A PORTRAIT OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN IN SOME SELECTED WORKS OF ALICE WALKER AND TONI MORRISON

BY

ISAH, KUDI LYDIA B.A (ABU 2001)

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DECLARATION

I declare that the work in the thesis entitled "A Portrait of African-American Women in some Selected Works of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison" has been written by me in the Department of English and Literary Studies under the supervision of Prof. T.A.N. Abubakar and Dr. (Mrs.) O.Omokore.

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.

Isah, Kudi Lydia

Name of Student	Signature	Date

CERTIFICATION

This thesis entitled "A PORTRAIT OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN IN SOME SELECTED WORKS OF ALICE WALKER AND TONI MORRISON" by Isah, Kudi Lydia meets the regulations governing the award of the degree of Master of Arts in Literature in English of Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, Nigeria and is approved for its contribution to knowledge and literary presentation.

Prof. T.A.N. Abubakar _____ _____

Chairman, Supervisory Committee Date

Dr. (Mrs) O. Omokore _____ _____

Member, Supervisory Committee Date

Prof. Adebayo Joshua _____ _____

Head of Department (Acting) Date

Prof. Adebayo Joshua _____ _____

Dean, Postgraduate School Date

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my beloved husband, CDRE. Isah Kudi, who has been very supportive and understanding.

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ABSTRACT

This work focuses on African-American women in the Black family structure as portrayed by Toni Morrison in her novels; *Paradise, Sula*, *The Bluest Eye*, and Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*, *Meridian*, and *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*. Considering the crucial role of the family unit in the socialising process, attention has been drawn to the effectiveness of Black Women in making the Black family to function despite the high percentage of Black homes in which the father is absent. The work is an appraisal of how Alice Walker and Toni Morrison celebrate Black women in their works, its main argument being that African-American literary scene had been male centred and driven, the plights of women not adequately addressed by African-American male writers who, in an attempt to speak for African-Americans subsume the women experience in the process. The research work is presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 is titled General Introduction and features a brief historical background of the African Americans in general, and Alice Walker and Toni Morrison in particular, writers understudy, stating clearly the relationships between their background and their works A critical study on African-American written literary tradition is taken, and African-American women literary tradition as a sub-genre is also studied to locate the writers under study. Feminism as a theoretical framework is discussed subsequently, stating its meaning, tenets, importance and relevance to the work. This takes the centre stage of Chapter 2; it is followed by a review of related literature. Chapter 3 is based on Toni Morrison's perception of the African American community as reflected in *Paradise*, *Sula*, and *The Bluest Eye*. It is titled "Strands of Feminism in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, *Sula*, and *The Bluest Eye*." Chapter 4 shares some semblance with Chapter 3, it is titled "Alice Walker's Portrait of Women in *The Color Purple*, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, and *Meridian*." The chapter is an appraisal of a woman's

question as seen by Walker in her community. A summation of the works comes up in Chapter 5 which is titled Conclusion.

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CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In most cultures of the world especially in Africa, women are assumed to be fed, nurtured and groomed solely for marriage, childbearing and other domestic purposes. This is made worse by religious practices, customs, culture and tradition that support and propagate the notion that women are weak and incompetent in comparison to men. Prior to the advent of feminism, the female voice was not given adequate attention: female writers in Victorian England veiled their identity by adopting male pseudonyms for their works to gain relevance. Even women like Lucy Terry and Harriet Jacobs who contributed immensely to the struggle for the abolition of slavery and in various Black movements were ignored due to the fact that the male-dominated and defined literary tradition alienated the Black woman and excluded her from the literary tradition.

Literature reflects the cultural assumptions and attitudes of its period. That, of course, includes attitudes towards women, and their status, their roles, their expectations. Most male-orientated works fail this vital requirement: there is a common totalising and hegemonic conceptualization of general experiences with no gender specification. Most great literatures are written by men, and given that critics are also men generally, they become less concerned with distinguishing a specifically feminine way of writing or responding to a text. To them, literature is literature. In a work with such a particular stance, female characters are seen as embodiments of subversive sexuality, presented as prepared to do the biddings of their husbands, having no status of their own and therefore completely dependent. In situations where

heroic roles are given to women, their experiences are often distorted as having no autonomy; their stories are shaped to meet the requirement of the male writers' visions. As a result there is the tendency of leading the reader to align with the view of the writer's male protagonist. Due to that; the image of women in literature revolves round the roles of subordinates who only function effectively in their serviceability, submissiveness, and passivity. Felinity is in effect equated with passivity. In American society the situation of the Black woman is traumatic. It is a complex position to be an African American, and more complex to be an African-American woman. As a Black, she suffers racism, as a female she suffers sexism. With the American society being stratified into economically determined classes, she suffers at class level. This constitutes a tripartite affliction.

Feminist literary theory therefore responds to the afore said, focusing particularly on women's experiences, sexuality, work, and family, challenging the traditional framework of knowledge and putting questions on assumptions of universality. From the perspective of feminists, new questions are asked and conditions and relationships previously not noticed or considered obvious or unchangeable are being re-examined in order to give women their rightful position in society. In the introduction to her work titled *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference* Juliana Mabuchi (1997) quotes Gloria T. Hull as saying:

> *One of the most dramatic changes in the literary world over the last decade has been the blossoming of a large corps of female writers, poets, critics. It is not that Black women writers did no exist prior to this period, but the Black literary scene had historically been predominantly a male preserve. On the one hand, a White male-dominated publishing industry hadn't seen it fit to publish the works of Black women writers; on the other hand, even among the Black intelligentsia, only the male articulation of the Black experience had been viewed as worthy of literary expression. In conjunction with the growth of a movement for women's liberation, however this situation*

> *has dramatically been reversed in recent years…Black women are currently making a valuable contribution to the U.S literary landscape, bringing their own experiences as women to life in the form of exciting female characters who confront not only a racist world but a sexist one.*

A close look at the works of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker affirms this observation. An attempt is made in their works on rejecting a hegemonic and totalising conceptualisation of women by Black male writers who claim to speak for all Negroes but subsume or erase the Black woman's voice. The works of these African-American female writers are predominantly an array of definition and redefinition of the plight and marginal position of Black women. They articulate the need for critics to value Black women's writing as an identifiable literary tradition.

Toni Morrison and Alice Walker contest the passive images of Black women accepted by the society. Their works place African-American women's voices at the centre of their narratives, an unusual position at that time. In having their women tell their stories the writers give a distinct new emphasis and a voice for an entire maternal ancestry often silenced by political and social rhetorics. Their outsider and insider status produces a newer dimension of viewing African-American feminism and a literary continuation of distinct oral tradition in which African-American women have been and are still pivotal participants. Against these negative images of women in literature, women have taken up the struggle for the elevation and recognition of womanhood, hence their choice as writers under study. This work is an appraisal of women's attempt on a literature that speaks for and on them and an added voice to plight of women whose affliction remains multifaceted.

1.2 Statement of Problem

African-American writing has historically and traditionally been male-centred and driven. Black male writers have from the very beginning of Black literary activity in the United States been the literary spokespersons of the African-American experience. Although the novel genre emerged with women literary experience alongside their male counterparts, female novelists have not been given full critical consideration. This lumping of human experience, particularly in the African-American context, as masculine or at best "genderless" (sexless) has meant the female voice and perspective remains silent or out rightly denied, this partial exclusion from the canon brought a degree of reactions. Recent works by African-American women have come to challenge this role of the Black male as a result, a systematic and extensive research devoted to bringing founders of the novel genre to limelight has been under taken. A clear example being Alice Walker's works on Zora Naele Hurston. In the process a whole portrait of the African-American experiences, for several decades and centuries has become increasingly challenged and altered. This study therefore attempts to appraise the literary activity of Black female writers and how their writings not only contests the place of the Black male within the tradition of African-American writing but also complements the overall depiction of the African-American experience. By focusing on the works of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker as representations of female voice in African-American society, this work hopes to uncover motifs and devices deployed by women writers to give voice to the silent and muted perspective of their female characters. The work also draws from history to question the justification of the negative and stereotypical presentation of women in history and literature. There is at the end more gender balance and a more comprehensive perspective about the experiences of the African-American woman

character and her place within the African-American family, community and the larger American society.

1.3 Aims and Objectives of Study

This research is undertaken to critically study the African-American Community as presented in *The Color Purple*, *In Love and Trouble*, *Meridian*, *Paradise*, *The Bluest Eyes*, and *Sula*, the selected works of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. The objectives of the study are to illustrate that:

1. There is an affinity between the experience and background of the writers and their works.
2. There is connectivity between feminist values and the writers' disposition.
3. These writers negotiate and celebrate the place of the woman in African-American community and literature.

1.4 Justification of Study

Nursing a negative perception about a girl child is an age long tradition. Women are viewed in most societies as sub-humans who offer nothing to the society beside the major role ascribed to them of rearing/bearing children and meeting the needs of their husbands. These social and cultural perceptions tend to deter women's representation in every facet of human endeavour even to the point of stereotypical character portrayal in literary works, both fiction and non-fiction.

The writings of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison occupy a valuable critical space in the tradition of African-American writing; their works address certain gaps especially pertaining to the role and place of the Black woman character as far as the experience of the African-American community is concerned. These selected texts of

Alice Walker and Toni Morrison have been so chosen because, collectively, they present a comprehensive portrait of the African-American female character within the African-American family and community. This study therefore complements the overall picture of the African-American experience as presented by Black male writers, who have over time remained the mouthpiece of both the male and female character in the African-American text.

1.5 Scope and Limitation

A critical study of the selected works of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison is the focus of this work. Consequently, Alice Walker's three works; *The Color Purple*, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, *Meridian*, and Toni Morrison's novels; *Sula*, *Paradise*, and *The Bluest Eye* have been used as the basis for the analysis of this study. This research provides a detailed historical and literary background to African-American women writing, and uses this platform to situate the literary activity of both Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. The selected works of the two writers provide adequate materials for the comprehension of the perspective of the African-American woman writer in her presentation of the African-American family and community. The research also features the history of the African-Americans, a study of the writers' background and its effect on their works, the study of African-American written literary tradition, a critical analysis and application of feminist literary tradition, and an appraisal of the primary texts.

1.6 Methodology

This work features a close reading of the primary texts: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, *Meridian*, and Toni

Morrison's *Sula*, *Paradise*, and *The Bluest Eye*. Materials in form of journals, magazines, secondary texts related to the novels under study from the library and the internet will also be studied and analysed.

1.7 Development of African-American Literary Tradition

African-Americans first arrived in the area that became the United States in 1619, when a handful of captives were sold by the captain of a Dutch Man-of-War ship to settlers at Jamestown. Subsequently, others were brought in increasing numbers to work in plantation farms. In some instances, Africans were brought directly to English colonies in North America, while others landed as slaves in the West Indies, but were later resold and shipped to the Mainland. By 1840 the slavery system in America was fully developed, 92% of all American Blacks were concentrated in the South (African-American: http://memberstermpaperslab.com2008) and of this most of them were under the plantation system; gang labour was the typical form of employment. Overseers were harsh as a matter of general practice, brutality was common, slaves could own no property unless sanctioned by a slave master, and rape of a female slave was not a crime except when it represented "trespassing" another White master's property. Slaves could not present evidence in court against Whites, and in most part of the South it was illegal to teach a Black to read or write. Opposition by Blacks was forbidden.They were also forbidden from carrying arms or gathering in numbers except in the presence of a White. Persons having any Black ancestry were to be considered and treated as Blacks (African-American: http://memberstermpaperslab.com2008).

After the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 by President Abraham Lincoln, the Black race was freed from slavery in the United States, but when the American Civil War ended, some Black code laws were put in place to discriminate against African-Americans. These codes restricted the lives of the freed slaves socially and economically. An example of such included the Jim Crow law (African-American: http://memberstermpaperslab.com2008). Jim Crow is named after an 1830 minstrel show character. This character, a White, was dressed up as a Black man using costume and make ups used from burnt coke. The name became synonymous to Black segregation and a racial hate system that ran mainly in Southern States of America between 1877 and 1960. Jim Crow's pictures were posted every where: water fountains, toilets, entrances and exits to recreation centres etc. There were separate schools, hospitals, prisons and cemeteries for Black and White people. The Blacks were barred from attending educational institutions with Whites and were limited to the least desirable residential and farming areas. They were also prohibited from practicing trades and opening businesses. A Black male could not offer a handshake to a White male as it implied being socially equal. White motorists had the right of way at all intersections; Blacks were not allowed to show public affection as it offended the Whites. The Blacks were segregated and restricted in every conceivable way (African-American: http://memberstermpaperslab.com2008).

Jim Crow system; which is a law backing Black-White differentials was strengthened by beliefs such as these: Whites are superior to Blacks in all ramifications, Whites and Blacks breeding would produce a mongrel race which would destroy America, to mention just a few. Violence was therefore accepted to keep Blacks in check. The common punishment for Jim Crow violation included burning at the stake, being beaten to death, hanging, castration or being dismembered.

Mass lynching claimed many lives: "…when the data was first recorded there were 4,730 public lynching at a rate of 58 a year…" (African-American: http://memberstermpaperslab.com2008). Beside Jim Crow, poll taxes, literacy test and other government tricks were also used to subdue Black voting. Though these wide spread anti-Black attitudes nurtured by slavery continued even after slavery, life thereafter, was much more bearable than during the slavery era. Suffice it to say that the Jim Crow system informed African-American literature as most of the issues raised by it became materials for early African-American writers, and by extension critical materials for this work.

Today, Blacks in the United States mainly reside in the cities (African-American: http://memberstermpaperslab.com2008). This is because during the first decade of the 20th century precisely 1912, the infestation of Southern cotton crops by insects called boll weevils diminished production and curtailed the need for farm labour; growing unemployment and increasing racial violence encouraged Blacks to leave the South. When World War I broke out in Europe, though the United States did not join the war until 1917, its factories supplied the combatants. American industries needed labour and the war slowed European immigration. In effect, Northern manufacturers recruited Southern Black workers to fill factory jobs.

From 1910 to 1930 between 1.5 million and 2 million African-Americans left the South for the industrial cities of the North. By 1930 more than 200,000 Blacks had moved to New York, about 180,000 to Chicago, and more than 130,000 to Philadelphia (www.termpaperslab.com/term-papers/58229.html2008). This sudden influx of new comers to established Northern Black communities brought not only new vitality but also new problems. Tension grew between long-time Black residents

and the new immigrants who were generally poor and sometimes illiterate. New Churches were established that rivalled older, more traditional Black Churches.

Under these conditions, many social conflicts gradually gave way to an increasing sense of racial pride and social cohesion. While Jim Crow laws and political terrorism continued to discourage Blacks from voting in the South, African-Americans in the Northern cities became an important political force. Black fraternal orders, political organizations, social clubs, and newspapers asserted an urban consciousness that became the foundation for the militancy and African-American cultural innovations of the 1920s. In the rural South, the Black family lived under the constant threat of Jim Crow laws and political terrorism while some of their counterparts in the North faced the problem of low income, high unemployment, congestion, poor education and other race related problems. A summation of these issues put the American Black family of the 1930s in a perpetual state of crisis; this limited the opportunity for the Black male to fulfil his traditional role of being the head of a household as protector and provider for his family. Because women were often able to find domestic employment when no jobs were available for the men, they provided more dependable and regular incomes: "Statistically Black women are frequently the heads of families than is the case in non-Black families" (African-American: http://memberstermpaperslab.com2008). Walker and Morrison therefore resent relegated position given to women by African-American male writers. This work therefore makes an appraisal of this very rendition as there is no significant change in contemporary literature.

On the overall, the Whites felt threatened by the thought of freed Black men roaming the streets United States as their equals. White supremacy had to be re-established and maintained, so different types of stereotypes were propagated such as

these: Black men were thought to be beastly and vagabonds and their women were viewed as sexually promiscuous making rape legitimate. White men always felt entitled to Black women. Having control over Black women not only denigrated Black womanhood, but also had control over Black manhood. Since the Black men did not have the means to protect their women from being raped by the White men, the women owed them no respect; this then brings us to the issue at stake: the African-American women writers' depiction of the female figure of a typical African-American setting.

Considering the crucial role played by the family unit in the socialising process, attention is drawn by African-American writers to the ineffectiveness and inability of the Black family to perform this function because of the high percentage of Black homes from which the father is absent. Against this background African-American writers took up a struggle for the elevation and recognition of African-American experience while African-American women articulated and struggled alongside their male counterparts for recognition of Black womanhood. The Black woman's participation in the struggle for freedom, civil rights and Black power movement in America helped in Black women's liberation and a discovery of their potentials in a male-dominated and literary defined tradition of the Black male writers (African-American: http://memberstermpaperslab.com2008).

African-American literature is a body of literatures produced in the United States by writers of African descent. It centres on issues like the roles of African-Americans within the larger American society, African-American culture, racism, slavery and equity, among others. It has its roots in the oral and vernacular tradition of African slaves in America and incorporates forms such as spirituals, sermons, gospel music, blues and rap. Disappointed by the failure of integration and gravitated to the

philosophy of cultural nationalism as the means to achieve liberation in contrast to the veneration of Western ideas and ideals by many integrationists of the 1950s, African-American literature emphasized the African cultural past as the true heritage of the African-Americans; this acknowledgement and appreciation of that heritage is a major tenet of the genre(African-American: http://memberstermpaperslab.com2008).

The earliest writers and poets such as Phillis Wheatlyn, Olaudah Equino, and other renaissance writers like Longston Hughes, Sterling A. Brown, Claude Mckay, and Zora Naele Hurston, to mention just a few, draw inspiration from the vernacular tradition. Some of the early African-American writers include Jupiter Hammon, who was considered the first African-American writer to have his work published titled *An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries* (1761). Also in the number are William Wells Brown, and Victor Sejour writer of *Le Mulatre* (*The Mulatto*) in 1837, the first known fiction by an African-American. Others include Williams Wells Brown and writer of *Clotel* or *The President's Daughter* (1953), Frederick Douglass best known for His *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), and other slave narratives written by various writers. These works became the mainstay of African-American literature as they influenced other African-Americans to write. One of the milestones of the African-American literary development is the Harlem Renaissance. Harlem Renaissance is:

> *a vigorous unprecedented artistic outburst of creative activity by and for African-Americans that occurred in the United States from 1920s to the 1930s in all fields of art, but is best known for the literature that came out of it…a larger flowering of social thought and culture that started as the New Negro Movement in form of series of literary discussion and had a considerable impact on today's literature* (www.termpaperslab.com/term-papers/58229.html2008).

Prior to the renaissance period books written by African-Americans were primarily read by only Blacks. With the renaissance, however, African-American

literature, art and performance began to be absorbed into the mainstream American culture. It created a positive Black identity, a new race consciousness, and became influential to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Some of the prominent works of Harlem Renaissance include Alain Locke's *Nigger Heaven* (1926), Zora's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem, Banjo Banana Bolt,* to mention just a few.

The values set for the Black community during the Renaissance were the basis for the ideological goals that championed the cause of the Civil Rights Movement later in the 20th century. The Civil Rights Movement also made a powerful impression on Black writers during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Just as Black activists were pushing to end segregation and racism so were Black women writers attempting to address issues through their works. The Civil Rights Movement in turn inspired a large Black Art Movement which defines African-American literature as a genre. Prominent works of this period include James Baldwin's *Go Tell It to the Mountain* (1953), Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945), and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952).

With the dismantling of racial segregation enforced by the Civil Rights legislations of the 1960s White colleges and universities in the United States became diversified. A number of Black study programmes were created in the schools curricula: Black culture, experiences and contribution became areas of scholarly interest. Thus the institutionalizing of African-American literature and literary studies made literature by both African-American men and women accessible and visible to American society. The Civil Rights era gave rise to the African-American literature of the 1970s and the rise of Black female writings, showing marked differences from the

repression and agitation of the past and ushering in the age literary innovation and freedom.

1.8 African-American Women's Written Literary Tradition as a Sub-genre

Some of the early writers of this sub-genre include Phillis Wheatley and Lucy Terry. Lucy Terry is the author of the oldest known piece of African-American literature, *Bars Fight* written in 1746 and published in 1855. Phillis Wheatley published her book *Poems on Various Subjects* (1773); others include Harriet Jacobs, writer of *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and Zora Neale Hurston, author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), among others. These became role models for other female African-American writers. A clear example of this is Alice Walker's rediscovery of Hurston's works in the 1970s.

A number of anthologies written by Black women in the 1970s helped to establish the study of African-American women's writing. During that period a significant number of scholarly works and anthologies devoted to African-American women writers were published such as; Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelist: The Development of a tradition 1892–1976* (1980), *Black Feminist Criticism, and Perspective on Black Women Writers* (1985), Claudia Tute's *Black Women at Work* (1983), and Mary Evan's *Black Women Writers (1950–1984)* (1986). These anthologies feature interviews with some prominent Black women writers that gave insight to the creative prowess of the African-American women thereby bringing their works to limelight. These interviews revealed insights on the creative prowess of African-American women; these anthologies brought their works to limelight.

African-American literary scholars of the latter part of the twentieth century also played a major role in the cannon of African-American women's writing by

making a rediscovery of ancient works of female writers. A typical example is Alice Walker's rediscovery of Zola Naele Hurston's lost works. Most recently, the recovery of lost texts continued with Henry Louis Gates' publication of Hanah Crafts' *The Bondwoman Narrative* (2002), which is speculated to be the first novel written by an African-American in the 1850s (Angelyn and Danielle, 1987:87). The Cambridge Companion to African-American women's literature also contains a variety of genre such as poetry, autobiographies, fiction and non fiction written by African-American women writers. All these fostered the growth of the sub-genre. Furthermore, the existence of the body of African-American literature from the renaissance inspired writers such as Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright to pursue literary careers in the late 1930s and the 1940s. The outpouring of African-American literature of the 1980s and 1990s by such writers as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison also had its roots in the writing of the Harlem Renaissance.

The influences of Toni Morrison's and Alice Walker's predecessors on them are apparent in their works; themes of racism, protest, incest and violence motif, migration, usage of Black English is reminiscent of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Wright's *Black Boy* and *Native Son*. Walker's second novel *Meridian* is named after Jean Toomer's "The Blue Meridian" (1932). Toomer's portraits of African-American Southern women's sexuality in his masterpiece *Cane* (1923) also shaped Walker's works. Their predecessors' literary affinity is apparent in the manner in which they apply Black cultural norms in their works and share the stylistic device of garnishing their works with Africanness.

Although influenced by many Black writers, Zora Neale Hurston remains their acknowledged mentor. Traces of her influence appear in their works. Hurston in her book, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* attempts to reassert the Black woman as the

traditionally strongwoman, capable of sustenance without male assistance. This she does successfully through the character Janie Starks. Morrison's heroine in *Sula* is reminiscent of this character, so also was the convent women in *Paradise*. Walker's attention to Black women's voices in her works is significant being the first time in contemporary United States literary history, a writer featured a variety of Southern Black women's perspectives this was also influenced by Hurston's works. Her works were to inspire Walker not only because of their use of Black folk English, which clearly influenced Walker's use of Black folk English in *The Color Purple*, but also because of Hurston's abiding respect for southern Black folk. Understanding the importance of Hurston's legacy to African-American literature, Alice Walker became a major force in the rediscovery of her works, Walker's discovery of Hurston and the inspiration she drew from her literary work's exemplifies the critical role Hurston played in the development of young female black writers, as well as passing on the tradition of Black people in educational institutions. Because of these young Black writer's efforts Hurston is considered a great African-American writer.

The Black Power Movements of 1960s also served as a milestone in the development of African-American written women literary Tradition. In contrast to the veneration of western ideas and ideals by many Integrationists of 1950s that failed to achieved its aims, Black power ideologues emphasized the African cultural past as the true heritage of African-Americans' This philosophy of cultural nationalism as a means of liberation also inspired the works of African-American writers of the 1970s. Walker's short story "Everyday Use" is dedicated to 'Grand Mama,' a supposedly backward Southern ancestor who is likely to be considered behind times (http://www.acns.nwu.edu/jazz/styles/bebop.html:NetZero6-2-02).

Toni Morrison's presentation of Misner as working to bring battling factions in the town together to negotiate truces and to give voice to the young people of the town illustrates the possibilities of the Civil Rights movement's ideal of participatory democracy. Morrison explicitly foregrounds an engagement with issues of coalition by weaving the Civil Rights Movement into the text through the presentation of Reverend Misner. Misner, a relatively recent arrival in the town of Ruby, attempts to raise the consciousness of the young people to a national movement in the face of their fathers and grandfathers, who established first Haven and then Ruby. This work of hers is shaped by her experience in the Civil Rights Movement. The movement also impacted on Alice Walker's literary career. Her novel *Meridian* features a woman, Meridian by name, who needs to be part of a movement; a struggle for change. In the novel Walker focused on the Movement's refusal to violate life and extend its philosophy of non-violence to include the nurturing of life.

African-American literature in general, and African-American women's writing in particular has gained added attention just of late, through the works of talk show hostess Oprah Winfrey; her book club medium brought African-American writers a far broader audience than they otherwise might have received.

1.9 Writers' Background

1.9.1 *Alice Walker*

Alice Walker, a Political activist, Novelist, short story Writer, Poet, and Essayist was born on February 9, 1944 into a family of Sharecroppers in Eatonton, Georgia. Her father, Willie Lee Walker, was a grandson of slaves. Minnie T.G. Walker, Walker's mother, a farm hand and domestic worker, saved the money she

earned as a domestic servant and enrolled Walker in the first grade at the age of four. When Walker was eight years old, a shot from her brother's gun permanently blinded her right eye, because of this defect Walker retreated into solitude and spent the subsequent seven years reading and writing poems. She was later offered a scholarship and attended Spellman College in Atlanta. While there, she travelled to Africa on scholarship and returned in 1964. She proceeded to Sarah Lawrence College, New York and, while there, she wrote her first short story "*To Hell with Dying.*" She also produced *Once* (1965), a collection of poems. She graduated in 1965 with a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degree. Walker's work is the product of her experience; she grew up in poverty along with seven of her siblings and their sharecropping parents. Walker's work is a product of her experience as a young Black underprivileged girl growing in the U.S. Walker's seclusion after the accidental shot by her brother informs. Walker comments: "I believe it is from this period – from my solitary, lonely position, the position of an outcast – that I began really to see people and things, really to notice relationships and to learn to be patient."

Her active participation in the Civil Rights Movement formed the material for her novel *Meridian*. Her first short story "*To hell with Dying"* included in one of her works under study (*In Love and Trouble*) is a product of her depression and three days consecutive attempts at suicide. Her background thus becomes important to this research.

1.9.2 *Toni Morrison*

Toni Morrison was born on 18 February, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio. Her name at birth was Chloe Anthony Wofford; she was one of four children born to her parents, George and Ramah Wofford. She attended Howard University in Washington D.C.

where she obtained a B.A. in English. She attended Cornels University where she earned a Masters degree in English in 1955. From 1955 to 1957, Morison taught at Texas Southern University, and then returned to Howard to teach English. She married Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect and had two sons. They divorced in 1964. Morrison became a senior editor at Random House, a major publishing company. Her first novel was *The Bluest Eye* written in 1970. Between 1970 and 1974, she published more than twenty reviews mostly on Black history and women's movement. Her second novel *Sula* came up in 1974, it was to be followed by *Song of Solomon* (1977). This brought Morrison a national recognition, and it received the National Book Critics Awards and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letter's Award. Other novels include *Tar Baby* (1981) and *The Beloved* (1987).

Morrison also taught at the State University of New York (1971-1972), Yale University (1976-1977). She was a professor of Humanities at the State University of New York, Albany (1984), a lecturer at the University of California (1987), and a professor of Humanities also in Princeton University.

Morrison's parents went through the harsh realities of life typical of African-American migrants from the South; for instance when the parents could not pay their $4.00 rent, the landlord set the house on fire with Morrison's older sister, and her parent still inside. This Southern heritage influenced her works, especially the themes of African-American displacements, first from Africa, then from the South to North America. Morrison has been recognized by numerous national and international literary organizations and has been awarded fourteen honorary degrees.

CHAPTER TWO:

FEMINISM AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Feminism as a Theoretical Framework

Due to the fact that both Alice Walker and Toni Morrison are feminists, as seen in the novels under study, this research locates the influences of feminist literary theory in their works; the theory therefore serves as the theoretical base for this study. Feminism can be seen as follows:

- A view that women are inherently equal to men and therefore deserve equal rights and opportunities.
- A range of contemporary theoretical perspectives, including political, sociological, legal, psychoanalytical, literary, and philosophical, in which women's experiences are examined in relation to actual and perceived differences between the power and status of men.
- A social justice movement in which issues of particular importance for women such as domestic violence, pay equity, globalization, are analysed, understood and addressed from feminist perspectives.
- A revolution that includes women and men who wish the world to be equal without boundaries. These boundaries or blockades are better known as discrimination and biases against gender sexual orientation, age, marital and economic status.
- A body of social theory and political movement primarily based on and motivated by the experiences of women.

- A philosophy in which women and their contributions are valued based on social, political and economic equality.
- (http://www.womenhistory.about.come2008)

Feminism as a movement had it genesis in the Seneca Falls Women Right Convention of July 1848 in New York,when seven women right activists reacted against their denial to take part in an anti-slavery convention organized in London in 1840. The goal of the Convention was "attainment of Franchise and declaration of sentiments" which is stated below.

Declaration of Sentiments

- Married women were legally dead in the eyes of the law.
- Women were not allowed to vote.
- Women had to submit to laws when they had no voice in their formation.
- Married women had no property rights.
- Husbands had legal power and responsibility over their wives to the extent that they beat them with impunity.
- Divorce and child custody laws favoured men, giving no rights to women.
- Women had to pay property taxes although they had no representation in the levying of these taxes.
- Most occupations were closed to women and when women did work they were paid only a fraction of what men earned.
- Women were not allowed to enter professions such as medicine or law.
- Women had no means to gain an education since no college or university would accept women students.
- With only a few exceptions, women were not allowed to participate in the affairs of the church.

- Women were robbed of their self confidence and self respect and were made totally dependent on men.

(http://www.womenhistory.about.come2008)

Over the times, several genres of feminist ideology have developed. Early and primary feminist movements are called the First Wave feminism, while feminism after 1960, the Second Wave. Recently a new generation of feminists have started a third wave.

2.1.1 *Feminist Literary Theory*

Feminist theory is an extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical discourse. It is aimed at understanding the nature of gender inequality and feminist politics in a variety of fields. The basic themes explored include discrimination, stereotyping, objectification, oppression of women, and patriarchy. The emergence of literary evaluations of early texts from the viewpoints of women became an important feature of feminist literary activity. Feminist reading argues that the notion of authority as the legitimized masculine concept in the ownership of texts, places the author as the father image. It is therefore argued that if the author is the father and owner of a text, he is also in control of his readers' attention and is the owner and possessor of the subjects of his text, and controls all his images, the woman inclusive. She thus has to conform to the male standards in such texts. Female writers are also forced to identify with men and male standards of writing, and constantly reminded of 'being' female writers. That therefore deprives them of the power of literary discourse which has been given false universal parameters by male writers.

The feminist writers fight against being the "other" and "outsider" in the literary tradition that is to speak for them. To them, exclusion from a literature that

claims to define their identity, but goes contrary, is to experience a sort of powerlessness. In an attempt to make sure that a literary text does not insist on their universality, left alone define it in specifically male terms, the feminists repudiate the universality of these structures by reading against their own logic of foundation and become resistant readers to the deliberately created illusions and imposed meanings.

Feminists believe that once the structure of the text is deconstructed, its universality inevitably disappears as in such reading the dominating presence of any central meaning fades into absence. That does not however mean that the feminist readers read outside the theoretical discourses, but the feminist provides a totally different point of departure from reading as a man. But by working within those discourses the feminist resists and undo the seemingly falsified perspective of the male reader. What happens when a female reader attempts to adjust the already accepted reading process that is male is to reverse it in such a way that the perspective of the male reader loses its universality and is neutralized. By focusing on the overlooked and suppressed elements of the text, the feminists subvert the centres of male domination in their discourses. The feminists' literary text also subverts the dominant male vision as the only viable vision of reality and displaces male perception as the only perception with universal parameters. These are the tenets of the feminist theory.

Feminists seek to make women's writings appreciable by focusing on certain concepts that are fundamental to the perception of gender, especially the female gender, and examine how such perceptions limit the woman's possibilities within established social settings. They examine the extent of inequality that women experience in societies within which they live with men, how social formations systematically oppress women in a bid to create equality within society with respect

to gender, to project the achievements and contributions of women to their society and to remove all gender-based distortions which appear in texts of philosophy literature and science, and to redress some societal stereotypes that featured for many years. In order to realize these objectives feminists writers employ a language that is down to earth and characterisation to make their works characteristically feminine.

All the above constitute a justification for feminism as a most appropriate theoretical tool for the evaluation of Toni Morrison's and Alice Walker's books which have women as their prominent subject or theme.

2.2 Review of Related Literatures

A good number of literary critics believe that for a work of art to be fully appreciated, the writer must show some concerns for the society that gives birth to his work and be relevant to the issues of his time. In defence of that, Achebe (1975:78) says:

> *It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporaryAfrica, will end up being completely irrelevant like that absurd man in the proverbs who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat flying from the flames.*

This call for writer's relevance by Achebe shares some resemblance with Ngugi wa Thiongo (1982:47) who sees a writer as "a kind of sensitive needle" who "registers with varying degrees of accuracy and success the conflicts and tensions in his changing society." That shows that any attempt by a Writer to go contrary to mediating between his society and its social vices relegates a Writer and his work. Hence the effort by the writers under study to satirise the unequal presentation of the femalefolk in books written by African American male writers. Wole Soyinka (1967)

when venting his anger on African writers' nonchalance to *"Contemporary Universal Collapse of Humanity"* at a conference in Stockholm in 1967 stated that:

> *When the writer in his own society can no longer function as conscience he must recognize that his choice lies between denying himself totally or withdrawing to the position of chronicler and post-mortem surgeon…The artist has always functioned in African society as the record of the mores and experience of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time. It is time for him to respond to this essence of himself.*

Sharing the same view point, Emmanuel Obiechina (1973:118) in his *Study of Onitsha Market Pamphlets* suggests that, "Good literature does more than reproduce the problems and crises of life. It should also show evidence of thought evidence that the writer has wrestled with the problems before consolidating his insight." Shortly before her demise, Mariama Ba in an interview with Harrell-Bond, 21 on relevance of literature argues that, "We cannot go forward without culture, without saying what we believe, without communicating with others, without making people think about things. Books are a weapon, a peaceful weapon perhaps but they are a weapon" (Mabuchi, 1997:1).

The importance of literature in a given society cannot be over emphasized. Indeed "The pen is mightier than the sword." In the history of literature, writers have made several attempts on questioning some established patterns of life and in the process some new ideas, thought and concepts have come to replace the older traditions with new ones. A typical example of this attempt is seen in the works under study. In this research Alice Walker and Toni Morrison have made a contributing rendition by portraying their characters not in stereotypical subservient and unchanging roles that are deliberately limiting, but they have made their women to come alive as speaking subjects and agents of change. The voices of the characters are now placed at the centre of the narratives. Meridian and Sula in the novels of

their names for example are conscious about their right to be themselves. In *The Bluest Eye*, Mrs Mac Tear is presented as a strong woman that works hard to keep her family, she hates the American ideals of beauty and tries to teach her children to have self respect and self worth. In *The Color Purple*, Celie resists oppression and liberates herself through supportive relations with other women. The Convent women in *Paradise*, a very small but largely self sufficient group of women find renewal through being cared for and caring for other women in a non-hierarchical and non patriarchal atmosphere.

Rendered as multi-vocal stories of women who flee their broken lives only to have their restructured ones destroyed again, *Paradise* is layered with complexity. It rejects a linear narrative and has many characters. Readers are to piece the women stories together as rendered in sections of their names. Though the novel is preoccupied by the attempts of a group of Black families to preserve their racial purity, Morrison rejects that the book is about racist or sexist Blacks, but instead argues that it is an attempt to answer the question that started *Paradise*. Kaltrine Dalsgard, Professor of American Studies at Roskilde University Denmark, in her critique of *Paradise* states:

> *Rather than being linear and monovocal, 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, the fact that Morrison's individual chapter headings are named after different characters makes clear that her narrative is without a unifying protagonist. And rather offering the narrative's many stories chronologically Morrison jumps back and forth between various points of time* (http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-7651/002-5902217-4420056).

This is very true of Toni Morrison's works – they are subtle and full of hidden significance. Her novels, especially *Sula* and *Paradise*, are full of mysteries; Morrison gives only part of a story at a time. She withholds and holds information

giving it bit by bit this is because she is part, a historian and part a story teller. Her works therefore require careful and participatory readings. Responding to criticism regarding her works in an interview with Marcus James *In Playing in the Dark* Morrison explains: "Though we live chronologically our consciousness works quite differently. We constantly think about yesterday or 20 years ago, or the future, as wego about the day. Our minds are alwaysmoving back and forth, planning, remembering, regretting" (http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-7651/002-5902217-4420056). In a separate interview Morrison also explains that:

> *My writing expects, demands participatory reading and that I think is what literature is supposed to do. It's not just about telling the story; it is about involving the reader. The reader supplies even some of the color, some the sound, my language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come in to it.* (http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-7651/002-5902217-4420056)

This is rightly stated. A reader has roles to play indeed:some of the 'colour' and 'sound' have to be supplied by the reader for better appreciation of her works. A clear example of this participatory reading is in the first statement of her novel *Paradise*: "They shot the White girl first." After that statement nothing is said about the race of any character in the Convent. Morrison removes all racial codes which will definitively identify the girls as belonging to a specific race and then include a number of racially ambiguous codes that confuses their racial identities further. In an interview with Paul Gray, Morrison admits that she purposefully left the race of the White girl unravelled: "I wanted the readers to wonder about the race of those girls until these Readers understood that their race didn't matter.I want to dissuade people from reading Literature that way…."

(http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-7651/002-5902217-4420056).

The *"Inner City Literature"* R*eader's Digest* of June (Randy, 2001:62-71), gives a critique of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* particularly on the plot structure and characterisation. According to this view the novel:

> *...is one of the most disappointing I have ever read. Pecola Breedlove does receive some closure in the form of insanity. Unfortunately, this does very little for the reader. Indeed the story ends with Pecola going crazy and everyone dismissing her as a crazy pregnant girl, who ends up dying young. There is not much resolution there at all. What's worse is that this is the most resolution we get. Most of the other characters just get a paragraph or two about what they end up doing. Indeed, The Bluest Eye is a good book in the literary sense that is virtually undisputed. However, there are story issues with the book that make it a book that you read in an English class, but do not necessarily enjoy.*

The aim of *The Bluest Eye* in the first instance is to question the Whites' ideology of supremacy that defines beauty purely from the Whites' perspective. For a girl to qualify as "beautiful" she should have "White skin," "blonde hair," "the bluest eyes," "red-pink cheeks," to mention just a few. These criteria disqualify Pecola and other girls of her colour in all ramifications because they are Black. In the process of trying to meet up with this "standard" Pecola goes crazy. The work explores the stigma that is seen as 'ideal' in the American culture which marginalized the Black community as different. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, being a literature of revolution and protest it is least expected that it should be enjoyed. Commenting on the theme of the novel, Morrison opines:

> *When the strength of a race depends on its beauty, when the focus is turned on how one looks as opposed to what one is, we are in trouble...The concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest and most pernicious and destructive ideas of the Western world, and we should have nothing to do with it. Physical beauty has nothing to do with our past, present or future. Its absence or presence was only important to them, the white people who used it for anything they wanted*(Morrison, 1974:89).

Although America's history of racism and slavery is central to Morrison's work, her novels transcend these issues to envelop truths about human conditions. Professor Fiona talking about Morrison's concern for human condition in *Sula* argues that:

> *By reading the story of Sula's life and the life of the community in the bottom, Morrison shows us the important ways in which families and communities can shape a child's identity. Sula not only portrays the way children are shaped, but also the way that a community receives an adult who challenges the very environment that melded them. Sula's action and much of her personality is a direct result of her childhood in the bottom. Sula's identity contains many elements of a strong independent feminist character* (Randy, 2001:62-71).

This concern, for women and women related issues, has remained a dominant preoccupation of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison; strands of feminism are a common feature of their works. Tar baby for example, which is a common name for Black children by the Whites, has been redefined by Morrison to mean "Black woman who can hold things together" while womanism coined by Walker (1983) is defined in the introduction of her book of essays *In Search of Our Mothers Garden* as "…a Black feminist or feminist of colour. One who appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility…women's strength and is committed to [the] survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female." In choosing to use "womanist" rather than "feminist" Walker expresses her protest against White feminists who fail to consider race and issues of the family setting as vital (Walker, 1983).

Madhu Dubey in *Black Women Novelist and the Nationalist Aesthetic* sees African-American women novelists of the 1970s, including Alice Walker, as attempting to create a place for Black Women in the masculinist BlackNationalist discourse. Alice Walker's term "womanist" and her womanist novel *Meridian* are part of that endeavour. In Walker's work, her women characters forge important links to

maintain continuity in both personal relationships and communities. According to Barbara Christian, in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Walker is concerned with "heritage" which to her "is not so much the grand sweep of history or artefacts created as it is the relations of people to each other, young to old, parent to child, man to woman."

In Walker's collections of short stories, *In Love And Trouble*, thirteen Black women protagonists are featured, many of them from the rural South who, as Barbara Christian notes, "against their own conscious wills in the face of pain, abuse, even death, challenge the conventions of sex, race and age, that attempt to restrict them." In *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens*, Walker states that her intent in the stories is to present a variety of women "mad, raging, loving resentful, hateful, strong, ugly, weak, pitiful and magnificent" as they try to live with the loyalty to Black men that characterize all their lives. Barbara Smith in "*Ms Walker*" praised the collection, saying it "would be an extraordinary literary work if its only virtue were the fact that the author sets out consciously to explore with honestly the textures and terror of Black women's lives." Smith adds, "The fact that Walker's perceptions, style and artistry are also consistently high makes her work a treasure." Walker views a similar terrain in *Meridian* (1976). She recounts the personal evolution of a young Black woman against the policies of the Civil Rights Movements. The novel raises questions of mother for the politically-aware female and the implications for the individual of being committed to revolution. Writing in the *New York Times Review of Books*, Merge Piercy commends *Meridian* as "a fine, taut novel that accomplishes a remarkable amount," and noted that Walker "writes with a sharp critical sense as she deals with the issues of tactics and strategy in the Civil Rights Movement with the nature of commitment, the possibility of interracial love and communication, the vital and lethal strands in

American and Blackexperience, with violence and non-violence." The novel receives much critical recognition and is praised for its deft handling of a complex subject matter. Years after its publication, Robert Towers commented in the *New York Review of Books* that *Meridian* "remains the most impressive fictional treatment of the movement that I have yet read".

In *The Color Purple* (1982) Walker brought together many of the characters and themes of her previous works. Peter S. Prescott in *Newsweek* proclaims *The Color Purple* "an American novel of permanent importance." The novel is a series of letters written by a Southern Black woman (Celie), reflecting a history of oppression and abuse suffered at the hands of men. The book is praised for its masterful recreation of the Black folk speech. In the same vein a critic, Robert Towers, comments in the *New York Review of Books* that "Walker converts Celie's sub-literate dialect into a medium of remarkable expressiveness, color, and poignancy." He adds: "I find it impossible to imagine Celie apart from her language; through it, not only was a memorable and infinitely touching character but a whole submerged world is vividly called into being." More than Walker's other works *The Color Purple* shows that even the most oppressed can liberate her self. The novel completes the cycle Walker announced two decades ago in her essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) about the survival and liberation of Black women through the strength and wisdom of others. Jeanne Fox-Aison in the *Chicago Tribune Book World* calls Walker "a provocative writer who writes about Blacks in particular, but all humanity in general."

The common area of criticism in Walker's work however, is her portrayal of Black men as violent. Walker's response to such criticism in an interview with Claudia Tute in *Black Women Writers at Work,* stated:

> *...I know many Brownfields,*(referring to a young son of Grange, a father who abandons his abused wife and son in Walker's first novel The Third Life of Grange Copeland) *and it's a shame that I know so many. I will not ignore people like Brownfield. I want you to know they exist. I want to tell you about them, and there is no way you are going to avoid them.*

On the plight of Black women in the United States Saldwin says,

> *It is a complex fate to be an Afro-American, not to talk of being an Afro-American woman. As a Black she suffers racism, as a female she suffers sexism. And an American society is stratified into economically determined classes, another level at which the Black woman is oppressed can be identified as class. This constitutes a triple oppression.*

There is no denying that racism is an intricate part of American culture. Robert Staples points out that "in all endeavours, the Black woman must face the forces of racism" (*Ibid*, 94). For centuries Black females have had to develop means of coping with racial oppression. This is particularly true of Black mothers who had to spend their days in the homes of white women taking care of their children and fighting off advances from their husbands. Even the Black females who were fortunate enough to escape domestic employment were not safe from exposure to racism. On recognising the Black woman's maternal instinct the White families utilised it to their own advantages by placing their children under the care of a Black "mammy." Maya Angelou comments:

> *There is a kind of strength that is almost frightening in Black women. It's as if a steel rod runs right through the head down to the feet. And I believe that we have to thank Black women not only for keeping the Black family alive, but (also) the white family....Because Black women have nursed a nation of strangers. For hundreds of years, they literally nursed babies at their breasts who they knew, when they grew up, would rape their daughters and kill their sons* (Maya Angelou, 1973).

This is indeed the position occupied by women. The Black woman's participation in the struggle for freedom, civil rights, and Black power movements in

the 20th Century America enlightened women, to their potentials as well as their oppressed conditions in the society. Alison Light (1983) in a review of *The Color Purple* has this to say:

> *One of many emotions I felt after reading this book was shame. Before I had forgotten or put aside my obligations as a woman, most of all a black woman. Being wrapped up in my self I had forgotten the shit my sisters had to live through and even die for to put me where I am today: a black woman able to think for my self, work for myself and plan my future.*

Black women have always been workers, not because they were necessarily "career oriented," but because of economic necessity. The economic necessity is particularly acute in the case of Black mothers. Because the Black male could not offer protection or security, the Black woman has worked with and for her family (Dance, 1975; p. 103). Black mothers are compelled to supplement the income of their husbands in order to provide adequately for their children:

> *For poor families the woman's position as earner can be crucial...More than half the nonwhites families rely on a woman as mainstay...Black families contain working wives much more frequently than do whites – in more than half of all the Negro families with both husband and wife present, the wife is employed...Negro women who work also contribute a larger portion of their family's income than do white working wives.* (*Ibid*.)

The husband's unwillingness to support the family is also dealt with in *Sula* by Toni Morrison. Eva's husband, BoyBoy is capable of making a decent living but he chooses to spend his money on women and whiskey. He finally decides to do his wife a favour and leaves her with three children prior to the onset of winter. "When he left in November, Eva had $1.65, five eggs, three beets and no idea of what or how to feel" (*Sula*, pp.27-28). It is from this situation that Eva must devise a means of providing for her children and herself. She will find it difficult to rise above her impoverished state due to economic and social forces: her status as a Black woman

will permit her to find only menial jobs paying low wages. The theme of poverty resulting from the low wages accorded menial jobs is picked up again with the Breedloves in *The Bluest Eye*, also by Toni Morrison. Pauline, the mother, is employed as a housekeeper for a White family. It is her job that finances the major part of the family's living expenses. Their lack of financial resources has forced them to move into a storefront. As further evidence of their poverty, Mrs. Breedlove doesn't even own a gown, but sleeps in an old dress. The family's economic situation prevents them from enjoying a comfortable position in society.

Though Black families often fail to achieve a comfortable niche in society due to financial reasons, Robert Staples states in *The Black Woman in America* that, "...the woman is likely to contribute the larger share of the income and to assume the larger share of the family responsibility." Black mothers are keenly aware of the economic problems of their families. They suffer most from these problems and they strive hardest to alleviate them. Given the laudable efforts of Walker and Morrison in these works, the gap this humble work intends to bridge is to amplify the efforts of these women through bringing their works to the shores of Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, Nigeria. It is believed that through the study of this piece many will get to know more of Walker and Morrison, and their attempts at women liberation, which may be a model to many. Suffice it to say that though there are copious works on the aforementioned writers, yet a dimension is added to the quest for recognition by these writers in this treatise.

CHAPTER THREE:

STRANDS OF FEMINISM IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*, *SULA*, AND *THE BLUEST EYE*

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* is a portrait of strivings and conflicts on the town of Ruby, founded in 1950 by an accomplished group of 8-Rock Black family, and the Convent, a single building surrounded by plains and rolling hills seventeen miles away. Due to the constant reprisal by various racist forces, the 8-Rock Black family relocates from Haven, a cosy town founded by their fathers in 1980, to Ruby, Oklahoma. It is quite unfortunate that the founding fathers of Ruby, in an attempt to escape from the hostile and oppressive White community that plagued their forefathers, on founding Ruby turned out to be worst oppressors venting their anger on innocent women who, being wounded at various moments by elements of life, take refuge in the Convent. The spectrum of the women's problems ranges from; foiled marriages, abandonment, and child abuse, and having "unlocatable" mothers, and fathers on "death row" (p.257). The Convent women whose age bracket ranges from sixteen to seventy offer caring, loving, non-intrusive, and inclusive environmentbased on mutual respect to every woman that strayed there. Toni Morrison uses Bellie Delia, a historian, as her mouthpiece and clearly identifies herself with the Convent community, describing it as "a place where you can stay for a while. No questions" and where "you can collect yourself and think things through, with nothing or nobody bothering you all the time."

Morrison depicts Ruby as a town and culture with a tightly woven patriarchal structure that seriously limits the possibilities for change. Though the patriarchs attempted to put into practice the ideals of participatory democracy and non-violence

reminiscent to the Civil Rights period, the attempt remained seriously flawed in its exclusion of women. In Ruby women are excluded day in day out in all matters that affect them in their common life. The women are denied a voice and remain possessions of men that must be negotiated by men, although the men pay lips service to the influence of women, the men essentially silence and exclude the women from negotiations and decisions. Morrison foregrounds this exclusion when, after a prayer meeting session, the men are said to hear "the tippy-tap steps of women who are no where to be seen" (p. 61). This is emblematic of the Civil Rights Movements; the officers of the leading organisation were male African-American ministers who did not allow women into their ranks even though women were not only very active but also highly influential within the day to day running of the organisation as well as in setting the agenda for the movement, and in constructing a model of participatory democracy.

As things are in Ruby, unwanted children are conceived and aborted, wished-for children are born "broken" (Mongoloids) and the young begin to react against the conservative lifestyle and authoritarian politics of the community's leading elders.The community's patriarchs react tothis development by launching series of angry accusations against its young male lions for failing their ancestral responsibility. The Convent women are held responsible for all that befell Ruby. These culminate in a horrific massacre of the women by these two groups of men on thatground. The men resort to violence to rid the Convent of its women residents not only because they see the women as "impure" and "unholy," but mainly "because they could...which is what being an 8-rock meant to them." The patriarchs' suspicion and fear of the women is also a function of their desire to retain control over their separatist enclave that is Ruby.

The town patriarchs consolidate their power through an unspoken but extremely tight control over women. As Pat recognises, “Everything that worries them must come from women” in that “the generations had to be not only racially untampered but free of adultery too” (p. 217). Morrison, however, positioned the Convent as the best hope for moving past racism and patriarchy. The Convent symbolises an interrelated, non-hierarchical form of justice, Morrison explores the interdependence of coalition and community as means of configuring a communal form of agency. The Convent provides a space that not only ensures temporary survival to all those who find their way there regardless of race, class or history, but also validates ordinary women and their stories to the extent that collectively they can construct certain positions for themselves that include position other than subjugation.

The younger men of Ruby had a serious disputation with the older generation on how the graffiti on the Oven should be interpreted. Due to passage of time the citizens of Ruby could not be sure what the real message is as the first word unscripted on the mouth of the Oven has been erased. The older generation insist it should be “Beware the Furrow of His Brow.” The younger group says; “ Be the Furrow of His Brow “Since the older generation cherish the memories of the old fathers of Haven as ruling forces in their lives, they cannot entertain other interpretations of something so sacred. This issue of rebellion: drunken sons and daughters talking back to parents and their persistent hanging out on the Oven infuriates the older men, who still think of the Oven as too important to treat in this fashion.

Although this behaviour ends in the scape-goating of the Convent women, Morison blames the changing society and affluence as responsible. Morrison attempts at the defence of the Convent women is also portrayed in the case of Soane and

Dovey, wives of Deacon and Steward Morgan, whose delivery of "broken" children is blamed on self-enclosure and incest which, in an attempt to maintain purity of race, culminates in a delivery of Mongoloids. By echoing the contrast so frequently recurring in between a community defined by an authoritarian male cultureand a house of women outcasts living on the community's marginson, the Convent in important ways functions as Morison's ideal alternative. Why? Because at the conclusion of Paradise there is a continuing challenge at patriarchal structures and the threats of violence towards women that ensures the survival of such structures.

After the massacre at the Convent, the town's people all headed home, Roger Best is called to pick up the bodies in his ambulance but when he gets there he finds "No bodies. Nothing. Even the Cadillac was gone" (p.292). Although the bodies of the women disappear, they reappear in other contexts, haunted those which have hurt them in the past. The Convent women continue to embody hope. The disappearance of the women's bodies functions as a rejections of conventional closure and refusal to be co-opted. They will not neatly and properly be buried within the patriarchal enclosure of Ruby. Moreover, that their bodies are some where "out there" imbues the Convent women with a mythical power that provides hope. As stated in the text Bellie Delia had another question:

> *'When will they return? When will they reappear, with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town....' She hoped with all her heart that the women were out there, darkly burnished, biding their time, brass-metaling their nails, filing their incisors but out there* (p. 308).

The disappearance of the murdered bodies positions the Convent women as indestructible in the sense that their engagement in such a dynamic, alternative coalition process grounded in caring and intersecting subject position in conflict with the patriarchal status quo will continue to emerge.

Morison's preference for the Convent women is seen in her depiction of the men of Ruby and the massacre. The men assert that everybody who goes near them (the Convent women) is maimed somehow, and "the mess is seeping back into our homes, our families" (p.276). In order to justify their violent actions, they dehumanized and demonized the Convent women as "female malice" (p.4) "incarnate" "strays" (p.114) "bitches more like witches," "heifers" and "sluts" (p.273). The extent of their not only hatred but also fear of the women is reflected in the weaponry they carry on their raid of the Convent: "They are nine, over twice the number of the women they are obliged to stamp or kill and they have the paraphernalia for either requirement: rope, a palm leaf cross, handcuffs, mace and sunglasses, along with clean, handsome guns(p. 3)." This preparation is just to oust five unarmed women, whose only fault is that they have chosen their fellow women for company, and deliberately abstain from sexual relations with men and thus forgo reproduction. It is indeed an absurdity the men fail to recognize. Bellie Delia, in response to such action calls the town of Ruby:

> *A town that had tried to ruin her grandfather, succeeded in swallowing her mother and almost broken her own self. A backward no place ruled by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the nerve to say who could live and who not and where….*(p. 308)

The patriarchal and racist separatism that grounds Ruby's identity allows for no other response than hatred and violence. Morrison further depicts Ruby as a place having no room for unmarried "women who choose themselves for company" (p. 276) and a town in which women's "identity rested on the men they married" (p. 187).

The same theme runs through Sula. In the novel Morrison makes a critique of America's failure to live up to its ideal of exceptionalism and promise to native and

African-Americans alike, showing the society's failure to offer women, especially those who openly reject patriarchy, the same individual freedom they craved and fought for.

Morrison depicts a pair of Black women, Nel Wright and Sula Peace, who are opposite in their ways of relating to the world around them. Nel is rational and balanced, she gets married and gives in to conformity, while Sula remains irrational and transient, and she follows her immediate passions completely unaware of circumstances around her. They function well only when they are together as they complement each other as opposites. As separate entities, they are vulnerable and isolated from the rest of the world: Sula because she is impulsive and disregards other people and Nel for being docile. Toni Morrison's depiction of Sula Peace, the main protagonist of the novel, reflects her preference for Sula's queer nature; she is depicted as wild and difficult girl who lives with her mother in the town's slut; she is head strong and self-driven. With a dark skin "like rich earth," the rose-shaped birth mark over one eye gives her a mysterious impression. She flares up at slightest provocation and "could hardly be counted on to sustain any emotion for more than three minutes" (p. 211). She is proud and alone, though she feels numb and remains silent at Chicken Little's funeral, yet she solely swings the little child to death and is not at any point remorseful of the death. Nel Wright, Sula's best friend and the other protagonist in the novel has a skin "almost like the colour of sand." She is a picture of innocence and purity: she is calm and constant, a quiet girl who obeys her mother, being a product of her mother who rigidly conforms to all societal roles. Nel grows up to be docile.

The two young girls, Nel and Sula, determine to be different from the women of their home they grow.They promise to be different and unique to who they are by

avoiding the societal roles that are set in place for them. However, we see a full circle in Nel, when she becomes the one woman she despised the most. Nel is unable to escape becoming her mother due to the fact that she is a product of the latter's upbringing. Nel learns to be passive when put in uncomfortable situations. As a young girl, Nel observes that when her mother was humiliated by the train conductor the mother only responded with a smile. Nel had promised never to act in a manner that would cause a man to look her. Although she made this pledge as a child, as adult she is unable to keep it: upon finding her husband in bed with her best friend Sula, Nel's reaction mirrors her mother's.

She claims that "They are not doing that, I am just standing here and seeing it, but they are not really doing it…" (p. 9).That is how cold Nel's response is "and I did not know how to move my feet or fix my eyes or what. I just stood there seeing it and smiling." When put in such a situation Nel's reaction is almost identical to her mother's reaction on the train. She is unable to break the pattern laid for her by her mother and the society. Her dreams of leaving Medallion and being true to her self as an individual have all been shattered. She ends up marrying Jude Green, living the rest of her life in Medallion, her dreams not being fulfilled. Now Nel belongs to the town and all of its ways. She has given herself over to them…" (p. 120). She is chosen as Jude's wife, a sign of ownership or possession. She is said to be "receptive, but hardly anxious" (p. 82) of the marriage. Against all of her dreams, she has become a traditional Black housewife contented by children, her husband, and whatever the townsfolk deems proper and acceptable. Twenty-five years after Sula's death, Nel realizes that she allows herself to defer her dreams until it is too late.

Morison uses a grey ball with images of leaves and mud to establish the death of Nel's ambition: "Leaves stirred: Mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe

green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze." Finally, the dream explodes, and Nel can only reflect. She has wasted opportunities for self-discovery and happiness while her closest friend experienced individuality and joy. Sula's refusal to have a patriarchal relationship as did Hannah her mother places her at a disadvantage, for while Hannah receives pleasure but remains a submissive participant in her relationship with Men, Sula not only takes control but claims power over the men; this among others makes her a victimizer not a victim, she is made a scape goat for every evil that befalls Bottom, her death is expected to bring some good fortune to the community. For the most part of the novel she is misunderstood and mistrusted, myths about her permeat the community, and it is said that she never ages, never loses a tooth, and never belches. When some one chokes, it is because he looks at Sula, and when a child falls,it is because Sula is around. The community bonded in their effort to oppose Sula because of her feminist stance.

Shadrack a veteran of World War 1, who suffers from a shell shock, is said to suffer mental disorders as a result of his having viewed death constantly and close. It is so serious that he remains straight jacketed while in the hospital. Back at Bottom he propagates National Suicide Day every 3rd day of January in which the Bottom community is expected to pile up their fears of death so that on the aforementioned date set aside people will be at liberty to choose how to die; in the process people come out in mass only for them to be drowned. Shadrack is known for parading around drunk, defecating in the public among other bizarre and harmful behaviours to the community, but is yet more favoured because of his gender. Sula, on the other hand, though more tolerable than Shedrack, becomes a scape goat. Nel sums it up towards the end of the novel: "You can't do it all, you a woman and a coloured

woman at that, you can't act like a man. You can't be walking around all independent – like doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't." Sula attempts a life and identity that is deemed beyond her gender and cultural means, this attempt at distinguishing herself leads to her down fall. Morrison portrays Sula having

> *Eva's arrogance and Hannah's self indulgence merged in her and, with a twist that was all her own imagination, she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. As willingly to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life – ever since her mother's remarks sent her flying up those stairs...* (*Sula*, p. 102)

Nel's representation shows a Black African-American woman feminist in the making but weighed and subsumed by patriarchal tendencies around her that makes her the subservient character she dreads most. In Sula however, Morison ideal alternative is fully depicted. These two characters aside, Morrison makes an array of female characters in the novel. Eva, Sula's Grand mother, deliberately stretches her leg to be crushed by a moving train to secure insurance for the children's upbringing. Eva, the most complex mother presented in the novel gives her children away temporarily because she is unable to support them without her husband's assistance. That gives credence to the belief that Black mothers place the welfare of their children above everything else. She makes the necessary sacrifices and returns to nurse her children to adulthood. She had no way of alleviating her hunger because the children were too young to be left alone while she works in the valley. This forced her to take a drastic measure. After carefully thinking about it, "two days later she left all of her children with Mrs. Suggs, saying she would be back the next day. Eighteen months later she swept down from a wagon with two crutches, a new black pocketbook, and one leg" (p. 20).

It was rumoured that Eva lost her leg by sticking it under a train to collect the insurance money. Whatever the fate of her leg, Eva's return was marked by prosperity. Her first act was to reclaim her children; and immediately thereafter she made provisions for a new dwelling for them. Eva's dedication to protecting her children remained constant through their adult lives having already sacrificed her leg to insure proper care for them. Her gallant attempt to save Hannah, Sula's mother is seen in the following excerpt:

> *She rolled up to the window and it was then she saw Hannah burning. The flames from the yard fire were licking the blue cotton dress, making her dance. Eva knew there was time for nothing in this world other than the time it took to get there and cover her daughter's body with her own. She lifted her heavy frame up on her good leg, and with fists and arms smashed the window pane. Using her stump as a support on the window sill, her good leg as a lever, she threw herself out of the window. Cut and bleeding she clawed the air trying to aim her body toward the flaming, dancing figure. She missed and came crashing down some twelve feet from Hannah's smoke. Stunned but still conscious, Eva dragged herself toward her firstborn, but Hannah, her senses lost, went flying out of the yard gesturing and bobbing like a sprung jack-in-the-box* (Morrison, *Sula*, p. 65-66).

This Black mother's dedication to providing for and protecting her children can be traced back to her African heritage. Historical evidence indicates that "Black women in Africa had an unbreakable bond with their children." Two factors serving to be responsible for this bond; polygamy and the matrilineal system,due to the father's attention being diverted by the children of other wives, each mother was responsible for the care and well being of her own children.The African mother makes provision for her children, placing their needs above her own. Eva is indeed a queer character who prefers killing her son than having him live as lunatic.In presenting Eva as a strong feminist character Morrison uses the historical material of slave mothers killing their children to avoid rearing them as slaves to depict Eva's murder of her son Plum because he had become a slave to drugs. He was her only son and to him she had

given the best of everything that she could give. Plum was part of the reason that she had sacrificed her leg. To see him wasting away before her eyes was more than she could bear. She says:

> *He gave me such a time. Such a time. Look like he didn't even want to be born. But he come on out. Boys is hard to bear. You wouldn't know that but they is. It was such a carryin' on to get him born and to keep him alive. Just to keep his little heart beating and his little old lungs cleared and look like when he came back from that war he wanted to git back in. After all the carryin' on, just gettin' him and keepin' him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well...I aint got the room no more even if he could do it...I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, got no more. I birthed him once. I couldn't do it again...I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn't and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man...But I held him close first. Real close. Sweet Plum. My baby boy* (pp. 61-62).

History recognises the fact that slave mothers sometimes killed their children to avoid rearing them as slaves. Eva murdered her son Plum because he had become a slave to drugs. He was her only son and to him she had given the best of everything that she could give. Plum was part of the reason that she had sacrificed her leg. Eva's house described as a "Throbbing disorder constantly awry with things, people, voices and slamming of doors" is solely run by her from her make shift wheel chair in the upstairs – a position from which she leaps in an attempt to save her daughter.

Morrison's portrayal of Eva shows the depth of maternal instinct in Black women. Though Eva had reared children other than her own it has been within the family that much of her strength has developed because it was here that she was forced to accept obligation and responsibilities for not only the care and protection of her own life, but for that of her offspring as well. The desire to protect and provide for them extended beyond the ones to which she gave birth to. Operating on a private scheme of preference and prejudice her acceptance of this obligation and her

willingness to fulfil them is responsible for the affectional ties that exist between her, her children and the tenants. The bond between Black mothers and their children is so intensely recognised that it is often a focal point for works of fiction.

Another powerful female figure is Helen Wright, mother of Nel Wright and Sula's friend. She is portrayed as an uppity woman who is very concerned with social ranking:"Helen Wright was an impressive woman; she makes sure she follows all society standards, she plays a large role in the community and is respected for her contributions to the Church." Nel's Mother treats her role as a housewife and mother with all seriousness and is always a conformist to norms and manners. Her house is described as having an atmosphere of "oppressive neatness" (p. 29), a strict and organized household that instilled societal values in Nel: "Under Helene's hand, the girl becomes obedient and polite. Any enthusiasm that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (p. 13).

As a result of Helene's seriousness in making sure that she remains a conformist to the core, her daughter Nel Wright ends up growing into the natured and responsible woman Helene wishes. Hannah, Sula's mother relates with newly weds that came into her mother's house for their honeymoons, men who have been married for many years, and men who have never been married at all. Oddly enough however, in return, Hannah gains the respect from the wives of these men Morison write that Hannah had been a nuisance, but she was complimenting the women in a way by wanting their husbands. She is said to have gained their sympathy because she remains a submissive participant in these relationships, unlike Sula that, as said earlier, not only takes control but also claims power over their men trying them out and discarding them with out any excuse.

Morrison aligns with these women, queer as they are, and depicts their minds their fears and desires.In *The Bluest Eye* the protagonist, by name Pecola Breedlove is an eleven-year old low-esteemed poor Black unwanted girl growing up in Lorain, Ohio in the early 1940s. Being in a society that promotes and rates blonde hair, blue eyes, pink skin as ideals of beauty, Pecola thinks she is ugly and desires to belong.She is driven by search for beauty and acceptance defined by a pursuit for the bluest eye ever. Unfortunately, her family and community make it impossible for her to ever be sanely content. To buttress this, Claudia opines: "...all of us felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when he stood astride her ugliness...her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us eloquent" (p. 205).

What constitutes Pecola's problem is not only the social perception of the community. Pecola's mother, Pauline William Breedlove, instead of providing her with the necessary love and respect that would ensure her survival, treats her with cruelty and contempt.In Pauline's eyes, Pecola is "ugly" and a negation to everything she admires while watching movies. Her attitudes towards Pecola are rooted in her own experiences in life in both the White society and her own family: "Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another – physical beauty. She was never able, after her education in the movies to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty" (p. 122).

As Pauline learned what physical beauty was she also quickly learned that when she is in the company of her White family (where she works as a mammy) she feels as if she is part of the positive virtues in an attempt to escape her "ugliness." She turns herself into the "perfect housemaid" for the White family, favouring their daughter over Pecola. The more time she spends with her own Black family, the more

she realizes how ugly, poor and unworthy they are. Geraldine, a socially conscious middle-class Black is concerned only with White things, and does everything possible to disconnect herself from her African roots. She mistreats her son, Louis Junior, and prefers giving love and affection to her blue eyed cat. Louis Junior being strongly affected by his mother's preference for her blue eyed cat vents his anger on Pecola by throwing the big black cat on her.

The Black families in the novel are unfortunate to find themselves in a world that perpetuates the notion that what is only seen as an "ideal" or perfect family is in form of a neat little house run by two loving parents, with two loving children, one of which should have a blonde hair and blue eyes and a fun loving dog who plays with the children. This signifies equality, happiness, worthiness and overall comfort. Anything that strays from this mainstream definition is not the norm. This therefore excludes Pecola and other young Black girls; they do not have white skin, blonde hair, red-pink cheeks and blue eyes. There is a difference between the "ideal" White families and the families of the Blacks. This social stigma breeds differential treatments on the characters that are different. This construction of what is beautiful, normal and acceptable is not only promoted through the media but even in their daily interaction with other characters in the novel and as always the case, women receive a double portion.

Pecola's father Cholly Breedlove, as he is called in the novel, is a bastard born to an unwed mother; his father ran away the very day of his delivery, and the mother abandons him three days later. His attempt to trace his root remains futile As a father Cholly is a failure, he does not provide anything to the family, knowing only abuses and desertion. Cholly functions as an exact opposite of a perfect father.As a

means of escape Cholly resorts to constantly fighting, beating, and abusing his wife, Pauline William Breedlove. A clear example is the scene of the fight in the novel:

> *She ran into the bedroom with a dishpan full of cold water and threw it in Cholly's face. He sat up, choking and spitting. Naked and ashen, he leaped from the bed, and with a flying tackle, grapped his wife around the waist, and they hit the floor. Cholly picked her up and knocked her down with the back of his hand. She fell in a sitting position, her back supported by Sammy's bed frame. She had not let go of the dishpan, and began to hit at Cholly's thighs and groins with it. He put his foot in her chest, and she dropped the pan. Dropping to his knee, he struck her several times in the face, and she might have succumbed early had he not hit his hand against the metal bed frame when his wife ducked. Mrs. Breedlove took advantage of this momentary suspension of blows and slipped out his reach...Mrs. Breedlove having snatched up the round, flat stove lid, ran tippy-toe to Cholly as he was pulling himself up from his knees and struck him two blows, knocking him right back into the senselessness out of which she had provoked him. Panting, she threw a quilt over him and let him lie* (p.38-39).

Life is so miserable for Pauline her solace being the fight she and Cholly engage. Depicting a typical condition of a Black family Morrison makes an array of the fighting session:

> *Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove fought each other with a darkly brutal formalism that was paralleled only by their lovemaking. Tacitly they had agreed not to kill each other. He fought her the way a coward fights a man – with feet, the palms of his hands, and teeth. She, in turn, fought back in a purely feminine way – with frying pans and pokers, and occasionally a flat iron would sail toward his head. They did not talk, groan, or curse during these beatings. There was only the muted sound of falling things, and flesh on unsurprised flesh* (p. 37-38).

Pauline has not been opportuned to experience true love. Her husband's problematic character and his confused and ambiguous perception of love and lust leads him to rape his own daughter Pecola, hence her down fall. Toni Morrison's women in particular and African-American women in general indeed face a tripartite affliction; it is always either they are fighting sexism, classism or racism.

The idea of the Black men blaming the women folk for the situation they find themselvesin is seen in Cholly's relationship with Darlene. On their being caught in the woods by two White men, who insist that the two should have an intercourse under the very ray of their flashlight. Cholly after being humiliated directs his anger on Darlene: "He hated her so much the flashlight wormed its way into his guts and turned the sweet taste of masculine into rotten bile" (p.118). Instead of directing his anger to the cruel White men for humiliating him, he vents his anger on the woman: "he hated …the one he had not been able to protect, to spare, to cover from the moon glow of the flashlight" (p. 118). Morison once again explores the twin affliction being suffered by the African-American woman, besides the humiliation suffered from the White man, her co-victim has suddenly turn victimizer, hating as a means of escape to his short comings. Cholly, a representation of a black adult, fully satisfied by the subservient position accorded the woman by the society blames her for his predicament.

In *The Bluest Eye* we see an example of a female figure being blamedfor faults that are hardly her own: characters such as Pauline, Cholly, and most children at school, turn to self hatred as a means of escape. Yet the self hatred soon becomes an externalized aggression that targets individuals like Pecola who represents exactly what in their minds is "ugly," their supposed "blackness". The reason being that they have accepted what the White society says about them, that they are ugly because they are blacks. Being a lot darker than other characters Pecola is excluded, marginalized and tormented because she represents, in their eyes everything, they resent about themselves. Pecola being marginalized and excluded by all is doomed never to survive, she ends up being a "broken-winged bird that cannot fly." Thus:

> *The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendril sap green days, walking up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer*

> *so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she hailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile efforts to fly,beating the air, a winged but grounded bird intent on the blue void it could not reach – could not even see – but which filled the valleys of the mind* (p. 162).

The deep scars of infant memories contribute immensely to the shaping of her life. Pecola therefore, degenerates as she grows due to her increasing awareness of her inadequacies. Ugliness, characterizes the lives of the Breedloves. Not only were their living conditions extremely poor, their physical appearance too borders on the repulsive. Pecola longs to improve her appearances in the hope of gaining social acceptability. Her symbol of beauty remains the white woman whose alluring eyes she admires. The simplicity of this craving for "blue eyes" is deceptive. A malady deep rooted in the social system wrought on the Black woman by the inferiority complex which her situation forces her to imbibe. The degree of emphasis placed on physical appearance nauseates her.

Economic frustrations, alcohol, and personal failure are some of the reasons for the Black males' violent treatment of his family. The Black woman's willingness to accept this abusive treatment is based on her understanding of his situation. Cholly became frustrated with his position in society and relieves that frustration by becoming abusive to his wife and children. The Black mother accepts this abuse along with the other complicating factors in her life. This acceptance is truly a dedication of a black woman to her family. Individual personality traits also have a way of hampering the progress of Black mothers. Some find the struggle too strenuous and resort to giving their children away, a typical example being Cholly's mother and Cholly himself. Others fail to give them the proper attention and care just like the case of Pauline Breedlove. Lack of love is seldom responsible for these conditions. It is lack of opportunity to participate in the mainstreams of the society that forces the

Black family into these situations. Toni Morrison devotes attention to these as very important facet of the Black family life.

CHAPTER FOUR:

ALICE WALKER'S PORTRAIT OF WOMEN IN *THE COLOR PURPLE, IN LOVE AND TROUBLE: STORIES OF BLACK WOMEN,* AND *MERIDIAN*

In *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women,* Alice Walker writes works in which Black protagonists, usually women, are caught between Black and White cultures and become victims of both in most cases. In the short story titled "*Her Sweet Jerome"* Walker portrays a troubled relationship that demonstrates how larger social issues intrude in individual lives of Black men and women. In this story, the particular social issue is the African-American revolution that aims at liberating all Black people but loses its focus somewhere along the line. All things being equal, fighting for the rights of Black people should be a common goal to all, the couple's different understanding of what this revolution means and their inability to communicate literally drives them apart. Mrs Jerome Franklin Washington the protagonist and central character triesher best to look White;she internalizes the roles and images imposed on her by a society that advocates that White alone is beautiful. As a result she loses to situate her self in either the relationship or the society. Jerome her husband is not a positive male figure he is only interested in the theories of the revolution making sure that his status of being superior to women is maintained. He enjoys treating his wife with cruelty and contempt, playing the master in the house and shows no remorse for oppressing her. Jerome is not clear of his position, he is definitely not a positive male figure in the story neither does he fight for the right of his people but a man interested only in theory, in vocabulary not in actions, especially those actions that will radically change his status of being superior to women. He identifies with his White oppressors and shows no remorse for oppressing his wife and abusing her physically and emotionally.

Walker explores the man's search for self worth in the story and how men make their wives casualties of that search. The men in their selfish ways always deny their women every assertion of self worth and identity. The story titled *"Roselily"* reflects a rural AfricanAmerican woman who escapes "poverty and disgrace" by marrying a man she barely knows. Being an unmarried mother of three kids by different fathers and raising them (the kids) alone on cotton picking and sewing in a factory, marrying a Black Muslim and moving to Chicago to start a new life is to Roselily the best chance to be free and respectable, only for her to come to a full realization that asking a lot of questions would have done her a lot of good than harm. The new husband looks down on her and her entire community for following the teachings of an unknown god. As time passes by Roselily comes to a realization that she is inferior, marriage is "binding not freeing," travelling to Chicago with the new husband is a symbol of "entrapment", his religion is "more intimidating than comforting" she will be made to wear a robe and veil, forced to hide her body and its sexuality except for its procreative functions, forcedto stay home and raise more children. These are contrary to Roselily's expectation. As Roselily half-listened to the wedding ceremony she reflects on how she will take to the strict confines of life as a wife in a Black Muslim home. Being poor, African-American, and a female, life presents Roselily with few appealing options; instead of holding unto what is difficult Roselily makes the convenient choice in her marriage, but is vastly disturbed by her actions. She is irrevocably bound to her husband through marriage: "She feels worried, ignorant, wrong and backward." In the story Walker explores a woman's predicament. Roselily has no place she can comfortably call a home, she is neither free with her community that treats her with disdain for being a mother of three illegitimate children from three different fathers nor with her husband that looks down

on her, whose marriage is more of entrapment than freedom.She therefore felt no connection to the people she was leaving or to the man she was leaving with. Walker re-emphasizes the woman question, her being continuously seen as a property, if she deserves any regard is to be seen and relate with, from the perspective of whom she marries, for relevance therefore Roselily subjugates herself to a union with a stranger that may cost her happiness.

The conflicts between two daughters over who should rightly take their mother's quilts and how they should be used are central to the story of "*Every Day's Use.*" Maggie's understanding of her heritage comes through when she tells Mama that "Dee can have the quilts because I can remember Grandma Dee without the quilts (p. 413). Wangero on the other hand expresses fears that Maggie would "probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use" (p. 413). It is however from Maggie's statement that her every day use of the quilts would be in memories of Grandma Dee. That shows that Mama and Margaret's lack of education and refinement does not prevent them from having inherent understanding of their heritage. Being conscious of ways in which the cultural nationalist rhetoric attempts to erase the importance of female ancestors, Walker's story emphasizes the rural Southern root of African-American heritage. By dedicating the story to "Grandmamma" and having her tell the story herself gives her a voice. Walker goes ahead to described mama as having physical qualities often demeaned by cultural nationalists. Grandmamma, like the stereotypical mammy of slavery, describes herself as: "…a large big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands.In the winter I wear flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day. I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man. My fat keeps me hot in zero weather" (p. 48).

Walker's writing is her way of breaking silences.By contrasting a sister who has the opportunity to go to college with a sister who stays at home Walker explores the challenges that contemporary African-American women face. Walker depicts the conflict that can result from an education that takes a woman away from her cultural source. Wangero, who have travelled far and near, rates her self too important and advanced for her folks. She has little regard for quilting and conceives the family's quilts as priceless artefacts which she intends to hang on her wall as a means of demonstrating to others that she has heritage. Maggie the uneducated sister, who has been nowhere beyond the supposedly backward Black South, loves and understands her family and can appreciate its history. She knows how to quilt and would put it to every day use, which is precisely what Walker suggests one needs to do with one's heritage, symbolizing the place of women in the Black power movement who were usually bright, beautiful, vocal and aggressive in their demands. Wangero is presented by Mama as an individual who "…looks any one in the eyes…hesitation was no part of her nature…was determined to stare down any disaster in her efforts. Her eye lids would not flicker for a minute at a time…at sixteen she had a style of her own: and knew what style was" (p. 195). Walker uses this personality trait of Wangero along her style of dress and speech to establish the identity of women as a challenge to the Black power movement that does not acknowledge nor properly respect the many African-American women who endured incredible hardship in their efforts to survive in the hostile environment of that era.

In the *"Strong Hosting"* Snooks, Rannie Mae Toomer's son, is dying of double pneumonia and whooping cough. Rannie has no one else in the world, is unmarried, and lives in an unheated, drafty shack somewhere in the South. Sarah, expert in country medicine suggests that one of the remedies might help Snooks, but

Rannie would have none of it. Her position as a Black and a female provides her the services of an expert in country medicine instead of a doctor despite the worsening condition of her son Snooks. At a point Rannie realises that no White doctor would come despite sending mail couriers inviting a White doctor. She has to put up with Sarah's recommendation; "a horse tea," a grey mere's urine, which out of desperation she happens to bring nothing in which to catch it. In a determination to save her child from death she places her tongue over the tiny crack on a shoe with which to collect "the tea" amidst rain, thunder, and lightening. This reflects once again a mother's determination to save her child. The bond between Black mothers and their children is often the focal point for works of fiction. Alice Walker also devotes attention to this mother-child relationship. Generally Black women work hard as domestic maids in White households and with little remuneration. They pay their rents and feed their children. Since slavery Black women have been used to playing the dominant role in family and marriage relationship, thus acquiring the strength of self reliance and self sufficiency.

Alice Walker draws her experiences in the rural South to portray the particular situation of Black women exploring the texture and terror of Black women's life. Walker's characters face their particular conflicts because they live in a racist and sexist society. Certainly marriage offers these women nothing, neither does religion, be it Christianity, Black Muslim faith or voodoo. They are trapped by archaic conventions, superstitions and traditions that in every way sever them the right to life. Though downtrodden these women invariably remain resilient. There is however an exception of a character, Roselily, who is not seen fighting back successfully against preconceived, stultifying, and restrictive notions of women's role. Besides representing through fictional characters the sufferings and resilience of Black

women, Alice Walker actively engaged in attempt to redefine womanhood on the basis of the past and present lives and experiences of women. These experiences are seen specifically as the expression of women in the patriarchal, racist and stratified American environment. The same theme runs through Alice Walker's second novel *Meridian*. The Black woman's participation in the struggle for freedom, civil rights, and Black power movements in America helped opened the eyes of women, including white women, to their potentials as well as their oppressed conditions in the society. In *Meridian* Walker uses her experience in the movement and the experiences of others especially Black women to explore issues of gender as well as race. She explores the effects of growing up in a racist society, relationships between Black women and men, Black men and White women and Black women and White women in the Civil Rights Movement.

In the novel Meridian, the main character, grows up through the eyes of the reader.Her emotional, physical and psychological stages of resistance were fully depicted. Meridian is bold enough to reject religion at a very early stage despite the fact that her mother is a devout Christian. In school Meridian is unable to finish a speech because she knows that there is no truth in the words she speaks (p. 121). Her defiance is also seen in how she becomes a non conformist when she gives up family life and motherhood to attend the college (pp. 90-91). Her decision to work as a volunteer for voter registration foreshadows further her individuality. Her determination to give the wild child a chance and, later after his tragic death, a proper funeral despite being denied by the authorities further shows Meridian's prowess: Meridian leading "the students sang through tears that slipped like melting pellets of sleet down their grieved and angered checks: we shall overcome…" (p. 37). She actively gets involved in the Civil Rights Movement, but concealing it from the

university. She encourages others to join the movement, and they go from door to door trying to convince others to have the courage to vote.

Despite the disappointing relationship with Truman Held, Meridian is strong enough to carry on having lost a child, lover and her friend Anne-Marion, Meridian moves into her next stage of life after overcoming a severe illness at the college. She becomes a mediator between her people and the mayor when Black people are not allowed to swim in the public swimming pool, and the mayor refuses to build them theirs. Meridian leads the Blacks in a peaceful demonstration to the mayor's office bearing the corpse of a dead five-year old boy who had been struck in the sewer for two days: "It was Meridian who had led them to the mayor's office, bearing in her arms the bloated figure of the five-year-old boy who had been struck in the sewer for two days before he was rake out with a graphing hook" (p. 93). That is after several children were drowned in floods while swimming in ditches that serves as make shift pools. The women sit with the mother of the lost child, recall their own lost children, stare at their cursing husbands who could not look back at them and shake their heads.

Through out the novel Meridian is depicted as having a positive sense of herself as a Black woman: strong, independent, and adventurous. She lives among the poorest Blacks in the rural South, becoming like them, leading them in non-violent protest marches to improve conditions in their communities:

> *While other students dreaded confrontation with police she welcomed it, and was capable of an inner gaiety, a sense of freedom, as she saw the clubs slashing down on her from above only once was she beaten into unconsciousness, and it was not the damage done to her body that she remembered.*

Walker celebrates her as a Black woman for these qualities. The Writer also makes an array of powerful black mothers to show her identification with Black motherhood. Walker traces Meridian's foremothers back several generations. One

was a slave who slowly starved to death to keep her children and to feed them; another a slave artist who buys her family's freedom with her earning from the paintings decorating people's bans. Walker brings alive the slaves' past in the story of the slave woman Louvinie a story teller. The slave artist and the story teller represent Walker's concern with the creativity of the African-American women.

The Color Purple by Alice Walker (1982) is another story on the plight of women. Spanning the two world wars,the story features Celie a child-wife betrothed to Albert an old violent drunk who only marries her not because he wants a relationship but to raise his kids and fix things up in the house. Celie becomes suitable for "Mr" (as she calls Albert) because though "she ugly…But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean and God fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain'tgonna make you feed it or clothe it" (p. 9). This being the foundation on which Celie's marriage to 'Mr' is basedit yields nothing besides misery, exploitation and all manner of domestic violence. Being repeatedly raped by her step father at home right from age 14 and having the children sold out, Celie is handed over to Albert for further exploitation. It is worthy of note that the men in *The Color Purple* are weak individuals but the power of patriarchy makes them strong and enables them to oppress the female characters.

Writing letters is a sort of life line and the only Solace to Celie. The women of her era live in a period reminiscent to the days of slavery they live a life filled with misery, being treated by their own husbands and White people around as inferior and do nothing about their condition. *The Color Purple* focuses on Celie alone as a point of reference. Her liberation afterwards comes through a group of women: Sophia, Shrug, and Nattie who decongest the notion that, "Wives are like children. You have to let them know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good

sound beating" (p. 37). This empowerment comes through when Sophia teaches Celie to stand and fight back for her rights as does Sophia to her husband Harpo, and to the Mayor her social emancipation manifests when she jilts Albert for a fellow woman Shug, and with Shug comes the discovery of her sister Nattie's lost letters, their re-union and subsequent discovery of her father's legacy and the growth of her business. Celie's libration leads to not merely sewing pants for sale but wearing them, an act solely that is male's preserves in that era. With this attainment Celie discovers her self-worth, becomes bold enough to call her husband by his name instead of "Mr" and even callshim a low-down dog. Albert's attitude towards Celie as well other women changes: he tells her "took me long enough to notice you such good company" (p. 275). In the novel Walker depicts a struggle that works:Shug makes it by singing, Nattie by being a missionary, Sophia rejects subjugation by fighting back, and Celie through sewing and selling pants. In the novel Alice Walker illustrates the abuse, neglect and oppression a Black woman goes through and illustrates the need to fight back in order to regain self esteem and confidence lost way back.

CHAPTER FIVE:

CONCLUSION

The entire study investigates the female perspective in African-American novels with emphasis on the selected works of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. The main argument of the study is that African-American writing has historically and traditionally been male-centred and driven. The woman's plight is inadequately treated. Alice Walker and Toni Morrison view women as being partially excluded from the canon that is to speak for them. This work is hence an appraisal of how Alice Walker and Toni Morrison negotiate and celebrate the place of a woman in African-American community in the novels under study, namely Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, *Meridian*, and Toni Morrison's *Sula*, *Paradise*, and *The Bluest Eye*. This choice is informed by the fact that Alice Walker and Toni Morrison occupy a valuable critical space in the tradition of African-American writing; in their works African-American female voices are placed at the centre of their narratives, an unusual position given to women as at that time. Their works address certain gaps, especially pertaining the role and place of the Black woman character as far as the African-American community is concerned; this gives a fair representation of African-American women's experience. The selected texts of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison have been so chosen because there is connectivity between the values highlighted and feminist literary theory which is the analytical took for this work. There is also an affinity between the depiction in the works and African-American history and tradition; collectively, the writers' works present a comprehensive portrait of the African-American female character within the African-American family and community. To buttress the aforesaid, a critical study of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, *Meridian*,

and Toni Morrison's *Sula*, *Paradise*, and *The Bluest Eye* has been taken. Secondary sources that have bearing with the primary texts, journals, and internet sources have also been consulted. An attempt has been made on a study of African-American historical experience which covers the development of African-American literary tradition, spanning the Harlem Renaissance, the Black power era, the Civil Rights movements, and the African-American literature of the 1970s. The African-American women's written literary tradition as a subgenre has been studied within which Alice Walker and Toni Morrison's works are located.

Feminist literary theory has been adopted as the theoretical framework of the study because of its focus on concepts fundamental to gender perception; it examines how such perceptions limit human possibility within established social settings and how these social formations systematically oppress women. Its attempt at bringing women's achievements and contributions to limelight through the removal of all gender-based distortions in philosophy and literature makes it a suitable analytical tool for this study.

This study appraises Alice Walker and Toni Morrison's arguments that women are capable of holding heroic roles. In *Paradise* Ruby, the setting of the story, is featured as a town and culture with a tightly-woven patriarchal structures that seriously limits the possibility for change, having no room for unmarried women, a town in which women's identity rested on the men they married (p. 187). Women are excluded day in day out in matters that affect them in their common life; they are denied a voice and remain possessions of men that must be negotiated by men: "Everything that worries them must come from women" (p. 217). This situation notwithstanding, the Convent women collectively construct certain positions for themselves that include positions other than subjugation. Toni Morrison names the

chapters of the novel after her female characters to indicate the relevance of the women in the story, they are presented as agents of change and heroines of the narrative. The women do not compromise their stand they also refuse to be subdued by the men's overriding influence. Morrison positioned the convent as the best hope for moving past racism and patriarchy. The convent is depicted to symbolize an interrelated, non-hierarchical form of justice. It provides a space that not only ensures temporary survival to all those who find their way there regardless of race, class, or history, but also validates ordinary women and their stories. The convent in important ways functions as Morrison's ideal alternative; at the end of *Paradise* there is a continuing challenge at patriarchal structures. The disappearance of the women's bodies functions as a rejection of conventional closure and refusal to be co-opted.

Sula, in the novel that bears her name, attempts a life and identity beyond her gender and cultural norms. This attempt at distinguishing herself leads to her downfall. That not withstanding, Morrison does not mince words in letting her readers know that in Sula, her ideal alternative is fully depicted. Nel Wright, Sula's friend, is not in any way her ideal feminine character. Nel shows an African-American woman in the making but weighed and subsumed by patriarchal tendencies around her that makes her the subservient character she dreads much; given to convention of marriage, Nel becomes a property, a possession of man to be contended by her husband, her children, and the society's dictates.

In *Meridian* Meridian, the protagonist is bold enough to reject religion at a very early age despite the fact that her mother is a devote Christian; her defiance is seen in how she becomes a non-conformist and gives up family life and motherhood to attend the college. Her decision to walk as a volunteer for voter registration

foreshadows further her individuality. Meridian is depicted as having a positive sense of herself: a Black, strong, independent and adventurous woman.

In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, the novel focuses only on Celie, through which the plight of a typical southern rural African-American woman is depicted – another motif of presenting the plight of women. Celie serves as Walker's mouthpiece. Her liberation comes through a group of women economically, psychologically, and socially. She grows past her husband's notion; "wives are like children. You have to let them know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating" (p. 37). In the novel Walker depicts a struggle that works. Shug makes it by singing, Nattie by being a missionary, Sophia rejects subjugation by fighting back, and Celie through sewing and selling pants. In *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, Walker presents fourteen powerful feminine characters that, according to her, are "mad" and "raging." She draws her experience from the rural South to portray the particular situation of Black women. Marriage offers these women nothing: they are trapped by archaic conventions, superstitions, traditions, that in every way deny them the right to live. Though downtrodden, these women invariably remain resilient

Although their respective communities view them as outcasts and use them as scapegoats at various degrees, these characters take the centre stage of the narratives and perform roles distinctively of the place given them by the society. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker align with these women to give them pivotal roles in the stories that speak for them.

In the course of the study the following findings have been made: that nursing a negative perception of a girl child is an age-long tradition. In most societies of the world, especially Africa, a girl is believed to be nurtured, groomed, solely for

the purpose of marriage, childbearing, and performance of domestic chores. A woman is assumed to have no place outside the confines of her home. It has also been established that this notion has infiltrated our literatures. Women in Victorian England are said to veil their identity as male pseudonyms for relevance. It has also been established that despite the fact that the novel genre emerged with female literary articulations along side their male counterparts, yet their works have not been given critical literary consideration. A critical study of feminist literary theory reveals that it is based on this negative portrayal that the theory emerged. As a result, the theory has fought objectification, patriarchy, and universal presentation of both male and female experiences as one.

Coming to the African-American experience, it has also been examined that: from the very beginning African-American literary terrain had been predominantly a male preserve, the male writers being the spokespersons of African-American literary experience make the plight of women of inadequately presentations, hence the totalitarian conceptualization. This male dominance has been rejected by African-American female writers; an attempt was made on rejecting the hegemonic conceptualization of women by Black male writers who claim to speak for all African-Americans, but subsume or erase the Black women's voices in the process. A female way of writing and reading a literary text has been defined.

Regarding the novels under study, the following findings have also been made, that; Alice Walker and Toni Morrison's works reveal the distinct emphasis placed on women in their roles as mothers and heads of their families. The stories are told primarily from the point of view of women, featuring different spheres of women's experiences, different classes, and personal backgrounds, depicting an array of powerful African-American women consoling and creating a communal space for

each woman to reconstruct their identity. The women are distinguished by their toughness, resilience, and fortitude; character traits which serve as fortification in their struggle to ensure Black family stability are portrayed. Alice Walker and Toni Morrison are preoccupied largely with portraying the complexity and vitality of Black female experience; their writings refute stereotypical images of Black women and show a concern for painting a faithful female perspective of Black female reality which had been inadequately portrayed in Black male writing. Studying women, their experiences, their works, as distinct and major components of literary study is a perspective this work highlights. It has therefore achieved its aim of adding a voice to the question of African-American women which has hitherto been raised by the writers under study.

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