RACE, IDENTITY AND PERSPECTIVES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE SELECTED WORKS OF TONI MORRISON AND RITA DOVE

BY

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BEING A RESEARCH SUBMITTED TO THE POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL, AHMADU BELLO UNIVERSITY, ZARIA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF MASTER OF ARTS (M.A) IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in the thesis titled "Race, Identity and Perspectives of African American Women in the Selected Works of Toni Morrison and Rita Dove" has been written by me in the Department of English and Literary Studies under the supervision of Dr. Edward Abah Ochigbo and Dr. Suleiman Jaji.

The information derived from the literature has been duly acknowledged in the text and a list of references provided. No part of this thesis was previously presented for another degree or diploma at any university.

…… …….. ……..

Name of student Signature Date

CERTIFICATION

This thesis entitled "Race Identity and Perspectives of African American Women in the Selected Works of Toni Morrison and Rita Dove" by Joseph Christopher meets the regulations governing the award of Masters of Arts Degree in Literature of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, is approved for its contribution to knowledge and Literary Presentation.

…… ……

Chairman, Supervisory Committee Date

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Member, Supervisory Committee Date

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Head of Department Date

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Dean, Postgraduate School Date

DEDICATION

This work is deservedly dedicated to the memory of my father, Late Mr. Amobi C. Christopher (Igwe), the one who kick-started this dream. Thank you father for all your efforts and hope in me! Owa Ne Te Ora Ana – The moon that beats at night has long departed…Nna Je Bezia Nudo – Father Rest in Peace…

It is also dedicated to the loving memory of my baby sister, Late Peace A. Christopher, who planted a seed of smile in the thick of this research from the onset. Thank you Sweet Sis!

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ABSTRACT

This study is concerned with an appraisal of Race, Identity and Perspectives of African American Women in the Selected Works of Toni Morrison and Rita Dove about the African American community, within the context of the United States of America. Over the years African American women writing has not been accorded due relevance within the American literary space. As such, black male writers have dominated the literary scene for long, being literarily the spoke persons on the specific and general dimensions of black people's existence and experience in America. This position is now being contested by black women writers such as Toni Morrison and Rita Dove. In other words, the claim of a homogenous black experience is now being debated and challenged by these African American women writers through different literary platforms. Thus, these black women writers foreground women characters who are now subjects of their own narrations. This research apprehends the various views of African American women about themselves, about the African American community and how their perspectives have contributed significantly to shaping the concerns bordering on history, existence, experience and the community of black people in America via different literary platforms. Significantly therefore, this research employs various genres of literature, specifically the novelistic art form and the poetic genre, as parameters for the exploration of the complex dynamics of African American community in America. To this extent, the study contends that the poetic genre of literature is also a distinctive genre that similarly apprehends the African American reality and should be emphasized alongside the novel form which has gained popular acceptance in the literary circle. This thesis employs the postcolonial praxis as a rewarding paradigm for investigating the works of Morrison and Dove, especially as it facilitates the foregrounding of such critical parameters as hegemony, hybridity, mimicry, conflict, power dynamics, identity, gender to name a few and how these concerns are implicated in the existence and experience of black people in America. This research work is presented in six chapters. Chapter one is the introduction, which provides a background on the conceptual framework of the research. It comments on the origin and development of African American writing as well as the emergence of African American women writing. Chapter two delineates the dynamics of slavery in Morrison's *A Mercy*. Chapter three locates the place and position of African American identity in Morrison's *Paradise.* Chapter four interrogates the concept of race in the globalized American society in Rita Dove's *American Smooth.* Chapter five appraises the dilemma of mothering in Dove's *Mother Love.* Chapter six, the concluding chapter brings to bear the central arguments and findings of the study and its contributions to knowledge in the field.

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CHAPTER ONE

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 African American History and the Development of African American Writing

African American literature acts as a creative umpire that offers possibilities for blacks in the United States to mediate their general aspirations and desires. As a body of literature, black writing started in the 18th century as the medium that provides African Americans the platform to interrogate the dynamics of the African American identity, community and experience within America. According to Abah (2008) "the culture of African American writing is traceable to the middle of the 18th century, although the issues at the front-burner of this literature extend beyond two hundred years. In truth the life of bondage and enslavement became the necessary materials which were to translate into black writing"(7). Abah's contention brings to the fore the root and origin of African American literature and its relationship with the social context of America. Commenting on the destabilizing nature of the life of bondage in America, Kenneth Stampp (1956) observes that African Americans were seen as slaves who were "deemed, held, taken, reputed and adjudged in law to be chattel slaves, in the hands of their captors, owners, possessors, executors, and administrators, to all intents, constructions and purposes whatsoever" (97). This debate suggests that the tragedy of blacks in America did not begin with the ordeal of Reconstruction, or with the agony of the civil war, but with the growth of what Kenneth Stampp sees as a "peculiar institution", that is, the institution of slavery in the ante-bellum days. Thus, "the engendering impulse of African American literature is resistance to human tyranny and the dedication to black dignity and identity" (Gates et al 2003). In other words, the struggles against the institution of slavery in America formed the fabric for black

writing and subsequently the impetus for its development. In his review of Frederick Douglass' Narrative of the life in 1845, Lucius Matlock as cited in Gates and Mckay (1997), notes that:

> *The soil of slavery itself – and the demands for its abolition – turned out to be an ironically fertile ground for the creation of a new literature, a literature indicting oppression, a literature created by the oppressed: "from the soil of slavery sprung forth some of the most brilliant productions, whose logical levers will ultimately upheave and overthrow the system (xxvii).*

From Matlock's view it is evident that the context of the emergence of black writing falls within the purview of an unbearable social environment of slavery in America. Thus, Jonathan Earle (2004) posits that "the abolition of slavery further created the environment for the thriving of African American literature" (4). Evidently, Earle is of the view that the elimination of slavery paved way for a more suitable platform for the development of black writing. It is in the light of this therefore that African American writers employed literature as a medium to express the plights and hopes of black people in America.

Fundamentally, the literary text has been used to contest certain myths about the Negroes in America. One of such skewed myths is that Negroes, in contrast to peoples from other races possess certain racial traits which uniquely make them fit for bondage. Such myth was born out of the sheer misconceptions and even mischief of white doctors, scientists, and pseudo-scientists who had contrived a physiological basis for alleged temperamental and intellectual differences between white and black people in America (Stampp 1956:8). Accordingly, Stampp notes that one of such prejudices is traceable to Dr. Samuel W. Cartwright of Louisiana, who contends that "the visible difference in skin pigmentation also extended to the membranes, the tendons, and . . . [to] all the fluids and secretions" (8). As such, even the "Negro's brain and nerves, the chyle

and all the humors, are tinctured with a shade of the pervading darkness" (8). Invariably, this and other Theological, Anthropological, Historical and Philosophical yardsticks were used to define the Negroes in America some years ago.

By and large, the contestation of inferiority – superiority complex in America, that is, the tension of racial superiority can be premised on the writings of such white psychologists as John Fiskie and John W. Burgass, whose works gave further impetus to the belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority in particular and white superiority in general. To buttress this position, Hume as cited in Gates and Mckay (1997:xxx) avers that "I am apt to suspect the Negroes, and in general all other species of men . . . to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation." Hume's derogatory view, promotes the superiority of white people over not only African Americans, but over all non-white races. This racist arrogance has largely informed the hegemonic positions by which white people have acted and dominated other races, particularly blacks in America. Again, the substance of this postulation is further brought home by Stampp (1956) who frowns at the erroneous assumption that blacks were barbarians who needed to be subjected to rigid discipline and severe controls and that their enslavement was significant for their own good and for the preservation of white civilization. This is further captured in the Preamble of South Carolina's Code of 1712, which reads thus:

> *Of barbarous, wild, savage natures, and . . . wholly unqualified to be govern by the laws, customs, and practices of this province, they had to be governed by such special laws, as may restrain the disorders, rapines, and inhumanity to which they are naturally prone and inclined and [as] may also tend to the safety and security of the people of this province and their estates (2).*

The aforementioned demonstrates the kind of prescriptive laws created by the Caucasians in America to subvert the voices, roles and positions of blacks who were brought to America to learn the "civilized ways" of white people among other reasons.

It is against this background therefore that, in the 18th century, African American writers saw themselves as people with special mission to counter and debunk the notion of black people as being incapable of literary expression. It was writers like Jupiter Hammon, Phillis Wheathley and Lucy Terry who began to champion this course as pioneer African Americans to delineate black experience through literature in 1746 and 1761 respectfully (Encarta 2009). Wikipedia (2009:3) posits that, "Olauda Equino also made similar contribution in this regards". Although, African American history and culture emerged out of the dynamic relationship between white and black people in America, African American writers sought to depict the nature and effects of the relationship between the two warring races. Thus, literature whether in the form of the novel, poetry, drama, and short story was used as a viable discursive site to illustrate the specific and general dimensions of the African American experience (Bryan 2004).

1.2 African American Women Writing

The explosion of black women's writing after the Civil Rights Movement in America is dubbed as the African American women literary movement (Jana Dreserova 2006:6). In view of this, since 1970, the sheer level of production of novels and books of poetry by African American women writers have been enormous. Henry L. Gates in Jana Dreserova (2006:7) contends that "this condition attest to the validity and consistency both of this new readership and of the movement itself". This movement is considered to be an extension of the Black Arts Movement, as well as its repudiation. In this vein, African American women writers' works began to flourish in many publications and their works represented the legacy of the movement.

Rowell in Jana Dreserova (2006:9) notes that some of the female authors tried to escape "the Movement's dictum that African American women writers should write solely for and about black people". Among the black women writers who went contrary to this belief of black nationalist writing were Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Rita Dove, Maya Angelo to name a few.

The 1970s in American literature can be described as the period of re-discovering the black women's literary tradition. Gates in Jana Dreserova (2006:9) notes excitingly "we are only just recovering piece by piece the parts of black women's literary past". As a result, African American women writers trace their roots and descent from their literary foremothers, such as Phillis Wheatley, Frances Harper, Pauline Hopkins, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Ann Petry, Dorothy West and Gwendolyn Brooks.

By the same token, the 1970s seems to be very significant within the context of African American literature not only in terms of the books published since then, but also in terms of quality. More so, the works of black women in America began to enjoy a broader audience during this period. Gates posits that "the growing institutionalization of Afro-American literature in traditional English Departments has been concomitant with the growth of black women's literature" (9). It was within this period that black women's literature was published in the mainstream houses and they became popular in America and the world at large. Important figures in the promotion of black women writing and black literature were Toni Morrison and Rita Dove.

It is in the light of the above therefore, that Toni Morrison and Rita Dove creatively and variously delineate several perspectives about women of color or non-white women in America. To buttress this view, Seodial Deena cited in Damion O. Lewis (2009:9) discusses the fate of

women, more appropriately, African American women like Morrison and Dove "who had no alternative but to discover and define themselves through their writings in order to liberate themselves". The liberating act of writing for African American women is therefore of greater significance and precedence than for women who have not been classified as racial "*Other*". Therefore, the tool of writing for African American women in the past and at present continues to create "a new territory for postcolonial women writers" (Deena in Damion Lewis 2009).

Essentially, the novelistic art form helps Morrison ground her convictions and worldviews in the reality of the African American society she depicts. Morrison uses the novel as a cultural instrument to redefine time and space of the black community in America. Via this form she explores various aspects of African American experience including slavery, racism, identity and gender as well as individual and communal consciousness. In a similar manner, the poetic genre enables Rita Dove employ a special elevated poetic style modeled on American history and the tradition of black people in America. Through the composition in verse, Dove uses structure, diction, metaphor, imagery, enjambment to mention a few, to comment on a myriad of relevant issues implicated in not only in America's past but also on issues of global and contemporary persuasion.

Overall, this thesis is concerned with Toni Morrison's *A Mercy and Paradise* and Rita Dove's *American Smooth and Mother Love* as major sources for understanding the nature and dynamics of African American life and the black community in the United States. Their fierce condemnations of slavery, oppression, racism to name a few contrast sharply with far more complacent attitudes that prevailed even among white writers and the trivial roles given to black women by black male writers. Thus, the works of Morrison and Dove have increasingly recognized and provided the impetus for black women's relevance in the literary space. This has

profoundly altered the older historical literary space predominantly occupied by men. To this end, it is important to look at race, identity and the perspectives of African American women about themselves, about the African American community and how their views have contributed significantly to shaping black identity, history and community in America.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Over the years, African American literary scene has been essentially male-dominated. Black male writers in America have been literally the spokespersons on the specific and general experiences of black people in America. As a result, African American women have been objects of debasement and marginalization depicted in the works of not only black male writers but also white American writers. Lydia Isah Kudi (2011) contends that *"*Black male writers have from beginning of Black literary activities in the United States of America been the literary spokespersons of African American experience". Kudi's contention obviously suggests that the hegemonic dominance in the literary canon and discourse within America is particularly felt by black women writers, even though black men are not totally free from this domination. Black women writing in America has been twice removed, emasculated, and silenced from the dominant discourse.

In response to this, African American women writers like Morrison through the novelistic art form and Dove through the poetic genre, have set out to challenge the whole portrait of the African American experience overtime in black male narratives. In other words, the claim of a homogeneous black experience is now contested by African American women writers via different genres of literature. As such, African American male writers no longer hold the monopoly to creatively portray both black women's experience and the overall African

American life in literary works. Women are now subjects of their own narration. Thus, African American writers as Morrison and Dove are now subjects of their own stories.

However, it is noteworthy that this research examines issues that transcend the borders of the oppression of black women which has become a common trend in literary criticism. This study examines broader issues and how they are implicated in the overall African American experience. Significantly therefore, it is important to look at the various perspectives that the African American women characters/poetic persona engender in the works of Morrison and Dove and how these views have contributed greatly to the African American history and literature.

Similarly, more often than not, literary critics and scholars are always misled by concluding that all women writings are tailored toward the exploration of the oppression and stereotypes of women in the society. As a result, they narrow the interpretation of the works of Morrison and Dove down to a feminist standpoint, thereby limiting their views on the plethora of matters and concerns inherent in the narratives of these black women writers. In other words, this is what critics as Derrida, Foucault, Hegel, and Gates refer to as being "'a lynched' approach to an understanding of the African American experience" (Jakubiak 2006:2). Thus, this thesis hopes to fill the gap in scholarship by deploying postcolonial discourse as the framework that affords one the necessary platform to examine the expansive terrain concerning the writings of black women in America.

Beyond this however, a review of literature shows that although a lot has been done on African American literature, African American women writing, and on the works of Morrison alone or Dove alone, but little or less has been done in comparing the different genres of both

women as black writers who have made vital contributions to the American literary canon. As a result there seem to be a gap left in the literary space because most people prefer to look at Morrison's or Dove's works separately. Thus, this research embraces the different literary platforms of African American women writers as unique mediums that apprehend the overall African American reality and experience.

1.4 AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this thesis is to examine race, identityr54fd and the perspectives of African American women in the selected works of Toni Morrison and Rita Dove about the African American identity and community within the context of the United States of America. Thus, the objectives of this research are to underline the following:

- To examine the perspectives of African American women in the selected works of Morrison and Dove about the African American experience, through different genres of literature that the two writers deploy.
- To interrogate how these perspectives collectively define the unique experiences of African Americans in America, particularly the African American identity.
- To understand what factors constitute the reason behind the differences in perspectives and concerns of these women writers in relation to the African American community.
- To show how the perspectives of African American women characters portrayed in the works under study underline relevant issues implicated in black American history and culture.
- To show that the perspectives of African American women in the works of Morrison and Dove represent the various ideologies and worldviews of the writers.

1.5 JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

This study is necessary because it hopes to fill the gap within literary scholarship given that little or no attention has been paid in comparing two different genres of literature written by black women writers in America. In this regard, this thesis evaluates the works of Morrison and Dove as two writers who deploy different literary platforms to interrogate the African American experience. Using divergent genres, both writers draw their materials from African American experience and community. By doing so, this research contends that the poetic genre of literature is also a distinctive genre that similarly apprehends the African American experience and should be emphasized alongside the novel form which has gained popular acceptance in the literary circle.

Beyond this however, it is important to understand the peculiar views of these African American women writers on the dynamics as well as the contradictions within America and the various ways in which their perceptions comment on the unique black identity in America. It is also important to understand why and how these women writers have sought to widen and enrich the African American culture and history through their works?

Thus, by studying Morrison's *A Mercy* and *Paradise* and Dove's *American Smooth* and *Mother Love*, the study expands our understanding of the characteristic issues of the African American individual and community today. By deploying postcolonial discourse as a literary tool of analysis of these writers' works, this research expands our perceptions on the problematic of being black in postmodern America.

1.6 SCOPE AND DELIMITATION

This research analyzes race, identity and perspectives of African American women in the selected works of Morrison and Dove as social, political, historical and cultural commentaries on the dynamics of the black American identity, community and experience in the United States. In doing so, this study has chosen Morrison and Dove because both writers essentially borrow their materials from the African American context. Although, Morrison's works reference America's past life and experience, Dove's works are more contemporaneous. It is noteworthy therefore that, both writers centralize the overall experiences of black people in America through female characters. As such, Morrison's and Dove's convictions and ideologies are evident in the female characters they depict in their works. Thus, a close study of Morrison's *A Mercy and Paradise* and Dove's *American Smooth and Mother Love* is the major thrust of this thesis.

The study limits the scope of its task to the aforementioned texts believing this to be a representative reflection of African American literature. Therefore, the books chosen for this study allows the research to explore deeply on the specific and general dynamics of the African American life. In other words, the texts under investigation are reflections of the socio-political and cultural realities of the African American society at large, seen particularly from the view point of African American women. As such, the study will be premised on how the various perspectives of African American women portrayed in the selected literary works of Morrison and Dove reconstruct important moments in American history. This will be achieved by locating both writers within the praxis of postcolonial discourse. Therefore, this research focuses centrally on Morrison's *A Mercy* and *Paradise*, and Rita Dove's *American Smooth* and *Mother Love* without much reference to their other works believing that a consideration of these texts shall enable the realization of the aim and objectives of this thesis.

1.7 METHODOLOGY

In order to give this research a contextual framework, Morrison's *A Mercy and Paradise* and Dove's *American Smooth and Mother Love* constitute the primary texts of analysis. In this sense, this research depends to a large extent on the study of the primary texts in relation to the goals of the study. However, other relevant secondary sources as articles, magazines, books, newspapers, journals, internet sources, unpublished theses and dissertations, seminar presentations and e-books will be utilized effectively and extensively.

1.8 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

POSTCOLONIAL DISCOURSE AND CONCEPTUAL THEORY

This study employs postcolonial discourse and strands of postcolonial theory as both the conceptual and the literary tool for the analysis of the primary texts. This choice is anchored on the fact the African American individual as well as the African American society in America has undergone various forms of colonialism, from 1619 – 1865. According to Michelle Russell in Blassigame(1971) "the fundamental relationship of the American nation to the African Americans she tries to rule domestically is a colonial one" (42). This assertion strongly implicates white America regarding its political and economic exploitation of blacks in America. That is, the relationship between white and black people in America is one that has made the black community in the United States peripheral and even expendable as a labor pool. Russell observes further that in the initial stages of colonization of black people in America four things occurred which we can identify as "Before Arrival" prerequisite. He posits thus:

> *First, "recruitment" channels had to be established between European slavers and Africans in position of trust and power, who acted as mercenaries against*

> *their people. Secondly, African mercenaries and European colonizers had to cooperate in selecting and collecting large populations "suitable" for transport to the New World. Third, those who were lucky enough to be chosen had to undergo the shock of passage, usually with other blacks of different tribes whose local customs had previously set them apart rather than binding them together. And the fourth, upon landing in America, the blacks who survived had to submit to a plantation diaspora which was the final complement to the systematic separation and disruption of families and tribes that had begun with recruitment (45)*

The above sums-up the experiences of the African Americans who were forcefully removed from Africa and brought to America, 'the New World', as slaves to advance the industrial development of America and enhance its economy. This brief preamble and what follows subsequently justifies the deployment of postcolonial discourse as the investigative tool of analysis for this research.

In recent years, the notion of postcolonial discourse or theory has posed some of the most far-reaching questions for literary scholars and students alike. By focusing on the issues of subjectivity, hybridity, mimicry, polyvalence, hegemony, race, identity, power, gender and knowledge, postcolonial discourse or theory enables readers to ask questions about who speaks for whom in the literary text, under what conditions and to what end? Since the wide spread collapse of colonialism, cultures that were former European colonies have been working to define and understand themselves outside the bounds of colonialism (Che Guevara 1964). In this respect, the field of postcolonial discourse or theory has been traced to the works of Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty, Homi Bhabha and Bill Ashcroft, who view literature and the society from two broad angles: how the writer, artist, cultural worker and his or her context has reflected

a colonial past, and how he or she survived and carved out a new way of creating and understanding the world?

In line with the aforementioned, Morrison and Dove like other postcolonial writers, depict the African American experience, in a manner that speaks back to the whites in America, thereby, creating space for the subaltern or marginalized black society to produce alternatives to dominant discourse. In this respect, Edward Said as cited in Nyuykin (2012:19), avers that "the discourse surrounding the subaltern societies is coded by superiority that is not necessarily reflected in the realities of the concerned countries". This simply means that whites in America attempt to study and explore the experiences of the African Americans and other marginalized people in America within an already coded discourse, failing to take into cognizance the realities of the black American community in America. In this sense, Achebe (2012:55) posits that "by 'writing back' to the West we were attempting to reshape the dialogue between the colonized and the colonizer. Our efforts, we hoped, would broaden the world's understanding, appreciation and conceptualization of what literature meant when including African [American] voice and perspective". In other words, by doing so, Achebe, like Morrison and Dove, engages in what Ode Ogede aptly referred to as 'the politics of representation' (Achebe, 2012:55). Thus, one of the highpoints of postcolonial literature as evident in the works of Morrison and Dove is the challenge of stereotypes, myths, and images of the oppressed and silenced blacks in America which the writers recast through stories – prose, poetry, essays, short stories and dramatic texts. As such, Morrison and Dove seek to create space for black voices in America. This is especially true of voices that have been previously silenced by dominant ideologies. Bill Ashcroft (1989) buttresses this point further by observing that in the notion of interpolation "the dominated talks back by using the paradigm of the oppressor". In other words, these writers create space for the

marginalized African American voices within America, using literature as a potent source for negotiating the location, identity, and interests of African Americans in America.

Due to the body of prejudices which have their root in the ignorant or malicious misrepresentations of the whites in America and the stereotypical image of black Americans, the marginalized blacks in America respond to their colonial legacy by "writing back to the centre" to borrow the words of Edward Said. The centre here is deployed to mean White America and the West with respect to their hegemonic dominance of the African American personality and the black American culture. Abah (2008:46) notes that, *"*although African American literary activity is a conscious attempt to mediate black experience; it has inevitably been a reaction to the literary representation of this experience by Euro-American, Anglo-Saxon oriented literary establishments". Black writers in America within which group Toni Morrison and Rita Dove can be located, reject White America's interpretation of African American reality and experience. In other words, the relationship between the white and black people in America is a situation whereby white people arrogate power to themselves to define black culture and its discourses. As such, this thesis emphasizes how Morrison and Dove through their writings strongly debunk the basic assumptions of white people in America by proffering their own understanding and interpretations of art and black aesthetics. Thus, it is within this context that Morrison and Dove can be located as post colonial writers and critics.

More importantly, race, identity and perspectives of African American women in the selected works of Morrison and Dove are articulated by the characters and poetic personae that the writers portray in their works. By deliberately using women as enablers to portray the dynamics of the black family and community, Morrison and Dove convey the overall response of the marginalized black people in America. Not only that, they depict experiences that are

symbolic of the various significant periods in American history. Thus, while on the one hand Morrison's characters reflect the experiences of black people before and within the context of slavery in the Ante-Bellum America, she similarly portrays the after-effects of slavery on the lives of her African American characters. Dove on the other hand situates her poetic personae within the context of contemporary America as they strive to apprehend the impact of globalization on their existence as blacks living within the multicultural context of the United States. Even though these writers share a lot in common, looked closely they still share a lot of differences.

Edward Said cited in Gates (2008: 20) notes that the central feature of postcolonial theory "discusses the role of imperialism, colonialization, globalization, and their literature and language in the construction of Knowledge and the people's resistance to imposed frame works of knowing" (20). This assertion will be useful considering analogies between the African American experience and the hegemonic structures in America as depicted in the works under study. More so, this frame helps to reveal the biases, distortions and misconceptions about the marginalized and disenfranchised black race in America, a process legitimized in part by the hegemonic literature, spearheaded by White America.

In addition, this research re-echoes Gayatri Spivak (1990:10) who observes that "postcolonial theory covers a wide and diverse range of writing". Such writings cut through history, language, feminism, culture, politics, economy, power, identity and a host of others. With this understanding, the dynamics of postcolonial theory is concerned with an appraisal of a plethora of issues including such issues as those of language, racism, slavery, colonialism, hybridity, hegemony, gender relations, race, identity among others. In truth, this study cannot

exhaustively explore all the poetics of postcolonial discourse. However, some of the strands espoused by Said and Ashcroft will be relevant to the aim and objectives of this research.

It is in the context of the foregoing therefore that Franz Fanon (1963:43) contends that some of the major highpoints of postcolonial discourse or theory are anchored on the following problematic:

- Postcolonial discourse looks at the emergent forms of postcolonial identity after the departure of the colonizer and how hybridity, subjectivity and identity are essentially designated in various texts.
- It looks at the operations of mimicry, hybridity and cultural politics within and after colonialism.
- It involves appropriation of language and how hegemony is used to enforce submission and silence on the oppressed.
- It looks at the impact of colonization on postcolonial history, economy and culture.
- Postcolonial discourse identifies the role of hegemonic powers in the colonial and postcolonial societies.
- It also recognizes the ways in which place and displacement, race, gender, class, conflict, customs and beliefs are combined to construct and recast individual or group identity.

Again, all of these postcolonial tools will help in the analysis that this research undertakes by highlighting the ways in which Morrison and Dove privilege the perspectives of African American women as the creative umpire for depicting the nature of the disenfranchised

and marginalized blacks in America. In order words, this research hopes to pick and explore some of the strands of postcolonial discourse from the theoretical assumptions of theorists as Edward Said, Franz Fanon, Bill Ashcroft and Antonio Gramsci. Invariably, by so doing, this will help to investigate how Morrison and Dove comment on the origin, problems and after-effects of colonialism on the cultural and social lives of black people in America. It is within this context therefore that Morrison's *A Mercy and Paradise* and Dove's *American Smooth and Mother Love* are encompassed within the framework of the postcolonial.

Significantly therefore, in order to facilitate our understanding of the dynamics of the African American society, Antonio Gramsci's postcolonial notion of hegemony becomes one of the key elements to be used to investigate the political, social, cultural and economic predominance of white people over African Americans and other non-whites in the texts under study. Thus, hegemony as a form of control exercised by white people in America through what Gramsci calls "Ideological State Apparatus" ISAs – churches, schools, language, mass media, popular culture, trade unions, political parties etc – against blacks in America, becomes an important element in the analysis that this research undertakes.

On the whole, this research contends that because of the expansive nature of postcolonial theory, it affords this thesis the opportunity to investigate and examine a wide range of issues implicated in the daily lives of blacks in America. This brings to mind Che Guevara's (1984) contention that "all reality is a social construct". From his point of view, no single or primary reality exists; instead, many realities exist. In disavowing a universal, objective reality, critics believe that reality is perspectival. Therefore to understand reality, this thesis contends that various perspectives must be harmonized so as to create a more detailed understanding of human identity, society and existence. In doing so, the postcolonial theory facilitates an understanding

of the various perspectives on the African American experience that have been foregrounded overtime by Western critics and scholars. To this end, given the sundry and multi-layered nature of the works of Morrison and Dove, it is most appropriate to approach *A Mercy, Paradise, American Smooth and Mother Love* with an expansive and non-restrictive theoretical tool of analysis. Thus, the foregoing constitutes a justification for the use of the postcolonial theory to evaluate the works of these black women writers under study.

1.9 LITERATURE REVIEW

1.9.1. Toni Morrison

In her article "*Something Rogue: Commensurability, Commodification, Crime and Justice"* Megan Sweeney (cited in Gates 2001:11), discusses the works of Toni Morrison and her exploration of the African American narrative. Sweeney views Morrison's works as stories that are both African and American as much as they are about the basic ideas of wealth, power, quest for happiness, family and love. In this sense, Sweeney's central postulation is evidenced by her proclamation of Morrison's use of narratives which allows her to indepthly explore the African American experience. In this light, it is the experience of African American women that helps Morrison to define the challenges of black people within the postcolonial American society.

In a similar way, New York Times (2008), submits that "*A Mercy* by Morrison reveals her, once more, as a conscious inheritor of the America's pastoral tradition, even as she implicitly criticizes it". This means that Morrison adopts in *A Mercy* a pattern that portrays America's country life, while subtly criticizing it. This postulation is further given impetus by the New York Times which opines that "Morrison's latest collection *A Mercy* is distinctively

postcolonial pastoral". That is *A Mercy* is Morrison's way of celebrating and criticizing at the same time some of the ills of America's country life.

Frontier (2008:3) further posits that Morrison's *A Mercy* contains both passion and skill in abundance, but more importantly, it presents her latest effort to reveal, to guide and to protect the African American identity located as it is within the larger American society. In her interview with Timothy Greenfield-Sanders (2009) on *A Mercy*, Morrison states that, "I wanted to separate race from slavery". To do so she moved as far as she could "to when what we now call America was fluid". The stories in *A Mercy* are as layered in such a way that reflects America's past. Thus, *A Mercy* explores not only American pastoral past but also the early beginnings of slavery in America.

In a similar fashion some critics have argued persuasively on the relevance of Morrison's *Paradise (1998),* to the black community. Zoe Heller (1998:10), disagrees with critics and scholars who believe that "Morrison's work can only be viewed in relation to its place in the canon of black women writing". Heller seems to disagree with the reductive approach, which places a restrictive parameter on the universality of the text.

Rendered as multi-vocal stories of women who flee their broken lives only to have their restructured ones destroyed again, *Paradise* is layered with complexities (Lydia K. Isah 2011). The text which has multiple characters rejects a linear narrative. Readers are to understand the nature and life of these individual women characters as they each represent a chapter in the text. Lydia further posits that the novel is preoccupied by attempts by a group of black families to preserve their racial purity. Katrine Dalsgard, in her critique of Paradise notes that: "Rather than being linear and mono-vocal, as would befit a master narrative, It is an open-ended fabric woven by Ruby's multiplicity of fragmented and sometimes competing narrative voices. Moreover

Morrison jumps back and forth between various points in time" This is Katrine Dalsgard's way of commenting on the complex nature of the plot of Morrison's *Paradise*.

This research therefore attempts to transcend the skewed commentaries on Morrison's works, especially by feminist critics who are often misled to believe that Morrison's *A Mercy* and *Paradise* can only be assessed within the context of black women writing as they depict the oppression and plight of black women in America. By employing the postcolonial literary tool of analysis, this study hopes to expand the scope concerning reading Morrison's works, by looking at other relevant issues implicated in the overall experiences of black people in America.

1.9.2 Rita Dove

Rita Dove like Morrison is an inspirational figure for African Americans and for women especially. Her works feature many iconic names with roots in African American social history including Billie Holiday, Rosa Parks and McDaniel. However, Dove is very much interested in what she called the "underside of history", exploring the quiet lives of those who, like Thomas and Beulah, are omitted from the official record. Be they famous or humble, Dove's sensual technique collapses the barriers of history to bring the reader into intimate contact with her subjects (Fwanshishak 2006). Critic Helen Vendler has said this of Dove's poems: "they fall on the ears with solace". This is partly because of Dove's musical background learning how to play the cello from her childhood days. This background underpins her immaculate sense of phrasing. Her poetry lives up to her own ideal: "I believe that language sings". In this regard, this quality is amply reflected in *American Smooth (2004)* and *Mother Love (1995).*

Edward Byrne (2004) in VALPARAISO POETRY REVIEW avers that Rita Dove's *American Smooth* appears to have blended the lyricism which derives from her musical background with a fresh sense of movement and rhythm within the poems that owe something to

her developed interest and participation in dancing. He observes that "the flow of the lines in her poetry seems even more subtle, more natural, and freer than in her past collections" (2).

Critical commentary on Rita Dove's poetry has frequently focused upon its graceful phrasing of language. A Reviewer like Helen Vendler (2004) notes that, "technically her poems work by her fierce concision and by her exceptional sense of rhythmic pulse". Certainly such a summary of Dove's poetic style, with its appropriate tone complemented by her finely tuned voice, provides an acute and accurate assessment for most of her poems presented in *American Smooth.*

In a similar fashion, The Washington Post Book World (1995) buttresses the view that *Mother Love (1995)* shows Dove's grace and skill as a poet. The title announces the subject clearly, but the poems have a range of emotion and observation that surprises the reader continually. *Mother Love* by Dove underlines the dynamics of mother-child relationship especially in the black American context. The figures behind the poems are Persphone and Demeter, a daughter and mother who learned to be together and apart. In addition, real places and other mothers and other daughters blend with the mythic.

The New York Times Book Review, 1995, on Rita Dove's *Mother Love*, posits that "Dove has survived overused source material by transforming it into something deeply personal. Most poets working this myth mistakenly try to enter a nonexistent past". In other words, Dove has taken as source material one of Greek's Mythologies and has transformed it into something different and new. Thus, she has transformed Persephone and Demeter into contemporary idioms. In fact, by reimaging the myth, one can obtain many resonances with the present (Katrine Dalsgard 1997:2). This is the important point of Rita Dove's *Mother Love*: the fact of considering the past close to the present, of the two coexisting with each other.

This research therefore transcends the views of critics and reviewers who limit their view to either the musical quality of Dove's poetry or the language deployed by the poet, thereby failing to apprehend in a holistic sense the perspectives of black women on the dynamics of African American identity, culture, history, experience and community, that Dove's poetry explores.

It is against this background therefore, that this thesis interrogates the various perspectives, issues and concerns of women in the selected works of Toni Morrison and Rita Dove, through an expansive theoretical tool, that is, postcolonial discourse, in order to explore the various portraits of these women which collectively sum-up the overall African American experience.

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CHAPTER TWO

2.0 DELINEATING THE DYNAMICS OF SLAVERY IN MORRISON'S *A MERCY*

2.1 Slavery and the African American Experience in Morrison's *A Mercy*

This chapter evaluates Morrison's delineation of the African American identity and experience within the context of slavery in America via the novel form. Morrison employs the novelistic art form which is a long fictional narrative to appraise with depth and clarity the social, political and personal realities of African Americans in America. Virginia Woolf as quoted in Freedman (1986) opines that this form is "attached to life at four corners" (7). In other words, the novel form allows writers like Morrison the room to explore or exhibit the depth of human nature. Thus, the quest to harness the depth of human existence is evident in her exploration of slavery and the African American experience in *A Mercy.*

According to Joao De Mancelos (2005:3), "slavery is a dark chronicle of loss and also a saga of resistance and reinvention of ethnic groups, put into bondage in the paradise of the captor". From this assertion, Joao De Mancelos like many scholars and writers delineate the context, nature, and impact of slavery on not only the African American community but also America at large. It is no wonder that the contemporary African American writer such as Toni Morrison found in slavery the material of inspiration for poignant literary works in order to portray a system of exploitation in America. Thus, how the slaves worked, behaved, lived and resisted bondage are themes that have received full exploration from this writer.

In this respect, Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) writes about an important moment in African American history, with reference to the history of American slavery. Morrison is really interested in broadening the perspective on slavery by focusing on the very early stages of slavery.

Although, *A Mercy* encapsulates the overall experience of Americans at the time when slavery was at its infancy, the text does not hesitate to comment on slavery as America's most complicated and vexing social problem, which Kenneth M. Stampp (1956: vii) refers to as an institution that "nagged at the public conscience; offering no easy solution, it demanded statesmanship of uncommon vision, wisdom, and boldness. This institution deserves close study if only because its impacts on the whole country were so disastrous". This statement significantly buttresses the repercussion of slavery as a long standing American reality. Therefore, as a historical novel, Joao de Mancelos (2011:3) opines that *A Mercy* "concentrates less in grandiose events and more in the frame of slavery and its effects on the quotidian life of several women who live in a farm in Virginia, in particular". In other words, *A Mercy* tries to reshape and reconstruct the history of American slavery through the memory of past events mirrored through the eyes of women from Africa, America and Europe. The time of the story is set in the late seventeenth century in America when slave trading and slavery were in their early years.

In the novel, Morrison looks at slavery from a broad perspective. Unlike in *Beloved* where she pays more detailed attention to the experiences of black people in America under the pangs of slavery, in *A Mercy* she approaches the slavery experience from a wider dimension. In doing so, she looks at slavery as it is implicated in the lives of other races in the United States beyond just the African American perspective. By so doing she provides a more comprehensive account of the nature and impact of slavery in America.

Florens a black female slave who is the central voice in *A Mercy* begins the story by outpouring her own perspective and experience about the traumatic and devastating life of slavery. Being an African American, she lives in a heterogeneous group that Jacob Vaark, a white settler and a slaver has assembled as members of his farm. This group is comprised of

Lina, a Native American whose village is devastated by small pox; Sorrow a slow-witted, curly-haired goose girl, who grows up in the ship and then one day is washed ashore; Rebekka a European sent by her father to become Jacob Vaark's wife and two indentured white servants Scully and Williard (52, 34,58).

At the age of six, Florens was sold into slavery to Jacob Vaark by her mother, in order to let her white master, De Ortega, get away with the debt he owed Jacob Vaark: "Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter. . . They wrote new papers (Jacob Vaark and De Ortega) agreeing that the girl was worth twenty pieces of eight, considering the number of years ahead of her (26,27). This act demonstrates how blacks were traded during slavery like properties by the white slave owners in America. Bought as a slave by Jacob Vaark, Florens was believed to be a potentially more profitable slave with more prospects because of her young age. As a result of this, Vaark, her new owner, also thought that she was truly a wise investment. Her mother who consented to the selling of Florens justifies her action in a monologue insisting that the Whiteman, Jacob Vaark seems more "human than her own white master (De Ortega), because he sees Florens as a human child, not pieces of eight"(166). In order to save Florens' life from the cruelty of De Ortega, she is forced to give her up to Jacob Vaark. Florens' mother perceptively confesses that "to be given dominion of yourself to another is a hard thing; to wrestle dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing" (167). The above explains how difficult it was to give up oneself or one's loved one into the captivity and the authority of another. For Florens' mother it is truly difficult to give up her only daughter to a similar life of slavery. However, against all emotional and psychological odds, she is forced to give her daughter away into this 'peculiar institution' that Kenneth Stampp's views as "the

best school invented for the 'mass training' of the sort of inert and backward people which the bulk of the American Negroes presented" (12).

However, Florens does not know her mother's internal dilemma and the regret that traumatizes her mother over her decision to sell Florens. She constantly questions how a mother can give up her little girl and send her off with a white trader as a slave. Seen in this light, Florens' traumatic feeling grows even worse when for the second time she feels rejected again by her new home. This happens when she is eventually brought to her new home by JacobVaark(15). This significantly therefore, brings to mind the postcolonial notion of place and displacement. Florens' active and valid sense of self may have been eroded given her relocation or "voluntary" removal from a familiar environment to a strange one for human labor (Ashcroft etal 1969:9). Florens' feeling of rejection and displacement by her community is anchored on the premise that her notion of "self" has been altered by cultural displacement and the conscious and unconscious suppression of her identity by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model. As such, Florens' experience is in consonance with Bethan Court's (2011) opinion that *"A Mercy* is a novel of dispossessed and transplanted people that investigates each character's search for the safe haven of home" (45). Therefore, the dialectic of place and displacement as seen in the character and circumstances of Florens in Morrison's *A Mercy* is always a feature of postcolonial societies, in terms of identity related concerns.

Again, Florens' predicament in *A Mercy* is characteristic of the traumatic nature of enslavement in America. She notes thus:

> *Sleeping on the cookhouse floor with them is not as nice as sleeping in a broken sleigh with Lina. In the cold weather we put planks around our part of the cowshed and wrap our arms together under*

pelts. We don't smell the cow flops because they
are frozen and we are deep under fur (6)

Florens conveys a picture of the living conditions of black people under slavery in America. In consonance to Morrison's view Frantz Fanon (1963:15) asserts that "blacks were beaten, under-nourished, ill and terrified". Under this kind of hostile environment, Florens' perspective attests to the struggle of black people to survive despite all odds. Morrison delineation of Florens conveys the sense of struggle by black slaves in America to survive under the living condition of squalor and degradation.

In a similar vein, Morrison probes into the mind of Florens' mother to narrate a perspective that explains the harsh realities of American slavery. Floren's mother reveals the cruelty committed in the course of American slavery. She was raped alongside other black women who were consequently left without the knowledge of the father of their children. Accordingly, she states that:

I don't know who is your father. It was too dark
to see any of them. They came at night and took
we three including Bess to a curing shed Shadows
of men sat on barrels, then stood. They said they
were told to break we in. There is no protection . . .
To be a female in this place is to be an open wound.
Even if the scars form the festering is ever below (164)

Florens' mother in this instance paints an image of bestiality obtainable within the confines of slavery in America. Her experience brings to the fore how black women within the institution of slavery in America were subjected to unprecedented torture, oppression and consistent rape. Chimamanda N. Adichie (2013:185) throws further light on this by contending that "Many American blacks have a white person in their ancestry, because white slave owners liked to go a-

raping in the slave quarters at night". In a larger sense, the generational crisis of the African American family could be partly traced to this.

Following this insight into the experience of black American women under American slavery, Florens' mother brings to bear another intriguing revelation on how slave raids take place on the shores of Africa. She observes that:

> *Everything heats up and finally the men*
> *burnt we houses and collected those they*
> *cannot kill for trade. Bound with vine one*
> *to another we were moved four times, each*
> *time more trading, more culling, more dying*
> *We increased in number or we decreased in*
> *number until may be seven times or ten times.*
> *The men guarding we and selling we were blacks (165)*

This revelation highlights the operation of human cargo and how the activities of the American slave institution were conducted. Florens' mother notes that Africans and blacks were responsible for selling them into slavery. She recollects clearly how blacks in America were forced out of Africa by their greedy ancestors. According to her "They assure we that the whitened man do not want to eat we. Still it is the continue of all misery" (165).

Further more, Florens' mother describes the brutality perpetuated during the Middle Passage. According to her:

> *Then the whitened man divided we and placed*
> *we in canoes. We come to a house made to float*
> *on the sea. Each water, river or sea has shark*
> *under them. The whitened ones guarding we like*
> *that as much as the sharks are happy to have*
> *plentiful feeding place. . . I preferred their teeth to*
> *the chains around my neck my waist my ankles (165)*

This passage succinctly highlights the hideous Passage to America; a passage of black slaves to America and the accompanying pain of slavery. In this respect, "a house made to float on the

sea" as revealed by Florens' mother figuratively describes the image of the kind of ship, boat or even canoe used to convey Africans to America as slaves. Not only that, Frantz Fanon (1963) asserts that "the hands of African slaves to America were cut off; lips were pierced in order to shut them with padlocks" (14). It is no wonder to Florens' mother, it was better to be eaten by sharks in the sea, than to stay alive as a black slave in chains during the Middle Passage. She elaborates thus:

> *When the canoe heeled, some of we jumped into the sea. Others were pulled under and we did not see their blood swirl until the alive ones were retrieved and placed under guard . . . we are put into the house that floats and we saw for the first time rats and it was hard to figure out how to die (165)*

Florens' mother attempts to describe in detail the strange experience of enslavement and how black slaves during the Middle Passage committed suicide by jumping off the ship or canoe in order to offer themselves to sea-sharks and escape the pangs of slavery. To this end, Fanon (1963) avers that white Americans orchestrated massacre, genocide and animal-like degradation on blacks "by constantly renewed aggressions, far from bringing them into submission, thrust them into an unbearable condition" (14). The above explains why postcolonial writes as Morrison have chosen the literary platform to voice out some of the ruthless treatments of white Americans on black people in America. Thus, Morrison depicts in Florens' mother, a first generational African slave, who transcend her dehumanized position in order to comment intelligently about slavery and its modus operandi. She is allowed a language medium, although, a battered English language to think through and express her view about enslavement.

Significantly therefore, in order to separate race from slavery in *A Mercy*, Morrison explores through Lina a perspective about the experiences of other white indentured slaves such

as Scully and Williard. In the text, Morrison contends that the institution of slavery at its infancy in America had no clear-cut boundary concerning color or race. Morrison borrows a leaf from James Sweet (2003:14) who posits that "slavery in America was a function of political and economic forces rather than any conscious antipathy to race". Sweet argues further that "the understanding of 'Negroes' as an enslaveable 'race' regardless of color continued in the Americas. In the early slave communities in Brazil, 'Negro' transcends Africa to include any slave, whether Native American or African" (8). In this sense, Sweet is of the opinion that the negative stereotypes placed on blacks under slavery, was also applicable to Native Americans and other non-Europeans. Thus, Morrison simulates the experiences of other non-Europeans and sometimes even the Europeans under American slavery to convey a more comprehensive portrait of the life of bondage and its direct repercussion on America as a whole.

In *A Mercy*, through the narrative voice of Lina, Morrison portrays Willard Bond, a Native American slave who was sold for seven years to a Virginia Planter. He was expected to be free at the age of twenty-one. However, three years was added to his term as indentured slave for infractions – theft and assault – and he was finally released to a farmer far up:

> *Willard was getting on in years and was still working off his passage. The original seven years stretched to twenty and some more, and he had long forgotten some of the mischief that kept extending his bondage (148)*

This explains how Native Americans were also forced into the life of bondage as were other non-Europeans in America. Eventually, Willard was handed over to his master who "made a land-for-toil-trade to his neighbor, Jacob Vaark" (149). Willard Bond was accused of stealing and assault in order to increase his years of indebtedness and days as an indentured white servant by his master. In other words, "Theft of a shoat was invented and thrown in just to increase Willard's

indebtedness . . . the dread of those solitary nights gripped his days, swine, sheep, are his companion" (148). In reaction to this, Willard drank himself to stupor and misbehaved "for early in his post, he had run away twice, only to be caught in a tavern yard and given extension of his term" (149).

Like Willard, Scully is himself an indentured white slave and had experienced more human folly than Willard. Lina observes that Scully suffers the punishment meted out to his mother for her lewdness and disobedience, before her death. "He was finishing his mother's contract. True, he didn't know how long it will take but he boasted unlike Willard's or Lina's enslavement his would end before death. He was the son of a woman sent off to the colonies for lewdness and disobedience" (57). Scully's enslavement started when he was twelve years old. He was a 'child of circumstance' and was unable to resolve the issues he was faced with at his tender age. According to Lina by the time Scully was twelve years he had been "schooled, loved and betrayed by an Anglican Curate" (158). He was left with a mixed feeling when he was caught in a sexual act with an Anglican Curate who betrayed him since "the Curate had to turn the circumstance of their being caught into the boy's lasciviousness; otherwise he would be not just defrocked but executed" (153)

From Lina's perspective Scully is portrayed as a white slave who was leased out to a Synod by his so-called father following his mother's death on the floor of the tavern she worked in. Given this event, the barkeeper claimed three years of Scully's labor to work off his mother's indebtedness, but his 'father' appeared and paid the balance due and sold his services along two casks of Spanish wine, to the Synod. "Scully's father settled the balance owed and recuperated certain expenses by leasing the boy to his current Master for a span of time soon to end" (153).

Lina concludes by saying that Scully's "freedom fee would be enough to buy a horse or set him up in a trade" (153).

In addition, Morrison's depiction of Lina's perspective in *A Mercy* reveals that without black slaves the dominant power, such as De Ortega the slave owner would have been impoverished. She contends that black slaves and slaves in general contributed to boosting the early American economy. In this sense, De Ortega encountered economic wealth and success because he had "access to a fleet of free labor [which] made his (De Ortega's) leisurely life possible. Without the shipload of enslaved Angolans he would not be merely indebt; he would be eating from his palms instead of porcelain and sleeping in Africa rather than a four-post bed" (27). In consonance with this, Morrison notes that most of the workforce used by slave masters like De Ortega and his likes was got from Africa. Some slaves were taken from Angola in Africa, Portugal's slave pool, as shipments to Brazil. In other words, Angola geographically located in Africa was one of such places where slaves were bought and taken to Portugal to contribute in boosting the economy of Europe.

In his conversation with Jacob Vaark, Downes reassures him of how promising sugar and rum business were, because Africans were selling slaves to Dutch and English planters, to cultivate their plantation. "Why would it dwindle? Africans are interested in selling slaves to Dutch and English planters who are buying them. Rum rules, no matter who does the trading". In view of this, Downes continues to emphasize the fruitfulness of sugar and rum business in America because of the efforts of slaves and other black workers. He submits thus: "but the point is no loss of investment. None ever. No crop failure. No wiped out beaver or fox. No war to interfere. Crop plentiful, eternal. Slave workers same. Buyers eager, products heavenly. In a month . . . a man can turn fifty pounds into five times as much"(31)

In his status as a benevolent slave owner, Jacob Vaark denounces the kind of wealth got from slave business, yet he could not escape it. Vaark's conviction was anchored on the basis that slaves in America were subjected to the condition of squalor and degradation as they struggled and tried to survive in unbearable oppressive conditions. For this reason, he was determined to acquire his wealth through a judicious means, other than slave trading and exploitation of slaves to enrich himself like other slave masters were doing in the colonies of America. "Jacob Vaark sneered at wealth dependant on captured workforce that required more force to maintain . . .he was determined to prove that his own industry could amass the fortune, the station, De Ortega claimed without trading his conscience for coin" (28). Unfortunately, Vaark dies before he could even realize this vision, leaving behind his slaves, his wife and his wealth. The foregoing demonstrates the proposition that the perspectives of women in Morrison's *A Mercy* represent the way in which the American slave institution variously oppressed black Americans, non-Europeans and other indentured whites.

2.2 Interrogating the Hegemony of Religion in Morrison's *A Mercy*

The concept of hegemony and religion in Morrison's *A Mercy* can be traced to Atonio Gramsci's series of essays posthumously assembled as *Prison Notebooks.* Gramsci (cited in Litowitz 2000) submits that the concept of hegemony describes a condition in which the supremacy of a social group is achieved not only by physical force (which he called 'domination' or 'command') but also through consensual submission of the very people who are dominated (a phenomenon Gramsci variously called 'leadership', 'direction', or 'hegemony'). In view of this, hegemony is a cultural domination to the point that one internalizes the values of the colonial authority. It operates in a way that the oppressed consciously and unconsciously acts in accordance with the dictates of the oppressor. It is invariably a subtle means of control,

without force. Thus, the nature of hegemony is such that the oppressor is no longer visible, yet the influence of the oppressor is felt in the structures left on ground.

From a postcolonial stance, in a Gramscian sense, Morrison's *A Mercy* deploys religion as a manifesting dynamic of colonial domination and hegemony. This phenomenon of subtle subjugation and exploitation in the text is according to Gramsci "the conscious and unconscious consent given by the oppressed of a population to the discretion imposed on social life by a dominant group" (31). Arguably, Euro-Americans in *A Mercy* are able to disseminate their imperial values through the church without coercion, thereby making the slaves or 'silent voices' imbibe western religious values, in a continuing struggle to survive. To this end, Bhabha (1994) avers that "Christianity is a form of social control" (33). This thought is aptly captured in Fanon (1963) where he concluded that "Christian religion, in this case the church in the colonies is the white people's church, the foreigner's church. She does not call the "native" to God's ways but to the ways of the white man, of the master, of the oppressor" (32). Fanon underscores the underlying motive of the practitioners of Christian religion within the context of American slavery, which was to dominate non-whites. Thus, religion is seen by Morrison as a mechanism by which the white-majority rule in America had become hegemonic.

Morrison's *A Mercy* portrait of Lina (a Native American) interrogates Western religious arrogance towards the subaltern African American and Native American cultures in America and the negative nomenclature given to any religious affiliation that is not western. In this context, Lina one of the leading characters in the text had herself renamed by the Worthies within the confines of the Judo-Christian belief system. The new name given to her by her new religion signifies hope and freedom from her so-called heathen way of life. The implication of this is that,

unknown to Lina Western religion is used to induce submission in her as she unconsciously promotes the dominant worldview:

> *They named her Messalina, just in case, but shortened it to Lina to signal a silver of hope. Afraid of once more losing shelter, terrified of being alone in the world without family, Lina acknowledge her status as heathen and let herself be purified by the worthies (47)*

From the aforementioned, Morrison's depiction of the Worthies signifies how Americans of Caucasian antecedent arrogate authority and superiority onto themselves over and above what they claim to be Lina's inferior heathen culture. Here, James Sweet (2003:21) observes that "Africans and the Native Americans were a people of beastly living, without a God, law, religion and common wealth". It is therefore not surprising for Lina to learn that:

> *Bathing naked in the river was a sin; that plucking cheeries from a tree burdened with them was theft; that to eat corn mush with one's finger was perverse. That God hated idleness most of all . . . covering oneself with the skin of beasts offended God, so they burned her deerskin dress and gave her a good duffel clothe one. They clipped the beads from her arms and scissored inches from her hair (48).*

It is evident that the subversion of Lina's Native American or American Indian cultural mores to fit into Western cultural patterns describes how alienation within the context of slavery is engendered. This provokes Fanon's (1963) postulation where he stated that "for centuries they have stifled the whole of humanity in the name of a so-called spiritual experience". In this way, this kind of hegemony encoded in religion is comprehensively representational of the system of

slavery in a Gramscian sense. To this effect, slave workers are manipulated into complying with a dominant set of practice, sometimes with or without the threat of physical force. To reiterate Douglass Litowitz's (2000) postulation, the hegemonic ideology or law induces compliance in large measure, through its function as constitutive of social practice. Thus, Western hegemony as depicted in *A Mercy* is overreaching because it extends beyond the domination of black people in America to non-Europeans.

In order to fully gauge the impact of western hegemony on subaltern voices, *A Mercy* explores the success of western hegemonic influence on marginalized voices of the world. Once Lina started "relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things"(48). In doing this, that is by merging European medicine with her native type and the scriptures with lore, 'mimicry' occurs in Homi Bhabha's view, resulting to a production of a new "invented" value, which Bhabha refers to as 'hybridity'. Again, this corroborates the fact that *A Mercy* is concerned with the kind of relationship that occurs when two warring worldviews interact, whether in a form of symbiotic or in a parasitic relationship, and how one worldview dominates the other.

Apparently, Morrison's revelation in *A Mercy* on how the original names of slaves were replaced by those of the Church and sometimes how slaves were named after their masters reflected a common trend in American slavery. They slaves' original names were frequently replaced with nicknames in accordance with their physical appearance, psychological characteristics or biological incidents (Fabre 1988:109). In an interview with Thomas Leclair, Morrison echoes this phenomenon:

If you came from Africa your name is gone.

> *It is problematic because it is not just your name, your family, your tribe. When you die how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name? That's a huge psychological scar. The best thing do is to take another name which is yours because it reflects something about you or your own choice (1994:126)*

Morrison describes how the marginalized blacks and other non-Europeans in America were forced to submit to various forms of hegemonic dominance under slavery, particularly in the area of acculturation. James Sweet (2003) underscores this point by positing that "Europe relies heavily on the names given to these so-called slaves. These names were indicative of acculturation in the broader Atlantic world either in Europe or the Americas" (27). As such, the church's baptism of these slaves as seen in Lina's case is a deliberate mechanism deployed by the Euro-American power to impose Christianity and European culture on blacks and non-Europeans in America. Thus, Sweet (2003) submits:

> *Several hundred slaves were gathered . . . without any Catechism or teaching about God, they were given Christian names, written down on a piece of paper by the priests so the slaves would not forget they were then administered salts on their tongues. Finally, water was cast on their heads, often in a collective fashion. This was the essence of their 'Atlantic Creolization' (28).*

Following this experience, Lina in Morrison's *A Mercy* started to act in consonance with her new way of life. However, although slaves in America saw the conversion to Christianity as a road to freedom, they did not completely reject their native laws and customs. This is why Lina like other slaves in America engage in syncretism, blending Christian values with native rites to produce 'hybridized' way of worship and life.

Again, *A Mercy* draws attention to the negative effect of slavery even on white people as Rebekka and her mother, whose hatred for Western religious arrogance, cannot be over emphasized. Rebbeka sees western religion as the imagination of the believer, an illusionary construction of a worshiper. Lina's opinion of Rebekka is concluded in this manner: "Rebekka' s understanding of (Western) God was faint, except as a larger kind of king, but she quieted the shame of insufficient devotion by assuming that he could be no grander nor better than the imagination of the believer" (74). In a sense, Rebekka's perspective of western religion and God is inspired by the knowledge she acquired from her mother. According to the omniscient narrator "Christianity as Rebekka experienced it from her mother was a flame fueled by wondrous hatred (74).

Of the many perspectives generated from the foregoing, one of the most significant that buttresses further Lina and Rebekka's negative disposition toward western religious value is traceable to the rift between the Catholic and the Protestant sects of Christianity in *A Mercy*. For example the conflict of relevance and superiority between the sects, no doubt, created rooms for suspicion in the minds of Rebekka and her mother. This suspicion further questions the authenticity and genuineness of western religious practices and the faith that they propagate. Earlier on when Rebekka "settled on Jacob Vaark's land, she visited the local church some seven miles away and met a few vaguely suspicious villagers. They had removed themselves from a larger sect in order to practice a purer form of their separatist religion, one truer and more acceptable to God" (78). Rebekka's visit to the local church heightened her annoyance and doubt. When the Pentecostal church refuses to baptize her first born and her daughter, she was forced to turn away from the church. Worse still, when she lost her husband, Jacob Vaark and

her children, she expresses with pain in her heart : "I don't think God knows who we are . . . he is doing something else in the world. We are not in his mind" (80).

In addition, Rebekka critiques Euro-American misrepresentation of what salvation is and the narrow belief that other than through the Christian faith, no one was saved. This is literally and dramatically revealed in Rebekka's submission that:

> *The possibility (to be saved) was open to most, however, except children of Ham. In addition, there were Papist and the tribes of Judah to whom redemption was denied along with the variety of others living willfully in error, dismissing these exclusions as familiar restrictions of all religions, Rebekka held a more personal grudge against them and their children . . . (92)*

Morrison's indictment of the religious arrogance of the Caucasian in *A Mercy* recalls Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage (1984).* Findley in this work, extends his method of rewriting canonical stories by "writing back" to the centre on the biblical story of Noah and the Great Flood. In his radical interrogation of the story of the flood, the great myth of salvation becomes a saga of destruction in the name of imperial righteousness and the extension of petty power. In this respect, Findley declares that this myth of salvation reserved only for a minority few is thus, symbolic of western world's marginalization and suppression of 'others'. He concludes by saying "once western thinking has been codified in and sanctioned by the book of Genesis, 'Othering' in its most radical form has been achieved" (98). Just like Findley, Morrison's indictment of Euro-American religious arrogance has been conveyed through the different perspectives that her women characters portrayed. These characters as Africans and Native Americans demonstrate how they are made victims of colonial marginalization and suppression in America.

In a fundamental sense, *A Mercy* draws our attention to the kind of prejudice deployed by the white-majority rule to establish control over the African Americans and the Native Americans in America. This kind of prejudice is better described in Fanon (1963) where he established that Euro-Americans saw blacks in America as a people whose "tradition, myths were the very sign of that poverty of spirit and depravity" (32). As a result, the hegemony that emerged from this postulation can be said to be subtle. Lina puts this in perspective: the

> *Native and Africans, for instance had access to grace but not to heaven – a heaven they knew as intimately as their own gardens. After life was more than divine; it was thrill soaked. Not a blue and gold paradise of twenty-four praise song, but an adventurous real life, where all choices were perfectly executed (99).*

This religious misrepresentation by the dominant Euro-American power is tailored to induce submission on the part of blacks and non-whites in America. No doubt, this postulation borrows from Gramsci's notion to the effect that hegemony is not merely physical but rather subtle. Thus, Lina sees the Euro-American religion as symbolic of subtle oppression and marginalization. Being a victim of maltreatment by the Presbyterians who were supposed to bring succor to her, the omniscient narrator has this to say of Lina:

> *The Presbyterians stare at her face and the blood wipes on her clothes but say nothing. They visit the printer and offer her up for sale. They no longer let her inside their house so for weeks she sleeps where she can and eat from the bowl they leave for her on the porch, like a dog . . . like a dog (105)*

All things considered, religion is seen by Morrison as a mechanism by which the Euro-American power has become not only hegemonic but also oppressive. In short, Morrison says that Euro-

American religion has been instrumental in facilitating enslavement and the activities of slavery in America. This view is repeatedly raised in Oyeghe B. Miederi (2011) where he observes that "one of the monumental failures of Christianity was in its inability to liberate black people from the degradation of servitude . . . Christianity glories in conquest and domination . . . Christianity is a religion of oppression" (75). Morrison shares this sentiment because Christianity to her is the religion of the slave masters and America which claims to be a Christian country, for generations, has denied black people their humanity. One can therefore conclude that, Christianity was one of the tools used to establish the institution of slavery in America.

2.3 Interrogating the Hegemony of Language in Morrison's *A Mercy*

Western language in this case the English language, played a significant role in promoting the hegemony of the slave holders and in the subjugation of slaves be they Africans or Native Americans. By realizing fully the potential of English language in the process of control, the imperialist power in Morrison's *A Mercy* made use of it to maintain domination over blacks and non-Europeans. Therefore, to underline the intricacies of power relations within the American context, *A Mercy* draws an interesting link between language and hegemony in a Gramscian sense. Borrowing from Gramsci's seminal work *The Prison Notebooks*, Morrison depicts the America that makes use of both coercive and subtle approaches for the purposes of hegemony. To her, the American society makes use of the Caucasian culture to maintain control over African Americans, of which English language is obviously an important component in transmitting white values and mores. The impact of this approach is so subtle and effective that the controlled African Americans unconsciously consent to their own domination. To this effect, Ngugi Wa Thiongo in Siddiqui (2010) observes that Western language that is, English language

"annihilates a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one of waste land" (40). The result of this is evident in the female characters as Florens, her mother, Lina, Sorrow and even Florens' brother in Morrison's *A Mercy*.

In *A Mercy* Morrison deliberately deploys the experience of Florens to graphically portray the African American life in America as one dogged by obstacles from different quarters. She observes accordingly the travails and conditions of black slaves who were illiterates in the United States: "I do not read what Mistress writes and Lina and Sorrow cannot"(5). Florens confronts the crisis of illiteracy facing black slaves in America. Florens like her mother, her brother, Lina, and Sorrow who could barely articulate an alphabet of the English Language. Within the context of slavery, acquiring knowledge or even learning how to read and write English Language was forbidden for slaves. Florens laments thus: "The Reverend father tells us that once every seven days we learn how to read and write. We are forbidden to leave the place so that four of us hide near the marsh. My mother, me, her little boy and Reverend Father" (6). Although it was forbidden for black slaves to learn how to read and write English Language under the American Slave Law, the Reverend Father being a white man essentially directed his energies at educating Florens, her little brother and her mother in secret. The Reverend Father's motive can further be explained by Michelle Russell in Blassigame (1971) who avers that:

> *In the isolated instance where white individuals or organizations like the American Missionary Association took it upon themselves to educate African Americans [in English Language] it was always in a religious context and for the purpose of stressing the possibility of posthumous salvation. As the institution of slavery could be perversely rationalized as the extension of the gospel, educating the "heathens" became the accepted substitute for "freeing" the slaves:*

salving white consciences by saving black souls (14).

What the above means in the postcolonial context is that perhaps the Reverend Father's motive falls within the premise of the Christian Missionaries' aim as seen earlier in the subsection above, to maintain subtle domination over and above black people in America through English language and through western knowledge. Thus, learning how to read and write in English language by Florens, her mother and her brother is a form of consensual domination according to Gramsci. No wonder Grant in Bhabha (1994) asserts that "the imitation of English Language will induce them [the colonial subjects] to remain under our control"(4). Here, Grant unconsciously brings to bear the hegemonic nature of the English language as a mode of Oriental learning.

Consequently, Morrison's *A Mercy* buttresses Edward Said's claim that one of the main features of postcolonial theory is the control over language. As such, through Florens, her mother and her younger brother, Morrison foregrounds the assumptions of Bill Ashcroft etal (1969:31) to the effect that "the imperial education system installs a 'standard' version of metropolitan language as the norm and marginalizes all 'variants' as impurities" (7). This perhaps is the reason why Florens' mother believes that understanding English Language and acquiring knowledge was the only key to comprehending and interpreting the world. This belief in a postcolonial sense as projected by Edward Said is a process "of conscious affiliation proceeding under the guise of filiation" (31). This implies that the learning of the English language proceeds from a desire not only to be accepted but to be adopted and absorbed into the dominant Euro-American culture. Said contends that, this kind of attitude caused those from the "Periphery" – like the African Americans and the Native Americans, to immerse themselves in an alien culture, denying their origins in an attempt to become "more English than the English"(4).

In sum, Florens observes how strange the hegemonic form of English Language is to her and how obscured and weird it is learning this alien language: "At first when I am brought here I don't talk any word. All of what I hear is different from what words mean to minha mae and me" (6). Florens' perspective reveals how strange English language was to her and her mother when they first encountered it. Subsequently, Florens, her mother and younger brother had to learn English language in order to cope and fit into the complex American society. Thus, from a postcolonial view, English language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which the conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established (Ashcroft 1969:7). Howe in Ashcroft etal (1969) captures this situation perceptively:

> *For those whose language is systematically destroyed by enslavement, for those whose language has been rendered unprivileged by the imposition of the language of a colonizing power . . . some mixture of one or other of these models describe the situation of all postcolonial societies (10)*

Howe's highlights one of the striking features of postcolonial societies which is the distortion or the unpriviledging of the language of the oppressed by slavery or colonialism.

It is against this background therefore, that these displaced individuals in *A Mercy* are pressured into adopting a new language in order to cope under a totally different environment. In view of this, Sartre in Fanon (1963) contends that "everything was done to wipe out their traditions, to substitute their language for ours and to destroy their culture with ours" (13). Sartre position reveals the nature of Caucasian hegemony in America. Thus, to Morrison, learning how to read and write in English language is a consensual submission to Western ideas and values by slaves like Florens, her brother, her mother and other slaves in *A Mercy*.

In a nutshell, *A Mercy* underlines Morrison's deployment of the various perspectives of women and the experiences of a group of displaced individuals to form a sense of self and belonging, and a sense of home in an unfamiliar environment during slavery. Bethan E. Court (2011: 45) notes that Morrison's *A Mercy* "is a novel of dispossessed and transplanted people that investigates each characters search for the safe haven of home". In other words, Morrison's *A Mercy* investigates each individual character's plight within the context of slavery in America and his/her quest for identity and self-realization. Rather than depict the collective trauma of a community and its attempt to overcome such trauma as a community, Morrison delineates individual traumatic experiences of displaced peoples and their quest for liberation. Evelyn Schreiber (2010) gives credence to this postulation because she sees the America that is depicted in *A Mercy* as a "a nation of transplanted populations, where class, family connections, and occasionally luck determine power and ownership; and where slavery does not necessarily equate with race; this developing America focuses on the personal trauma of individuals rather than on the collective memory and group suffering"(164). Thus, slavery is typical of postcolonial projection of European imperial domination and its resultant implication in the lives of the enslaved.

In conclusion, Morrison's *A Mercy* deliberately uses women in a sense as enablers to portray the complex dynamics of the black family and community in America. Her major contention in the texts is: that slavery did not start on the basis of race; and that slavery, religion and language were crucial factors in the subjugation of non-whites and in furthering white supremacy in America. In a nutshell, Morrison argues that in carrying through the intentions of the Euro-Americans, the subalterns, non-white victims variously rebelled and agreed to their own subjugation.

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CHAPTER THREE

3.0 LOCATING THE PLACE OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

3.1 The Portrait of the Individual African American Identity in Morrison's *Paradise*

The writer Hector De Crevecoeur in *Letters from African American Farmer* (1782) alongside other scholars, critics and analysts have for centuries asked questions as to "who is an African American?." In the same way, blacks in America have grappled with the notion of "who is an African American?". This question becomes very significant to blacks in America, given the history that robbed the African Americans several traces of their identity, language and cultural past. Therefore, through the various experiences of African American women in *Paradise,* Morrison highlights the dynamics of the African American identity.

It is in the light of the above therefore that Erik Erikson in Gates (2003) contends that "throughout history, African Americans have been trying to figure out who they are in order to form a basic identity that they will build on throughout their lives" (4). In order to respond to Erikson's contention, Morrison in *Paradise* looks at two important aspects of African American identity [individual and communal African American identity] from the perspectives of African American women characters, as fundamental in understanding the dynamic nature of the African American personality and identity. That is, in order to understand the identity of a black person in America, one must understand who the African American is and where he/she is coming from. As such, one must bring to the mind the various components that define the African American and the nature of the society where or she resides. By so doing, Morrison interrogates the

postcolonial vision of black identity in America through the perspectives of black women charcaters. Not only that, she also looks at new aspects to the African American identity in *Paradise,* which have rarely been discussed and emphasized by writers and critics. To Morrison, the notion of identity within the African American context leads to a number of issues such as individual or personal African American identity and communal or community African American identity.

Morrison's *Paradise* is according to Vida De Voss (2010) "a proliferation of literal twins, figurative twins, twin situations and twin histories. The double is a mirror figure, which is ultimately not limited to the numerical two, but instead conveys the idea about a self and the other, thus a self and all others"(8). In this sense, the double figure functions to disrupt the idea of 'singularity' or 'one-sidedness' in identity by making otherness part of the self. He argues further that Morrison's double enables the creation of identity in tension with an other to reveal an "interactional" identity of unity in multiplicity (9). Impliedly therefore, the self and the other play complementary roles in defining an aspect of the African American identity.

Joao De Mancelos (2005:17) observes that the individual African American identity exists in itself by virtue of reference to other identities: "Every individual recognizes himself/herself not only by a reflection of the self, but also by the image that others have" (4). This postulation suggests that an African American will only have relevance or importance when viewed through the mirror of other black individuals in the community. In other words, what constitutes and defines the individual self and identity in the African American community is a reference to the other. Thus, in Morrison's *Paradise* characters complement each other. By this means they depict the relationship between the self and the other and how they contribute to the growth of the African American community.

One major character whose perspective enables Morrison to justify the sense of unity in multiplicity or the complementary roles between the self and the other is Mavis. Through Mavis in *Paradise,* Morrison draws from the three sets of twins which include Deacon (Deek) and Steward, their grandfather and his twin brother, and Mavis' dead twin babies (16) to depict how individuals complement one another. Others are two sets of brothers killed in Vietnam War – Mavis' two brothers and Deek's only two sons (16). Also, Morrison draws from two sisters, Soane and Dovey married to two brothers, Deek and Steward; the town's founding fathers including Big Papa and Big Dady and Old Fathers and New Fathers (17), to depict the relevance of the self and the other. Essentially, this assumption by Morrison challenges the idea of singularity in identity, and suggests that identity is a product of dichotomies, dual or binary oppositions necessary for both the self and the other to explicate the complex nature of the African American identity. To explain this logic further Vida De Voss submits that "twin histories are presented in the stories of Haven and Ruby, and also metaphorically in the history of United States of America. The founding of both towns (Haven and Ruby) is also marked by disallowing"(9). Thus, Morrison's *Paradise* portrays the African American individual as a product of binary relationships.

In *Paradise* Morrison explores the dynamics of the individual African American identity as she draws from the perspective of women characters like Consolata and her relationship with Mother Mary Magna. This she does to describe the intricate relationship that exists between the self and the other. According to Consolata upon Mother Mary Magna's demise, "her rope to the world had slid from her fingers". (247). In other words, the narrator has this to say of Consolata upon Mother Mary Magna's death:

When Mary Magna died, Consolata, fifty-four

years old was orphaned in a way she was not as a street baby and was never as a servant. There was reason the church cautioned against excessive human love and when Mary Magna left her, Consolata accepted the sympathy of her two friends, the help and murmurs of support from Mavis, the effort to cheer her from Grace, but her rope of the world had slid from her fingers (247)

The preceding passage contends that Mother Mary Magna was to Consolata her essence of being alive and being human. Being an integral part of Consolata, Mother Mary Magna figuratively embodies the innate connection of vital dependence between the self (Consolata) and the other (Mother Mary Magna). To this effect, Bhabha (1994) posits that "the splits are being articulated into a collective body" (14). Therefore, this is the more reason why when Mother Mary Magna passed on, Consolata is left to feel like she had lost her essence, identity and her personality. She feels like she had:

No identification, no insurance, no family, and no work. Facing extinction, waiting to be evicted, wary of God, she felt like a curl of paper – nothing written on it – lying in the corner of an empty closet" (247-248).

Mary Magna's death aborted Consolata's identity, marred her meaning in life and shattered her connection to the past and the present, thereby creating in her emptiness, loneliness and meaninglessness. Thus, she is left without her alter ego. Consolata continues to mourn her alter ego thus: "Prisoner wine helped until it didn't and she found herself, full of a drinker's malice, wishing she had the strength to beat the life out the women freeloading in the house" (248). Consolata's experience vividly captures Fanon's (1963) where he observes that "the Negroes who lived in the United States in fact experience the need to attach themselves to identity

matrix" (173). This further explains the kind of friction that takes place when there is a separation or distortion in the order of harmony between the self and the other or the self and the alter ego. Ranulph Glanville (2008) posits thus "what is called the self and the other are in effect . . . the same . . . because each validates the other" (3). Put differently, what is considered the self is referential to the other. Therefore, when the self is mentioned, the notion of the other must come to play. It is in the light of this that Morrison borrows from the unity that exists between the self and the other or the self and alter ego to suggest that in order for blacks in America to survive the complex nature of the American society, they must stick together. In this sense, the African American cannot be self-sufficient without reference to the other. This way, an individual in the African American community can be defined primarily in terms of the other. No wonder, Morrison in *Paradise* describes Consolata upon the demise of her alter ego as a "drunken, ignorant, penniless woman living in darkness unable to rise from a cot to do something useful or die on it and rid the world of her stench" (248). This describes a self helpless in her state of misery upon the demise of her alter ego.

Similarly, Morrison portrays another woman's perspective in *Paradise* as a self that knows itself through the other by her depiction of Arnette on her wedding day. Arnette being an African American, believes that she loves her husband, KD, absolutely, because he was all she knew about herself. According to Arnette:

> *She believed she loved him absolutely because he was all she knew about herself – which was to say, everything she knew of her body was connected to him. Except for Bellie Delia, no one had told her there was any other way to think of herself. Not her mother; not even her sister-in-law (148)*

It seems to Arnette that the only way to understand herself and her world of existence is through her husband, her alter ego, the other. She testifies to this happy union noting that in her relationship with KD:

> *She had been so happy. At last so very very happy.*
> *free of the bleak sadness that encased her as soon*
> *as she was home from college: the unrelenting*
> *suffocation in her parent's house; the brand-new*
> *disgust that accompanied the care of her broken*
> *nieces and nephews; the need for sleep that alarmed*
> *her mother, annoyed her sister-in-law and infuriated*
> *her brother and her father; the flat-out nothing-to-doness,*
> *interrupted only by wonder and worryabout K.D. (148).*

In describing the complementary role between the self (Arnette) and the alter ego (K.D.), Morrison as Bhabha's would argue paints a portrait of single as a union of two; a bond that brings about a liberation from "bleak sadness" typical of the American society in *Paradise*. Arnette's expression of her love for K.D. and her sense of satisfaction and fulfillment in him recalls Sartre's postulation in *The Transcendence of the Ego* as cited in Ranulph Glanville (2008) to the effect that the self and the other are "of a uniform and homogenous sameness" (3). This emphasizes the complementary role both play in defining individual identity. Therefore, *Paradise* is Morrison's way of depicting the complementary role of the self and the other, or the self and the alter ego. By so doing she elucidates the kind of relationship obtainable in the African American community. This kind of relationship according to Morrison, is based on the dependence on one another by African Americans for communal living. This is a typical characteristic feature of the black American community in America.

More importantly therefore, Morrison in *Paradise* deliberately puts a black woman character like Soane in a position that helps to understand what happens when the self is detached from the other or when the self is in conflict with the alter ego. Through Soane

Morrison reveals the intertwined and complex nature of the African American individual identity captured in the conflict between Deek (Deacon) and his twin brother Steward. Not only that, Morrison portrays a self that knows itself through the other. She represents Deek as someone experiencing incompleteness when he and Steward stopped talking to each other after the attack on the convent.

> *It was Deacon (Deek) Morgan who had changed the most. It was as though he looked in his brother's face and did not like himself anymore. To everyone's surprise he had formed a friendship (well, a relationship anyway) with someone other than Steward, the cause, reason and basis of which were a mystery" (300)*

It was such that when they both fell out, "he (Deek) was angry, suspicious . . . what he felt now was exotic to a twin – an incompleteness, a muffled solitude, which took away appetite, sleep and sound" (300-301). This occurrence is in line with Bhabha's (1994) postulation that "the social articulation of difference is a complex" (7). For this reason, the conflict between Decon Morgan and his twin brother expresses what Fanon describes as "the need that man has to liberate himself from the part of his being which already contained the seed of decay" (177). To this extent, Morrison contends that the implication of the rift between the self and the other will amount to tension, conflict and sometimes even violence which will distort and destroy the individual as well as communal identity. In this context, Deacon Morgan's reflection is mirrored through the actions and inactions of his brother, Steward. In other words, Steward's way of life influenced and even changed Deek's disposition toward life immediately after the attack on the convent, thereby creating a vacuum in him only the other can fill. No wonder when he and Richard Misner discussed at length over the issues bothering him, Richard Misner came to realize that "the man's life was uninhabitable" (302). In a postcolonial sense, Morrison describes

an African American individual's struggle for a sense of self. While it is difficult for the African American to affirm such a sense in a society that is obsessed with 'whiteness' *Paradise* creates a counter identity to describe the experience of black people in America. Consequently, Morrison's conclusion in *Paradise* is that to escape the 'suffocating' nature of American life, African Americans must continuously remain in harmony and unity with each other and one another. To this end, blacks in America must remain together in unity and love in order to contend with the usually complex dynamics of the American society.

3.2 The Communal African American Identity in Morrison's *Paradise*

The notion of the communal or collective African American identity within the context of the postcolonial refers to a group of black people in America whose cultural, religious, political, and ethnic make-up is unique. Erik Erikson in Gates (2003) describes this as "the acceptance by a black person to identify with the group of people in America". This submission indicates strong commitment on the part of an African American to dedicate his or her life to the observance of black values in America. Also, it indicates strongly that the African American will defend the views of the black community and assume risk for black people in America. In this regard, Sofield (1999) posits that "every human being, in addition to having his/her own personal identity, has a sense of who he/she is in relation to a larger community" (6). This goes to say that the cohesiveness of the communal or collective African American identity goes beyond individual identity, as the collective suffers the pain of grief from the loss of a member (Gates 2003). In this respect, Edward Said's postcolonial supposition on communal African American identity in Ashcroft (1989:4) serves as a ground for Morrison's delineation of African American communal identity in *Paradise*. Said comments on the nature of a postcolonial society like the

African American community and the type of hybridization black culture in America has produced. Accordingly, he notes that "all postcolonial societies realize their identity in difference . . . they are constituted by their difference . . . and it is in this relationship that identity both as a distancing from the centre and as a means of self-assertion comes into being" (1978:8). Said's view suggests that the African American personality is a combination of various cultural mores, particularly the African values and the Euro-American mores. Therefore, Morrison's *Paradise* deploys the idea of the communal African American identity in a postcolonial manner as an attempt to strip away conventional perspective on the African American personality in order to examine what the collective African American identity might be for the postcolonial blacks in America.

In *Paradise* Morrison weaves her story around the perspectives that these women Mavis, Grace, Seneca, Divine, Patricia, Consolata, Lone and Save-Marie come up with in order to recast the communal African American identity, experience and society. Through Mavis, Morrison describes Ruby in Oklahoma as a town which is according to the founding fathers "one all black town worth the pain" (30). The citizens of the original city, Haven were freed slaves. The story of the founding fathers' difficulties when establishing Haven became a philosophical foundation of the community. According to Maria Bring (2005:31), "Homesteaders of all blacks rejected them because they were poor and too bedraggled looking". In this sense, this rejection termed "disallowing" by both the whites and light-skinned blacks transformed into a significant historical narrative for both the citizens of Haven and Ruby. Thus, the fact that their Old Fathers could face such a tribulation, rejection and hostility and still prevail triumphantly in the end made them hailed heroes of Haven and Ruby. For this singular act, those who are directly related to the Old Fathers revel in how they were able to create a functioning all black town. By creating

an all black town, the 8-rocks engage in a process that Bhabha (1994) refers to as one that "estranges any immediate access to an ordinary identity or a received tradition" (4).To Bhabha, an all black town for the African Americans in Morrison's *Paradise* is an attempt to strip them of the past influenced by Euro-American values. By creating an all black town African Americans demonstrate that a Negro identity and culture exist (Fanon 1963:70).

In the light of the above, the hatred for the group who rejected them continued to live with them and their children. In particular the hatred of white people and lighter-skinned blacks lingered on. Thus:

> *For ten generations they had believed the division they fought to close was free against slaves and rich against poor. Usually, but not always whites against blacks. Now they saw a new separation: light-skinned against black. Oh, they knew there was a difference in minds of whites, but it had not struck them before that it was of consequence, serious consequence to Negroes themselves (32).*

It is evident that the Ruby people have strived for years to bridge the gap between freed blacks and black slaves, and that between rich and poor black people. However, they are now faced with a rather more challenging task in terms of how to manage the difference between light-skinned and very dark skinned blacks, which they never thought was a problem.

Therefore, the need to stick together as very dark skinned blacks inspired the idea for all black towns, Haven and later Ruby. In Ruby, African Americans strive to create a Paradise where they could stay for eternity. Freed from white oppression and light-skinned discrimination, they shared all they could with each other; they brought their team spirit with them from Haven. This act by the African Americans in Morrison's *Paradise* reaffirms Homi Bhabha's (1994)

postulation that: "it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are in the minority" (5). In other words, the African Americans in *Paradise* strived to create a new way of life; new tradition and guiding principles to the point that staying together was the only means for survival. Through their team spirit, they were able to create a functioning little community (Maria Bring 2005). They started a store, a bank, build streets, and houses. Thereafter, they felt safe that their women could walk around in the middle of the night and "nothing for 90 miles thought she was a prey" (35). Ruby as a little town did not need policemen or jails because there were no criminals:

> *Unique and isolated, this was a town justifiably pleased with itself. It neither had nor needed a jail. No criminals had ever come from this town. And the one or two people who acted up, humiliated their families or threatened the town's view of itself were taken good care of (36).*

The men of Ruby have consequently created a united all black town, sticking together by the unwritten laws, customs and tradition of the community. The traditional and cultural norms in the society are therefore enforced by certain individuals known as the 8-rock families, who control virtually everything in the community. From the foregoing the efforts of blacks in Morrison's *Paradise* to create an all black town is at best described by Bhabha as "the emergence of a community envisaged as a project – at once a vision and a construction" (4). Thus, Ruby people consider themselves as "pure-race" ruled by strong self-preservation instinct and the need to fight any threat of infiltration and decentralization of power which implicitly challenges their communal identity.

One important perspective that brings to bear the concept of collective identity is that of Patricia Best and her project. Patricia Best's narration portrays the Oven as one significant symbol of collective identity in Morrison's *Paradise*. The Oven holds a monumental and sentimental value for the 8-rock and the people of Ruby and Haven. The "flawlessly designed Oven both nourished and monumentalized what they (The Old Fathers) had done" (7). In fact, the Old Fathers saw the Oven as a permanent fixture in the ground that would lay claim and testify to their freedom having been through all the ordeals in America, before they founded Haven. They had survived the natural elements they encountered during their trek to the West. They have equally triumphed over the humiliation and poverty and of being routed out of offices they held during Reconstruction and subsequently being reduced to field labor because nobody would give them jobs that required mental labor (99,193). Thus, the Oven would testify to their perseverance in overcoming such tribulation. In addition, the Oven is an attestation to the roles that African American women played in their triumph over such perilous times.

Again, the Oven is a kind of communal kitchen "if not [of] a certain distinct possibility" (99), for the African Americans in Morrison's *Paradise*, which stood in polar opposite to the white kitchen where black women were raped. To the Old Fathers, the Oven "signaled luxury – an amplitude of soul and stature that was freedom without borders and without deep menacing woods where enemies could hide. . . here freedom was a test administered by the natural world that a man had to take for himself every day." (99). To a large extent, the Oven is a symbol of black unity, identity and history, in Ruby. It is created and valued as a symbol of the community's strength and continuity of a place of gathering, feasting and storytelling. As the center that holds the people together, it is a place of social rituals, political negotiations, ceremonies, gossip, cooking, celebration etc (Chirila 2011). No wonder when Morgan "touched

the stove hood (Oven) admiring its construction and power . . . he remembers the ceremony they had when the Oven's iron lip was recemented into place and its worn letters polished for all to see"(6). Evidently, the Oven holds a vibrant memory in the minds of the people of Ruby, which reminds them of their history and cultural identity as a people.

By employing the concept of a book within a book, Patricia engages in the rewriting, recollecting and the reconstructing of the communal African American identity; a process that recollects numerous stories about the individuals and the events that constitute the heroic past of the African American community in Morrison's *Paradise*. In order to realize her aim of recollecting the history of a communal African American identity (Ruby), Patricia Best continues thus:

> *Patricia climbed the stairs of her bedroom and*
> *decided to while away the rest of the evening on*
> *her history project or rather what used to be*
> *a history project . . . it all began as a gift to the*
> *citizens of Ruby – acollection of family trees;*
> *the genealogies of each of the fifteen families . . .*
> *After that, most of her notes came from talking to*
> *people asking to see bibles and examining church*
> *records. Things got out of hand when she asked to*
> *see letters and marriage certificates. . . the trees*
> *still required occasional alterations – birth, marriages,*
> *deaths – but her interest in the supplementary notes*
> *increased (187)*

Apparently, Patricia Best's research project on documenting the collective black American identity in Morrison's *Paradise* took several forms of investigations and studies. To Patricia Best, it was the:

> *Twenty minutes she spent looking at the Blackhorse*
> *Bible that convinced her that a new species of tree*
> *would be needed to go further, to record accurately*
> *the relationships among the fifteen families of*
> *Ruby, their ancestors in Haven and, further back,*

in Mississippi and Louisiana (188)

It was this realization that propelled Patricia Best into an intensive research about the Ruby people. She disagrees with "the town's official story, elaborated from pulpits, in Sunday school classes and ceremonial speeches" (188). Not only that, she also disagrees with some of the "footnotes, crevices or questions" as important information that depict the collective identity of the Ruby people. Through Patricia Best, Morrison ridicules the idea of an all black town. She questions what Bhabha refers to as "the binary of logic through which identities of difference are often constructed – Blacks/Whites, Self/Other"(5). In other words, by establishing an all black town, Patricia Best came to fully realization that the African Americans in Morrison's *Paradise* are invariably constructing a 'racialized difference' which they are fighting against in the first place. Patricia Best discovers that the very idea of "pure ethnically cleansed black identity" was a mere fabrication by the founding fathers of Ruby. Thus, through the complex interweaving of history:

> *Pat had wanted proof in documents where possible to match the stories, and where proof was not available she interpreted - freely but, she thought, insightfully because she alone had the required emotional distance. She alone would figure out why a line was drawn through Ethan Blackhorse's name in the Blackhorse Bible and what the heavy ink blot hid next to Zechariah's name in the Morgan Bible (188).*

Thus, it is through this 'insightful' research devoid of emotion that Pat discovers that:

> *There were nine large intact families who had made the original journey,Who were thrown out and cast away in Fairly, Oklahoma, and went on to found Haven. Their names were legend: Blackhorse, Morgan, Poole, Fleetwood, Beauchamp, Cato, Flood and both DuPres families. With their siblings and wives and children, they were seventy-nine or eighty-one in all(188).*

It is through Pat's documentation that the stories behind the Ruby people are further highlighted. She brings to bear why and how African Americans were thrown out and cast away from Oklahoma and how they eventually became 8-rock and founded Haven and later Ruby. Also, Patricia's recollection of history reflects what Fanon sees as the attempt to "reconstruct the customary boundaries of black and white people, high and low; and challenged the normative expectations of development and progress" (6). Thus, the "pure race" which is symbolically named 8-rock "eight rock a deep deep level in the coal mines" and is made up of "blue black people, tall and graceful, whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren't 8-rock like them"(35), is Morrison's way of looking at how history is reflected in the collective memory of a group of black people whose struggle for survival can be located in their quest for a collective black identity.

Ruby as an African American community in *Paradise* is Morrison's way of describing black people's troubled attempts at forging a communal consciousness and a sense of history after slavery. In other words, Morrison looks at how African Americans have struggled over time to create a collective black identity for themselves in America. With this in mind, Sofield (1999) avers that postcolonial authors as Morrison "use their literature to solidify through criticism and celebration, an emerging communal identity" (2). Thus *Paradise* is essentially Morrison's way of portraying the African American community as one gaining understanding of itself and its place in the multicultural American society.

In sum, *Paradise* is Morrison's attempt at reconstructing the African American identity. The text constructively advances what constitutes the identity of a black person in America. Morrison distinguishes between the individual African American identity and the communal African American identity to reveal the complex dynamics inherent in the personality and

identity of black people in America. By so doing, Morrison frames African American experiences in the United States in the personal or individual recollections and collective or communal representations of black people in relation to the cultural, social, and political dynamics of America. However it is worth noting Morrison's contention that the notion of black homogeneity in America is a fallacy. To her, black identity may be homogenous, but that does not entirely solve or resolve the problems of black people in America. Therefore, by writing on the African American identity and personality, Sofield (1999) contends that African American women writers as Morrison are using literature in a postcolonial sense as a "means for personal inquiry to function as a forum that utilizes their talents to reinvent identity, thus offering a new perspective to readers looking to literature for inspiration or guidance" (15). To this end, Morrison looks at how the African American self has constructed a communal black identity in America over time.

3.3 The Place of African American Women in Morrison's *Paradise*

In a number of societies globally women are believed to be fed, nurtured and groomed precisely for marriage, child bearing and other domestic purposes. This postulation is further given credence by some religious practices, customs, cultures and traditions that promote notions of women as docile, subservient and incompetent in comparison to the men. Simone De Beauvior (1952:34) asserts that "the man represents both the positive and the neutral, as indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general: whereas women represent only the negative, defined by limiting criteria". Consequently, Simone De Beauvoir explicates in a postcolonial manner the common social stereotypes placed on the woman in

virtually all communities of the world. The justification of the social stereotypes placed on the woman in every part of the world including the African American community, is further projected in the views of Aristotle (cited in Simone De Beauvoir, 1952:35), who posits that "the female is female by certain lack of qualities. The female should be regarded as afflicted by natural defectiveness". This patriarchal model which is deeply embedded in the American community is predicated upon the dominance of men and the submissiveness of women who are both materially and emotionally dependent on the former. Nonetheless, this social stereotype is responsible for Simone Beauvoir's claim that the "woman is sex and absolutely sex, no less. She is essentially defined by reference to the man and not by reference to herself. He is the Subject, the Absolute – she is the Other"(48). This gender contention is evident in postcolonial discourse.

Morrison continues with the portrayal of the perspectives of women characters like Mavis, Grace, Seneca, Divine, Patricia, Lone, Consolata and Soane in *Paradise* to depict the subservient role and position given to black American women by the men of Ruby. In the novel, before arriving at the convent, each of these women had experienced some kind of maltreatment by the male dominated Ruby society. It is against the background of oppression and marginalization that these women decided to escape to a self-styled convent in search of freedom and redefinition of personal or individual identity. Mehdi Hassanian Esfahani states that "Mavis and other women escape to the convent in search of freedom, love, peace, parental care and attention. They escaped from the patriarchal construct of paradise (Ruby), to find themselves their own haven" (10), defaced of overwhelming laws, cultural norms, and the dictates of both white and black men's community. To these women, the convent is a conducive place to isolate themselves from both white and black men's hegemony. By moving to the convent Morrison in Bring (2005) avers that these black women "are seeking for another home, to avoid Ruby men

who are propagating the spirit of patriarchy throughout the town to meet their own desires and the standards of white Americans" (79). In other words, these African American women are seeking for a comfortable place, where they can belong. Thus, Bring observes that the "convent gradually turns into a place which received and helped women who were escaping from something"(79). It is in this light that Krumholz (2010) captures in brief the past of these broken African American women:

> *Mavis is a failed mother who mistakenly kills her babies in an attempt to please and avoid being beaten by her male lover. Grace embodies female sexual desires and desirability. Seneca, abandoned by her mother and abused in a string of foster homes, mutilates herself to express her 'anxiety of belonging'. Pallas is the poor little rich girl whose parent's lover's betrayal is followed by rape (28).*

The preceding illustration underscores Morrison's deployment of these women as representational markers of disparaged women who are considered as the other in the patriarchal American society. The women are portrayed as being damaged in one way or the other by the conservative patriarchal structures designed by black men in the African American community to uphold and assert male dominance over and above black women of Ruby. This argument further drives home the view of postcolonial feminists who take into cognizance the "perspective of a socially marginalized subgroup (black women) in their relationship to the dominant group (black men)" (Kudi 2011:4).

Morrison portrays the experience of a black female character named Soane to depict the oppression of black women in *Paradise*. Through the character of Soane Morrison reveals that "almost every family in mythical Ruby is controlled by a powerful father figure, and these men

also possess hegemonic authority in the public sphere" (270). Soane describes the road that leads to Ruby as:

> *Only women walked this road. Only women. Never men*
> *For more than twenty years Soane had watched them.*
> *Back and forth: crying women, staring women, scowling,*
> *lip-biting women or women just plain lost . . . women*
> *dragged their Sorrow up and down the road between Ruby*
> *and the convent (270)*

Soane depicts Ruby as a place where patriarchal dominance holds sway. She does not hesitate to portray Ruby as a society where women are relegated to the back ground and tormented in different ways by black men.

Soane marries into the Morgan family and she is tormented by the demise of her three children. Her marriage with Deacon (Deek) Morgan one of the twins left her in agony when she lost two of her boys to the Vietnam War. Not only that, she later had a miscarriage. Worse still, she gradually notices that her husband is having an illicit affair with one of the women living in the convent. Soane's suffering brings to the fore the experience of women like Violet in Morrison's *Jazz.* Violet's husband had an illicit affair with a woman who is a white woman named Dorcas. However, Soane's reaction was different as she exhibits a tender attitude towards Deek's lover, because she lays a special emphasis towards her children over her affection for her husband (282). Soane's plight describes African American women in Ruby as people who have been consistently relegated to the background by unfaithful black men. To this end, Barbara (1984) observes that "black women's existence and culture and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape them are in the 'real world' of white and/ or black men's consciousness" (7).

In the same vein, Mavis' perspective in the novel draws from her past life which was filled with the fear and her inability to please and satisfy her husband in every aspect of their marriage. For example her sexual life with her husband which is supposed to be pleasurable and enjoyable, always ignites in her mind the question of whether or not it would be "quick like most always or long, wandering, collapsing in wordless fatigue"(26). Not only that, she discovers that "he didn't penetrate – (He) just rubbed himself to climax while chewing a clump of her hair through the nightgown that covered her face" (26). Therefore, her emotional life with her husband is one without satisfaction. Besides this emotional torture of Mavis, is the psychological and physical trauma she faces in the hands of her husband. Her social life is in jeopardy and her situation becomes worse when she realizes that her husband whispers to her children a plan to kill her. This argument is given strong backing by Alice Walker's "In Search of our Mother's Garden" cited in Barbara (1984) where she contends that "the political, economic and social restrictions of slavery and racism have historically stunted the creative lives of black women" (36). No wonder, Mavis is emotionally, psychologically and physically tortured by the trauma inflicted on her by her husband and Ruby community.

Furthermore, Morrison draws from the view of another black woman to describe the plights of black women in America. Dovey Morgan the wife of Steward Morgan variously complained about her husband, because of his attitude towards disputing with others concerning the words engraved on the Oven. She does not like him having such deep attachment to the traditions of the town. When she finds out that she was sterile, the only existence she could rely on is her husband. She is under emotional siege. Her deep feeling of solitude results in her hallucinations. The hallucination she experiences becomes her place of retreat from the patriarchal black community of Ruby men. In a quest to escape the existing realities of her

society she begins to hallucinate about a godly being who understands her plight (212). As this situation demonstrates Dovey, needs the sense of belonging to somebody who is living for her alone like Tea Cake is to Janie in "Their Eyes were Watching God". Dovey's ideals and aspiration portray the real intention of black women living within a male dominated black society. Her dissatisfaction with her husband, Steward, who considers her only relevant in bed every night to satisfy his sexual longings, speaks of the similar experience of the women of Ruby. In addition to this attitude towards her, he always spoils her cooking by adding a lot of peppers which also displeases her. Eiko Okuwaki (2004) posits that the expression of Dovey's despair is similar to the desires of the heroine, Janie in *"Their Eyes were Watching God"*. Janie had been forced into domestic servitude by her ex-husband as had Dovey. She is let down by her ex-husband who promised to give her a deep love which her first husband had not given her. In this situation, in the solitude of a town like Ruby where nobody visits except for the 8-rock people, there is no way for Ruby women to satisfy their own desires except to create hallucinations that temporarily mediate their difficulties.

In addition, Morrison evaluates the perspective and experience of Pat Best, the daughter of Roger Best in Ruby. Pat Best comes to terms with the reason why she and her family were shunned in the community. She strives very hard to be accepted in Ruby by adapting to the life there and living under the patriarchal structure of the society. Her suffering and discrimination originates from the fact that her father, Roger Best, married an outsider – someone not from the 8-rock. Only pure bloodline is wanted in Ruby. Thus, Roger Best and his family were described as "the dung we left behind" (36) by Ruby men. For this reason, Roger Best was excommunicated for breaking the unwritten blood commandment of Ruby people by marrying a

light skinned woman who was like a white person. In this light, Pat expresses her discontentment over how her parents and her daughter are treated by Ruby men:

> *They hate us because we look like a cracker and was bound to have cracker-looking children like me, and although I married Billy Cato,who was an 8-rock like you, like them, I passed the skin color to my daughter, as you and everybody knew I would (38).*

Pat is hurt by the mean treatment of her mother because she is not from 8-rock. This kind of treatment further extended to Roger Best's granddaughter Bellie Delia, who because she pulled her under wear down in public at three is considered a loose woman in Ruby. The fact that Bellie Delia was three years old at that time didn't seem to matter to the Ruby folks. She remains infamous even though she is still a virgin; she is still considered as "the daughter to someone whom she felt they despised, so she has an ax to grand. So she is reevaluating, and has come to learn some terrible things she thinks about this town" (105). From this revelation, she finds out something terrible about the genealogy of the town. It is obvious that there is an obsession to protect the bloodline and the coal blackness of the 8-rock. This realization became an eye opener that ridicules the fact that blacks in the African American community have turned out to become oppressors of their own black race. To this extent, Morrison sarcastically reveals the elusive nature of the kind of unity and tranquility that the black people strive to uphold within the Africana American community depicted in *Paradise*. Thus to Patricia Best the aim of communal living or collective African American identity is defeated. In essence, Patricia Best frowns at the kind of freedom that favors one section of the society at the detriment of the other. To her, the idea of freedom, and unity in Ruby did not equally incorporate the important drive for women's right. In this respect, Morrison contends in *Paradise* that the fight for equality, freedom and unity can become repressive. In reaction to the discovery of the truth about the 8-rock, Patricia Best

burns the genealogical tree she had painstakingly made after discovering the intense hatred of the 8-rock for any deviation from the true bloodline and anything which might result to a stain on that bloodline.

In a similar fashion, Morrison explores the perspective of Arnette Fleetwood the elder daughter of the Fleetwoods who suffers the same faith with Ruby women. Being a member of the 8-rock and married from the 8-rock, Arnette is troubled by her husband's ill-treatment of her. Although she is pregnant with KD's baby, she realizes that he is not in love with her through his deeds and his actions, for he loves a woman in the convent (221). What even made matters worse was the unrelenting animosity between the Fleetwoods and the Morgans. To escape the tension and the hostility between the two families and the lack of love from her husband KD, she tries to kill the baby by beating her stomach when she is about to put to birth in the convent. Incidentally, the baby passes on few days later. Eiko Okuwaki (2004) posits that "the death of the baby reminds us of the relationship between Sethe and Beloved in Morrison's *Beloved" (29).* Sethe killed her daughter to protect her from the life of enslavement, Arnette in this case attempts to take her baby's life to prevent it from the ill-treatment of her husband and the Ruby men.

In a postcolonial manner, as delineated by Morrison, Frantz Fanon portrays the black woman as the "other" which according to him is "the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. While He (the black man), is Subject, he is the absolute – she (the black woman) is the other" (16). To substantiate this view, Mehdi Esfahani (2005) observes that in a male driven society like America, women are suppressed, devoiced, and inessential, and are considered as objects and not important. Thus, Ruby society does not pay attention to the rights of women, their desires and hopes; rather a lot of attention is drawn to Ruby, Ruby men and their past. To

make matters worse, the women of Ruby knew too well that speaking or even projecting their point of view will fall on deaf ears since their history is replete with the view that "they are just women . . . what they said was easily ignored by good brave men of Ruby"(201).

It is in light of escaping to the convent in order to isolate themselves from the patriarchy of Ruby men that these women; Mavis, Grace, Seneca, Divine, Patricia, Lone, Consolata and Soane, are blamed for the deterioration of Ruby. Incidentally, the men of Ruby started to believe that the convent women had special powers. They were considered as "Bitches. More like witches" (276) and Ruby men thought to themselves that "before those heifers came to town this was a peaceable kingdom" (276). In other words, the women of the convent were blamed for all the deterioration in Ruby. These women in the convent were labeled by the men of Ruby as sluts without a religion, corrupt to the bone marrow and filthy like the dust as they drink like fish too (276). The others before them "at least had a religion. These sluts out there by themselves never step foot in church and I bet you a dollar to a fat nickel they ain't thinking about either. They don't need men and they don't need God" (277). With this perception of the convent women, the men strongly believed that "They meddle. Drawing folks out there like flies to shit and everybody who goes there near them is maimed somehow and the mess is seeping back into our homes, our families. We can't have it . . . can't have it at all"(276). As a result of this, Ruby is threatened because "out yonder all slithery in a house full of women. Not women locked safely away from men; but worse, women who chose themselves for company, which is to say not a convent but a coven" (277).

Evidently, everyone jumps on the bandwagon and blames the convent women for all the ills in the society. The people of 8-rock "have been wanting to blame somebody for sweetie's children for a long time" (277). The consequences of this is that the men decided to "take aim at

the women of the convent" for the good of Ruby. Thus, Pat Best's account of the massacre of the convent women reveals how the women were murdered in cold blood. "8-rocks murdered five harmless women because the women were impure (not 8-rock); because the women were unholy and because they could – which was what being an 8-rock meant (278). This statement is indicative of the peak of the animosity in the novel, which is a testament of the arrogation of authority and power by the men of the 8-rock to maim anyone who stands against what they believe in and live for. Thus, the women of the convent became the victims of the stringent patriarchal dictates in the African American community of Ruby.

In conclusion, *Paradise* is Morrison's way of focusing on gender consciousness from a postcolonial perspective. She deliberately creates a female-centered world in the text to encapsulate the disparaged roles given to black women within the African American community. Morrison also comments on the fact that the tragedy of African American women in *Paradise* comes from gender discrimination promoted by white society and black men within an all black community. The predicament of the African American woman is in two fold. She suffers racially at the hands of the hegemonic white society and also of the patriarchal structures of the black male dominated society. By highlighting some of the contradictions and complexities in the African American community Morrison's *Paradise* comments on the implications of gender discrimination perpetrated by both white and black men. Thus, Morrison's *Paradise* lends itself to the postcolonial readings of gender because it focuses on the notion of patriarchy which is part of gender discrimination. To this end, Morrison through *Paradise* acts in concert with other African American women writers to open up all the possibilities for black women in not only the American literary scene, but also within the larger American society. Morrison's approach is purely postcolonial.

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CHAPTER FOUR

4.0 UNDERPINNING THE DYNAMICS OF RACE IN THE GLOBALIZED AMERICA VIA AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN CHARACTERS IN RITA DOVE'S *AMERICAN SMOOTH*

4.1 Race, Racism and the Globalized American Society in Dove's *American Smooth*

African American literature is also known for its vast body of diverse poetry. Perhaps, this has a lot to do with poetry's relationship to music which is another cultural form in which black Americans from the beginning of their presence in America have explored. According to John Freedman (1986) poetry allows the African American writer the avenue to "utilize the five senses by tapping into the emotional recesses of human psyche. Poetry possesses the aptitude for subconscious influence. It comes the nearest of all literature to epitomizing the deepest layers of the soul, because it is very nearly musical" (30). This assertion contends that the poetic genre of literature is usually an exploration of individual consciousness and perception through a recognizable pattern to word sequence. It is to this effect that Wordsworth as cited in Freedman defines poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling"(9). Such feeling and idea are given intensity by the use of distinctive style and rhythm, designed to convey experience in a vivid and imaginative way. Thus poetry is a unique platform that allows black writers in America to explore a myriad of relevant human experiences via the use of imagery, metaphor, simile, enjambment etc. In the sophisticated and complex poetry of Rita Dove is embedded with the treatment of wide range of themes – particularly of race and racism - woven with musical qualities to summarize the dynamics of the African American experience in the United State of America.

Jana Dreserova (2006) observes that, the question of race in African American poetry "cannot be omitted as a delimiter of the African American identity since it represents certain cultural heritage, especially when it carries the burden of the legacy of the past atrocities committed in the name of racial difference" (41). This suggests that the notion of race is significant in interrogating the African American society and life, as it throws more light on the American society with the various divide within it. Accordingly, in her interview with Lofgren (1996), Dove comments on the significance of race:

> *Race may define part of one's identity, especially once one gets beyond childhood; and there are situations where it matters, as well as certain experiences that would not have happened to someone of a different "persuasion" but it shouldn't become a trauma that causes one to distrust people on the bases of their color or to refrain from befriending someone else because of his or her racial origin (345.)*

The aforesaid is explicit of Dove's awareness of the tension that the subject of 'race' signifies. However, she notes that such tension should not be manipulated for selfish reasons.

In view of this, Dove's interpretation of race throws further light on what she believes it represents for the African Americans. She observes that "it is a trauma of color . . . when you allow yourself to be eaten up by suffering under the pressure of what others think of you, that is trauma" (345). For blacks, particularly women in America race simply means the trauma of their skin color. In other words, it is the trauma of being black and not white. As a result, Dove states that blacks in the American would "love to walk through life without the anxiety of being prejudged and pigeonholed on the basis of their race" (346). This contention justifies the general feeling of alienation, desolation and discrimination of black people in the context of a globalized American society. Thus, these and other concerns are the thematic focus of Rita Dove's *American Smooth*.

Rita Dove's *American Smooth* (2004) is divided into five parts with over hundred poems. The first part: "Fox Trot Fridays" describes the synchronization of African American values into mainstream America. The second part: "Not Welcome Here" describes the perceptions of race and racism in America. The third: "Twelve Chairs" deals with the American brand of justice. The fourth: "Blues in Half-Tones" focuses on the place of African American icons in shaping the national and global history and experience. Finally the fifth: "Evening Primrose" tells of the poets concern with American history and her appraisal of personal experience. Although this collection is structured into different parts, overall the poetry is Dove's aesthetic delineation of the collective experiences of the American cultural life and society.

In the light of depicting the problem of color in the globalized American society, Dove's *American Smooth* regurgitates the discontentment of African Americans in the poem titled "Brown" (23). In other words, it is against the background of racial polemics in America, that the primacy of the African American predicament and experience is discernable in the poem titled "Brown" (23). Dove depicts precisely the pressure that comes with being black or brown in America. The poem contextualizes the prevalent question of racism, segregation and stereotypes within the contemporary American society. It is against the back ground of racial discrimination in America that Dove begins the poem titled "Brown" (23) from the perspective of a black female persona asking "Why you good in every color!"(1). By doing so, the poet employs the concept of color as a means of commenting and redressing the issues of black oppression and racism even in a globalized setting. This reaffirms Barbosa's (2010) stance that "racism, discrimination and segregation are all forms of modern slavery". Put differently, racism is an "on-going colonial presence" (Bhabha 1994). The racial arrogance of white people in America is consolidated by the increase in discriminatory practices over social amenities. That is why Dove

portrays a typical American society where blacks are denied certain social, political, economical and health benefits. This is an ideology rooted in the assumption of a Manichean and binary structured American society with white and black people divided on virtually all fronts (Abah 2008). The racial divide in America is rendered strongly in Fanon (1963) where he asserts that the American society "is a world divided into compartments . . . if we examine closely this system of compartments, we will at least be able to reveal the lines of force it implies" (21). This proposition implies that America as a society is a world cut in two. In this respect, the persona in line seven of stanza two of Dove's "Brown" is stunned to state that:

For once I was the only
black person in the room . . .
I thought of a few other
things, too, unmentionable (23)

Typifying the racial politics in America, the persona creates strong imagery that describes white supremacy ideology in a society where white color is perceived supreme over other colors. Thus, the notion of black inferiority is alive even in the multi-racial and diverse America. Dove's black female persona in "Brown" proudly promotes her color when she observes in line six of stanza two that:

Don't get me wrong:
I have always loved my skin,
the way it glows against citron
and fuchsia, the difficult hues
but the difference I cause
whenever I walk into a polite
space (15)

The persona's view above regurgitates the general conception about the notion of "Am black and proud" promoted by a large section of blacks in America. The fact that African Americans could promote their "blackness as being beautiful" within a society where they are marginalized and

suppressed is conveyed here. This is reminiscent of the racial affirmation of the Civil Rights Era and Black Cultural Revolution Era of the 1960s and 1970s, when black was flaunted and celebrated.

Similarly, as projected by contemporary African American Poetry, this difference is therefore celebrated and strongly identified with in the poem titled "Fox"(25). This poem continues in the perspective of the former to describe the persona in stanza three as someone who

Knew what she was
and so was capable of
anything anyone could imagine.
She loved what she was,
she imagined nothing,
she loved nothing more
than what she had
which was enough
for her.

In this sense, Dove uses simple stanza forms, short lines and an accessible diction to create an imagery that describes the African American personality, identity as well as black cultural life in America. This further suggests the vibrancy of their lives and values in sharp contrast with the criticism of the Caucasian values symbolized by Waltz (Ingersoll (ed), 2001:21-58). "Fox" thus, is an appraisal of the African American self in the light of a fast changing society; hence, the persona is presented as a single but strong black woman.

By and large, the poem "Cozy Apologia"(29) reinforces a fictional perspective that critiques the crises of Global Capitalist attitude in America. The persona in line five of stanza one decries that "this post-post-modern age is all business: compact disks and faxes, a do-it-now-and-take-no-risks-events"(12-13). In this regard, the global society is such that the transnational companies have become powerful organizations which try to control the global economy because everything means business to them. Thus, even though the American society has finally

"hunkered down to business" in lines seven and eight, Dove astutely notes that globalization can be charged with promising empty shells. Borrowing a leaf from Hungwe (2010), Dove notes that "globalization promises a better tomorrow between the two worlds (white and black) who will benefit from greater economic efficiency and increase the world in the long run" (45). However this assumption is further contradicted by the evidence given in the same poem. She goes further to describe the globalized American society in line ten as "a hurricane…nudging up the coast" whose "oddly males: Big Bad Floyd . . . bring a host of daydreams" (16-17). For the persona, the contemporary American society is one that "falls of the Divine", that is, pays no attention to religion and the place of God in human existence. Since the modern/post-modern man seeks to comprehend the world and human nature through science, a method Stanley Rosen (2002) describes as "modern science and technology, for instance, are both at once the great sources of modern forgetfulness (crises) and the chief obstacles to reviving ancient thoughts" (4). Rosen is quick to lay blame on modernity itself. According to him, the moderns are their own worst enemy. In their hasty repudiation of ancient wisdom and ordinary pre-scientific experience, they have lost the "terms that best describes their own project" (43).

Again, from another perspective an African American woman, the poem titled "First Juror" (73) describes the American system of justice. Here, Doves juxtaposes Proof with Doubt in line four and five of stanza one as a kind of diametrically opposed relationship between the ideal and reality, to portray the conflict inherent in the twisted administration of justice on black Americans within the mainstream. According to the poetic voice in the poem, "Proof is a cast shadow/doubt is to walk into a field at high noon/with one tendril held to the wind". By this juxtaposition, the binary opposition of "Proof and Doubt" demonstrates Dove's contempt for the American legal system that is inefficiently biased against the African Americans. To Dove, it is

the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the American justice system that is responsible for the high incarceration rates of African Americans by white American mainstream. Therefore, Dove emphasizes on race as a systemic form of oppression, legislated through the judicial apparatuses of America and further normalized through social institutions such as schools. The above is what Fanon refers to as "our souls contain racial prejudice" (47). "Our soul" deployed by Fanon in this context, refers to white Americans and their inherent racial contempt for non-white people.

Continuing with her poetic rendition of racial prejudice against black people in America, the poem titled "Second Juror" (74*)* through the perspective of a black female persona portrays the disposition and resentment of African Americans toward this kind of treatment. Because of this, black people in lines nine to twelve of stanza four of the poem are seen as people who seek "a stone to throw/a curse to hurl/a silence to break/ an age to write" about their grievances over the racial politics in America. In this respect, James Weldon Johnson in Lake Tim (2005) assigns the blame of America's racial problem to the whites in America. In other words, Johnson interrogates the question of black response to white racism in America. He avers that the "resort to force remains and will doubtlessly remain the rightful recourse of oppressed peoples" (2). Consequently, he submits that black people's response to white racism and discrimination in America must be judged for its 'soundness' and not on any moral or pacific grounds.

Discontented with the place and position of the African American personality in post-colonial America, the black female narrative voice draws from her perspective in the poem titled "Third juror" (75) to describe black people in America as people who are always compelled to stay in-between by the existing status-quo. As such, through the implied metaphor of "the between", the African American character is seen "between the lip and the kiss/between the hand and the fist/between rumor and prayer/between dungeon and tower/between fear and

liberty/always between". This expounds on the Gramscian form of hegemony in order to describe the place and position of black people in the postcolonial America. To Dove, this kind of domination sterms from the white American racist attitude and has succeeded in forcing the African Americans to the background. No wonder, such hostile representation of blacks in America justifies Johnson's further claims that "we would be justified in taking up arms or anything we could lay our hands on and fighting for the common rights we are entitled to and denied" (2). Thus, W.E.B Du Bois as cited in Lake Tim (2005) adds by stating that "the problem facing the 20th century America was the 'color line'"(4).

Against this backdrop, Dove is aware of the fluid nature of the American society as the "Fourth Juror" (76) draws our attention in lines five to ten to the black female narrative voice's physical and psychological yearning for a definable place and position in a post-colonial American society. The perspective of the persona's outcry is to "Cancel the afternoon/evening mornings all/ the days to come/until the fires fall to ash/ the fog clears and/ we can see where we really stand" (76). As a result, the black female persona in the "Fifth Juror" (77) begs to know when the globalized American society will come to terms with a definable place for blacks and other minority groups in America, in "How long will this take?" (77). In what seems to be confusion and disappointment over the personality and identity crisis of the African American in the contemporary American society, the black female persona in a different light in the poem "Sixth Juror" (78) decries "am not anyone more than anyone else/I did my job, then looked into their eyes/ what had I become?" (78). As such, the "Sixth Juror" down to the "Twelfth Juror" imbues the collection with the perspectives that are centered on the place of the African American identity and personality within mainstream America. This can further be described as

Dove's attempt at recognizing and delineating ideas through series of thought provoking imageries, metaphors, and symbols drawn from so many facets of the American life.

In the same vein, the poem "The Return of Lieutenant James Reese Europe" (65) draws from the perspective of another black female narrative voice to portray the experiences of black army regiments from WW1. By making allusion to historical figures like Lt. James Europe, Hatti McDaniel and the black military jazz band matching up 5th Avenue in perfect formation for victory parade in 1919, the persona contends in line fifteen to twenty-five that these proud black soldiers in America brought jazz to Europe.

> *We toured devastation, American good will*
> *in a forty-four piece band. Dignitaries smiled;*
> *the wounded settled back to dream. That old*
> *woman in St. Nazaire who tucked up her skirt*
> *so she could "walk the dog". German prisoners*
> *tapping their feet as we went by" (8)*

The persona recognizes the musical qualities and the entertaining potentials of the black American soldiers, who brought succor to the wounded white soldiers from the war and other viewers. The black female persona goes further to describe how the soldiers were discriminated on in line twenty-one to twenty-six.

> *We trained in the streets: the streets where*
> *we came from. We drilled with sticks, boys*
> *darting between bushes, shouting – that's*
> *all you thought we were good for. We trained*
> *anyway. In camp we had no plates or forks.*
> *First to sail, first to join the French army,*
> *first to combat with the shortest training (10)*

The above – mentioned describes the racial misconception, discrimination and treatment of the African Americans who were not given similar military training white Americans had received before World War 1. Dove, in her interview with Camille Dungy (2005), observes: "they

(African American soldiers) had enlisted as Americans but had entered the war under the French Command because the leaders of the segregated U.S forces could not envisage fighting the war with the collaborated efforts of African American soldiers. Just one more of those absurd situations produced by this country's racial trauma" (3).

Similarly, the black female narrative voice proceeds further in the poem titled "Ripoint" (67) to provide a vivid account of the African American soldiers in the war front in line seven to fourteen of stanza three:

> *We were en route to the battle fields of the 369th*
> *the Great War's Negro Soldiers who it was said*
> *fought like tigers joking as the shells fell around*
> *them so that the French told the Americans Send*
> *us more like these and they did and so the Harlem*
> *Hellfighters earned their stripes in the War To*
> *End All Wars (20).*

In this graphic portrayal of black American soldiers as fierce fighters, the persona does not relent at depicting the kind of courage they had in the battle front, to the extent that they won the admiration of the French, who sought more and more for black American soldiers from America.

Following these events, after the war, these African American soldiers came home rejoicing in the "The Return of Lieutenant James Reese" (65), saying: "You didn't want us when we left but we went/You didn't want us coming back but here we are/ stepping right up white-faced Fifth Avenue in a phalanx (*no prancing, no showing of teeth, no swank*) past the liberty lions/ eyes forward, tin hats aligned" (15). The above aptly depicts that even the African American soldiers were conscious of their total rejection by the white American soldiers. As a result, Dove cited in Camille Dungy (2005) opines that "so little was known about these men, even though they distinguished themselves in the combat. They received more medals and

citation of honor – not from this country but from the French, the *Croix de Guerre*" (3). This is further captured in lines 20 of the poem:

> *No jazz for you. We'll play a brisk French march*
> *And show our ribbons, flash our Croix de Guerre*
> *(yes we learn French, too) all the way until we*
> *reach 110th street and yes! take our turn onto*
> *Lenox Avenue and all those brown faces (25)*

Thus, through allusions, symbols and imagery in this poem, Dove depicts the discrimination of African American soldiers (because of their color) by white American soldiers which is by extension the prevalent practice of the wider American society.

Overall, Rita Dove is of the view that the African American society must strive beyond the racial politics directed at them by the whites in America, to embrace universality, change and the global transformation of the world. By so doing, blacks in America will surmount the various misconceptions of white Americans. Thus, she calls on African Americans to reject the prevailing affirmation of "blackness" particularly endorsed during the Civil Rights era, in order to fully grasp the dynamics of the American reality and society as well. She observes that: "I'm part of the tradition that is still growing among African Americans. That is finally exploring the freedom to write about anything we choose without it necessarily having to be about 'being black' – whatever one imagines by that" (Dungy 2005). She also adds by saying that "I think the more diverse our writing becomes, the more it touches on all aspects of (American) life as if it's the most natural thing in the world"(13). In this sense, Dove is of the view that whether in writing or in the approach to the dynamics of the American reality African Americans need to transcend race and racial prejudices of white people in America. As such, Ekaterini Georgoudaki (2008:20) opines that Dove's *American Smooth* "also continues in the search for wholeness

balance, connection, continuity, reconciliation with the self and the world as well as the effort to redefine the self and history and to renew cultural values".

In a whole, even though Dove addresses the issue of race in *American Smooth*, she does not adopt a strong voice of either a Black Nationalist or a Feminist poet. As such, Dove does not "let indignation, anger and protest control her verse" (Georgoudaki 2008). For this, Rampersad in (Walters 2008) avers that "instead of an obsession with the theme about race, one finds eagerness [in her poetry] or perhaps even an anxiety, to transcend black cultural nationalism in the name of inclusive sensibility" (216). To this end, Dove writes with the freedom to portray a wide range of issues implicated in the general American life and society without paying so much attention to her color.

4.2 Globalization, Change and the Integration of the African American Values into the Mainstream in Dove's *American Smooth*

The notion of globalization is a never-ending enterprise given the broad nature of the term. This means that the term can be viewed from divergent perspectives – politics, culture, economics, and ecological conscience etcetera. However, for the purposes of this work the term will be looked at from a more cultural position. Davis in Hungwe (2010) affirms that globalization is "a planetary synthesis of cultures". In this sense, Barbosa (2010) contends that the "westernization" or "modernization" in globalization is a dynamic whereby the structures of modernity (capitalism, industrialism, bureaucratism, individualism, rationalism etc) are spread all over the world, normally destroying pre-existent cultures and local self-determination in the process. Given this premise, the cultural effects of globalization on the periphery can sometimes

be negative. Tomlinson (2003) contends that "globalization destroys localities . . . everywhere becoming blandly culturally uniform, but, that cultural experience is in various ways 'lifted out' of its traditional 'anchoring' in particular localities" (43). This suggests that globalization rubs minority groups of the world their indigenous cultural heritages and experience, by making them assimilate alien popular cultures. By this, globalization involves a kind of subtle domination of certain cultural values. It is to this extent that Spybey (1996) observes that "globalization is sometimes described as an American imperialism" (4). In other words, globalization is the Western or Caucasian form of cultural domination of the periphery (blacks in America).

From a more Anthropological view, Barbosa observes that the term is basically concerned with the relation between the global (the centre) and the local (subaltern), as well as what becomes of this relationship. In other words, the global process in the society and its particular context included cultures and ways of life and its connectedness, all in relationship to time and space. Globalization which is an agent of synchronization encourages the rapid reorganization of social and cultural life, resulting in what Bhabha refers to as hybridity. In this respect, globalization has its gains and losses. While the gains of globalization are usually in favor of the white Americans as Spybey observes, its losses are mostly felt by African Americans and other minority groups in America. It is in the light of this therefore, that Rita Dove explores global motifs in *American Smooth*, in order to underline the change that has occurred in America over time, especially in relation to the life and experience of African Americans. Also, she questions the negative impact of the kind of synchronization of African American values into the mainstream America, done with the intention to subtly dominate blacks in America.

Rita Dove's poetry collection *American Smooth (2004)* is innovative in its exploration of musical forms and themes. Her preoccupation with the American experience in poetry, weaves the lyricism which derives from her musical background with a fresh sense of movement and rhythm within the poems (Fwanshishak 2006). In this sense, Dove in her preface describes *American Smooth* as having a veritable platform free from irregularities, roughness or illicit projections for all Americans, white or black. In other words, *American Smooth* has no obstructions or difficulties in portraying agreeable perspectives, cultures and identities in America. This is why Dove defines the title of her collection, *American Smooth*, as "a form of ballroom dancing derived from the traditional standard dances e.g waltz, fox, trot, and tango, in which the partners are free to release each other from the close embrace and dance without any physical contact, thus, permitting improvisation and individual expression" (Dove, 2004). This definition is suggestive of the fusion and integration of the Caucasian dance patterns (waltz and fox) with the African American dance modes (trot and tango) in America, which Dove figuratively draws from to emphasize the synchronization of African American values into the mainstream America.

In addition, Dove in her interview with Camille Dungy (2005) avers that:

> *The title refers to a type of ballroom dancing – American Smooth is the jazzier, American version of fox, trots, tangos, and waltzes. When I first encountered the term it seemed representative of so much that is quintessentially American. By 'quintessentially American' I mean more African American, they way we kind of riff off on things and make them our own. And that became the overlying metaphor for the entire book, the idea of taking whatever you're handed – whether it's history's ironies or dance – and making it your own" (2)*

The above is Dove's way of commenting on the acceptance, assimilation and the integration of the white American values into the African American mores by blacks in America. Although

Steffen (2001) observes that "Dove is one of the initiators of the trend toward a mainstream Pluricultural national identity" (2), Dove is one of those who led the vanguard of integrating African American values into the mainstream America for common good of the nation . Her *American Smooth* questions the resultant effect of a synchronization of black values into the American cultural standards done with the aim to subtly repress black American mores. This is in consonance with what Ashcroft (1989) refers to as postcolonial culture:

> *Post-colonial culture is inevitably a hybridized phenomenon involving a dialectical relationship between the "grafted European (white) cultural systems and the indigenous (black) ontology, with its impulse to create or recreate an independent local identity (194)*

This suggests that the African American culture is inescapably a product of the hybridization from both African cultural mores and the white American values. Thus, Dove questions this kind of dialectical relationship with the hegemonic aim of promoting the American cultural values over and above the African American mores.

On the one hand, Dove treats the leitmotif of change and synchronization of African American values with that of the mainstream America in the poem titled "All Souls" (15). Through the perspective of a black female narrative voice, the poem attests to the assumption that "Of course the world had changed/ As it would from now on everyday" (9-10). This situation is properly articulated in Homi Bhabha's in *The Location of Culture (1994).* He contends that the interaction between two sides (whether colonizer-colonized or whites and blacks) in America "creates a metaphoric third space which in turn creates (the) hybridity" (7). Dove metaphorically refers to this in the poem as "the new world", and that "everything has

changed" in America. This change is ushered in by the advent of globalization in America. To an extent, Dove is consciously aware of globalization and its intertwined and complex tendencies on the contemporary American society. As a result, the contemporary American society is viewed by her as a melting pot for divergent cultural heritages. On this ground, Dove believes that the world had changed for "the two souls" (black and white) of the American society. Thus, "now that change was de rigueur, man would discover desire, then yearn for what he would learn to call distraction" (14-15). Invariably, the quest to know in the words of Immanuel Kant and the desire to comprehend the new world is typically a characteristic of the post-modern African American and his/her society which Dove draws from.

In this context, Dove posits that the differences between the various parts of the United States as evident in the slavery and post-slavery era are gradually fading away. For "Already the din was fading before them/ a silence larger than all their ignorance" (23-24). Dove in Camille Dungy (2005) observes accordingly "we are living in an era where African Americans can enter the hallowed arena a bit more easily than our foremothers and forefathers. Our predecessors no matter how intelligent they were, were not welcomed into the ivied compounds of America and therefore did not enjoy the casual privileges of American life" (9). By "hallowed arena" in the foregoing, it is obvious that Dove still recognizes the problematic of race and racism even in the contemporary America, although racism now is not as pronounced as it were in the past. As a result of this occurrence, Americans are beginning to realize their ignorance as "they walked into a new world, until it was all they knew" (26-27). By the acceptance of the various parts and cultures of America by Americans, in a seemingly new era, Dove avers that the different aspects of American society is finally "hunkering down to business" (27) as they "are straining to make

out new ways . . . new words" (29). Invariably, this authenticates the place and position of hybridity within the context of postmodern America.

Looked at from a postcolonial perspective, the integration of the black American values into the mainstream America is typical of what anthropology calls the "deterritorialization" and "reterritorialization" of the African American culture (Barbosa 2010:34). The terms are used to refer to the general weakening of the ties between culture and place, to the displacement of cultural subjects and objects within a particular location in space and time. On the one hand, the concept of 'deterritorialization' points out the moment for the replacement of culture in new time-space context, while on the other hand, 'reterritorialization' is the process of re-inscribing culture in new time-space context. In the light of this, anthropology views globalization (a product of Western construction) as a dualistic phenomenon whose hegemonic influence is usually felt by the subaltern groups of the world. In other words, globalization has its gains and losses. While the gains of globalization are usually in favor of the white Americans, the losses are most times felt by black Americans and other minority groups in America. Thus, Dove weaves through the dualistic nature of globalization in America to portray the dynamics of the postcolonial America in *American Smooth*.

In "Fox Trot Fridays" (19), Dove explicates another black female perspective to comment on the socio-cultural acceptance which allows for the synchronization of divergent values, particularly the African American values into the white American mainstream. She explores the forms of music and dance to portray softer movements of different dance patterns in America through the poem. Thereby, creating milder movements of dancers in America, in the bid to escape the crises of a globalized society through the soothing therapy of mild music and dance (Bryne, 2004:7).The persona declares:

Thank the stars there's a day
each week to tuck in the grief,
lift your pearls, and stride brush
stride quick – quick with a
heel-ball-toe (19)

In the foregoing, Dove's deploys a colorful imagery of the persona's ecstatic mood of excitement for a day to relief herself of the social crisis of post-modernity through music and dance. She depicts music and dance as veritable sources of distraction to escape the difficulties of contemporary America. To this extent, Dove privileges music as not only being an escapist rout from the harsh realities of the globalized America, but also as therapeutic. Thus, music serves as a mild treatment of the general realities of postmodern African American life (Fwanshishak 2006).

On the other hand, in what seems like a contradictory perspective that Dove weaves through her collection, she criticizes the kind of integration that subdues and dominate African American cultural mores. In other words, even though Rita Dove believes in the synchronization of values in America for the common good of the nation, she probes the kind of integration of values that leaves behind the traces of racism, marginalization and the alienation of black people in America. This is evident in the poem titled "Ta Ta Cha Cha" (20). In line five of stanza one, the black female persona describes the African American cultural mores as "besandaled and backpacked" – packed or stuffed into the "authentic" mainstream mores - to demonstrates the concern of contemporary African Americans about their cultural identity. As such, Fwanshiahak Daniel (2006) posits that "whether in the street of America or Europe, this poem projects the black American persona as distracted and lost" (65) in a globalized world. Thus, the black female persona in the poem "Ta Ta Cha Cha" declares:

One, two – no, five doves

Scatter before a wingtip's
Distracted tread.
Lost, lost they coo. . .
I'm American, besandaled
And backpacked sunk
In the bowl of sky (20)

The above is a way of framing Dove's treatment of the negative impact globalization as a threat to the African American identity and culture, since globalization seeks to promote the hegemonic culture in America as national culture, by subduing all minority cultures and identities (Smith 2006). Thus, Emenyonu (2006:40) contends that what remains of the minority culture and identity like the black culture in America is "stored up memories that may be shaped by the people's responses to the new space". As such, Dove in line four of the poem "Ta Ta Cha Cha" is forced to ask "Who you? . . . lost from a wing, drifts one pale" (14). Looked at closely, this poem probes into the place and position of the black American character in the world paralyzed by the forces of science and technology and prays for the confidence and assurance needed in life through music. Thus the persona makes a plea:

Teach me this dance
you make, snatching a sweet
from the path of a man
who because he knows
where he's headed, walks
without seeing, face hidden
by a dirty wingspan
of the daily news (21)

By and large, in a postcolonial sense, Dove starkly depicts that globalization makes the borders and barriers in cultural identity increasingly irrelevant as they transcend mental as well as physical barriers. This means that the common line between blacks and whites in America has become blurred to some degree. Harvey's (1986) position of this statement has become influential in making sense of the black identity in the face of globalization. For Harvey, the

world shrinks as a consequence of technological innovations. These "technological advancements facilitate the increased interconnectedness that constitutes a core component of discussions of globalization" (42).

To this effect, Hungwe (2010) argues from a postcolonial point of view that "globalization exploits, denigrates and humiliates the subaltern in the same way slavery and colonialism did" (44). This assertion is a justification for the distraction and confusion in the black American character in the poem "Quick" (22), where the persona in line seven and eight is seen as one who "peers from the culvert, all bobble and twitch, vacant eyes" having been through this "bait and switch all night. . .on the hill . . .with pure purpose poured into flight". The black American persona is described here as one who is confused, distracted and lost since integration has not erased completely the racist projections of white Americans and has also failed to alleviate the political, social and economic conditions of African Americans in the United States. She is wrapped up in the dynamics of a global world and as a result appears indecisive to confronting the problems associated with it.

Similarly, through the perspective of a black female persona Dove in the poem titled "I Have Been a Stranger in a Strange Land" (17) portrays white Americans as agents of globalization. The persona states that they were "Cataloging the universe/probably pretending they could organize/what was clearly someone else's chaos" (12). The resultant effect of white American arrogance of the world leaves the persona to "wander for a while/bush to arbor" as she "lingered to look through a pond's restive mirror" (7-8). The persona's reluctant attitude in the poem questions the "pond" used figuratively by Dove to symbolize synchronization. Thus, despite the synchronization of African American values into the white American mainstream, Dove frowns at this kind of integration that did not take into consideration the rights and liberties

of black people in America. She probes the racist assumptions of white Americans still inherent in America and the political, social, and economic conditions of African Americans in the United States.

In conclusion, Dove's *American Smooth* is the writer's way of promoting cultural synchronization only when it is done with the aim of not dominating minority groups like African Americans in the United States. She critiques the insistence of African Americans to retain and express their cultural heritage exclusive of the entire American experience. She also repudiates the doggedness of the white American mainstream to shut out African Americans from certain aspects of the American Dream, and American society generally. In this sense, she tones down the initial ideal of upholding "blackness" in the works of her predecessors, in order to open doors for racial dialogue and integration. For her, racial, economic, or political difference in America should not obstruct fusion and survival as a nation. Dove's *American Smooth* underlines and describes these problems within a multicultural and global perspective of American history. Put differently, Dove's *American Smooth* provides the platform upon which the varied cultural differences of the American experience are negotiated. It also provides an avenue for the interpretation of personal and emotional experiences within the larger African American and mainstream American society. To this end, Dove's *American Smooth* like contemporary African American poetry is concerned with racial and cultural dialogue and the appreciation of the multicultural ethos of the American society.

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CHAPTER FIVE

5.0 INTERROGATING THE DILEMMA OF MOTHERING IN RITA DOVE'S MOTHER LOVE

5.1 Family and the Dilemma of Mothering in Rita Dove's *Mother Love*

The Twentieth and Twenty First centuries American society provide a vivid example of the way in which racism, industrialization and capitalism interact to redefine, reshape and determine the lives of blacks in America. Prior to this, there have been numerous accounts defining the context of slavery for blacks and how black women operated in a slave society (Littlefield 2007). These accounts represent motherhood as one of the many roles that slave women performed, as they were also laborers, breeders and concubines in the 17th- 18th century America. Motherhood however represents a unique position for African American women even in the 21st century. In this vein, the African American woman writer like Rita Dove explores the roles of black women in the African American community in order to create new meaning of motherhood which is at the centre of black women existence in America. Thus, Rita Dove's *Mother Love (1995)* highlights the complex nature of black motherhood in a globalized American society. It interrogates the significance of motherhood for black family life. It is also a commentary on how black women's motherhood challenges the hegemonic constructions of race, gender, and class in the post-colonial American society.

Dove's attention on motherhood elicits the unique relationship between the mother and the child, one which is important for child development. Black mother's nurse their children, provide love, affection, guidance and shape their primary development. To this extent, Littlefield (2007) observes:

> *Motherhood for black women was survival. Black women had children, set up households, nursed and cared for their children, and formed communities. As mothers black women loved their children and cared for them in spite of the multiple tasks they performed. The bond between mother and child was strong (5).*

The above submission is largely true for motherhood in the African American community, in the face of absentee husbands and fathers who are practically forced out of their homes as a result of one problem or the other. For this reason, the nature of motherhood for back women has always been pertinent to comprehending black family life in America.

Rita Dove's *Mother Love* (1995) is divided into seven parts with over 70 poems. The first part contains a single poem, describing the relationship between Demeter (the Mother) and Persephone (the child). The second part unveils Persephone's (the child) leaving home. Part three traces Persephone's journey through her new world. Part four describes Persephone's life in her new world. Part five progresses into Persephone's emergence into motherhood and Demeter's reconciliation with her. In six, life after reconciliation between mother and daughter is depicted. The seventh part is autobiographical, it focuses on Persephone. Although the collection provides a sort of structural coherence, the scope of each poem covers divergent experience of its own.

Dove draws from the popular historical and Greek Mythology of Demeter and Persephone (an ancient story) to portray a violated world. According to Dove, "it is a modern dilemma as well" (IV). In other words, this collection is focused on mother- daughter relationship performed by characters of Greek Myths, Demeter and Persephone. Interestingly, Dove draws from her personal experience with her own daughter who fled home and stayed at her own will abroad in uncomfortable conditions. It is in the light of this therefore, that Dove

captures the dilemma of mothering in America in most of the poems in *Mother Love*. To this extent, Dove contextualizes the attitudes of contemporary African American children towards the black American family values and norms. Dove's *Mother Love* explicates the pressure on the black mother and how she is left alone in the attempts to nurture and ensure the survival of her child. This is better comprehended against the backdrop of the preponderance of unstable family settings in the black community exemplified by the desertion of husbands and fathers who appear in capable of coping with the pressures that their roles entail (Abah 2008: 191). It is in the light of the above that Rita Dove's *Mother Love* explores these initiatives of black American mothers in fostering what seems to be cordial relationship with their children in the face of unprecedented forces in America.

In the poem titled "Primer" (7) Dove introduces a perspective that begins with a symbolic description of Persephone as an ignorant child "in the sixth grade" who is "chased home by the Gatlin kids, three skinny sisters in rolled-down bobby socks" (1-4). In her portrayal of Persephone's childhood experience, Dove negotiates a personal experience similar in many respects with that of several children. She does this by focusing on Persephone as a child bullied by three skinny sisters in the sixth grade: "they trod my heel/ I knew they'd beat me up" (8). However, she is rescued from the hands of the bullies by her "five-foot-zero mother" who "drove up in her caddie to shake them down to size" (9). In this regard, Persephone is left with no option than to describe the love and protection derivable from her mother in another poem titled "Party Dress for a First Born" (8). In this poem, the black female persona in lines one to three of first stanza declares that "when I ran to my mother, waiting radiant as a cornstalk at the edge of the field, nothing else mattered: the world stood still" (7-12). Here the black female persona figuratively describes the overwhelming presence of her mother to the extent that everything

around her freezes. Thus, the relationship between Demeter and Persephone in the poem "Primer" underlines what family means to the postcolonial African American character.

To buttress the following "Persephone Falling" (9) another poem symbolically alludes Demeter as a black mother who serves as watchword to the daughter. As a loving and caring mother, Demeter dishes out important instructions to her child:

> *Remember: go straight to school.*
> *This is important, stop fooling around*
> *Don't answer to strangers. Stick With*
> *your playmates, keep your eyes down.(10-15)*

These warnings and instructions didactically serve as black family values to guide the child through life, particularly within the African American context. In other words, the instructions are a combination of African American family values and norms which form a part of the cultural dynamism of African American people. In this respect, the African American mother teaches her daughter values that will support her through life. She instills in her daughter values that will teach her how to "be Subject and not Object" (Collins 1993), so that she can affirm herself despite her gender and color in the male dominated American society. In short, these values that Demeter prescribes for her daughter are meant to give Persephone the required "strength every morning rise" (Heroes:3) in order to assert her dignity as a woman in the patriarchal American setting. However, as the child leaps into maturity the child begins to derail from the path charted by the mother as a result of what some critics call postmodern/mainstream distractions. The following lines capture the process of how the child succumbs to the pressure around her: "This is how easily the pit opens. This is how one foot sinks onto the ground" (12-13). Again, the metaphor of 'the pit' in the poem serves as some sort of global distraction that swallowed the child. It also marks the beginning of child's differentiation and realization of

his/her own personality, as well as deviation from the mother's 'protective' steps. Such realization is a moment of self discovery for the child, as well as rebellion that evoke a negative response in the mother's eyes, as the child does not fit into her expectation. Thus "No one heard her. No one! She had strayed from the herd"(16).

In one sense, the above draws from Ashcroft (1989:91) postulation that "one of the major acts of abrogation in postcolonial literature is a rejection of the process by which 'authenticity' is granted to the categories of experience authorized by the centre at the expense of those relegated to the margins of the Empire". That is, "Persephone Falling" (9), is Dove's attempt at rejecting the process by which 'authenticity' is prescribed by the white Americans at the detriment of blacks in America. This is why she portrays in Persephone a daughter whose rejection of her indigenous value system is a form of relegation of her own indigenous experience and other traditional African American values to the background. This she does in the bid to uphold an alien global cultural value prescribed by whites in America. Significantly, Persephone's conscious opposition to the "simple" and "plain" black American mores does not suggest that the African American value system is abnormal. Rather it is a process that depicts how the white American value system is hegemonic and privileges its own experiences over and above others.

From a different perspective, Dove comments on the nature of the African American home without a father or husband figure to contend with the dynamics of African American family. Dove addresses the notion of absentee husbands and fathers in the poem titled "Persephone in Hell" (23). Hades who is Persephone's father deserted his home in line seven of the poem as he notes: "I don't belong here" (5). Lofgren (1996) reveals the reason why Hades left his wife and daughter. He observes that Hades is "undeniably flirtatious, mildly seductive and hardly violent" (138) as a husband. Through the agency of Persephone, Dove vividly

describes him in lines thirteen to fifteen of the poem as one who is "gone as easily as smoke" to settle more "in bottles/holding out a glass/on certain days at the Cote d'Azur/ with smoke from a hundred cigarettes" (23). In short, Hades is typically an example of a failed African American father/husband who has taken to frivolous life style at the expense of his family. This explains why he is hardly mentioned in the collection. Thus, Hades describes abandoning his family in lines 23 as "I part the green sheaths/I part the brown fields"

The poem titled "The Search" (10) projects another different perspective that locates the growth of the black American child (Persephone) within a very fluid and globalized American context. In other words, this poem presents the child as someone who is lost and blown away in the wind of post modernism. The child is further described as someone who departs from the ways of her upbringing, for she is:

> *Blown apart by loss, she let herself go -*
> *wandered by neighborhood hatless, breasts*
> *swinging under a ratty sweater, crusted*
> *mascara blackening her grace. It was a*
> *shame, the wives whispered, to carry on*
> *so. To them, wearing foam curlers arraigned*
> *like piglets to market was almost debonair,*
> *but an uncombed head? - not be trusted (10).*

The aforementioned by demonstrates the child's desertion of home, family values and ways of her upbringing, to adopt alien values away from home, in what Bill Ashcroft (1989) refers to as Persephone's "unconscious psychological attempt at assimilating an alternative focus of 'objectivity' in a post-colonial context" (104). No wonder her near-nudity and sheer shamelessness, made older black women to "watched more closely, tantalized by so much indifference" (7-9) in terms of her indecent behavior. Describing the recent attitude of the child, within the context of time and change in America in line ten of the poem, the poet contends

"Winter came early and still she frequented the path by the river until one with murmurous eyes pulled her down to size" (5-11). Here, "winter" and "river" are symbols used by Dove to signify the movement of time, which negatively influenced the new person that Persephone has become. Therefore, because of her indecent behavior, Persephone was subsequently raped by an unknown stranger. This is better captured in the metaphoric act of the "one with murmurous eyes pulled her down to size" (12).

The poet's creative appraisal of the African American reality in the quest for liberation and independence by black juveniles in the 20th and 21st century America is practically portrayed in the poem titled "Exit" (49). This poem offers an overview of the stages of development, particularly, when a child separates from the mother. The complex relationship between the mother and the child is severed by the attitude of the child factored by the mainstream forces (global distractions) in the society. In this poem, the moment of separation is captured accordingly:

> *Well the world's open. And now through*
> *the windshield the sky begins to blush*
> *as you did when your mother told what*
> *it took to be a woman in this life (11 – 17).*

The "world is open" signifies the liberty and free will of the child to experience an alternative life and worldview different from what she was taught and all she ever knew. Upon the realization of her liberty to her new life, the child becomes red-faced through suspicion and embarrassment of what she had been told by her mother that "it took to be a woman in this life" (11). As such, this moment is described by the mother in the last line of the poem as "the saddest object in the world" (20); a moment of fragmentation, alienation, pain and agony, where the

mother had no choice but to let her child have her way even though it is contrary to what she had taught the child.

Beyond this however, the poem titled "Exit"(49) subtly probes the way and manner which Persephone practically walks into the dominant Caucasian experience. "The door opens onto the street like in the movies/ Reprieve has been granted, 'provisionally'" (23). Not only that, the poem further describes Persephone leaving home in line five and six as "the door to the taxicab waits" she leaves with her "suitcase" (9). Thus, Dove describes Persephone's quest to be liberated from the dictates of her own indigenous African American mores to demonstrate the act of imbibing mainstream American values, with Persephone's unconscious aim at subverting her own indigenous mores. By extension, Persephone's new found expression is a sign of the assimilation of the "authentic" Caucasian experience (Ashcroft 1989).

To expound the foregoing, Dove contends that separation takes root in diverse form. It may happen as a result of the child's blatant refusal to adhere to the instructions of the family in terms of values and mores, or by the child's desertion of home to an unknown place, or even the child's contestation with the mother for a self-conceived liberty. These differences no matter the forms they take, project the dilemma of mothering in the African American community. Therefore, the mother is left to mourn the separation from her child with a heavy heart.

By this means, "Demeter Mourning"(48) captures the perspective of fragmentation, alienation and the experience of a black mother mourning the separation from her daughter. According to the black female persona in the poem: "nothing can console me . . . nothing turns gold to corn . . . nothing is sweet to the tooth crushing" (1-7). In other words, this expression invariably upholds the untold predicament of a mother who knows nothing but grief following

her child's departure from her. In lines seven and eight of the poem "It will not be happiness for I have known" thus she "will not ask for the impossible". As a result, she is left no option but to resign to fate. Indeed, because of this incapacitation the poem "Grief: The Council" (15) reaffirms the position of a mother ravaged by pains and agony. "Yes it's a tragedy, low down shame . . . it was pathetic. I bet she ain't took in a word I said" (6-16). Here the notion of privileging the "authentic" mainstream values is brought to the fore by Demeter. She ironically reveals how she as a mother loses her child to a strange a way of life. Thus, this results to Demeter's inner anguish expressed in the poem.

Demeter laments over her child's wayward style of life in "Persephone Falling" (9). Regardless of this however, the mother seems optimistic that someday the child will find the appropriate bearing in life. "Meanwhile, ain't nothing we can do but be discrete to wait . . . (and) brighten up a bit . . . I say we gotta see her through" (18-23). It is evident that Demeter's intention for her daughter is denigrated by Persephone who insists on privileging what she assumes is the "Objective" moral values, by rejecting what was initially her own upbringing. Nevertheless, Persephone sees the world around her as a space to assimilate alternative mainstream American mores, in order to justify her teenage quest for liberty and freedom, and to fit into the experiences of contemporary times.

Paradoxically, there is always an implicit call for help in every African American child who has deviated in one way or the other in his/her quest for liberation. In this sense, the quest by the African American child for liberation and self-actualization and realization which culminates into the child's personhood and identity have dominated the contemporary century Africana American community. In this regard, Dove weaves into the poetic thread the contestation between motherhood/mother love and the quest for independence of the black

American child, to delineate the experience that reveals the ambiguous nature of mother and child relationship in America. In "Persephone Adducted" (13), Dove underpins the dilemma of the child as "she cried out for mama who did not hear her. She left with a wide eye thrown back, she left with curses, rage that withered her features to hag's" (1-4). Dove is aware of the intrinsic and non-visible desire for help by the child who "scream as the blossom incinerated" (4). To this extent, the child's experience ironically demonstrates the child's reluctance towards what the new world holds for her. Thus, Dove explores the child's experience to depict the contradiction inherent in decision making by the African American adolescent child. To a large extent, Dove portrays Persephone as an African American child who is forced to generate images of herself only in terms of her success in being the "alternative" (Ashcroft 1984:94).

Significantly therefore, Dove uncovers the feeling of alienation and fragmentation by Persephone once she arrives the city. This traces Persephone's journey through her new world. Persephone in the poem "Persephone in Hell" (23) observes in line nine that: "It's an old drama, waiting/ one grows into it/enough to fill the boredom/it's a treacherous fit" (4). Because she was bored when she came to the city, she engages in despicable acts. She begins a life style that is against her mother's approval: "She couldn't know what I was feeling/ I was doing what she didn't need to know/ I was doing everything and feeling nothing (8).

Put differently, Persephone begins a life in prostitution. She begins to sell her body to make ends meet. She captures her experience in her new world in the following lines:

> *Two days of rain, how to spend it? Clip on*
> *large earrings, man's sweater, black tights;*
> *walk on old umbrella through the passage*
> *at number 17, dip in for chocolate chaud*
> *while watching the Africans… There*
> *was love of course. Mostly, boys: A flat-faced*

engineering student from Missouri a Texan
flaunting his teaspoon of Cherokee blood
I waited afterwards – their pale eyelids, foreheads
thrown back so the rapture could evaporate
I was curious, mainly: how would each one smell?
How many ways could he do it? I was drowning
in their flowers(25)

The vivid imagery towards the ending of this verse portrays the amorous desire that propels Persephone into a life of obscenity away from home. She begins to have sexual intercourse with different boys and men to get by in her chosen new life. In delineating the dilemma of mothering within the context of the African American community, *Dove's Mother Love* comments on the displacement, fragmentation alienation, as well as the "apprehension with identity" (Lofgren 1996:135).

It is in view of this that "Mother Love" (17) paints a perspective that recounts the reassurance of mothering love in the face of wreaked emotions and disappointments. The fate of the African American mother in the poem is often described in lines twenty-four to twenty-five as "exhaustion every time", her life is a "smoky battlefield", and her home is a "comfort of pity and damming". These metaphors are demonstrative of the dilemma of mothering in the African American community without the assistance by a husband or father figure given the absentee nature of black men within the African American context. For this reason, "Mother Love" begins with:

Who can forget the attitude of mothering
toss me a baby without bordering . . .
any woman knows the remedy for grief
is being needed: duty bugles and we'll
climb out of exhaustion every time . . .
through, storming the smoky battlefield (1-13)

Dove's treatment of the plight of motherhood in the context of the black community in America is a culmination of the experiences of black women disparaged by racist, political, social and economic conditions of America.

Similarly, in the poem "The Bristro Styx"(40) the mother runs into the daughter in a Persian café and she is stunned by how her daughter looks, how she behaves. To the mother "she was thinner with a mannered gautness" (3). This explains the persona's resentment over the newly adopted way of life by her daughter. She asks her daughter:

"How's business?" I asked, and hazarded
A motherly smile to keep from crying out:
Are you content to conduct your life as a
Cliché and, what's worse, An anachronism,
a treading artist's Demimonde (15-19)

Consequently, as they were having dinner with the daughter, the mother is forced to ask:

"But are you happy? I whispered it
Quickly. "What?" You know, mother"-
She bit into the starry rose of a fig-
"One really should try the fruit here"
I've lost her, I thought and called
For the bill (67-71)

This underscores the mother's final conviction that her daughter's new way of life is linked to the experience and cultural context of a white hegemonic and globalized America. As such, she realizes that she has lost her daughter to an entirely unfamiliar way of life.

Therefore the only thing left to the mother that reminds her of her child is the loosened belly skin after giving birth, so that she has earned the navels sunk in grief and her "muscles say I have been used"(14). In the end, the mother reconciles with the fact that her daughter does not belong to her any more, given that she has lost her to mainstream distractions. The persona's

submission therefore is "I 've crossed a hemisphere, worked my way through petals and sunlight to find a place fit for mourning" (1-3). Figuratively, this "place fit for mourning" is further described in the poem as a hospital where the mother is seen trying to heal from a possible high blood pressure. For, "I have arrived on the lake . . . I rummage on a sonic hospital graph announcing recovery" (10-15)

Dove concludes in "Demeter's Prayer to Hades" (63) with the mother's sincere prayer for her daughter as she resigns to fate. Here the mother's concern and earnest prayers are necessary to comprehend her love for her daughter despite all odds.

> *This alone is what I wish for you:*
> *Knowledge to understand each*
> *desire has an edge. To know we*
> *are responsible for the lives. We*
> *change. No faith comes without*
> *a cost, no one believes without*
> *dying (6)*

The mother confesses that she has no reason to reject her child and lay curses on her even though she has given up her family values. For "there are no curses – only mirrors held up to the souls of gods and mortals" (11) marks her continuous prayers to guide and protect her child and as such she urges her child to "believe in yourself, go ahead – see where it gets you"(14-15).

To this end, Dove's *Mother Love* comments on the dilemma of black mothers in America. Through this, the general dynamics of the American society is brought to the fore. Accordingly, Dove underlines the struggles of the African American mothers with child upbringing in the face of absentee husbands/fathers, especially in a post-modern America. To Dove, friction in mothering or mother/child relationship is an inevitable phenomenon. By extension, friction within a multicultural society like the United States is inescapable. Therefore,

in order to create a unified American society both the mainstream America and other minority groups like the African Americans must function in unconditional love and a sense of duty towards each other, just like Demeter did when Persephone strayed in Dove's *Mother Love.* As such, Dove calls for tolerance, acceptance and mutual respect for individual worldviews, needs and desires, that way there can be compassion and compromise in seeking relevance beyond known boundaries. Thus, in delineating the dynamics of the American society, Dove weaves around both public and private concerns in *Mother Love* to give her collection an outlook whose description is typically African American.

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CHAPTER SIX

6.0 CONCLUSION

This study on the "Perspectives of Women in the Selected Works of Toni Morrison and Rita Dove" has demonstrated the dynamic nature of African American life and experiences in relation to the American society. In this regard, by deliberately centralizing the experience of African Americans through female characters, Morrison's *A Mercy and Paradise* have on the one hand portrayed black women in America as slaves, stereotyped, strong, brave and resilient. On the other hand, Dove's *American Smooth and Mother Love* depict African American women as representational father figures, and as mothers who are resourceful and sometimes weak. These representations of women in various ways via different literary platforms collectively reflect the overall African American identity, community and experience within the context of the United States.

This study has added to knowledge in the field by looking at new perspectives on the African American history, existence, experience and community. In other words, it has examined new views and posturings of women that no longer celebrate or glorify the African American life and community as was initially obtainable in the works of black male writers during the Civil Rights era and the era of Black Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s in America. Instead, both Morrison's and Dove's works creatively expose the flaws of America's past history alongside its complications and its effects on the contemporary America of today. To this extent, both writers have challenged, critiqued and recast the overall American history through various literary platforms.

It is against the backdrop of the foregoing therefore, that Morrison's novelistic exploration of the dynamics of slavery in *A Mercy* reveals the dispositions of blacks in America to the nature and impact of the American slavery in a historical and contemporary sense. Morrison assumes the role of a historian who gives an account of what has happened and what is still happening within America. In this respect, Morrison's *A Mercy* draws from the traumatic experience that blacks have undergone viewed within the context of a triangulated sort of oppression that embraces the convergence of race, religion and language during American Slavery. As a result, the trauma of slavery in *A Mercy* represents pains and wounds that are unhealed. In this vein, *A Mercy* is Morrison's recourse to the past in order to represent the cultural and literary manifestation of the on-going trauma in the memories and experiences of contemporary African Americans.

This leitmotif is propelled by different objectives in Morrison's *Paradise*. The novel underscores her views on the relationship between literature and race, and the role of the writer in articulating crucial moments in American history and society. Indeed, *Paradise* is Morrison's attempt to explicate the notion of race and how it has influenced individual as well as communal African American identity.

In addition to this however, *Paradise* is Morrison's critique of African American identity in such a way that African American, men of Ruby, are little more than white men in blackfaces. In other words, Morrison challenges the way and manner in which black men in America have become themselves oppressors of their own community. By downplaying race, Morrison is able to critique African American identity constructions. This inevitably leads to the questions about class and gender even within the African American community. In this manner, *Paradise* begs

the question of what it means to be or not to be an African American, male or female, dark skinned or light skinned, living within the context of the United State.

Although, Morrison's novels focus on the female character as the narrative umpire in her works, she is particularly interested in delineating a rather holistic portrait of the African American experience, in order to project the polyvalence and complexity inherent in the African American society. By doing this, she sums up the predicament of the marginalized groups in America, who suffer the after effects of racist practices and institutions. In order to carry through her postulation, Morrison uses a figurative language frame in exposing the memories of tragically imposed deprivation on the lives and voices of the subaltern in America.

In a similar light, Rita Dove's poetic exploration of African American reality undeniably appraises the scope and expressions of black identity and its relevance to the African American community. Her *American Smooth* is geared at highlighting how African Americans have over the years been able to resolve this conflict of identity, dualism and its crisis in the face of the changing phases of the American experience. In this regard, Dove's *American Smooth* is therefore characterized by a pursuit of socio-economic and psychological liberation in the light of a fast globalizing world. In other words, this volume of poetry explores issues as those of the synchronization of African American values with those of the mainstream America that way showing them as integral components of the American reality. Dove's poetry further identifies and delineates these problems within the multicultural, racial and global framework of American history. In this way, Dove's *American Smooth* transcends Morrison's preoccupation with the American past and history with a more contemporary perspective.

Also, Dove's *Mother Love* depicts the dilemma of the African American value system in the current phase of a science threatening world. On the strength of this, *Mother Love* explores the relationship between mother and daughter through the redefinition of Demeter and Persephone's myth. In fact, by reimaging the myth one can obtain many resonances with the present. This is an important point of Rita Dove's works: the fact of considering the past close to the present, or coexisting with it. As such, time and history represent an important point in Dove's narrative. By revitalizing the language, by redefining not only the African American tradition, but also the universal concepts of love, history, family, home, time, etc, with vivid imagery, Dove gives new impulse to African American poetry.

To this end, the novelistic and poetic forms of Morrison and Dove have provided insights into the African American experience in the United States. They have in this vein also captured the subaltern perspectives of black Americans on the various aspects of American life. These writers have in a postcolonial sense negotiated the experiences of the marginalized ethnic groups of blacks and the non-whites in America. Morrison and Dove employ the parameters of the different genres of literature to not only portray the trauma of being at some point colonized, but to speak back to the hegemonic forces in America. By doing so, they represent and recast the image as well as identity of black people in America.

In this light, the central preoccupation of this thesis has been an examination of the various visions of African American women on the social realities of blacks in America and how socio-political, economic and cultural changes have been profoundly impacted by the way in which African Americans have survived the complex dynamics of the multicultural American society. In a way, Morrison and Dove have consistently addressed the traumatic and post-traumatic experience of black people in their respective works.

Given this position, this thesis has interrogated the totality of black American experience through the toolkit of postcolonial discourse. This has been achieved to the extent that both the novelistic and the poetic genres of literature used in interpreting the multifaceted American experience in this thesis reconstruct the fixed notions of black history and identity in relation to the slavery and post-slavery eras in America. The import of this is that it facilitates a better understanding of the traumatic nature and legacy of slavery, which further lends credence and coherence to the modern day black community and identity as well as the American history. In other words, this study employs postcolonial discourse to investigate the past and its impact on the contemporary American society.

This study of Morrison's and Dove's aesthetic works has demonstrated how both writers have created space for marginalized blacks in America in the literary domain. In the process their works interrogate the hegemonic dominance of white Americans and the lopsided conceptualization of the African American ideals, personality, family and community in some sections of American literature. Their works probes what Fanon (1963) would argue ". . . investigate the means by which Europe imposed and maintained its codes in its post-colonial domination of so much of the rest of the world" (196). It is in this light therefore that the aesthetic propositions of these writers highlighted various significant issues of the black experience. This has put in perspective the present situation of African Americans in America. Thus, in underscoring the various perspectives of African American women writers particularly by deploying a postcolonial discourse framework, this thesis performs nonetheless a vital task of re-evaluating and commenting on the current positions of blacks in America and other issues that form integral aspects of the larger network of American life.

Overall, the study of the "Perspectives of Women in the Selected Works of Toni Morrison and Rita Dove" has revealed cogent views on the dynamic nature of the African American identity and society. However, by giving female characters central roles in their works, critics and reviewers in many instances tend to impose feminist literary criticism in the readings of Toni Morrison's and Rita Dove's works. For this reason, Morrison and Dove have both rejected the reductive approach of feminist literary theory and the like to appraise their respective works. Both Morrison and Dove deliberately employ women figures in their works as creative umpires to reconstruct and reshape the overall black people's history, experience, and community in the United States of America. To this end, this research which employs the framework of postcolonial discourse, provides invaluable insights into the various segments of the American experience.

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