewster Place is the outcome of their determination to protect their couple and escape the discrimination they face in a middle-class neighborhood they used to live in.

II.6.1. Lorraine and Theresa’s rejection by the Women of Brewster Place: When the Oppressed Becomes an Oppressor

The residents of Brewster Place are displeased with the existence of the lesbians as creatures endangering the conventional structure of family. The latter mirrors the social limitations in defining a woman who is accepted only if conforming to the communal pattern. Within this framework, Collins explains that in a society that views black women’s chief mission is “inspiring Black men”, “keeping the house”, and “building blocks of the nation”; any violation or failure to fulfill these functions will result in censure (*From Black* 110). Consequently, Lesbians are viewed as a challenge to the

premises of the social system by rejecting the "conservative gender ideology essential for Black families, communities, and the Black nation" (Collins, *From Black* 111).

Lorraine, fond of communal acceptance and social uplift, asserts that:"Black people were all in the same boat-she'd come to realize this even more since they had moved to Brewster- and if they didn't row together, they would sink together" (142). Unfortunately for her, once rumors spread about her and Theresa as being lesbians, all the community rejects them. Theresa kept on reminding Lorraine of their difference and warning her about the hostility of the residents of Brewster place, but Lorraine has always believed that they are her people and she is not different from the other women. In that, she ponders "why should she feel different from the people she lived around?" (142).

Though the women of Brewster place reject the two, deep inside they knew that they are by no means different from them. Consequently, they start to look for differences to justify their act of exclusion. In her, *Dangerous Desire: Sexual Freedom and Sexual Violence Since the Sixties,* Pamela Barnett explains that "…the straight women come to realize that they themselves often look, and more importantly act, like Lesbians" (127). Similarly, both Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde explain that the heterosexual black women's exaggerated hatred and fear towards homosexual women is the result of suppressing their own feelings, connection, and sympathy towards other women for fear of being pigeonholed as lesbians. While Smith states that homophobic black women "have to speak out vociferously against lesbianism because if they don't they may have to deal with their own deep feelings for women" (qtd. in Collins, *Black Feminist* 167), Lorde adds that "the Black lesbian is an emotional threat" only to those black women

who have feelings of “kinship and love for other Black women” (49). As such, afraid of being stigmatized as lesbians and not being able to reach over the difference between themselves and the two lesbians, the women had put a wall between themselves and Lorraine and Theresa, just like the world had put a wall in Brewster Place (Vinson 11-12).

In fact, the women’s attitude towards Lorraine and Theresa reveals their docile, submissive, and subordinate state. On the one hand, the fact that they cannot tolerate Lorraine and Theresa’s love portends “an alliance with the sexist ideology of their own oppressors – both black and white” (K. Walker 66). On the other, their rejection and marginalization of the two reveal their illusive vision as being superior and privileged for being heterosexual. On this issue, Collins explains that lacking any racial or social privilege, black women often consider straightness and heterosexuality as their unique privilege (*Black Feminist* 126).

During a meeting organized by Kiswana, instead of dealing with the injustice of the landlord and the miserable conditions the people of Brewster Place are living in, Sophia, one of the women in Brewster Place, says “what we should be discussin…is that bad element that done moved in this block amongst decent people” (139-40). Believing that the sexual orientation of the two is a greater evil than their miserable conditions, the abuse of the land lord, the crimes of C.C. Baker and his gang, Sophie like the other women in Brewster Place reveal not only their inherent homophobia but mostly the preconceived ideas they are made to believe in. These women are at the same time

oppressors and victims; their condemnation of the two is the outcome of their own oppression.

> In effect, Naylor plays out the hierarchy of race, gender, and sexuality. White men oppress black men, and black men, in turn, attempt to regain power by oppressing black women. Black women, then, are the most powerless and thus are left to assume whatever authority they can – whether it is with their children, as in Cora Lee's case, or with persons of a different sexual orientation (K. Walker 66).

Furthermore, the women's rejection of Lorraine and Theresa illustrates simply their insecurity. Because of Lorraine and Theresa's independence and rejection of men, the other women perceive their relationship as a judgment and condemnation against them for being dominated by men. In fact, Sophie and the other women's condemnation of Lorraine and Theresa on the basis of their sexual orientation mirrors the social views of the time. In sum, sexuality was one aspect of the intersectional system of oppression. In the sixties, seventies and early eighties, while heterosexuality was deemed to be normal, homosexuality was believed to be deviant on the basis of binary thinking. Heterosexuality becomes one of the pillars of the hegemonic ideology. As such, just like what happens with Lorraine and Theresa, lesbians were stigmatized, sequestered, and rejected (Collins, *Black Feminist* 129).

Despite her religious beliefs and piety, it is again Mattie who defends the two lesbians. Sophia, knowing the might and impact Mattie has on other women in the community, tries to convince her of the abominableness of the two referring to the Bible. But Mattie

answers her: “My Bible also says in First Peter not to be a busybody in other people’s matters, Sophie. And the way I see it, if they ain’t botherin with what goes on in my place, why should I bother ‘bout what goes on in theirs?” (140). Unlike the narrow vision of the other women who reduce Lorraine and Theresa’s love into a mere sexual act, Mattie appreciates the bond, serenity and power that this love generates. This is explained when Mattie discusses the significance and essence of loving women with Etta: “Well, I’ve loved women, too. There was Miss Eva and Ciel, and even as ornery as you can get, I’ve loved you practically all my life... I’ve love some women deeper than I ever loved any man. …And there been some women who loved me more and did more for me than any man ever did” (141).

Mattie’s declaration is just an affirmation of her approval of the lesbians’ relationship. According to Larry Andrews, the support and power the lesbians’ relationship generates remind Mattie of the various relationships she has had with different women. Interestingly, she asserts that her relationships with other women, just like the one of the lesbians, surpass any relationship she has ever had with men “in the distorted world of black relationships” (287).

II.6.2. CC.Baker’s Hypermasculinity and the Right of Domination

The women of the community are not the only ones who reject the presence of the lesbians; the men of the community also do. The already deprived black men of any kind of power, status, education, or wealth find the lesbians’ rejection of men and their overblown independence beyond the pale. hooks describes black men’s hatred and obsession with women as an outcome of a forced racist policy that encouraged men “to

phobically focus on women as their enemy" in order to "blindly allow other forces –the truly powerful de-humanizing elements in American life-to strip them daily of their humanity" (*Ain't I* 114). As such, being themselves subjects to racial deprivation, C. C. Baker and his friends, standing for young men in Brewster Place, pour their frustration, worthlessness, and anger on Lorraine. In that, Naylor states:

> These young men always moved in a pack, or never without two or three. They needed the others continually near to verify their existence. …C.C. Baker was greatly disturbed by the thought of Lorraine. He knew of only one way to deal with women other than his mother. Before he had learned exactly how women gave birth, he knew how to please or punish or extract favors from them by the execution of what lay curled behind his fly. It was his lifeline to that part of his being that sheltered his self-respect. And the thought of any woman who lay beyond the length of its power was a threat. (161-62)

Because of her exclusion from the community and her lesbianism, Lorraine becomes the "weakest element" in the "cycle of oppression" and turns paradoxically into a threat that should be exterminated (K. Walker 67). From a similar standpoint, Collins explains that lesbianism does only instigate exclusion from the patriarchal hegemonic society, but most importantly renders lesbians vulnerable creatures open to males' domination and violence. Moving from believing that sexuality is related to an individual's "biological make up" to believing that sexuality is rooted in "a system of power", many African-American people perceive that "*heterosexism* can be defined as the belief in the inherent superiority of one form of sexual expression over another and thereby the right to

dominate" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 126-28). It is because of C.C. Baker and his gang's belief in their "right to dominate" Lorraine that they express their loathing and desire to punish her through violence (Collins, *Black Feminist* 128).

Kiswana becomes infuriated because of C.C. Baker when he harasses Lorraine. Thus, she determinably defends Lorraine. C.C. Baker, like most men in a patriarchal society, "fear[s] and resent[s] women who do not assume traditional passive roles" (hooks, *Ain't I* 79). Thus, Kiswana's strength and determination accentuate his sense of insecurity and fuel his desire to assert his power and "verify his existence" (161). It is Lorraine, later on, who pays the price of Kiswana's defiance and C. C. Baker's obsession with male domination.

"Lorraine found herself, on her knees, surrounded by the most dangerous species in existence- human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide" (70). Eventually, C.C. and his gang brutally rape Lorraine revenging their denied masculinity. This deformed sadistic assertion of masculinity corresponds to what Christopher Kilmartin and Julie Allison name "hypermasculinity". The latter is related to black men's compensation of their powerlessness depending on violence as "an acceptable and often preferred means of expressing power, dominance, and manliness" (100). Just like Kilmartin and Allison, hooks perceives black men's violence as an allusion to "a positive expression of masculinity" fostered by "insecure feelings about their selfhood". She further explains that many young black men have the impulse to show their peers and surrounding that they are bold, machos, and willing to commit violent acts. Unsurprisingly, within a sexist society that "fosters, condones, and supports

male's violence", black men become inclined to direct "frustrated aggression" towards those without power (*Ain't I* 104-05). As such, C.C. Baker and his gang perceive Lorraine's lesbianism as a violation of their power and "an attack on male [their] right to access women" (Rich 23). Violence becomes the only means to reinstate their manliness and assuage their frustration. They find it compulsory to correct and fix Lorraine's deviant and subversive orientation through rape (Barnett 133).

II.6.3.Lorraine's Rape: a Lost Soul and a Failed Female Bonding

Theresa has always told Lorraine to be proud of her lesbianism as a part of her selfhood and whole existence. So, when C.C. and his gang rape Lorraine, they aim at inserting their masculinity, punishing her for lesbianism, and above all demolishing an important aspect of her selfhood. Eventually Lorraine survives, but it is her body not her soul that does. According to Pamela Barnett, "the rape socially sexes Lorraine, reducing her to only her wounded inside, thus insisting that she is essentially female and no different from the other women" striping her of essential part of her identity (124). Evidently, After Lorraine's rape, the narrator describes the scene when Mattie sees Lorraine saying that she sees "the body crawling up the alley" (172) suggesting that all what remains of Lorraine is her body but by no means her soul.

Lorraine's rape is a warning and a protest against women's failing bonding. While Naylor depicts the positive impact of women's support and union through the stories of Mattie, Etta, Cora Lee, and Lucielia, Lorraine's rape portrays the appalling impact of this lost union. Naylor in an interview with William Goldstein explains that "in the case of Lorraine there was no woman on that block willing to help her and she was in trouble.

…And she had no one to go to" (qtd. in Vinson 11). Tragically, the women whose sense of selfhood is already endangered failed to help or support Lorraine–worse, eliminate her from their community. Cheryl Clarke explains the impact of homophobia as a phenomenon that breaks up the union of black people hindering their progress and instilling patriarchal dominance (78). More precisely, Audre Lorde, in her "I Am Your Sister. Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities" maintains that "lesbophobia and heterosexism" create more boundaries and differences among black women causing "distancing", "misunderstandings", and divisions. The latter will hinder the implementation of the ideals of sisterhood and the reclamation of their rights (qtd. in Davies 13). Similarly, the women of Brewster Place are paralyzed and unable to fight back their real enemy because of their homophobia. Mattie is the only woman who is conscious enough of impact of this divisionist attitude perpetuating homophobia. Her acceptance of Lorraine and Theresa despite their sexual orientation echoes hooks call for "push[ing] against the boundaries of heterosexism to create spaces where women, all women, irrespective of their sexual identity and/ or preference, could and can be as free as they want to be (hooks, *Feminsim Is* 98-99).

III. Towards Female Bonding

In the novel, memory plays a central role in healing the women and helping them to find a firm sense of selfhood. However, Lorraine's communal rejection, her rape and her lost memories aggravate her trauma. Lorraine is unable to retain her memories as her "screams tried to break through…But the tough rubbery flesh sent them vibrating back into her brain, first shaking lifeless the cells that nurtured her memory" (171). Not only

that Lorraine is unable to retain her memories, but even if she does no one in that stringent misogynic community will believe her. In that, when one of C.C's gang is afraid of Lorraine telling the others about their crime, C.C. Baker replies: "Man, how she gonna prove it? Your dick ain't got no fingerprints" (171).

II.6.4.Killing Ben: Reinstating Justice and Summoning Female Voices

Seeing "Ben as part of a continuum of male violence" and a passive father who witnesses his daughter's rape (Awkward 60), Lorraine with her aching body, wrecked soul, and repressive anger, conjures up all the pain she has gone through and kills Ben. Her immediate response to the pain inflicted on her reflects her desire of agency, rebellion, and deliverance. Though her raped black body is ravaged and her soul is aching, Lorraine finally decides to withstand the misogynic oppression she has been suffering from. Killing Ben is an act of rebellion, but above all an act that reveals Lorraine's determination to survive despite the atrocities she has gone through. At one moment, the act of rape reduces Lorraine into a mere body without any soul, but soon that emptiness is replaced with an eagerness to act. The act of killing Ben is not just an atonement for her pain and rape, but also an act to inflict some sort of justice. Similarly, Virginia Fowler maintains that Lorraine's murder of Ben "provides a kind of poetic justice for all the women who have been assaulted by men in the course of the novel" (54).

Though both are tragic, Lorraine's rape and the moment of killing Ben are very important and intense in the sense that they alter the course of action in the novel. One the one hand, killing Ben awakens Lorraine's desire for survival and resistance, and on

the other; it unites all the women of community. After all, the women come to realize that "what happens to Lorraine could happen to all of them and has indeed happened to many of them, albeit in milder forms" (K. Walker 54).When Mattie sees that Lorraine has killed Ben, she runs to her to prevent further harm. Interestingly enough, this moment is a one of affinity, fusion, and comfort. "Mattie screams went ricocheting in Lorraine's head, and she joined them with her own as she brought the brick down again, splitting his forehead and crushing his temple, rendering his brains just a bit more useless than hers were now. Arms grabbed her around the waist" (173). It is the first time for Lorraine that she feels such a propinquity and understanding. It is different from her relationship with Theresa or Kiswana; the scene with Mattie is so intimate and overwhelming that the thoughts and brains of the women become one. Laura Nicosia describes this unifying moment between Mattie and Lorraine through "their shared acts of primal screaming" as one of healing and of "melding terrors" - shared terrors of social and adrocentric oppression (185).

Though this moment of sharing is a bit late to prevent Lorraine's tragedy, it does succeed in bringing all the women together. They finally accept her as a woman, comprehend their connection with her, and sympathize with her. They come to understand, as Naylor explains in an interview with Goldstein, that "Lorraine wasn't raped because she is a lesbian" but because she was a woman. "And, regardless of race, regardless of social status, regardless of sexual preference, the commonality is the female experience" (qtd. in Vinson 11). Having their own lives and memories affected by the racist and sexist dominant ideologies, Lorraine's rape becomes an evidence and a

collective reminder of the necessity to unite against these intersectional oppressions (Vinson 11).

III.2. A Shared Dream and Shared Memories: Re(membering) of the Women of Brewster Place

Eventually, every woman in Brewster Place "dreamed that rainy week of the tall yellow woman in the bloody green and black dress. She had come to them in the midst of the cold sweat of a nightmare, or had hung around the edges of fitful sleep" (176). The feeling of concern and union reaches even Ciel who has left Brewster Place even before the coming of Lorraine. In that, she says: "…Something about that wall and Ben. And there was a woman who was supposed to be me, I guess. She didn't look exactly like me, but inside I felt it was me. …And something bad had happened to me by the wall- I mean her- something bad had happened to her" (176). Ciel's connection and affinity with Lorraine though never knowing her reinforces the idea of women's communion.

Besides that, this magical sororal bond suggests a sharing of collective memory- a memory of trauma. It is not surprising that the women were not present but share the same memory because as Marianne Hirsh explains: "memory can be transmitted to those who were not actually there to live an event" (106). After all, the shared memories and dreams reveal women's union and recognition of a common menace. Furthermore, they function as "a healing device and a tool for redemption" leading women to engage in "an active process" of "interpreting and further crystallising shared past experiences (particularly trauma)… thus providing opportunities for transforming the pain they experienced and for further healing" (Wang 309). Sharing memories and "re-

membering", Davies explains, bring back together the disparate members of the society. It is this re-membering that crosses the spatial, racial, and sexual boundaries and unites peoples against a common menace (12). As such, in the novel, trauma and pain as well as shared memories and eventual re-membering are gradual changes that reveal women's consciousness about their status as victimized black women and the inevitability of making a change. Sensing a sort of power in their union, the women just like in their collective memory come to realize the need to establish their selfhood collectively.

III.3.Mattie Deferred Dream: a Collective consciousness Reappropriating the Female Self and Community

Besides the women's union through dreaming of Lorraine's rape, Naylor once more gathers the women in a dream about the block party objecting the racist and sexist oppressions. The women, under the rain, destroy the wall that symbolizes their collective racist and sexist oppression as Naylor explains in an interview with Bonetti (qtd. in Vinson 5). The women's attempt to break the wall, which is a symbol of their oppression and of their connection, indicates a drastic determination about overthrowing the intersectional oppressive forces that curb their freedom and massacre their individuality. The action of breaking the wall allows the women to survive and exist collectively. It is no surprise that at the moment of breaking the wall it starts raining. Just like the rain which is a symbol of purification, refinement, and rebirth, the women's lives are purified and a nascent selfhood is remarkable.

Many critics find that withstanding repression and establishing a selfhood through a dream is deceiving. While Laura Niscosia, for instance, perceives devoting a whole the

ending chapter to a dream is a punishment for women's homophobia and division (191), and Michael Awkward sees that ending the seven different stories with a dream deepens the sense of fragmentation in the novel (62), I believe that having Mattie uniting the women in her dream is a reflection of her actual deeds along the novel. While in the previous chapters of the novel, Mattie helps each woman to get out from her misery by relying basically on memory, she eventually gathers up all the women through a collective memory and a collective dream to fight against a greater evil- the racist and sexist horrors that ruined their lives. The self-sustaining and resilient Mattie, eventually, mobilizes all the women to assert their selfhood.

According to Karen Castellucci Cox, Mattie's dream becomes "a symbolic act" that fuels women's "communal memory", "collective consciousness", and shared "terror and rage" resulting in the emergence of a "communal alliance" between the women who are "galvanized into action" to break the wall and enact their agency of emancipation and pursuit of selfhood (151-64). While in the previous dream about Lorraine's rape every woman individually envisions Lorraine's suffering and identifies herself with her, Mattie's final dream gathers all the women and presents them tightly acting together. The women of Brewster Place move gradually from considering their personal suffering to sharing their collective oppression, memories, and traumas. Furthermore, the move from a shared dream into a shared action is very significant in the sense that it portrays women's ongoing efforts towards their union and redemption. They come to understand the power of their communion stemming initially from their shared memories and dreams; only a selfhood born within a communal frame can survive and challenge the cycle of abuse they are subject to.

Noticing that “there is still blood on this wall”, Mattie calls out: “We gonna need some help here” (186). Though Kiswana protests that “there no blood on those bricks…You know there’s no blood” (187), she ends up convinced of the ugliness of the scene as Ciel puts the brick in Kiswana’s hand. “Kiswana looked down at the wet stone and her rainsoaked braids leaked onto the surface, spreading the dark stain. She wept and ran to throw the brick spotted with her blood out into the avenue” (187). Lorraine’s blood becomes her own blood. After all, every woman senses that it is her own blood. Even Theresa, who previously rejects and is rejected by the other women, joins the women at this moment. Cora Lee gives Theresa a brick saying: “Here, please, take these. I’m so tired” (187). All the women, despite their differences, engage in breaking the wall. The women obey their mother figure and spiritual leader by breaking the wall passing the bricks “hand to hand, table to table, until the bricks flew out of Brewster Place” (186). Interestingly, breaking the wall becomes a “communal catharsis”, and a primary thrust towards women’s quest for change and selfhood (K. Walker 68).

As such, by highlighting shared dreams, communal memories, and collective actions, Naylor maintains that the quest of selfhood can be fulfilled only collectively. As the women join their memories, stories, dreams, and suffering, “they begin to more thoroughly understand their individual subjugation… which then prompts communal support, reclaimed agency, and resistance” (Vinson 2). They cease to exist as victimized, shadowy, and othered individuals in a biased community and start to live as individuals who belong to a tightly knit community that allows them to hone their own personal future and face the racist and sexist ideologies. As such, Naylor reveals the potential of

women's union, in general, not only in forging their sense of selfhood but also in amending their surrounding.

Breaking the wall marks the culmination and the beginning of women's continuous struggle to undermine the intersectional oppression they suffer from. Using Langston Hughes' poem, "Dream Deferred", as the novel's epilogue Corroborates this idea. Not only does the epilogue imply that this dream may be realized later on, but also does connote that women's survival and resistance require constant strength and exertion. Similarly, Jill L. Matus explains that "Naylor inscribes an ideology that affirms deferral; the capacity to defer and to dream is endorsed as life-availing" (138). Naylor is an exceptional writer par excellence; exceptional in her vision of selfhood, rebellion against oppression, and even ending her novel. When asked about the significance of the novel's open ending, Naylor answers Angels Carabi: "This is going to depend on the reader. When she [Mattie]wakes up, the party is going to take place, but the clouds are coming and you know it's going to rain. Is this going to be a deferred dream? Well, I decided to let each reader decide" (qtd. in Vinson 14). From this spectrum, the novel's open ending is evocative in the sense that it conveys Naylor's view about women's struggle as well as her vision about community. Naylor, as Jill Matus avers, "resists a history that seeks to impose a closure on Black American dreams, recording also in her deferred ending a reluctance to see 'community' as a static or finished work" (63). Naylor's vision of Brewster Place as a black community corroborates Collin's positive perception of the "ghettoization". She explains that while this ghettoization aims at imposing racial and social injustices, black neighborhoods become a separate space to "craft distinctive oppositional knowledges" (*Black Feminist* 9-10).

Conclusion

Interestingly, the various women's stories in the novel give the impression that the novel is a narrative about victimized passive women, but the story entitled "the Block Party" makes the change. What is striking is that readers do not see a clear struggle from the beginning against the social bias the women suffer from; all what the stories portray is the women's attempts to survive. Naylor's depiction of women's prolonged suffering and delayed emancipation is but a reflection of real life. One cannot survive, change, or live without problems and pain; it is human nature. Naylor by postponing the whole action until the end of the novel gives the impression that the novel is about to start. It makes readers look forward to what is going to happen later on. In this sense, Naylor seems to deal with a postponed quest for selfhood. But once the women engage in this quest, it proves to be so revolutionary and intense. Actually, crystallizing women's revolt through a dream does by no means reduce its credibility. The dream is, in fact, very suggestive in the sense that it opens vast horizons for the reader to perceive the multifaceted aspects of the notion of selfhood. Captivatingly, Naylor's vision of selfhood is so exceptional. Dealing with seven different women, describing the details of their lives and troubles, and uniting them at the very end of the novel reveal Naylor's perception of selfhood as the outcome of a profound empathy and communion between women after endured torment and pain because of the acute oppressive and hostile social system. It is their selfless love, or as the Greek philosopher Plato names it "*philia*" that enables the women to survive and unite. And only their union and establishment of a matriarchal community can secure a self-assertive selfhood.

It is no surprise that *The Women of Brewster Place* proves "to be as significant in its way as Southern writer William Faulkner's mythic Yoknapatawpha County or Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*" (Labin 3). After all, the realistic portrayal of the novel renders it more of a social treatise on the impact of poverty, violence, racial and gender segregation. Furthermore, the realistic depiction is conspicuous when Naylor uses the stereotypical images about black womanhood to describe her women characters: the mother figure, the welfare mother, the Amazonic, and the Jezebel. However, each time she eventually liberates the women from these limiting clichés. After all, her realistic depiction of the diversity of the black urban woman's experience, struggle, limitations, and possible options to throw back mainstream gender and racial ideals inspires many black women in the real life to reappropriate their lives and pursue their dreams.

General Conclusion

General Conclusion

It is my belief and my faith that whenever you are trying to convey a sense of a common reality to people, they will want to read and hear about it.

-Alice Walker, "The Eighties and Me"

One can easily perceive that African-American literature, in general, and African-American women's literature, in particular, is the product of overwhelming historical, social, economic, and racial circumstances. As such, black women's literary works mark the merging of history and literature. Because of the latter, literature is no longer a simple story, but becomes a reflection of the social conventions and ideological practices in which it is set. Accordingly, any sort of connection or affinity between black women writers' works is axiomatic. Their works become the emblem of their shared history of suffering for being black women. And again, because black women writers' works mark the merging of history and literature, literature is no longer a simple written protest, but becomes an agenda that provides a vision of a new society free from sexism and racism. Black women writers may not be formal historians, sociologists, or psychologists, but still convey patterns, concepts, issues, and themes that are reflective of psychological matters, historical events, and social realities. As such, black women writers become creators not only of literature, but also visionists of their society.

Struggling themselves with the double jeopardy of being black and female, black women writers seem to be preoccupied and pensive about how to portray their realities, what limiting circumstances are worth analyzing, and what solutions are possible for the

problems that confined and deteriorated their lives. "…Understanding fully and indelibly that if I don't do it now no one else is so vitally interested, or capable of doing it to my satisfaction-I write all the things I should have been able to read" is a statement by Alice Walker that may encapsulate all black women writers' intentions and objectives in their writings (*In Search* 13).

Don DeLillo, in the end of his *Underworld* writes: "everything is connected in the end". Indeed, this applies to the novels discussed in this study. The focus of *The Color Purple*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Quicksand*, *Sula*, and *The Women of Brewster Place* on exploring black women's selfhood connects these novels despite being written in different times. Knowing that fiction is insightful and can be even transforming, these women writers devote their works to sensitize black women about the necessity to fight for and maintain self-fulfillment in a racist and patriarchal world that imperils their existence. As such, these novels by this fascinating cadre of young African-American women writers are ripe for an analysis of the daily struggle and possible choices and opportunities available for black women between 1930s and 1980s.

By depicting the female characters' gradual move from objectification to self-realization, these novels give readers a hint about black women's changing position in the American society. This changing position is the outcome of the efforts of women who advocate the black women's case, encourage black women to make a change, and aspire to make of their works a vindication of the black women's changed consciousness. From a similar perspective, hooks states: "we are clearing a path for ourselves and our sisters. We hope that as they see us reach our goal—no longer victimized, no longer unrecognized, no longer afraid— they will take courage and follow" (*Ain't I* 196). The

selected works systematically recast the image of the African-American woman in dynamic and fascinating ways. Through their female characters, the women writers have defined and clarified the historical position of African-American women in order to revise our perceptions of African-American womanhood and so reconstruct African-American female identity. Incontestably, the selected works of these women writers are a manifestation of black women's courage, will, and ability to redress their position as being passive objects manipulated within an invalid patriarchal power system, as well as a confirmation of their ability to speak for themselves. These works are the outcome of black women's long-standing rejection of social and racial injustices. They, not only disrupt the myopic and stereotypical representations of black women in literature, but most importantly become the emblem of a rooted tradition that approaches black female selfhood as a rhizomatic rather than an arborescent entity.

The works of these black women writers make of them ardent advocators of black feminist politics. The latter can be functional only when denouncing hegemonic dominance, resisting all forms of oppression, and defending the silenced and the unprivileged- points that constitute the core of these black women writers' works. Being oppositional and transformational in nature, the works of these women writers become sites of resistance and struggle against all forms of domination and multiple oppressions.

Similarly, *the Color Purple, Their Eyes Were Watching God, Quicksand, Sula,* and *The Women of Brewster Place* tell stories of black women who oppose their domineering racist, patriarchal, and heterosexual societies, and above all strive to uplift themselves from their state as being objectified and dominated individuals to individuals with a self-determining selfhood.

In their novels, Walker, Hurston, Larsen, Morrison, and Naylor present the lives of black women restricted by intersectional forces and limited constructions. On the one hand, these various limiting forces endanger the female characters' lives, but on the other confirm the complexities of the black female experience. The latter is further underscored by the female characters' determination and incessant struggle against the gender and racial limiting forces. The five novels are astounding in their treatment of black women's selfhood. Although all the novels depict women's quest for selfhood and reject the monolithic definition of black women's identity, each novel approaches selfhood differently.

In *The Color Purple,* Alice Walker depicts Celie's gradual fulfillment of an independent selfhood. Initially, Celie is the perfect depiction of the mammy who suffers from patriarchal devaluation and oppression; she is very servile, exploited, and humiliated. Gradually, however, Celie develops a changing vision about herself and her surrounding. Nettie and Shug's support and love are crucial in Celie's changing condition from submission to self-assertion. What is outstanding besides Celie's fortitude and growing potentials in the midst of the domineering abusive patriarchal atmosphere is Walker's exceptional vision of the female selfhood as being consummated while achieving harmony with the larger community.

This comprehensive and inclusive vision of selfhood is shared by Naylor in her *The Women of Brewster Place*, though in an altered from. While Walker calls for a selfhood that integrates physical and emotional independence as well as concord with the patriarchal society, Naylor insists on fulfilling an independent selfhood that can only be safeguarded by matriarchal communion. Naylor explores the lives of seven different

women to emphasize black women's diversity, and above all underscore the necessity of their supportive posture. It is only when all the women, in the novel, come together that they overthrow the intersectional racial, gender, and class limitations. The female characters, at the beginning, are pigeonholed according to racial stereotypes; Mattie and Cora Lee are welfare mothers, Etta Mae Johnson is a Jezebel, and Theresa is a Sapphire. Regardless of their class, sexual orientation, religious dedication, the women in Brewster Place liberate themselves only when they unite and form a tight communion. Naylor, in this sense, embraces an inclusive sense of selfhood merged in the collective female experience.

Morrison perceives the female selfhood with a more restricted vision than Walker and Naylor. In her *Sula*, Morrison explores a female mutual selfhood. The way Nel and Sula complete each other is exceptional. Instead of depicting a victorious ending, in the traditional sense, Morrison portrays the tragic impact of social conventions on Sula and Nel's relationship. Sula, the transgressive woman, succeeds eventually in liberating Nel from the social dictates that reduced her to the mammy stereotype. Nel's ultimate epiphany is the incarnation of self-fulfillment in the novel.

While Hurston and Larsen both deal with mulattos, their exploration of selfhood differs. Hurston's vision of selfhood is rather radical. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a novel that celebrates Janie's victory and emancipation from androcentric and social confinements. During her marriages to three men, Janie's husbands oppress her, but she resorts to different strategies to obliterate their domination over her; she moves from strategic submission to defiance. Janie demonstrates her agency to impose her own choices concerning the type of relationships with men she wishes to have and the type of

identity she desires to fulfill. *Their Eyes were Watching God* is a novel that demonstrates the might of a woman's will to survive on her own terms, and determination to overthrow social domination. Janie engages in journey of self-discovery and ends up self-assertive and independent.

Unlike Janie who scorns her society and believes in the construction of selfhood beyond all social frames, Helga Crane seems to be obsessed with securing a social niche that safeguards her intersectional selfhood. Through Helga Crane, Larsen portrays her vision of the female mulatto selfhood. Larsen emphasizes that a changed consciousness and awareness is as significant as an unruly selfhood is. Helga starts with inherent aversion and rebellion against the social, racial, and gender regulations- a point that jeopardizes her selfhood, but finally learns how to subtly maintain her individuality. Larsen, as such, disregards the heroic victory against the patriarchal and racial regime and prioritizes survival and preserving selfhood.

Through their works, these black women writers explore the multifaceted aspects of black women's lives and the intricacy of black womanhood. They intend to widen the space for black women in literature by emphasizing the diversity of their characters' experiences, the complexity of their lives, and their poignant humanity. By creating such characters, black women writers render their works examples of boundary crossings- crossing racial, class, and gender limits. The writers' depiction of disparate facets and controlling images that distort black womanhood impart much of the social and racial conditions that afflicted black women's lives in reality. They excel in portraying black women's pains, responding to their aspirations, and rearticulating an existing awareness.

Their female characters are neither realistic nor heroic models, but still they instigate and inspire their readers.

Besides rejecting the limited constructions about black womanhood, the writers seem to agree on the significance of female bonding. The novels portray the different effects of female relationships; Walker describes the nurturing relationship between Celie and Shug and Nettie, Hurston armors Janie with a confidant-Phoeby, Morrison portrays Sula and Nel as complementary women whose union generates their strength and their separation their frailty, Naylor celebrates a matriarchal community, and Larsen portrays Helga's less fortunate ending because of the absence of a female figure in her life. As such, these female bonds help black women to counteract the intersectional forces that oppress them by providing a secure, healing and nurturing environment. Above all, because female bonding is based on coming together of body and spirit, it ultimately generates strength, change, and victory.

Though not all the novels are a confirmation of the women's ultimate victory, they all highlight their psychological and moral development. After all, the route towards emancipation and self-fulfillment seems more important than women's eventual victory. *The Color Purple, Their Eyes Were Watching God, Quicksand, Sula, and The Women of Brewster Place* are all novels that explore and focus on the growth and maturity of women characters. They are novels of apprenticeship in the way they highlight the changing consciousness, personal growth, and profound comprehension of the female characters' inner selves and social surrounding. The female characters' development results in a revision and reconstruction of an alternative comprehensive shape of their selfhood.

This study does not claim the female characters' definite and absolute emancipation or fulfillment of selfhood. It examines the consuming oppressive forces that demean black womanhood, and black women's rejoinder and search for an independent selfhood. Re-visioning black womanhood and focusing on women's changing consciousness and ongoing quest of selfhood are of considerable importance. After all, it is black women's private consciousness that allows them to survive and transcend intersecting social and gender oppressions on the one hand, and that forms the essential step towards self-fulfillment on the other.

It is only when black women perceive the world through a different lens, that they can be said to have experienced not only a changed self but also a changed worldview. This changed worldview is the outcome of the individual's inner strength. A woman's changed consciousness, inner strength, and determination form the core of a changed worldview. Nikki Giovanni states: "We've got to live in the real world. If we don't like the world we're living in, change it. And if we can't change it, we can change ourselves. We can do something" (Tate, *Black Women* 68). It is the possibility and necessity to do something and change something that prompts these black women writers to depict their protagonists' unremitting pursuit of change and of selfhood. Both black feminist thinkers and black women writers agree that the black woman's craving for self-definition and the journey itself towards self-fulfillment are of paramount significance. It is the persistence on the journey towards self-definition that changes and empowers black women enabling them to make a way out of no way.

Having the women writers' ending their female protagonists' quest of selfhood differently points out the diversity of the black women's life and struggle, the various

oppressive limitations, and the relativity of black women's fulfillment of selfhood. Despite the intersectional oppressive forces that aim at dissolving the existence of black womanhood, the novelists confirm that black women, eventually, stand firm and survive. And a woman's survival is the greatest proof of her resistance and struggle.

Through reading these five novels, this study has traced the patterns through which women's selfhood has been violated by the hegemonic racial and patriarchal system, and established by black women. Most importantly, it has approached selfhood as a continuous and predominant concern of black women through different times. Because black woman's selfhood is always questing, provisional and in process, black womanhood constantly preoccupies black women writers. After all, it is a nonstop struggle for black women. In modern society, for instance, black women, black women writers, and black feminist thinking become subject to a massive incorporative policy leading to the depoliticization and symbolic inclusion of black feminist ideas. As such, modern black women's identity becomes at stake as they become forced to secure their position within these multicultural and symbolically inclusive society. Consequently, a plethora of modern and post-modern works dealing with the issue of black women's identity emerge. The latter leads one to pose the following questions: How do modern and post-modern black women writers perceive black women's selfhood? What are the obstacles that modern black women face vis-à-vis their womanhood and selfhood? And how is intersectional oppression similar or different from symbolically inclusive societies when it comes to black women's selfhood? As such, a suggested future research would be about investigations of the common bonds and shared interests between the 1920s and 1980s black women writers as well as modern and post modern black women writers.

The latter may highlight the artistic uniqueness of black women's writings, the richness of their literary tradition, and the diversity of their experiences as black women.

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Résumé

Cette étude vise des travaux bien spécifiques rédigés par des écrivaines Afro-Américaines dont : *The Color Purple* (1982) d'Alice Walker, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) de Zora Neal Hurston, *Quicksand* (1928) de Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, *Sula* (1973) de Toni Morrison, et *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) de Gloria Naylor et met ainsi l'accent sur la nécessité du combat des femmes noires afin de défier et renverser les injustices raciales et patriarcales, tout ça dans le but de générer une individualité indépendante. L'objectif de cette recherche est d'explorer l'idée de quête de l'individualité des femmes noires et leur désir de former des identités uniques, insoumises, et émancipées malgré les obstructions intersectionelles. Ce travail explique la manière dont ces écrivaines, dans leurs romans, attirent l'attention sur les efforts persistants des femmes protagonistes afin de surpasser les stéréotypes sur les femmes noires, de défier les injustices raciales et patriarcales, et de créer différent moyens innovateurs pour la poursuite de l'accomplissement de soi. Chaque caractère féminin a une approche différente du soi selon son entourage et les conditions dans lesquelles elle vit. Parce que ces auteurs se concentrent sur l'expérience unique des femmes noires, leurs romans deviennent l'emblème d'une tradition enracinée qui considère l'individualité des femmes noires comme une entité rhizomatique. Quoique tous les romans ne soient pas une confirmation de la victoire définitive des femmes, ils soulignent tous leur développement et leur maturité.

Mots clés: Écrivaines Afro-Américaines, individualité, féminité, femmes noires, oppression, patriarcat.

ملخص

تستهدف هده الدراسة أعمال مختارة لكاتبات أفرو امريكيات و المتمثلة في ذو كالور بوربل (1982) لاليس ولكور ,ذيير ايز وير وتشن قاد (1937) لزورا نيل هورستن, كويك ساند (1928) لنبلا لارسن ,سولا (1973) لتوني موريسن ,و ذو ويمن اف برويتر بليس (1982) لجلوريا نيلور . و تناقش هذه الدراسة اهمية كفاح النساء السوداوات من اجل مواجهة القيود الظالمة و تغيير اللاعدالة العرقية و الهيمنة الذكورية في هته الاعمال المختارة من منظور أدبي نقدي نسوى. كل هدا من اجل خلق هوية نسوية مستقلة. الهدف من هذا البحث هو دراسة فكرة الهوية و تحقيق الذات لدى النساء السوداوات و رغبتهن في تكوين هوية مستقلة و حرة رغم العقبات و المعوقات المختلفة. تبين هده الدراسة الطريقة التي انتهجتها الكاتبات لتسليط الضوء على عزم و كفاح النساء السوداوات من اجل الإطاحة بالمفاهيم الضيقة التي تحدد هويتهم و التغلب على الأنماط ,السلوكيات و المقدسات الاجتماعية و كدا خلق طرق مبتكرة و متنوعة لتحقيق هوية نسويه حرة و منفتحة . كل شخصية نسويه تنطلق في رحلة لاكتشاف الذات و تنتهج منهجا خاصا لتحقيق ذاتها اخذت بعين الاعتبار المجتمع التي تعيش فيه و الشروط التي تمر بها. نظرا لمجهودات الكاتبات لابراز التميز و الكفاح المستمر للمراة السوداء يمكن اعتبار الروايات رمزا لعادة متذجرة تندد بالطبيعة المتميزة و المتشعبة و الغنية لهوية النساء السود. هذا الاخير يفسر لماذا سلطت الكاتبات الضوء على الوعي الناشئ ,النمو الشخصي و النضوج الفكري لشخصياتهم النسوية بغض النظر على الانتصار الكلي على مجتمعهن العنصري الذكوري.

كلمات مفتاحيه: كاتبات أفرو امريكيات , النساء السود, الهوية النسوية, الاضطهاد, الذكورية ,العنصربة