THE DISCOURSE OF GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCE IN SELECTED NOVELS OF MAYA ANGELOU AND TERRY MCMILLAN

BY

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DEDICATION

To you **Lord**
Author and perfecter of my faith
Possessor of good and perfect gifts
The High Priest of my confession
For your banner over me

And

To my **Parents**
Pillars of strength
Nurturers of hardy hopes
And dimpled dreams
Whose haven resounds with love
Lurching me to the sky
As my stepping stone.

CERTIFICATION

I certify that this work was carried out by Monica Sylvanus Udoette of the Department of English, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

African American literature has been predominantly a male-preserve in the task of narrating the experience of slavery and its relics of denigration before the advent of reactionary literature by black female writers. Studies on female-authored African American literary works have concentrated on responding to male-authored representations of the tensions of racism, internal crisis of man-woman relationships and the challenges of empowering the black female character. Little attention has been paid to African American female writings across generations and gender categories. This study, therefore, investigates the narrative thrusts of selected works of Maya Angelou and Terry McMillan to determine the dimensions of divergence across generations of African American female writers.

The study adopts Alice Walker's womanist theory and bell hooks' feminist theory which account for differences in the construction of black women consciousness. Six novels – Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), *Gather Together in my Name* (1974), and *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), and Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* (1992), *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* (2001) and *The Interruption of Everything* (2005) – were purposively selected. The texts are subjected to literary and comparative analyses.

From the first autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* to the last *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou offers detailed testimony on the effects of displacement on the individual psyche and the black community. Maya Angelou's selected novels reveal the creation of a collective communal memory through the use of the autobiographical prose form. Angelou's narratives reveal her understanding of history, her reverence for memory of collective black folk tradition and represent the Black Arts era. In contrast, Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale, A Day Late and a Dollar Short* and *The Interruption of Everything* reveal a paradigm shift from the communal experience to the individual, the internal crisis among individuals in the family and aspiration of specific sentiments as she projects the female character as ambitious and daring. McMillan's fiction stands out in several ways. She revises and borrows recognisable literary conventions to project the changing roles of women to reinforce her radical perspective. However, the choice of professionally successful black women as characters in her novels relates to the drastic increase in the population of working class women in the 1990s and reflexive of the post-womanist tradition. Her works accentuate the quest for personal liberty, romance and intimate relationships as the central conflicts facing black female protagonists. Although two decades separate Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*, a close reading of the novels reveals that the texts derive qualitative interpretations from the unique difference in ideas and aesthetics represented by Alice Walker, bell hooks and other Black feminists.

While Maya Angelou's novels keep within the womanist tradition, those by Terry McMillan are radically feminist and modernist in orientation. Thus, the two writers exemplify the Black Arts era and post-womanist literary generation respectively and differently situate the novels within specific historical, socio-political, economic, gendered and literary contexts.

Key words: Generational difference, Womanism, African American literature, Maya Angelou, Terry McMillan.
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CHAPTER ONE

African American Women's Writing: A Literary History

There has been little research focus on African American female writing across generational categories and same gender peculiarities. The common trend has been the study of difference in Black male and Black female writings. The implication of this trend of writing has made African American female writings more of a counter discourse and response to Black male literature as against being an authentic literary expression. The purpose of this study would therefore be to examine the depth of difference in selected texts of two African American women writers Maya Angelou and Terry McMillan with the intention of exploring the concept and implication of generational time split on imaginative writing. It also seeks to discover and establish the relationship between the psyche of these writers and their literary inventions, with the aim of discovering the extent to which these authors self-write, by considering the complexities of the Black female realities in the United States. Another aim of this study will be to accentuate the inclination of these writers and highlight the socio-economic impact of each writer's literary generation as markers and shift in the narratives. The context of research interest with its diverse aspects would require critical investigation and review of available literature in this field of study as well as others related to this study. This research relies to a large extent on resource materials from libraries, previous documented interviews granted by the authors, and the internet for relevant information for the study. These findings are applied to a close reading of the selected texts to reveal both a diachronic and synchronic explication of content and style. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, Gather Together In My Name* and *The Heart of A Woman*, Terry McMillan's *Waiting To Exhale, A Day Late And A Dollar Short, The Interruption of Everything* are the selected primary texts for analyses.

African American literature constantly reflects an attempt at narrating the Black American experience, the struggles associated with the experience of slavery and its relics of denigration and oppression which seem to remain visible features of the Black community in the United States. The discourse of African American female writing is an attempt at foregrounding the tension that exists between black and white people on the one hand, and Black men and women on the other hand, within the shores of America

with the aim of asserting, as well as negotiating the appropriate place for the Black woman in the society. Relating to this, Kofi Anyidoho (1989: 25) affirms the use of literature as a weapon of social change thus:

> All over the Black world, literature has frequently functioned as a weapon for revolutionary change. Literature of combat is a natural product of any situation of enslavement or oppression. Because of the Black World's long history of enslavement and oppression, this phenomenon can only be expected. It is a phenomenon that takes many forms in actual practice, but the basic objective is essentially consistent to inspire and aid revolt against an unjust system. And, as a rule, the more outrageously unjust the situation, the more unabashedly revolutionary the literature becomes.

The above assertion implies that socio-political milieu determines to a great extent, the degree of reactionary literature. Literature therefore becomes a creative activity drawn from an enduring pattern of thought, feeling and behaviour of the society; a tool for capturing diverse forms of interactions between people in the society.

Basically, African American female writers chronicle the peculiarities of female experience, the struggles associated with being black and woman in America. In a similar view, Virginia Sapiro (1994:7) holds that:

> Women are seen as people want to see them: as comfortable, nurturing always available mothers. Women are seen through stereotypes and this allows us to deal with them without really having to pay close attention to them or to any contradictory evidence in the facts of their lives.

The African American female writer seems to stand at crossroads as she negotiates self-redefinition against various forms of subjugation perpetuated within their society by black men as well as whites. In crafting an art which is relevant, the writer not only probes but responds to the yearnings of his environment. Similarly, the contemporary African American female fiction has been illuminating and interrogating the abnormalities of racism, sexism, and classism which merely replicates the apparatus of slavery. To this end, Patricia Hill Collins (1991:6) classification of Black women's oppression as being structured along three interdependent dimensions remains valid. First, the exploitation of Black women's labour which represents the economic dimension of oppression. Secondly, Hill observes that the political dimension of

oppression has denied African American women the rights and privileges routinely extended to white male citizen. This denial includes exclusion from public office and withholding equitable treatment in criminal justice system to enhance political subordination of Black women.

However, the controlling images of Black women that originated during the slave era attest to the ideological dimension of Black women's oppression. Hence, Collins' (1991:7) opines that:

> Ideology represents the process by which certain assumed qualities are attached to Black women and how those qualities are used to justify oppression. From the mammies, Jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, the nexus of negative stereotypical images applied to African American women has been fundamental to Black women's oppression.

Basically, the process of redefining the woman's place within her society and culture has been the concern of many female writers including black female writers in Africa and in the Diaspora. This is as a result of the stereotypical images applied to the woman's domestic, political, as well as sexual roles. The prejudice against the female sex is often balanced by the prejudice against colour produced by the same cause and manifested very much in the same way. To a degree, often did people find a similarity between a slave and a woman, doubly damned in sex and color, and in class too in the American society. Consequently, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (1990:1) asserts:

> One muffled strain in the south a jarring chord and a vague and uncomprehended cadenza has been and still is the Negro. And of that muffled chord, the one mute and voiceless note has been the sadly expectant black woman…. And not many can more sensibly realize and more accurately tell the weight and fret of the "long dull pain" than the open-eyed but hitherto voiceless Black Woman of America.

Gates' observation remains valid in that in the United States, African Americans have been consistently relegated to what could be termed as a 'second fiddle position' in the scheme of things since the days of slavery and colonialism. The earliest of this harrowing historical reality was the transportation of twenty indentured labourers in a Dutch vessel and their arrival in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. With this historical antecedent, black female writers have sought over time to reassert the rightful place of

woman in the society. Of note is the epoch making Seneca Women Convention of 1848. However, the recent discovery of Hannah Craft's *The Bondwoman's Narrative* by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., now reaching public view after nearly 150 years in obscurity, makes the novel likely the first novel by an African American woman.

The Seneca Falls convention held in Seneca on July 19 to July 20, 1848 was the first women's rights convention held in the United States and often labeled as the birthplace of feminism. However, the idea for the convention came about at another protest meeting, the 1840 World Anti-Slavery convention in London. At that convention, the female delegates were not allowed to participate in the debates. According to Martin Kelly 2008 in *Microsoft Encarta*, Lucretia Mott wrote in her diary that even though the convention was titled a "World" convention, "that was mere poetical license". She had accompanied her husband to London, but had to sit behind a partition with other ladies such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton. They took a dim view of their treatment and the idea of a woman's convention was born. Elizabeth Cady Stanton composed the "Declaration of Sentiments" a document declaring the rights of women modeled on the "Declaration of Independence". In adapting the Declaration of Independence, Stanton and her co-authors replaced "King George" with "all men" as the agent of women's oppressed condition and compiled a suitable list of grievances. These grievances reflected the severe limitations on women's legal rights in America. Women were not allowed to vote or participate in the creation of laws that they had to obey; their properties were equally taxed. Furthermore, in cases of divorce, custody of children was automatically awarded to the father, access to the professions and higher education generally was closed to women, and most churches barred women from participating publicly in the ministry or other positions of authority. The "Declaration of Sentiments" proclaimed that "all men and women were created equal" and that the undersigned would employ all methods at their disposal to right these wrongs.

As a result of this convention, women were able to establish a place for themselves in the society. The convention became a major landmark that spurred women especially black American women to express their views on the peculiarities of the female experience. Women such as Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe began writing about women's moral superiority and publishing their works. Many women began participating in reform organizations whose goals were to improve the lives of others and to fight for the rights of those who could not speak for themselves, such as school children and the mentally ill.

The history of African American female writings would be incomplete without a brief survey of black female contribution in anti-slavery campaigns. A case in point is Sojourner Truth (1797 – 1883). Sojourner Truth was born into slavery in new York as Isabella Baumfree after her father's owner, Baumfree. Isabella experienced a religious conversion in a Methodist Perfectionist Commune. In 1843, she took the name Sojourner Truth and became a travelling preacher (the meaning of her new name). *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997) describes Sojourner Truth as a leading exponent of liberty in both the abolitionist and feminist movements in the mid-nineteen century. She distinguished herself as an orator fighting for equal rights and the abolition of slavery. It is observed that at the outset of the civil war, Sojourner Truth had come to represent a brand of female, communitarian, vernacular African American leadership that rivaled the masculine, individualist, self consciously literary model of black spokesman espoused by Fredrick Douglass himself. The rhetorical question – "And Ain't I a woman?" – repeated in her "Address to the Ohio Women's Rights Convention (1851), became not only the de facto title of the speech but also the crux of her challenge as a black woman to racial and sexual stereotypes that few had had the foresight to address so courageously. Thus:

> …That man over there say that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages or over mud-puddles, or give me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me? Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen 'em mos' all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? … if the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again. (112).

Truth's activist movements marked her out more than any other African American of her era as the stuff of antislavery legend. Before Truth's era though, Lucy Terry Prince (1730 - 1821) had openly voiced her disapproval of racial discrimination. Lucy Prince was well known for her speaking ability and she used her skills a number of times in defense of people's rights and property. Although she was not a lawyer, she argued a case before the United States Supreme Court and won.

Another prominent woman of the era was Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897) with her publication of the first female-authored slave narrative in the United States in 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.* The novel *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was one of the first open discussions about sexual harassment and abuse endured by slave women, a topic that even made many abolitionists uncomfortable. In her narrative, she calls attention to the injustice of slavery, particularly in terms of racial, class, and sexual oppression that black female slaves faced. The narrative became a unique analysis of the myths and the realities that defined African American women and their relationship to the nineteenth century's "cult of true womanhood" as Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1997) puts it in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature.* Equally, Anna Julia Cooper (1859 – 1964), an essayist, whose speeches and essays were collected in *A Voice From the South: by a Black Woman of the South* (1892) also advocated for civil rights, women's rights, suffrage for women, and an American Literature that would be more inclusive. Her activism gave voice to the disenfranchised black woman of the nineteenth century while anticipating the feminist movement of the twentieth century.

Like her contemporaries, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's (1825-1911) life and literature were inseparably entwined as she signed on as an agent for the Pennsylvania Society for promoting the Abolition of Slavery. On May 20, 1893, Frances Harper addressed the World's Congress of Representative Women assembled as part of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. She encouraged her audience to see themselves standing "on the threshold of woman's era" and urged that they be prepared to receive the "responsibility of political power." Harper was the last of six black women to address the delegates; on the previous two days Fannie Barrier Williams, Anna Julia Cooper, Fannie Jackson Coppin, Sarah J. Early, and Hallie Quinn Brown had been the black spokeswomen at this international but overwhelmingly white women's forum. Williams spoke of the women "for whom real ability, virtue, and special talents count for nothing when they become applicants for respectable employment" and asserted that black women were increasingly "a part of the social forces that must help to determine the questions that so concern women generally." Anna Julia Cooper described the black woman's struggle for sexual autonomy as "a struggle against fearful and overwhelming odds that often ended in a horrible death. The painful, patient, and silent toil of mothers to gain a fee simple title to the bodies of their daughters, the despairing fight to keep hallow their own persons." She contrasted the white woman who "could at least plead for her own emancipation" to the black women of the South who have to "suffer and struggle

and be silent" and made her concluding appeal to "the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritisms, whether of sex, race, country, or condition."As the repressive measures against blacks, especially slaves increased, Harper's writings became increasingly militant. Later, as part of her equal rights advocacy, Harper joined Frederick Douglass, Robert and Harriet Purvis, Sojourner Truth, Susan B Anthony, Lucretia Mott, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the newly founded American Equal Rights Association. In 1850, the year of the Fugitive Slave Act, she taught Domestic Science as the first woman faculty member at Union Seminary, an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) school which was later merged to Wilberforce University. During the decade following Emancipation, she published three collections of poetry, one of which is *Moses: A Story of the Nile* (1869).

With the artistic awakening that came with the Harlem Renaissance, Anne Spencer's poetry emerged as the most modernist with its emphasis on privacy of vision. James Weldon Johnson accidentally learned of her writing and cajoled Spencer into allowing her collection of poetry *Before the Feast of Shushan* to be published in the *Crisis*. Many of Spencer's poetry convey a romantic concern with the human search for beauty and meaning in a sordid universe as well as people's futile attempt to impose order on God's earth. The 1920s saw her publications in magazines such as *Survey Graphic*, *Palms*, *Opportunity*, and *Lyric*. Though many of her writings were lost, critics continue to rediscover the voice of Anne Spencer – a voice that pulsates through black women's writing in the later half of the twentieth century.

As a major player of the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston (1891 – 1960) has been viewed as a literary foremother by many African American women writers including Alice Walker. She arrived in New York City with her own unique spice box, at a time when the Harlem Renaissance was just beginning to swing. Her expedition to the south in search of folklore became the source of her novels. Her novels most importantly *Their Eyes Were Watching God* feature protagonists who feel enslaved by socially prescribed race, class, and gender roles in the American society. Zora Neale Hurston, in her life and in her works, moved the image of the black women beyond stereotype, as she sought the ever-evolving way of the folk. She grafted onto the nineteenth century mode, a new way of looking at the mullatta and the southern black woman, preparing the way for different spice boxes in the twentieth century.

However, the tempo of struggle changed with the Black Arts Movement (1968). The movement was characterized by the radical opposition to any concept of the artist

that alienates him from his community. Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power Concept. The concept of Black Power expresses the determination of black people to define and liberate themselves. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black American. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. As Stephan Talty (2006:178) observes:

> The 1960s - and the 1970s, for that matter – were mostly "about" blackness: black rights, black culture, black identity. Blacks studied blackness; whites studied blackness. In the South, the attempts were often personal. Whites tended actually to know someone who was being desegregated: a nephew whose school was now admitting black students or a store owner whose lunch counter had just served its first black customers. This was an intimate process.

The Black Arts relate to the African-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Basically, the Black experience in America is a composite of numerous social and political battles organized by black activists and intellectuals to achieve and maintain rights, progress, structure, pride, and stability within Black communities across the nation. Therefore, the black artist takes this to mean that his primary duty is to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people. The Black Arts movement augmented a body of writing by producing Black Power intellectuals who contested representations of slavery as projected by the new revisionist energies. The movement provided pride and perspective necessary to pierce the myths of the antebellum period.

As part of the black arts era Mari Evans (1923-) born in Toledo, Ohio, is one of the most energetic and respected poets of the Black Arts movement. The eloquent simplicity of her lyrics complements the directness of her themes. She writes preeminently of loss – a lost Africa, lost love, failed relationships between black women and black men. Her position is that such losses summon from us the courage to struggle, to continue in the face of adversity and pain. Gates' (1997) posits that her works combine the themes of African liberation to embrace Africa and the Third World as ideal subjects. Her television show *The Black Experience*, broadcast in the 1960s and early 1970s, helped to focus her energy and attention on the unique problems of the black community. Her volume *I Am a Black Woman* (1970) links the themes of black enslavement and impoverishment with the global oppression of the wretched. Claims for

freedom and justice for blacks in the United States are joined with protest against the imperialistic oppression of the Vietnamese people and the subjugation of people of color generally. In the collection, Evans vindicates the lives of the poor, particularly poor black women who work in white homes as domestics. Evans poetic voice helped define the 1960s Black Arts Movement.

Interestingly, the career of Maya Angelou (1928 -) is a testament both to her vitality and her power to endure. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Maya Angelou proclaimed, "all my work is meant to say, 'You may encounter many defeats but you must not be defeated'. In fact, the encountering may be the very experience which creates the vitality and the power to endure". Her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) describes what it meant to be a black girl in Arkansas, faced with rape, racism and the trauma of losing her voice for five years, thus, she writes "for the Black Voice and any ear which can hear it". Writing and political activism were sources of recuperation for her. In *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), Angelou relates her growing commitment to writing and her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Angelou was the first woman and first African American to write and present a poem for a presidential inauguration: she read "On the Pulse of Morning" at President Bill Clinton's first inauguration in 1993.

Alice Walker (1944 -) began writing about black women living in America, from her experience of the difficulties the black people faced.. Because her youth was so filled with persecution and separation, Walker found herself involved heavily in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. As one of the earliest and most celebrated contemporary African-American writers, Walker found inspiration in Zora Neale Hurston and served as a source of inspiration for writers such as Toni Morison and Maya Angelou. Walker's work is a part of her own commitment to the salvation of the Black community and female participation in the community. As a volunteer during the "Freedom Summer" voter registration drive in the Civil Rights South, her lived experience allowed her to create fiction, poetry, and critical writing from a place of personal experience and observation. The women in Walker's fiction are often on a quest for identity and her stories advocate gender and racial equality. Her works include *The Color Purple* (1982), which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *To Hell With Dying* (1973) *The Temple of My Familiar (1990), Anything We Love can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism* (1997).

For Toni Morrison (1931-), the history and literature of the United States and of our present world are "incoherent" without an understanding of the African American presence. Her work always engages major contemporary social issues, the interrelatedness of racism, class exploitation and sexism, domination, and imperialism; the spirituality and power of oral folk traditions and values; the mythic scope of the imagination; and the negotiation of slippery boundaries, especially for members of oppressed groups, between personal desire and political urgencies. Her work also articulates perennial human concerns and paradoxes. Morrison has, in the last two decades, published six novels and an essay collection that have transformed our view of American history and literature. In 1993, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, the first African American writer to be so honoured for championing the unique beauty of African American literature. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) was published at the height of black cultural nationalism, when most African American literature featured male protagonists and when the women's movement was gaining visibility. Along with Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *The Bluest Eye* signaled a shift in the shape and emphases of contemporary American literature. Women would begin to occupy a more central role as subjects, the diversity of black communities would be more persistently explored, and relationships among blacks rather than only between blacks and whites would be legitimate topics for African American writers. However, in the early 70s, the image of the tragic mulatta was no longer the preoccupation of the literature of the black woman rather the black woman herself as Barbara Smith (1985:16) puts it:

> had to illuminate her own situation, reflect on her own identity and growth, her relationship to men, children, society, history and philosophy as she had experienced it. And during these explosive years some black women began to project the intensity, complexity and diversity of the experience of black women from their own point of view . . . a literature replaced by a diversity of physical and psychological types.

Following this trend, another black female activist was Toni Cade Bambara (1939-1995) born in New York City on March 25, 1939, a writer who championed African American communal traditions, especially the spoken language and storytelling patterns of black folk. Bambara insisted that social commitment is inseparable from the production of arts. As a member of the Black Arts movement, she edited the anthology *The Black Woman* (1970) one of the pivotal texts in African American feminist writing.

The sense of collective mothering so much a part of black communities is central to Bambara's fiction. Her work is a careful blend of experimental techniques and her examination of community and change.

As a short story writer, dramatist, critic, and poet, Sherley Anne Williams (1944) combines in her work a keen sense of the tradition of black oral and Western literary forms with the concerns of class that are often camouflaged by race in contemporary American literature. According to Gates Jr. (1997) Williams feels an affinity with "protest fiction" and claims kin with Alice Walker, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, Ernest Gaines, Amiri Baraka, and Toni Morrison, writers who render black life as significant in and of itself and not simply as an adjunct to the white experience or as an irritation in the history of the United States. William's writings attempt to bring the female African American experience into the American literary canon. Her (1986) *Dessa Rose* reveals both the uniformities and the idiosyncrasies of 'woman's place', while making imaginative and unprecedented use of its male characters as well.

This era also features writers like Terry McMillan (1951-), whose phenomenal success has been achieved by talent, hardwork, and classic American publicity and promotion. McMillan has become something of a celebrity, in many ways the apotheosis of the renaissance in writing by African American women. Her ability to draw on her own life experiences and evoke her own emotional truths in her novel is one important element of her tremendous popular appeal. McMillan's life and works offer an eloquent testimonial on an individual's capacity to imagine and create fulfilling lives for themselves.

The last of this trend is Rita Dove (1952 -). She is the first African American to be named poet laureate of the United States, an office she served from 1993 to 1995. Often seen by critics as speaking for a younger generation of poets, Dove rejected what she perceived to be the narrowness of the 1960s Black Arts movement in favour of a more inclusive sensibility. Dove's gathering together of European women as well as women from other parts of the world separates her from the many African American poets whose interests are primarily those of their own communities.

Generally, African American literature has focused on a number of recurring historical and sociological themes, all of which reflect the politics – the realities of political, social, and economic power – of black American experience. According to Lois Tyson (1999:388) these themes include the reclamation of African past, the survival of

the horrors of the Middle Passage and the ordeal of slavery, the quest for freedom from slavery and from other forms of oppression, the quest for literacy, the experience of African Americans during the Civil War and Reconstruction. These themes also expanded to include: the relevance of life in the South under segregation, the problems and conflicts of mulattoes in a racist society and the difficulties of economic survival, the migration North and the related themes of urbanization, alienation, and the quest to reconcile double consciousness, the role of religion in personal and collective survival. From the era of the abolitionist through the rise of the American Communism in the early 20th Century, organised groups and individual African American leaders have taken a revolutionary standpoint and spoken against America's racist social climate. This social climate, in as much as it is an agitation for the entire black community, becomes more suffocating for the black woman.

Over time due to the peculiarities of their history, black women in America perceived themselves to be further relegated to what could be called "a third fiddle position". The term 'second fiddle' describes a position where African Americans are generally discriminated against by whites and black men as well oppress black women within their community. This position is further heightened by the fact that blacks originated mainly from Africa, hitherto dubbed "the dark continent", and whites from Europe, adjudged to be civilized, the center of learning and industry. As whites in America looked down on blacks, black women perceived that their men folk in turn looked down on them. With this realization, the women began to band together and voice their concern on mutual equality with black men and then whites. Calvin C. Hernton (1987:50-51) assesses this trend thus:

> In 1903 Du Bois pointed out that the Negro, being both Black and American, shoulders a double Consciousness. Black women have contended with the mountain of racism but being at once black, American and female, they have been victimized by the mountain of sexism, not only from the white world, but from the men of the black world as well. Black women are the bearers of what Barbara Smith calls, "geometric oppression". They are therefore bearers of a triple consciousness.

In literary works by white authors and black male authors like Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the representation of African American women generally was restricted to minor or stereotyped characters. For instance, Calvin

Hernton (1987:39) argues that black women representations by most African American male writers generally acclaimed to be the central and most influential figures of black literary tradition in the United States were not wholesome. Thus:

> Consider for example, the depiction of black women in the two most acclaimed black novels of the twentieth century. In Native Son, Richard Wright portrays Bigger Thomas's mother and sister "realistically" as decrepit, nagging bitches. Bigger's girlfriend, Bessie Mears, is a pathetic nothing. Mary Rambo, the black female in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, is a symbolic mammy figure…It is a matter of historical record that….black writing in the United States has been systematically discriminatory against black women.

Hernton's serious reservation above on black male writings is in solidarity with feminists critics as they agitate for change. As a result, black women writers have been concerned, throughout their literary history, to portray black women as real people with all the complexity and depth that black women have as against an alternative portrayal of women as frail and fragile by white women authors. These concerns have been the focus of the feminist ideology; an ideology that fosters the creation of a uniquely feminine consciousness in a bid to re-examine and re-write the social history of women. This prompts us to re-evaluate Sharon Spencer's (1982:157) stance in "Feminist Criticism and Literature" that "feminism" is all about "the conviction that 'traditional definitions of women are inadequate' and that 'women suffer injustices because of their sex' ". The above explication does not make a feminist anti-men but one who agrees that women have historically been oppressed within culture and society and also believes that such oppression is unacceptable. It is not surprising to find models of the ideal, independent women figure marking the pages of Black women's work. The essence is that feminism is concerned with combating cultural stereotypes of female experience.

According to Lois Tyson (1999:84) feminism distinguishes between the word "sex", which refers to our biological constitution as female or male, and the word "gender", which refers to our cultural programming as feminine or masculine, which are categories created by society rather than by nature. Put differently, the inferior position long occupied by women in patriarchal societies has been culturally, not biologically produced. Equally traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; while casting women as emotional, (irrational) weak, nurturing and submissive. These gender roles have been used very successfully to justify such inequalities, which still occur today, excluding women from equal access to leadership and decision making positions. The belief that men are superior to women has been

used to justify and maintain the male monopoly of positions of economic, political, and social power. Meaning that the inferior position long occupied by women in patriarchal society has been culturally not biologically, produced. The point therefore is that patriarchy continually exerts forces that undermine women's self-confidence and assertiveness, then points to the absence of these qualities as proof that women are naturally self-effacing and submissive.

While it appears that all women are subjected to patriarchal oppression, (Tyson: 95) notes that "each woman's specific needs, desires, and problems are greatly shaped by her race, socio-economic class, sexual orientation, educational experience, religion, and nationality". As such, Barbara Smith's (1985:5) exemplification on the images of black women throughout American history becomes valid:

> Before we move from the images of black women projected in slavery and reconstruction literature, we must look at the images fashioned by another tradition, the oral tradition, the witnessing as black people as seen through narratives and songs. The slave narrative as a genre has tended to be represented by those extraordinary slaves, usually men such as Frederick Douglass, who escaped from bondage. Yet there are many narratives of slaves, and of women slaves, who considered themselves common folk and remained in slavery most of their lives…. Within the genre, the image of mammies persists. She is there as cook, housekeeper, nursemaid, seamstress, always nurturing and caring for her folk. But unlike the white southern image of mammy, she is cunning, prone to poisoning her master, not at all content with her lot. It is interesting and ironic that Sojourner Truth, the flamboyant orator who educated the abolition of slavery and fought for women's rights, would fit the stereotype, at least the physical stereotype, of the mammy southern gentlemen wanted to perceive as harmless. Sojourner Truth is not only mammy who fought to protect her own children or who rose up against slavery. Mammies kicked, fought, connived, plotted, most often covertly, to throw off the chains of bondage. Mammy saw herself as a mother, but to her that role embodied a certain dignity and responsibility, rather than a physical debasement, doubtless a carry-over from the African view that every mother is a symbol of the marvelous creativity of the earth.

Smith's stance detailed above captures the trend of the evolving images of women from mammies to cook, housekeeper, nursemaid, seamstress in slave narratives and reconstruction literature. These stereotypes are confronted and hopefully discredited by the creation of new, alternative images which try to expand women's consciousness.

The black male community, while it has tended to marginalise black women because of their gender, nevertheless encourages them to prioritize racial issues over gender issues, arguing that black women are oppressed more by racism than by sexism. As Lorraine Bethel (1982:178) observes, an understanding of this double oppression forms the basis of African American feminist criticism:

> Black feminist literary criticism offers a framework for identifying the common socio-aesthetic problems of authors who attempt to fashion a literature of cultural identity in the midst of radial/sexual oppression. It incorporates a political analysis that enables us to comprehend and appreciate the incredible achievements Black women… made in establishing artistic and literary traditions of any sort, and to understand their qualities and sensibilities. Such understanding requires a consciousness of the oppression these artists faced daily in a society full of institutionalized and violent hatred for both tier Black Skins and their female bodies. Developing and maintaining this consciousness is a basic tenet of Black feminism.

Black feminism therefore, holds a mirror not just to the public lives but to the private lives of African American women as well and it prompts re-assessment of their most personal experiences and their most entrenched and comfortable assumptions.

PHASES AND FACES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERARY WRITING

Black women writers are in the vanguard of a crusade to foster heightened awareness of the challenges facing African American women in the United States. Mary Helen Washington as quoted in Gates (1990:32) mirrors this trend of women advocacy for sustained revision of male dominated canon when she says:

> What we have to recognize is that the creation of the fiction of tradition is a matter of power, not justice, and that that power has always been in the hands of men – mostly white but some black. Women are disinherited. Our "ritual journeys", our "articulate voices", our "symbolic spaces" are rarely the same as men's. Those differences and the assumption that those differences make women inherently inferior, plus the appropriation by men of the power to define tradition, account for women's absence from our written records.

In spite of the fact that black females are often 'absent' or 'unaccounted for' in the written records of the black literary tradition, the pioneering efforts of June Jordon, Barbara Smith, Alice Walker, Mary Helen Washington, and Barbara Christian have generated a wholesale revision of this image. Equally, the second generation of black women critics including Deborah McDowell, Hazel Carby, Trudier Harris, Claudia Tate, Gloria Hull and Hortense Spillers has demonstrated that black women's writing draws on African American cultural traditions in a way that anticipates many of the more radical insights of mainstream critical theory.

Craig Werner (1989:2) acknowledges that "the form and content of the earliest novels by black women must be understood as direct responses to these images, which served to justify racist institutions". Despite the profound psychological and economic impact of these stereotypes, in confronting them Sherley Anne Williams (Gates 1990:69) suggests that African American women should engage black men constructively in a dialogue to resolve perceived differences and grievances:

> Feminist readings can lead to mis-apprehensions of particular texts or even of a whole tradition, but certain of its formulations offer us a vocabulary that can be made meaningful in terms of our own experience.

Williams' position is from the perspective of rewriting black women's experience in America and seeks to correct as it were, the harsh effects of the stereotypes rather than apportion blames.

Obviously, contemporary African American novels by black women provide the necessary context or subtext for a better understanding of black women's preoccupation with themes of racism, sexism, and classism, which to a great extent, has influenced the development of concepts of love, power, autonomy, creativity, manhood, and womanhood in the black family and community. In pursuing these themes, Barbara Smith's essay "Toward A Black Feminist Criticism*"* in *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982:157) advocates that "… a Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity." Smith's comment adequately captures the realities confronting the African American woman in a hostile, patriarchal, racial and class stratified society.

Recently, growth in the consciousness of writers and change in the reality of African American women's experience has produced young writers. These writers have the advantage of looking at "the silences and absences of early literature about women and by women and they are poised for a more radical feminine commitment from the start" as Kolawole (1997:142) puts it. They are more determined to confront the forces limiting women in a changing society. The trend in the fiction of these writers is the prominence of women playing important roles as well as being the centre of the narrative action. The younger generation of black women writers has the benefit of the restless spirit of the modern age and they start off by creating heroines who are impatient with tradition and eager to change the nervous conditions and social set-up. These works reveal a definitive role for women and make explicit the writers' conscious effort to be the spokesperson for her gender. The choice by black women writers to frequently use a black female character as narrator in a novel is in order to give black women authority as tellers. Black women's self-definition occupies an important place in African American writing. In addition, the prevalence of the biographical mode in African American women's writing confirms the desire for a personal as well as a collective self-inscription. Therefore, the writer draws attention to the process of fiction itself to reveal the thin line between fiction and reality.

However, the black woman's condition in America incarnates haunting memories and re-memories of her brutalization and dehumanization during slavery and the precariousness of her present condition. In her triple marginality, she is refused space by the patriarchal male-dominated and racial segregationist society. It is in subversion of these hegemonic attitudes that black women writers have appropriated public space to project their views on the women condition and that of the black population generally. Thus, Washington (1990:34) observes:

> If there is a single distinguishing feature of the literature of black women – and this accounts for their lack of recognition – it is this: their literature is about black women; it takes the trouble to record the thoughts, words, feelings, and deeds of black women, experiences that make the realities of being black in America look very different from what men have written.

Apparently, this concern about the women condition is noted as the unifying factor that informs the writings of African American women literature and translates as the indices of reference. Several Black feminist critics like Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Barbara Christian have examined female subjugation and the alleged exclusion

of Black women's voices during the Black Power Movement and/or the years from 1966 to 1976. These years represent the significant effort in the reclamation of the black community, yet the fight against racial oppression ignored internal gender oppression within the black community. Michelle Wallace (1978) interrogates the role of black women in the folds of exclusively masculine rhetoric. She identifies black women's initial reluctance to speak against the performance of "macho" as a fear of being deemed "counterrevolutionary" – and leading to the destruction of the black family. The silent Black woman has often been misread and idealized. She is seen as a quiet and willing supporter, working for the cause, except for a few cases, not in the forefront of activism.

In another development, Barbara Christian (1990:38) cautions on the danger of black women silences and the need for increased agitation for a revisionist voice:

> …much of course can be learned by all of us from all of us who speak, read, write including those of us who look high. But as we look high, we might also look low lest we devalue woman in the world even as we define women. In ignoring their voices, we may also limit our own process until our voices no longer sound like women' voices any more.

This statement by Christian is a rallying call to all women to embrace the cause of womanhood with the strategy of emancipating the woman from the yoke of male domination and oppression. It is a call for the undermining of the derogatory ideological constructs or givens and representations of womanhood by the dominant phallic world. In this, Ama Ata Aidoo's (1989:13) encapsulation of the evolution of women from societal words to full-fledged independence endowed with remarkable assertive powers becomes valid:

> …for centuries women in all societies have been relegated to a kind of marginal existence and been tutored to accept their marginality. It has been a dual process: first what the society wants of them, and then what the society has seen to it that they themselves project. Then suddenly, by the twentieth century, people were beginning not to seem, satisfied with this. In the last hundred years or less, the strides that have been made in terms of the awareness of the position of women have been enormous in all societies.

Apparently, the creative narratives of black women portray the prominence of relationships as key in Black families. Black women must negotiate the conflicting requirements of their relationship to the black community as a whole – their solidarity

with black men against racist oppression – and their relationship to women of all races in an effort to resist sexist oppression. To emphasize the importance of relationships between black women, black women writers often frame their narratives in a conversation (a real conversation, one imagined by the protagonist, or one that takes place through letters) between two black women or girls. Equally, to evoke a world that resonates with black women's experience, the use of imagery associated with black women's domestic space and activity is frequently employed as a literary strategy. For instance, imagery associated with the kitchen and other locations within the home where such traditional skills as quilting, canning, gardening and farm chores, and the passing down of family and cultural heritage to children occur. Also, imagery associated with black women's physical appearance, such as clothing, hairstyles, skin colour and cosmetics appears in characterization.

Interestingly, Bernard W. Bell (1987:242) offers a plethora of trends common among black women novelists. He argues that these women employ to a greater or lesser degree the following signs and structures:

> (1) Motifs of interlocking racist, sexist, and classist oppression; (2) black female protagonists; (3) spiritual journeys from victimization to the realization of personal autonomy or creativity; (4) a centrality of female bonding or networking; (5) a sharp focus on personal relationships in the family and community; and (6) black female language.

While the above structure is valid in black women narratives, Mary Helen Washington (1982) draws attention to three female character types often used by black women writers to represent black women from different historical periods. The first is the "suspended women", the victim of men and of society as a whole, with few or no options. Here "Suspended" is used in the sense that she cannot change her situation. This character type is often found in works set in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries like Nannie in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Pauline Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970). The second type is the "assimilated woman", who is not victimized by physical violence and has much more control of her life, but who is victimized by psychological violence in that she is cut off from her African American roots by her desire to be accepted by white society. This type is often found in works set in the 1940s and 1950s. Examples include Mrs. Turner in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye*. The "emergent" women is the third

character type who is coming to an awareness of her own psychological and political oppression and becoming capable of creating a new life and new choices for herself, usually through a harsh experience of initiation that makes her ready for the change like Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* However, Tyson (1999:394) makes a suggestion of an additional character type, "the liberated woman". The woman, who has discovered her abilities, knows what she needs, and goes about getting it. She is the woman who has already found herself like Shug Avery in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and Pilate in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and the four protagonists in Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* (1992).

Ultimately, Washington argues that Black women are searching for a "specific language, specific symbols, specific images" with which to record their lives, and, even though they can claim a rightful place in the African American tradition and the feminist tradition of women writers, it is also clear that, for the purposes of liberation, black women writers will first insist on their own name, their own space. Whatever the literary device deployed by black women writers, the aim is to emphasize the struggle of black women to assert their own identity. That identity may take the form of sacrificing oneself for the good of the family, the community, or the race. Or it may take the form of exploring one's own abilities, needs, and desires. Black women's self-definition occupies an important place in their writing.

THE WOMANIST IDEAL

Feminism as defined by Barbara Smith (1982:49) is the "political theory and practice that struggles to free (all) women: women of color, working-class women, disabled women, lesbians, old women as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women". For Sharon Spencer (1982:157) "feminism" is all about "the conviction that 'traditional definitions of women are inadequate' and that 'women suffer injustices because of their sex' ". This explication offers that a feminist is not anti-men but one who agrees that women have historically been oppressed within culture and society and also believes that such oppression is unacceptable. While feminism is concerned with combating cultural stereotypes of female experience, it is also a theory that seeks to subvert male domination by privileging the desires and aspirations of women within the society and ensuring their centrality in the scheme of things. Feminist inquiry holds that the present structure of the society is patriarchal.

These issues have been the preoccupation of proponents of what may be classified as first wave feminism like Virginia Woolf (1929) in *A Room of One's Own* and Simone De Beauvoir (1949) in *The Second Sex* . Woolf recognized that gender identity is socially constructed and examined the problems facing women writers while adopting androgyny to achieve a balance between self-realization and female self-annihilation. Betty Friedan (1963) in *The Feminine Mystique* is known for the second wave feminism aimed at bringing women into the mainstream of American society. She identifies the place of economic empowerment in liberating the woman psychologically and giving her a sense of worth. The second wave feminism focused on female experience in female fictional characters, the reaction of women's readers, the career of women and the techniques and topics of women writers. Its focus was on the literary representation of the female in women's writing. Elaine Showalter (1977) in *A Literature of their Own*, one of its proponents, encouraged the construction of a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, as such she coined the term for this kind of criticism – "gynocriticism".

According to Lois Tyson (1999:84) feminism distinguishes between the word "sex", which refers to our biological constitution as female or male, and the word "gender", which refers to our cultural programming as feminine or masculine, which are categories created by society rather than by nature. Equally traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; while casting women as emotional, (irrational) weak, nurturing and submissive. These gender roles have been used very successfully to justify such inequalities, which still occur today, excluding women from equal access to leadership and decision making positions. The belief that men are superior to women has been used to justify and maintain the male monopoly of positions of economic, political, and social power. Meaning that the inferior position long occupied by women in patriarchal society has been culturally not biologically, produced.

The critical reappraisal of feminist literary criticism as postulated by Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn (1985:1-2) holds two related premises about gender. One is that the inequality of sexes is neither a biological given nor a divine mandate, but a cultural construct. The second is that a male perspective, assumed to be 'universal' has dominated fields of knowledge, shaping their paradigms and methods. Therefore, it behoves on feminist scholarship "the onerous task of revising concepts previously thought universal but now seen as originating in particular cultures and serving particular

purposes and restoring a female perspective by extending knowledge about women's experience".

Toril Moi (1990: xiii) in her preface to *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* asserts:

> one of the central principles of feminist criticism is that no account can ever be neutral... The principal objective of feminist criticism has always been political: it seeks to expose, not to perpetuate practices... constructive criticism should, however, indicate the positive from which it is speaking: simply to say that one is speaking as a feminist is not a sufficient response to that responsibility.

What this connotes categorically is that constructive criticism should be precise and indicate a marked perspective. To say that one is speaking as a feminist is not a sufficient response to that responsibility because it will thereby make feminist criticism subjective and political in nature. It is clear that divisions exist among feminists on a unified approach to issues that are central to their discourse. These divisions also manifest among African American feminists. Apparently, what feminists all over the world seem to accept in common is that the lot of women should be improved and that man has dominated activities on earth to the detriment of the woman. The method of addressing the perceived imbalances are both moderate and extreme positions as some exponents favour dialogue and co-operation while others advocate blatant and outright rejection of such moderate methods.

However, Catherine Stimpson (1989:23) observes that since the 1960s, "feminism has split again and again until it has become feminisms, a set of groups, each with its own ideology, identity and agenda**".** This creates an awareness of the need for a feminist ideology that is culturally specific for black women in Africa and in the Diaspora. In fact, Mary E. Modupe Kolawole (1997:22) asserts that it is this awareness that has prompted many Africans to search for alternatives, thus, "the quest for a different terminology that more adequately addresses the specificity of African women's yearning as opposed to an imposed or dogmatic position is a wholesome one". Also, Molara Ogundipe–Leslie (1994:11) has equally rejected the term feminism and has found it expedient to adopt the term "Stiwanism". Thus:

> I have since advocated the word "Stiwanism", instead of feminism, to bypass these concerns and to bypass the combative discourses that ensue whenever one raises the issue feminism in

> Africa…. The new word describes what similarly minded women and myself would like to see in Africa…. "Stiwa" is an acronym for social Transformation Including Women in Africa.

In the US, the dogged commitment of black women to the project of making women visible in a society that breeds deeper invisibility marked the beginnings of feminist inquiry or black feminism. Feminism is viewed by some black women as a divisive force in the black community; as such the quest for an alternative model which seeks ways to reconcile with the concerns of the black community is an wholesome one. Similarly, Carolyn Denard (1988:172) points out that many African American women "advocate what may be called ethnic cultural feminism" which is concerned more with the particular female cultural values of their own ethnic group rather than with those of women in general. Denard explains further that ethnic cultural feminism acknowledges the damaging effect of sexism on women of colour, both inside and outside their ethnic community. The serious reservations expressed about black male writings by feminist critics prompted black women writers such as Alice Walker to initiate an approach which seeks to foster unity, peace and progress instead of division, acrimony and rancour in the black community in America. The approach has subsequently been referred to as "Womanist Inquiry". Although it is an aspect of feminist theory, it seeks to explore phenomena relating to both genders from an unbiased and healthy perspective.

Womanism as an alternative to feminism represents the black women's response to gender discrimination in the United States. Unlike mainstream feminism which is perceived to be decidedly against men, womanism argues for a union of males and females in joint endeavours to advance the human race. Womanism, according to Walker, admits shortcomings and strengths on the part of both men and women and is essentially "urging black men, not so much to 'come down and fight,' as to come down and talk". Thus, the promotion of dialogue as an avenue for resolving differences and disputes between men and women in the society is central to Walker's concept.

Using the format for a typical dictionary entry, Walker sets out her womanist aesthetic as the preface for her work, *In search of Our Mothers' Garden* (1983: xi). The first component of the definition invokes the black vernacular and provides details about the womanist attitude:

> Womanist 1. From womanish. (opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e.,

> like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *wilful* behaviour. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

In the second component, Alice Walker (1983: xii) defines womanism within a Black context and an emergent or feminine coming of age. She describes womanist vis-a-vis her relationships with others and with herself, stresses connectedness over separatism, encourages an acceptance of a collective past as it is exhibited in the many hues of African diaspora, and celebrates a legacy of resistance to oppression:

> 2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."

Walker's womanist ideology affirms a psychological wholeness that is communally oriental and is explicitly opposed to the self-sufficient individuality of bourgeois humanist ideology. While the first component of her definition sets out the proper womanist attitude or approach to self-actualisation, the third component invites the unrestrained expression of love of all things, an appreciation for the natural world and its cycles. These definitions of womanism while addressing the question of racial focus and specificity highlight the quest for personal and communal wholeness as valid expressions. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1996:119) posits that womanism is a sure and durable panacea to not only literary, but also other socio-political problems in the society. Thus, she endorses Walker's concept:

> Alice Walker's (1984) definition of a womanist, though located in the African-American context, can help to sharpen my focus here. She sees the womanist as precocious, courageous, and serious. Within this context, she also

> includes the "Sassy" young girl who questions her position vis-à-vis the adult and/or female world, aspects that are implicit in these writers' criticism of sexism and other manifestations of oppression. Feminism appears more rhetorical, polemical, and individualistic in its thrust, paling before womanism, which is communal in its orientation and is ideologically like a palaver in which the destiny of distressed peoples can be urgently discussed in a meaningful context to avert disaster, not just to talk abstractly.

Similarly, Barbara Christian (1985:83) praises Walker for 'turning the idea of art on its head' through her enumeration of the concept of womanism. Christian observes that, instead of feminism, Walker pioneered womanism which subsequently became integral to the African American woman's quest for self-assertion in the United States:

> Walker turned the idea of Art on its head. Instead of looking high, she suggested we should look low. On that low ground she found a multitude of artist – mothers –the woman who had transformed the material to which they had had access into their conception of beauty: cooking, gardening, quitting, story telling. In retrieving that low ground, Walker not only reclaimed her foremothers, she pointed to a critical approach....

Equally, Christian (1985:16) observes that the Black woman herself had to:

> illuminate her own situation, reflect on her own identity and growth, her relationship to men, children, society, history, and philosophy as she had experienced it. And during these explosive years some black women writers began to project the intensity, complexity, and diversity of the experience of black women from their own point of view.

In another development, Clenora Hudson-Weems has enunciated another brand of womanism referred to as "Africana Womanism". The aim is to comprehensively accommodate the needs, yearnings and aspirations of African people on the continent and in the Diaspora. It goes beyond Walker's womanist philosophy by completely dissociating itself from all forms of western feminism. According to Obioma Nnaemeka (1998:149-162) in *Sisterhood Feminisms and Power From Africa to the Diaspora*, Hudson-Weems' brand of womanism regards Western feminist theory and practice with suspicion and mistrust, pointing out that such an orientation caters essentially to the needs of Western white women. Hudson-Weems considers Africana womanism as the most current concept in the task of integration and unification of people of African ancestry in the world. She defines the concept as "an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent, grounded in 'African Culture' and therefore, it necessarily

focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of Africana woman". Thus, Hudson-Weems distances her ideology from that of Walker and other feminist exponents. She even goes to the extent of dissociating her endeavour from the general umbrella of the feminist movement and views the term 'feminism' as a white woman's invention. Whereas Hudson–Weems' Africana Womanism concept offers a plethora of points for regular and useful references for this study, Walker's womanist orientations is clearly focused on the quest by black women in America for self-assertion in a predominantly white society. Womanists seek cooperation with men for the sake of community – affirming endeavours which run contrary to traditional western feminist objectives. In addition to fundamentally reforming literary writings by men, they seek to subvert and overturn such works in their desire to empower women.

Recently, Kalenda C. Eaton (2008:8) added another strand to the womanist model by expanding it to include a community based approach to political mobilization within the Black community. This project is termed as Afro-Politico Womanist (APW). Eaton defines Afro-Politico Womanist agenda as "an inclusive and progressive theoretical approach to literary activism as it relates to an ideological understanding of the Black community". As a combination of Black Feminism and Womanism, Eaton contends that "the Afro-Politico Womanist framework incorporates Black female activism, History, Literature, and Experiential Theory into the reading of texts". The emphasis in this model is a holistic, community based approach to political mobilization within the Black community which was largely ignored during the activism of the post-Civil Right period. It prioritizes the strength, survival, unity, and health (mental and physical) of the global black community, by first, addressing the needs and concerns of the existing poor and working class, as they define these needs. Afro-Politico Womanism resists reliance on singular leadership as the method by which members of the Black community understand their roles in the political process. The concept supports portions of Alice Walker's definition of "Womanism" specifically the phrase "committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female". Eaton justifies below the relevance of this theory as it applies to African American women's literary criticism:

> APW is committed to positive literary representations of Black female political activism, and often exists in 20th century literature written by black women, in which the protagonist(s) has a strong desire to "disrupt the infrastructure." In the context of this project, literary representations of Black female political activism includes a character's struggle for justice within the Black community. Black authors whose work falls under this

> definition write within the socio-political context of insurgency or transformation in the "imagined" Black community. The female characters act as agents in an effort to expose inaction (or perilous action) of the American polity. Instead of focusing solely on gender oppression and gendered violence within the black community, I argue that Black female artists engaged in a fight for common goals, while at the same time acknowledging the usefulness of a woman-centered theoretical model.

Possibly, questions concerning this model may include but not limited to the following: Can any Black woman be read according to the APW paradigm? Have Black women been characterized this way for years? What makes Afro-Politico Womanism different? As Eaton (2008) concludes, the purpose of defining another model is not to emphasize difference, but to address the work of specific type of organizer and activist who exists within Black literature and is traditionally ignored in historical and political reflections on the Black revolution. By using literature as a form of activism, the Black woman writer's insider position and stake in the eradication of injustice enables her to negotiate multidimensional experiences in terms of being black, woman, partner, writer, and activist. Ultimately, several literary works popular for their "strong black female or feminist" portrayal are unable to fulfill the agenda's goals because these works may include protagonists who exist apart from the community and devalue political mobilization or such characters when faced with choices choose individualism over action on behalf of the larger community.

According to Valerie Bryston (1992:181) "radical feminists analysis insists that male power is not confined to the public worlds of politics and paid employment, but that it extends into private life". This means that traditional concepts of power and politics are challenged and extended to such 'personal' areas of life as the family and sexuality, both of which are seen as instruments of patriarchal domination. Feminists therefore hope to reorder society and destroy the prevailing arrangement which is believed to favour only men. Unlike the womanists, they are not accommodating and their methods of attaining their quests are often divisive and disruptive. Feminists seek to replace that old order with a new set of values which they hope would serve as an alternative capable of righting the wrongs they perceive. One notices that this is exactly where the problem arises. In their attempt to devise and propagate a suitable alternative to the prevailing system, they have often veered towards extreme positions which run contrary to the ideals of true art. The extreme feminist positions have given impetus to the womanists

who prefer productive dialogue with their male counterparts in order to foster unity, progress and wholeness of the human society.

Alice Walker is foremost in this regard as she challenges white feminist assessment of issues and proffers womanism as an alternative to their brand of feminism. In her 1978 essay, "One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression Within the Work(s)", she emphasizes what she regards as the 'twin afflictions' of her life:

> That white feminists as well as some Black People deny the Black woman her womanhood – that they define issues in terms of Blacks on one hand, women (meaning white women) on the other. They miss the obvious fact – that Black People come in both sexes.

From this, it is clear that Walker views white feminism as compounding the old problems of white racism. She defines a womanist as a "black feminist whose readings reflect the present, when the process of confusion, resistance to the established order and the discovery of a freeing order is, especially for women, a prerequisite for growth" (p.468). Walker's womanist aesthetic takes shape in the context of addressing a psychological wholeness that is communally oriented and is explicitly opposed to the self-sufficient individualism. She further argues that, although she speaks from the point of view of sisterhood with all women, all women must understand that sexism and racism in America are critically related.

Interestingly, Michele Wallace (1982:5) traces the need for a black feminism that addresses the misconstrued perceptions of the black community where from childhood the black woman's dreams are deferred as it were by the larger societal realities. Thus:

> When I was in the third grade I wanted to be president. I can still remember the stricken look on my teacher's face when I announced it in class. By the time I was in the fourth grade I had decided to be the president's wife instead. It never occurred to me that I could be neither because I was Black. Growing up in a dreamy state of mind not uncommon to the offspring of the Black middle class, I was convinced that hatred was an insubstantial emotion and would certainly vanish before it could affect me. I had the world to choose from in planning a life.

Today, Michele Wallace's deferred dream has been fulfilled by another black woman Michelle Obama. Mrs. Obama becomes the first and current First Lady in America. The American reality has changed considerably for Blacks from the dreamy state of mind of aspiring to be President to having a sitting Black President, Barack Obama. Before he

became President, Barack Obama's *The Audacity of Hope* (2006:356-357) charts the course of dogged optimism and believe in meaningful pursuits, thus:

> The audacity of hope. That was the best of the American spirit, I thought – having the audacity to believe despite all the evidence to the contrary that we could restore a sense of community to a nation torn by conflict; the gall to believe that despite personal setbacks, the loss of a job or an illness in the family or a childhood mired in poverty, we had some control – and therefore responsibility – over our own fate. It was that audacity, I thought, that joined us as one people. It was that pervasive spirit of hope that tied my own family's story to the larger American story…

However, we would attempt a definition and an assessment of Black feminism as the larger construct of Walker's brand of Womanism as adopted for this study. Despite its apparent emphasis on naming, Patricia Hill Collins (1991:19) notes two interrelated tensions that highlight issues in defining Black feminist thought. The first concerns the question of who can be a Black feminist. Following this, Patricia Bell Scott (1982) classifies all African American women, regardless of content of ideas as Black feminist. This perspective makes living as a Black woman an appropriate experience for stimulating a Black feminist consciousness. Yet this indiscriminate label conflates the terms 'woman' and 'feminist' and identifies being of African descent as the sole determinant of a Black feminist consciousness. The idea of a biological criterion for the term 'black' with the accompanying assumption that being of African descent somehow produces a certain consciousness or perspective is inherent in the above definition.

Similarly, Deborah McDowell in her essay "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism" (1985:191) reviews Black feminism:

> I use the term here simply to refer to Black female critics who analyze the works of Black female writers from a feminist political perspective. But the term can also apply to any criticism written by a Black woman regardless of her subject or perspective – a book written by a male from a feminist or political perspective, a book written by a Black woman or about Black women authors in general, or any writing by women.

Although McDowell implies that elite white men could be "black feminist", she is clearly unwilling to state so categorically. Her perspective includes whites and Black men who embrace a specific political perspective and Black women regardless of political perspectives as potential Black feminist critics. In contrast, Michele Wallace's (1982:7)

view of Black movement is skeptical as it alienates the black woman creating the need for a black feminist search for sisterhood:

> The message of the Black movement was that I was being watched, on probation as a Black woman, that any signs of aggressiveness, intelligence, or independence would mean I'd be denied even the one role still left open to me as "my man's woman," keeper of house, children, and incense burners. I grew increasingly desperate about slipping up- they, Black men, were threatening me with being deserted, with being *alone*. Like any "normal" woman, I eagerly grabbed at my own enslavement.

Basically Collins (1991:21) observes that the "ambiguities surrounding current perspectives on who can be a Black feminist is directly tied to a second definitional tension in Black feminist thought" and that is the question of what constitutes Black feminism. Collins reiterates that a definition of Black feminist thought is needed that avoids the materialist position that being Black and/or female generates. Claims that Black feminist thought is the exclusive province of African American women, regardless of the experiences and worldview of such women, typify this position. One way of addressing the definitional tensions in Black feminism is to specify the relationship between a 'Black women's standpoint – those experiences and ideas shared by African American women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, and society – and theories that interpret these experiences. As such Collins attempts a more comprehensive definition of Black feminism:

> Black feminist thought consists of theories or specialized thought produced by African–American women intellectuals designed to express a Black women's standpoint. The dimensions of this stand point include the presence of characteristic core themes, the diversity of Black women's experiences in encountering these core themes, the varying expressions of Black women's Afrocentric feminist consciousness... Black feminist thought is *of* frican American women in that it taps the multiple relationships among Black women needed to produce a self – defined Black women's standpoint. Black feminist thought is *for* Black women in that it empowers Black women for political activism.

Black feminism brings the racial dimension into the feminist discourse by arguing that sexism, class oppression and racism are inextricably woven together.

However, Filomina Chioma Steady as quoted in Collins (1991:37) offers the opinion that what constitutes black feminism is the solidarity of humanity. Thus:

> Whether we advocate working through separate Black woman's organizations, becoming part of women's organizations, working within existing political structures, or supporting Black community institutions, African American women intellectuals repeatedly identify political actions such as these as a *means* for human empowerment rather than ends in and of themselves.

Thus the primary guiding principle of Black feminism is a recurring humanist vision.

Similarly, Alice Walker's preference for the term *womanist*, a term she describes as "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender", addresses this notion of the solidarity of humanity. To Walker, one is "womanist" when one is "committed to the survival and whole of entire people, male and female". On the other hand, bell hooks in her preface to *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) recounts black women experience as one that demands attention and a literature of necessity as it were:

> To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body. As black Americans living in a small Kentucky town, the railroad tracks were a daily remainder of our marginality. Across those tracks were paved streets, stores we could not enter, restaurants we could not eat in, and people we could not look directly in the face. Across those tracks was a world we could work in as maids, as janitors, as prostitutes, as long as it was in a service capacity. We could enter that world but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracts, to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town.

It appears that the above experience of marginalization informs her somewhat radical feminist orientation, as such, hooks (1984:30) observes that defining feminism as enabling total personal freedom for women is limited, "it is grounded in preserving the patriarchal, capitalist, individualist status quo". She adds that defining feminism in terms of creating a sense of community for the otherwise isolated women has a degree of value, but that the longing for such community is more common in white, middle class women than in non-white, lower class women. She offers a solution to the problem of definition by suggesting that we shift from statements such as 'I am a feminist' to 'I advocate feminism'. Such an approach could "serve as a way women who are concerned about feminism as well as other political movements could express their support while avoiding linguistic structures that give primacy to one particular group". She argues that women

interested in the revolutionary change were quick to label the exercise of power a negative trait without distinguishing between power as domination and control over others and power that is creative and life-affirming. hooks (1981:194) earlier analysis of feminism adds a critical dimension of the necessity of self-conscious struggle against a more generalized ideology of domination:

> To me feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women will have equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates western culture on various levels – sex, race, and class, to name a few – and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that the self development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires.

Both the words and actions of Black women intellectuals from different historical times and addressing markedly different audiences resonate with a strikingly similar theme of the oneness of all human life. Taken together, (Collins 1991:39) opines that the ideas of Anna Julia Cooper, Pauli Murray, Bell Hooks, Alice Walker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and other Black women intellectuals too numerous to mention suggest a powerful answer to the question, " What is Black Feminism?" Inherent in their words and deeds is a definition of Black feminism as a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community. Invariably, womanism as black female alternative to feminism is geared towards actualizing Black women's dream in America of equal opportunity and fulfillment in life. Therefore, it is cardinal to this analysis. The whole endeavour of reassessing and redefining female character portrayals in writings by black females is therefore viewed in the context of the quest for fulfillment by black women in the United States. The womanists, by pointing to aspects of feminism 'committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female', are, by implication, deconstructing traditional western feminism.

Black female writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Jude Jordan, Toni Morrison, Terry McMillan, Rita Dove, Ntozake Shange in America and their counterparts in Africa like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Ifeoma Okoye, project women whose process of development shows a rejection of the constraining demands of a former order and as such promote female consciousness of equal opportunity. In fact Mary Helen Washington (1975) in *Black-Eyed Susan* observes that "[o]ne of the main preoccupations of the Black woman writer has been the Black

woman herself – her aspirations, her conflicts, her relationship to her men and her children, her creativity" (p. x). Black female writing highlights the daily preoccupations of black females as they struggle to create the basis for improving the lot of their offspring and contribute to the uplift of their people and communities.

Clearly, sexism and racism are systems of societal and psychological restrictions that have critically affected the lives of African American women. Since sex and race have been so interrelated in the history of America, it is not surprising that when Black women publish novels, they necessarily reflected on that relationship, whether they intended to or not. From Frances Harper's *Lola Leroy* (1892) to Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981) the tradition of African American women novelist is a stunning expression of various configurations of societal definitions that have been accorded the black woman.

By projecting assertive female characters and their persistent self-application to change, black female writers highlight their dogged commitment in confronting challenges and this captures a particular phase in the march towards self-realisation. These writers interrogate what appears to be a system of internalised racism and sexism in the American society. In literary works by most black women, internalised racism is projected as a psychological programming by which a racist society indoctrinates people of colour to believe in white superiority. Such victims generally feel inferior to whites, less attractive, less worthwhile, less capable; and often wish they were white or looked more white. Toni Morrison portrays this concern in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), where Pecola Breedlove a young black girl denies her beauty, but believes she would be pretty, happy, and loved if only she had blue eyes. One could say that African American women writers celebrate the strength and dignity of the Black woman as an entity to be reckoned with. However to arrive at the present position, black women have had to wage a determined and sustained battle for recognition against the assumed male-dominated structure.

In her work, feminist critic Sondra O' Neale (1984:25) asserts:

> The black woman is America's favourite unconfessed symbol. She is the nation's archetype for unwed mothers, welfare checks, and food stamps. . . That said, if the larger society does not know who Black women are, only who it wants them to be; if even Black men as scholars and thinkers writing in this century could not "free" the images of Black women in the national psyche, it remained for Black women to accomplish the task themselves.

These black women hope for continuous 'positive' change. Thus, they reject the black male – oriented mode as Mary Helen Washington (*1990:39-41)* puts it:

> Obviously we will have to learn to read the Afro-American literary tradition in new ways, for continuing on the old way is impossible. In the past ten or fifteen years the crucial task of reconstruction has been carried on by a number of scholars whose work has made it possible to document black women as artists, as intellectuals, as symbol makers… As we continue the work of reconstructing a literary history, as we reject the old male-dominated accounts of history, refusing to be cramped into the little spaces men have allotted women, we should be aware that this is an act of enlightenment, not simply a repudiation… The making of a literary history in which black women are fully represented is a search for full vision, to create a circle where now we have but a segment.

Such a rejection of previous literary trends in the African American community informs the portrayals of black females and the roles assigned them to fit the paradigm of each writer's literary age. This study is a revisionist discourse of the intercession of race, class, gender and generation. Generation is the aspect that is least discussed, thus, making this a slate for the analysis of generational difference in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, Gather Together In My Name, The Heart of A Woman* and Terry McMillan's *Waiting To Exhale, A Day Late And A Dollar Short, The Interruption of Everything*. The choice of Maya Angelou's novels as a representative of the 1950s and 1960s is carefully done as the texts clearly attest to the post slavery black community probably with its autobiographic undertone. Angelou's five volume autobiography highlights the historical and political scenario of the black arts movements, civil and post civil rights era, core racism, quality of black and white relationship in racist South of Stamps, role model in sports and athletic activities, as well as her trail of insecurities through childhood, single motherhood and adulthood. McMillan's works *Waiting To Exhale, A Day Late and A Dollar Short, The Interruption of Everything* on the other hand, a reflection of a more recent generation of the 80s and 90s, highlight black survival, family crisis and the effect of drugs, current role models as intellectuals, and aspires to the fulfilment of desires, previously held to be wishful; and the tensions of dysfunctional black family relations. As the activists of the civil rights movement of the 40s, 50s, 60s, were pushing to end segregation and racism and create a new sense of Black Nationalism, black writers were equally addressing these issues in their works. However, another reason for the choice of Terry McMillan is necessitated by the notion

that despite her overwhelming achievement in writing and film productions she is yet to enjoy much serious academic reviews. This study interprets selected novelists' use of folk material, sites of memory, and history to rewrite the interior lives of black women in the American society; thus highlighting dimensions of difference in the comparative narratives. The texts explore the interior lives of black women in the American society through their characterisation.

The next Chapter provides an assessment of some definitions and distinctions of generation, difference and the concept of autobiographical imagination. Chapter Three examines Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, *Gather Together In My Name* and *The Heart of A Woman* and argues that she documents repositories of individual memories and in the process creates a collective communal memory through the use of the autobiography prose form. Chapter Four scrutinizes Terry McMillan's exploration of the internal crisis among individuals in the family and the aspirations of specific sentiments in her novels *Waiting To Exhale, A Day Late And A Dollar Short, The Interruption of Everything.* This work argues that her texts function as a dialectical process that contends the innovative form she develops in her prose, and reinforces her radical perspective to black female consciousness. Chapter Five compares Maya Angelou and Terry McMillan's narratives in relation to the dimensions of divergence. While Maya Angelou seeks liberation through her understanding of history, her reverence for memory of collective black folk tradition, and the use of the autobiographical mode for the analysis of personalised sexual abuse, the reality of pre – and post – Civil Rights movement invariably becomes prominent in the narrative. In contrast, Terry McMillan's texts reveal a paradigm shift from communal experience to the individual by strategically revising and borrowing recognizable literary conventions and recasting them to project the changing roles of women and a rather not subtle but radical feminist perspective. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that not only do the authors advocate female consciousness but they also enact the peculiarities of their literary generation through their art. It situates the novels within particular historical, socio-political, economic, gendered and literary contexts.

CHAPTER TWO

WRITING GENERATION, DIFFERENCE AND THEORIES IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN NOVEL

It appears that from the period of slavery through the European colonization of Africa, black people universally have been, accorded what could be described as an inferior status by whites. In the United States, blacks were enslaved and discriminated against by whites. As African Americans made concerted efforts to end discrimination by whites, black women began to band together to fight the perception of being bearers of a heritage of triple oppression. The pervasive black experience in America has necessitated the need to understand and interpret the activities of wo/man within specific societies and cultures and as such facilitate the development of relevant theories that are culture specific. This proposition validates the authenticity of ideological persuasions in situating narratives into specific timeframes and generic models. Therefore, this chapter examines some relevant models and terms in relation to the construction of difference in black woman consciousness; the relationship between autobiography and literature as well as the exploration of the different variants of feminism.

The concept of generation is connotative of societal formations, and its application to literary investigation makes explicit the multi-dimensional assertion of the inter-relationship between literature and sociology. Corsten (1999) defines generation as a 'cluster of people who were born in the same years'. This cluster precludes specific collective identities measureable in cohorts of ten years or more. According to Bryan S. Turner (1991) in *Ideology and Utopia: Collected Works of Karl Mannheim*, the classical description of generation mainly constructs two problems, "the polarisation between the generations and the problem of the relation of a particular generation to the other ideas appearing in the society as its formational consciousness and collective mobilisation". Historically, the generations defined themselves through the critical avant-garde, forerunners or in the name of pathfinders – a sort of modernity finders against the conservative competitors. It appears therefore, that there is no formation of generation apart from historical turnovers or new cultural appearances. Sociologists would describe those challenging, excessive and even order-violating manifestations as the guidelines to

the modernizing mind of any society. In exploring the implications of Mannheim's pivotal essay, June Edmunds and Bryan Turner (2002:7) assert that rather than seeing generations as continuations of societal norms, Mannheim portrayed generations as "sources of opposition, challenging existing societal norms and values and bringing social change through collective generational organisation". The three building blocks of this theory of generation includes site or location, actuality and units. Generation as a site or location specifies in terms of collective response to a traumatic event or catastrophe that unite particular cohort of individuals into self-conscious age stratum. Generation as actuality relates to specific social groups or age groups acting as agents of social change and carriers of intellectual and organisational alternatives to the status quo. In defining a generational unit, one needs to incorporate and articulate structures of knowledge or consciousness that expresses a particular location. In all, these descriptions of Mannheim's are not the only existing description of generation.

However, a generation can be defined as a group of people born roughly within a twenty year time period during the same era in history as Codrington & Marshall (2004) puts it. Members of each generation share similar social conditions, historical events, economic trends and technological advancements. Notable personalities and cultural changes within that time period influence, mould, and shape the groups' values and thinking. To identify the persona of a generation, Codrington & Marshall propose we look for three attributes: perceived membership; common beliefs and behaviours; and a common location in history. This identity would make for easy classification into their prescribed generational markers. Thus, GI Generation – for people born between 1900s and 1920s; Silent Generation – for those born between the 1920s and 1940s; Baby Boomer Generation – born between 1940s and 1960s; Generation Xers – born between 1960s and 1980s; and the Millennial Generation – for those born between the 1980s and 2000s. Overall, the place of difference in generational studies is the approach to generation gap perceived to refer to differences between generations that cause conflict and complicate communication.

Orinta Zvikaite-Rotting (2007:55) offers alternative ways of talking about the term generation and captures it within four broad categories: "the generation used in the context of family and genealogy; the generation used by pedagogy; the generation used by historians; and the generation used in the socio-political context". In the first context, the main themes of family research distinguish the life-span event: the relationship between the generations in regard to child–parent grandparent relationships, and the

principle of dependency between them. One generation develops from child dependency on the parent through socialization, individualization, contact inside and outside the parent's house, and leaving of the parent's house. Then come the family life of her or his own, the decision for or against children, and the contacts with other generations and their problems during the steps of life. The new conflict of those relations appears, for example, through bondless and unclear roles of new families: families with no kids, families with no grandparents, bi-national families, and so on.

Pedagogy speaks about a type of generation in the context of learning situations: the generation of teachers and the generation of students maintaining and producing further norms, knowledge and cultural, economical and social inheritance. Here the emergent conflict appears, for example, in the final understanding that the learning process is a life-long process and not predominantly a matter of age. Historians use generation in the context of groups with specific orientation and action, as social movements and generations of historical events and of historical weight. This classification of conflict comes within, for example, ungrouped powerless groups with less emphasis on change. Some sociologists like to speak about generational cohorts or units, instead of the broad spectrum. As such, Zvikaite – Rotting (2007:56) defines unit or cohort as comprising "a combination of factors and includes the ambivalence of the four different ways of the relationship between generation theory and praxis, taking into account the existence of multigenerational bonds". Those conceptual differences and variety of applications of the word generation appear in the Zvikaite-Rotting's question: "what is my generation unit in a special situation and what is it really and essentially?". The task of finding answers to such questions above justifies the need for the study of distinctive generational markers and makes research in generational difference a valid exercise.

Rachel Gordon (2005) asserts that communication gaps spring up when we try to pretend that generational differences do not exist, and at the same time, the idea of difference is not always an exclusive one. Each generation offers diversity in terms of technological advancements, shifting relationships as well as a plethora of ideas that gives it a certain frame of reference. It follows therefore that when we take the time to think about where people of other generations are coming from, we can start bridging those communication gaps that exist when we work in isolation. However, in relation to African American literature Craig Werner (1989:1) recognizing the implicit relevance of difference comments thus:

> Black women novelists, individually and collectively, differ. Situated in literary and social contexts in which differences are perceived primarily as emblems of superiority or inferiority, black women novelists have quietly forcefully asserted the value of difference, their own and others. Resisting hierarchical attitudes and institutions that fragment human community and individual psyches, novelists from Harriet Wilson through Zora Neale Hurston to Toni Cade Bambara have celebrated *relationship* as the crucial resource for human survival and fulfillment. Negotiating their experience of triple jeopardy – the multiplicative combination of race, class, and gender oppression – black women have struggled, not always successfully, to conceive and realize processes capable of freeing the energies that throughout American history have been frozen into stereotypes that discourage or preclude real dialogue between black women and those who could benefit from their insights and help alter the circumstances that make their survival a minor miracle.

Werner's position is an affirmation of the unique difference in black female experience and the value placed on such experiences in black women's writing. The idea of difference between women of different ages and classes, points to the relevance of many feminine voices, all testifying to the reality of their experiences. What this connotes is that self-writing is the hallmark of difference in black women's literature.

To read African American novels, Maryemma Graham (2004:3) observes is "to be confronted with difference". This position is worth agreeing with in the sense that one of the fundamental differences between the earlier periods of African American novel writing and the present is not only the range of voices but the intensity and creativity in transforming both the lives of black women and other literary traditions. The early slave narrative – the predecessor to the novel – had to fit a triangular relationship of narrator, audience, and sponsors. This continued to dictate the development of thematic and formal conventions in the early African American novel up to the twentieth century. Bernard Bell (1987:5) contends that this double consciousness evokes the burden of multiple allegiances which can be reinterpreted as:

> socialized ambivalence . . . the network of understandings that defines black American culture and informs black American consciousness . . . resulting from systematic barriers of exclusions and discrimination . . . producing a residue of shared memories and frames of reference.

Apparently, the social mission of the novel bears a special relationship to the history of African Americans, but its aesthetic significance lies in the rhetorical strategies and metaphorical language the author uses to reenact if not resolve the novel's inherent tensions. Put differently, as the writers get inspiration from history and their task becomes a demand of creativity. As such, African American novels adopt innovative literary conventions and aspects of history in their narrative construct. Also, informed social perspectives in black literary texts are necessitated upon by the writers' historical generation and their ability to inscribe self writing in the creative process. Graham (2004:5) affirms that the study of difference in African American novel is a wholesome task; ". . . to change the future is to give meaning to a common past in new ways". The act of writing is therefore part of a larger process of cultural revisionism, of redefining history and historical memory, and of confronting the past in innovative and provocative ways that are intentionally self-reflexive.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL IMAGINATION

Tess Cosslett (2000:4) defines autobiography in terms of memory and recollection. Autobiography has to do with "recovering a past (as well as with the projection of a future), and depends on the deployment of an often shifting, partial and contested set of personal or collective memories". In other words, the recovery of a past through personal testimony depends on what is remembered and what is forgotten. Similarly, Evelyne Ender (2008:2) notes that "remembering . . . is a mental time travel, a sort of reliving of something that happened in the past". Her position presupposes that autobiography explores two selves in the writing of a life: the self then and the self now.

On the other hand, William L. Howarth (1974:364) defines autobiography as a 'self –portrait' where the autobiographer becomes a "painter and model". This definition implies that the autobiographer does a literary version of painting with memory providing the essential element of a mirror in the act of painting. However, the autobiographical narrator doubling as protagonist and author, poses further problems that add to the debate on the literary content, narrative coherence and the "truthfulness" of the autobiographical claims. Jean Starobinski (1971:285) extends the portrait model of autobiography to include time and movement. He defines autobiography as "a biography of a person written by himself" which essentially reveals the "identity of the narrator and the hero of the narration" and specifies the narration to cover a "temporal sequence." The centrality of an individual's life in narration is recurring in these definitions of autobiography. In

another sense, Robert Smith (1995:136) defines autobiography as "both the narrowing of the space between subject and object, discourse and theme". It is also "the opening of a new space, a scene of writing which is more potent its so-called 'agents' or institutors, all those who, envisage their own position of control". Smith's definition is very optimistic, as it connotes the possibility of a narration that is more powerful than the narrator, one that exercises the freedom to bridge the gap between the subject and object.

Though autobiographies have been in existence for a long time, there is no specific accepted definition of the form. Several definitions by scholars highlight the features of the form by emphasizing those features without necessarily undermining the views of others. Remy Oriaku (1998:7) reiterates that autobiography can be said to be a "remembered and interpretative personal history, a narration of fact laced with fiction either as a result of lapses of memory or the need to fill in the gaps and give coherence and meaning to the events or experiences being presented." From this view, the task of the autobiographer is to select from original situation(s) and reconstruct a narrative through a complex of remembered experiences that relate to life account. By using his imagination the autobiographer arranges the selection of previously unrelated events from the repertoire of his memory into a cause and effect pattern and gives meaning to it. Autobiographies are characterized by the use of the first person narrative point of view where the narrator is himself one of the characters and speaks as "I" in the story. Tuija Saresma (2005:4) is particularly concerned with the autobiographical "I" that usually poses as witness phenomenon in life narrative, which "disintegrates" in the course of writing or reading the autobiography and ceases to represent a unity self and becomes "multiply coded in a range of discourses". Leigh Gilmore (1998:184) refers to this persona behind the "I" in the autobiography as the "site of multiple solicitations, multiple markings of 'identity', and multiple figurations of agency". Jens Brockmeier (2001:3) tries to explain the issue of 'reference' in autobiography that focuses on the fidelity of the autobiography to its course by exploring the difference between the author, the storyteller, and the "self-behind" in the discourse of life. In contrast, Shari Benstock (1988:4) writes of autobiography as "revealing rather than closing up gaps both in time and space and between the individual and the social". Here the emphasis is on autobiography widening the divergence between the manner and the matter of discourse.

Generally, autobiography is commonly considered to be an ordinary human activity reducing the life term to a co-extension of meaning with history. Oriaku (1998:2) debunks the assumption that autobiography must always religiously bear the burden of

'fidelity to historical facts'. The autobiographer writes within the confines of a projected self-image and the demands of a narrative of some selective details of his real life. He further adds that 'the self of autobiography is therefore an invention which is a symbolic representation of the total man'. (3). In another sense, Graham Greene (1971) describes autobiography as 'a sort of life', a life which of necessity is even more selective because it ends prematurely. His position is a view of life that can arrest time. Paul John Eakin (1976:241) adopts the photographer's lens to capture autobiography as "a picture, an idea of fiction based on the suspension of time". Meta Harris (2005:36) views autobiography as "a means to share one's history and culture with others". In defining autobiography, Nabokov (1999:122) opines that 'imagination and memory remain distinct but mutually supportive in an autobiographical process'. Put differently, the above postulation suggests that there is an element of imagination in every act of life – narration. He adds that autobiography "illuminates the plainer historical substance of factual recall". So far as it "depends on access to memory to tell a retrospective narrative of the past" Smith & Watson (2001:16) reiterates that autobiography is a relevant tool for self-re-enactment. Interestingly, Brunner (1997:27) in his definition of autobiography gives a succinct detail of a simple scenario that answers the question of an otherwise complex question of definition:

> It consist of the following: a narrator in the here and now takes upon himself or herself the task of describing the process of protagonist in the there and then, one who happens to share his name. he must by convention bring that protagonist from the past into the present in such a way that the protagonist and the narrator eventually fuse and become one person with a shared consciousness.

The implication is that autobiography establishes a link between the past and the present through the use of memory. In all, self-memory, self-knowledge, self-history or self-narration that is embedded in autobiographical narrative is subsumed in human ability to entertain first person thought. The ability to tell individual or group story or project identity is a longstanding art form.

Inadvertently, autobiography has come to be associated with self-revelation, self-analysis and introspection. In contrast Leigh Gilmore (2001:3) observes that autobiography appears to "constrain self-representation through its almost legalistic definition of truth telling, its anxiety about invention, and its preference for the literal and verifiable". It appears that this concept of truth-telling and testimony comes partly from a legal framework – the testimony of witnesses in court. In this sense, it connects first-

person narration to the case, relying on the testimony of eye witnesses. The second derivation of the term 'testimony' is a religious one: testifiers bear witness to their beliefs. Both senses resonate with speaking out about hitherto unheard experiences. Liz Stanley (2000:40) asserts that autobiographical practices are "everyday practices which typically occur as 'moments' within a very wide range of other kinds of activities, rather than as one-off set-piece performances". She adds that its process uses not only facts and events but also permits social and cultural values. In other words, a tension exists between the self and the society as it were, which is resolved in the narrative presentation of a unique self which can also be recognized by the society. Earlier, Stanley (1992:3) defined autobiography as "ideological accounts of 'lives', which in turn feed back into everyday understandings of how 'common lives' and 'extraordinary lives' can be recognized". According to Stanley, the writer essentially tells the reader the story that she wants them to have and writes with that purpose not from the perspective of simply revealing her story. It follows then, that the autobiographer may or may not decide to write a "true" story. The test for validity or truth is more or less ruled out in autobiography as the autobiographical act involves presenting the subject's past life from a certain point of view.

Autobiography as it relates to African American literature dates back to the testimony of the victims of slavery in the form of slave narratives. Slave narratives were written or dictated to others by former slaves. Although the slave narratives were used by abolitionist editors for propaganda purposes, most of the slave narratives were genuine expressions of the experiences, thoughts and feelings of blacks held in chattel slavery. These texts provide a well-balanced account of the nature of the institution of slavery in the antebellum South and its impact on black men, women, children, individually and collectively. Slave narratives like Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave Written by Himself* (1845) and Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) give insights on the nature of slavery, master-slave relationships, slaveholder brutality, the slave personality and consciousness, the slave family, the hierarchy of the plantation, the cultural and religious life of slaves, survival techniques and forms of slave resistance and strategies used by slaves to escape. Jacobs' narrative addresses the woman question in slavery as she examines "sass" as a mode of women's discourse and a weapon of self defense. Slave narratives have since been replaced with different forms of narratives each depicting the peculiarity of black experience representing stages in a continuum of historical times. From the early slave

narrative, through confessional spiritual autobiographies, to modern autobiographies and black women's autobiographies, the place of memory in these narratives remains valid. Memory is how the past is recalled and it is also how we heal. Thus, Toni Morrison as quoted in Graham (2004:35) defines "re-memory" as a "place in which things so bad had happened that when you went near them it would happen".

In relation to African American literature, autobiography makes use of some of the major conventions of literature especially narrative and aesthetic functions that make it a valid genre of literature. It uses imagination to organize the selection of previously unrelated events from memory and assigns meaning(s) to them which they initially never had. Meta Harris (2005:38) justifies the need for Black women to write their lives, as much for "the correcting of the history of their lives as for the personal benefits they gain from engaging in the process of developing autobiography". The autobiographical process, she adds, "permits the writer to think deeply about her life and to develop a positive self-identity". The creation of autobiography is therefore a therapeutic process. The autobiographer does not seek to include in his narrative all the events or all the major events in his life, rather he selects incidents and experiences which form the main highlights in the process of personality formation. This personality formation affords him the centre of consciousness in the story in relation to other people and physical details. The self of autobiography is therefore an invention which is a symbolic representation of humanity.

Angelou's novels validate a genre of expression known as the autobiography. Autobiographical fiction became a medium for women of colour to bring attention to how their personal lives have been impacted by the larger social and political systems. Meta Harris (2005:26) posits that historically, "black Americans have commonly employed the genre of autobiography to tell their stories". It originally took the form of slave narratives, produced to show white people that slaves were indeed human beings. The simple act of writing is a way for Black women to create their own identities. Self re- definition through the writing of autobiography places power in the hands of the writer to define who she is. Although one may argue that the writer of autobiography essentially tells the reader the story that she wants them to have and writes with that purpose, and not from the perspective of simply revealing her story to the world, the autobiography writer may or may not decide to write a "true" story. That is, the writer may decide to present her story using fictional details and characters that for

her may more fully convey the important themes of her life. According to Alison Easton (2000:177)

> all autobiography is, of course, by its very nature an unfinished story, but slave narratives are particularly painful in their lack of conclusion. The legal freedom from chattel slavery that the narratives ultimately record is hollowed out by the endemic racism of the "free" society the autobiographer has come to live within.

Easton's observation that autobiography is an unfinished story is valid in the sense that the stories narrated are time-bound and restricted to a moment in the author's life carefully chosen for narration. The author is still busy living the life event remaining to be told.

The significance of the autobiographical impulse in the African American novel arises as the continuous need to explain and inscribe the self in a world which has historically denied the existence of that self. To examine the African American novel, then, is to understand its paradoxical nature. This nature allows for the freedom to create a sustained vision in a world of counter-freedoms and conflicting visions as well as accommodating the humanistic formation of cultural memory. For many an African American author, the act of writing is part of a larger process of cultural revisionism, of redefining history and historical memory, and of confronting the past in innovative and provocative ways that are intentionally self-reflexive. It is a process of changing the future by giving meaning to a common past in new ways. Christel Temple (2012:23) asserts that autobiography in African American literature is "a rich source from which to seek and discover cognitive evidence of ways in which Africana women cosmologically envision their role in the advancement and survival of the race". Temple's reference to the wealth of resources specifies patterns of women's approaches to relationships to include an examination of mothers/mother-figures, leaders, pioneers and the sustenance of both nuclear and extended family relations as well as the community at large.

According to Mary Kolawole (1997:171) "autobiography is often the most effective way of presenting the author's voice.... it is a deliberate attempt to inscribe the writer's experience as a mode of collective writing or re-writing of African women's reality". She explains further that writing as the brainchild of the author entails self-inscription as well as writing the collective identity for self-fulfillment. Autobiography provides scaffolding for understanding the articulate segments of a life once lived. Therefore, memory and dream play central roles in the process of fiction as a recollection

of the collective consciousness. However, autobiography can be considered as a reconstruction of life as remembered by the author in as much as it records a stage in life much earlier than when it is narrated.

By relying on memory, the autobiographer has to equally subvert his detailed accounts to achieve unity and coherence of thought. This automatically makes him an imaginative writer and his work qualifies as literature. The whole process of selecting events from the mass of life's events to form his/her story can be described as a creative act. Similarly, Joanne Braxton (1989) argues for redefinition of the genre of black American autobiography to include the images women as well as their memoirs, reminiscences, diaries, and journals – as corrective to both black and feminist literary criticism. On the other hand, Temple (2012:30) validates the continuity that autobiography offers across generations of African American women experience, thus, "each additional layer of autobiographical narrative is dynamic because in spite of the diversity and range of peculiarity based on era, age, genre, and audience, the sources are conversant within a continuum of Africana womanist experience". Therefore, literature in so far as it re-enacts social realities, places the status of an authentic literary form on autobiography like prose fiction, poetry and drama. In studying memory for its personal and biographical aspects, we cannot but "confront the complicated complicating fact that human truths are inherently bound up with our ability to represent them and narrate them (Ender 2008:16). In all, literature offers the best examples of our ability to construct our past through the language of recollection in autobiography.

CHAPTER THREE

MAYA ANGELOU: SELF NARRATION AND THE CREATIVE IMPULSE

This chapter explores three selected novels of Maya Angelou - *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Gather Together In My Name*, and *The Heart of a Woman* tracing the trend of her creative impulse in self narration. The activities of the Civil Rights Movements and the Black Arts Movements were pivotal in the socio-political milieu of the generation and events surrounding political activism features in the novels.

REMEMBRANCE AND HEALING IN MAYA ANGELOU'S *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS*

Jeffrey M Elliot in his *Conversations with Maya Angelou* (1989) provides details of Angelou's personal life. Maya Angelou was born Marguerite Annie Johnson on 4 April 1928 in St. Louis to Vivian Baxter and Bailey Johnson, a civilian dietician for the U.S. Navy. At age three, she was sent to Stamps to be cared for by their paternal grandmother, Mrs. Annie Henderson. While growing up she and her brother Bailey were trained at the daily meetings of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, or at her grandmother's general merchandise store. She graduated from the Lafayette County Training School in 1940 and returned to her mother in San Francisco. A few weeks after she received her high school diploma, she gave birth to her son, Guy Bailey Johnson. Her career as a professional entertainer began on the West Coast, where she performed as a dancer-singer at the Purple Onion in the early 1950s.

In 1959, Angelou and her son moved to New York and joined the Harlem Writers Guild with the help of John Killens. She produced, directed, and starred in Cabaret for Freedom to raise funds for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Following the close of the highly successful show, she gained the position of the Northern coordinator for the SCLC at the request of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Her

work in theatre opened up opportunities in role like the White Queen in Genet's The Blacks, directed by Gene Frankel at St. Mark's Playhouse. Elizabeth Bealieu (2006) records that for the production of The Blacks, she joined a cast of stars like Roscoe Lee Brown, Godfrey Cambridge, James Earl Jones, and Cicely Tyson. In 1974, she adapted Sophocles' Ajax for its premiere at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. Original screenplays to her credit include the film version of *Georgia* and the television productions of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *The Sisters*. She also authored and produced a television series on African traditions inherent in American culture and played the role of Kunta Kinte's grandmother in *Roots*. For PBS programming, she served as a guest interviewer on Assignment America and appeared in a special series on creativity hosted by Bill Moyers, which featured a return visit to Stamps. Her other achievements include appointment to the Commission of International Women's Year by former President Carter; nomination of Woman of the Year in communications by Ladies' Home Journal and nomination as a trustee of the American Film Institute and member of the Directors Guild. She has received honorary degrees, including one from the University of Arkansas located near her childhood home. Fluent in seven languages, she has worked as the editor of the Arab Observer in Cairo and the African Review in Ghana. In December 1981, Angelou accepted a lifetime appointment as the first Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, where she lectures on literature and popular culture. In 1983, Women in Communications presented her with the Matrix Award in the field of books.

Her personal life has been anything but smooth. As a young mother, Angelou had to endure painful periods of separation from her son while she worked at more than one job to support them. Often her ventures into show business would take her far from home, and she would put Guy in the care of her mother or baby-sitters. When she was twenty-one years old, she married Tosh Angelos, a sailor of Greek-American ancestry, but their marriage ended after three years. While working in New York, she met and later married Vusumzi Make, a black South African activist who travelled extensively raising money to end apartheid. They divided their time between New York and Cairo, but after a few years their marriage deteriorated. In 1973, Angelou married Paul du Feu, a carpenter and construction worker she had met in London. They lived together on the West Coast during most of their seven-year marriage. Her literary reputation is based on the publication of five volumes of autobiography – *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) *Gather Together in My Name*, (1974) *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry*

Like Christmas, *The Heart of a Woman* (1981) – and five volumes of poetry – *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie*, *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well*, *And Still I Rise*, *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* and *Now Sheba Sings the Song*.

The novel *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings* derived its title from poet Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Sympathy" (1899), the poem combines the themes of imperative self-knowledge with the artist's desire for voice amid the pervasive silencing of a hostile and corrupt society. Maya Angelou's first novel begins with the two Johnson children, Maya (a shortened form of Marguerite) and her brother Bailey, riding on a train to Stamps, Arkansas, from California. Moving from the West Coast to the South, through to the Midwest briefly, and ultimately back to the West again, the textual and geographic itinerary of the novel forms a symbolic circle, tacitly enunciating a yearning for wholeness. For these children passed around, the home provided by the strong female presence of their paternal grandmother, Mrs. Annie Henderson, offers a catalyst for their educational and emotional development. While rural Stamps provides the earliest scenes of instruction both in and outside of the home, San Francisco emerges as the site where the older Maya explores a more diverse spectrum of opportunities from which to forge a life path.

Maya Angelou calls attention to displacement as the most important loss in her childhood as she is separated from her parents at age three and never fully regains a sense of security and belonging. Carol E. Neubauer (1990:116) asserts that her displacement from her family is not only an emotional handicap but is compounded by an equally unsettling sense of racial and geographic displacement. In the novel, Angelou describes her coming of age as an insecure black girl in the American South during the 1930s and subsequently in California during the 1940s. Annie, whom they call Momma, runs the only store in the black section of Stamps and becomes the central moral figure in Maya's childhood. As young children, Maya and Bailey struggle with the pain of having been rejected and abandoned by their parents. Angelou is shuttled around to seven different homes between the ages of three and sixteen: from California to Stamps to St. Louis to Stamps to Los Angeles to Oakland to San Francisco to Los Angeles to San Francisco. These movements validate Neubauer view of the unsettling effect of geographic displacement.

Angelou first confidently reaches back in memory to re-enact the painful times: when she and her brother Bailey fail to understand the adult code and, therefore, break laws they know nothing of; when they swing easily from hysterical laughter to desperate

loneliness, from a hunger for heroes to the voluntary pleasure-pain game of wondering who their real parents are and how long it will be before they come to take them to their real home. Dolly A. McPherson (1999:22) states that growing up in Stamps, Arkansas is:

> a continual struggle against surrender to the very large adults, who, being black, practiced and taught special traditions whose roots were buried in Africa or had been created during centuries of slavery. According to these traditions, a good child dropped her eyes when speaking to an adult; a good child spoke softly; a good child never resisted the idea that whites were better, cleaner, or more intelligent than blacks. Growing up and surviving as a young girl in the South of the 1930s and early 1940s is a painful experience for a young girl whose world is colored by disillusion and despair, aloneness, self-doubt, and a diminished sense of self.

Indeed, Angelou underscores her diminished sense of self and rootlessness of her early childhood years in the Easter Sunday recital when she is unable to finish reciting a poem in church, and self-consciously feeling ridiculed and a failure, she races from the church crying, laughing, wetting herself, yet she expresses her predicament in the few lines of the poem she tries to recite:

> "What you looking at me for? I didn't come to stay. . ." I hadn't so much forgot as I couldn't bring myself to remember. Other things were more important. "What you looking at me for? I didn't come to stay. . ." Whether I could remember the rest of the poem or not was immaterial. The truth of the statement was like a wadded-up handkerchief, sopping wet in my fists, and the sooner they accepted it the quicker I could let my hands open and air would cool my palms. "What you looking at me for...?" (1)

The words are painfully appropriate and the statement above becomes her shield against the cold reality of her rootlessness. However, James Saunders (2009:3) cites displacement and physical movements as valid sites for young Maya's social conditioning:

> a physical movement between geographical regions has been part of that literary tradition, a given in slave narratives where virtually all of the authors first had to escape southern slavery and then make their way north before being in a position to record the events of their lives. Such geographical movement has been particularly important in the life and autobiographies of the artist Maya Angelou, described by Butterfield as one who "does not

> submit tamely to the cage. She is repeatedly thrust into situations where she must act on her own initiative to save herself and thereby learns the strength of self-confidence".

Besieged by the tripartite crossfire of racism, sexism, and power, young Angelou is belittled and degraded at every turn, making her unable to put down her shield and feel comfortable staying in one place. When she is thirteen and moves to San Francisco with her mother and Bailey, she feels that she belongs somewhere for the first time. Young Maya identifies with the city as a town full of displaced people. Maya's personal displacement echoes the larger societal forces that displaced blacks all across the country. She realizes that thousands of other terrified black children made the same journey as she and Bailey, travelling on their own to newly affluent parents in northern cities, or back to southern towns when the North failed to supply the economic prosperity it had promised. As young children in Stamps in the 1930s, racial prejudice severely limits their lives. Within the first pages, she sums up this demoralizing period:

> I stumbled and started to say something, or maybe to scream, but a green persimmon, or it could have been a lemon, caught me between the legs and squeezed. I tasted the sour on my tongue and felt it in the back of my mouth. Then before I reached the door, the sting was burning down my legs and into my Sunday socks. I tried to hold, to squeeze it back, to keep it from speeding, but when I reached the church porch I knew I'd have to let it go, or it would probably run right back up to my head and my poor head would burst like a dropped watermelon, and all the brains and spit and tongue and eyes would roll all over the place. So I ran down into the yard and let it go. I ran, peeing and crying, not toward the toilet out back but to our house. I'd get a whipping for it, to be sure, and the nasty children would have something new to tease me about. I laughed anyway, partially for the sweet release; still, the greater joy came not only from being liberated from the silly church but from the knowledge that I wouldn't die from a busted head. If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. (3).

The pain of her continual degradation and rejection comes not only from the displacement itself, but even more poignantly, from the child's acute understanding of prejudice. A smooth, clean razor would be enough of a threat, but a rusty, jagged one leaves no doubt in the victim's mind.

In the opening pages of the book, Maya suffers from a strong sense of racial self-hatred. She internalizes the idea that blond hair is beautiful and that she is a fat black girl trapped in a nightmare, thus her fantasies are ephemeral:

> Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? My light-blue eyes were going to hypnotize them, after all the things they said about "my daddy must of been a Chinaman" (I thought they meant made out of china, like a cup) because my eyes were so small and squinty. Then they would understand why I had never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke the common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs' tails and snouts. Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil. (2).

At this point, she entirely separates her sense of self from her sense of race, creating room for identity crisis compounded by received ideas of white feminine beauty. For Maya, real life in Stamps means there is no magical metamorphosis, no respite from her "black dream".

Young Maya confronts the insidious effects of racism and segregation in America at a very young age. White dominance intrudes on several occasions that also teach Maya vital lessons in courage and survival and open her eyes to the fact that she belongs to an oppressed class. In Uncle Willie, for example, she sees the dual peril of being black and crippled when he is forced to hide in the potato bin when the ex-sheriff casually warns Grandmother Henderson that local white lynchers will be on a rampage in the black community. Through this terrifying experience, Maya learns that lameness offers no protection from the wrath of bigots. The scene with the ex-sheriff only leaves Maya humiliated and angry:

> The used-to-be sheriff sat rakishly astraddle his horse. His nonchalance was meant to convey his authority and power over even dumb animals. How much more capable he would be with Negroes. It went without saying. His twang jogged in the brittle air. From the side of the Store, Bailey and I heard him say to Momma, "Annie, tell Willie he better lay low tonight. A crazy nigger messed with a white lady today. Some of the boys'll be coming over here later." Even after the slow drag of years, I remember the sense of fear which filled my mouth with hot, dry air, and made my body light.

> The "boys"? Those cement faces and eyes of hate that burned the clothes off you if they happened to see you lounging on the main street downtown on Saturday. Boys? It seemed that youth had never happened to them. Boys? No, rather men who were covered with graves' dust and age without beauty or learning. The ugliness and rottenness of old abominations. If on Judgment Day I were summoned by St. Peter to give testimony to the used-to-be sheriff's act of kindness, I would be unable to say anything in his behalf. His confidence that my uncle and every other Black man who heard of the Klan's coming ride would scurry under their houses to hide in chicken droppings was too humiliating to hear. (14)

As the ex-sheriff leaves without waiting for Momma's thanks, Maya muses in indignation the vicissitudes of growing up black in an atmosphere of pervasive uncertainty, racist and sexist devaluation.

This first autobiography provides detailed testimony to the daily insults visited upon members of Angelou's extended family as well as neighbouring blacks who work hard picking cotton, never to get ahead or even see beyond their debilitating financial situations. Infact, Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu (2006:446) affirms that:

> In Stamps, the narrator expresses her frustration with the treatment of the blacks in the rural community: the drudgery and alienation resulting from toil in the cotton fields, the victimization by local racists, and the small but searing indignities faced by her loved ones, a daily reminder of color prejudice.

While her grandmother is indeed the proud owner of a local general store, even that matriarch suffers insults delivered by young, poor white girls who insist on addressing her by her first name, Annie. One memorable episode bears witness to the indignities endured by Maya's grandmother at the hands of some neighbourhood poor whites:

> Before the girls got to the porch I heard their laughter crackling and popping like pine logs in a cooking stove. I suppose my lifelong paranoia was born in those cold, molasses-slow minutes. They came finally to stand on the ground in front of Momma. At first they pretended seriousness. Then one of them wrapped her right arm in the crook of her left, pushed out her mouth and started to hum. I realized that she was aping my grandmother. Another said, "Naw, Helen, you ain't standing like her. This here's it." Then she lifted her chest, folded her arms and mocked that strange carriage that was Annie Henderson. Another laughed, "Naw, you can't do it. Your mouth ain't pooched out enough. It's like this." I thought about the rifle behind the door, but I knew I'd never be able to hold it straight,

> and the .410, our sawed-off shotgun, which stayed loaded and was fired every New Year's night, was locked in the trunk and Uncle Willie had the key on his chain. Through the fly-specked screen-door, I could see that the arms of Momma's apron jiggled from the vibrations of her humming. But her knees seemed to have locked as if they would never bend again. She sang on. No louder than before, but no softer either. No slower or faster. The dirt of the girls' cotton dresses continued on their legs, feet, arms and faces to make them all of a piece. Their greasy uncoloured hair hung down, uncombed, with a grim finality. I knelt to see them better, to remember them for all time. The tears that had slipped down my dress left unsurprising dark spots, and made the front yard blurry and even more unreal. The world had taken a deep breath and was having doubts about continuing to revolve. (24-25).

Her grandmother is further outraged when a dentist, to whom she had lent money when he was in danger of losing his practice, now refuses to examine her granddaughter and adamantly proclaims: "I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's." These unjust social realities confine and demean Maya and her relatives. She comes to learn how the pressures of living in a thoroughly racist society have profoundly shaped the character of her family members, and she strives to surmount them.

It is believed that many growing young girls, denied the emotional satisfaction of loving, concerned parents, look for emotional support at school or at play and if they are lucky, they find something that moderates their emotional discontent. For young Maya, however, there is little compensation of this sort or references to rewarding peer association. She is not only dislocated by her environment but also is alienated from any supporting peer relationships. When Maya is eight, her father, of whom she has no memory, arrives in Stamps unexpectedly and takes her and Bailey to live with their mother, Vivian, in St. Louis, Missouri. Beautiful and alluring, Vivian lives a wild life working in gambling parlours. One morning Vivian's live-in boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, sexually molests Maya. The second time Mr. Freeman embraces the eight-year-old girl, he rapes her. The rape, an excruciatingly painful act that involves Maya in ambiguous complicity, produces confusion, shame, and guilt. The courtroom where Mr. Freeman's trial for rape is held would be imposing to a mature, self-confident adult, but it is shattering to the child, whose confusion, shame, and guilt are further compounded by the voyeuristic aspects of the open courtroom testimony. When Maya is unable to remember what Mr. Freeman was wearing when he raped her, the lawyer suggests that she, not the defendant, is to blame for her victimization. Bewildered and frightened, Maya denies that Mr. Freeman ever touched her before the rape—partly because, in her confusion, she is

convinced of her own complicity in the two sexual episodes but more because of her lifelong desire for her mother's love and approval:

> I couldn't say yes and tell them how he had loved me a few minutes and how he had held me close before he thought I had peed in my bed. My uncles would kill me and Grandmother Baxter would stop speaking, as she did when she was angry. And all those people in the court would stone me as they had stoned the harlot in the Bible. And Mother, who thought 1was such a good girl, would be disappointed.... Hooked at [Mr. Freeman's] heavy face trying to look as if he would have liked me to say No. I said no.... The lie lumped in my throat and I couldn't get air. . . . Our lawyer brought me off the stand to my mother's arms. The fact that 1 had arrived at my desired destination by lies made it less appealing to me. (40).

Here the essence of remembrance is carefully done as a tool for both physical and psychological healing. Although the novel has been criticized for its honest depiction of rape, its exploration of the ugly spectre of racism in America, its recounting of the circumstances of Angelou's own out-of-wedlock teen pregnancy, and its humorous poking at the foibles of the institutional church, Angelou in an interview with Joanne M. Braxton (1999:12) condemns the rape of a child as cruel:

> The rape of a child is the cruelest action because it has so many implications. The child is, herself, himself, the potential rapist. Many people who have been raped quite often go to violate everything: themselves first, and then their families, their lovers, then the community and the society. It is so awful.] can say, honestly, that I don't believe a day has passed that I haven't thought about it, in something 1 do, in my own sexuality, in my own practices. So I thought to myself, "You write so that perhaps people who hadn't raped anybody yet might be discouraged, people who had might be informed, people who have not been raped might understand something, and people who have been raped might forgive themselves." That's why 1 wrote about the rape.

Maya Angelou has tempered her own anger and put it to a constructive purpose; her work speaks to the necessity of reflecting, remembering, opening, cleansing, healing, and, at times, issuing a warning.

Later, when Mr. Freeman is found murdered, Maya is convinced that he is dead because she lied—that evil flows through her mouth, waiting to destroy any person she might talk to. To protect others, she convinces herself that she must stop talking: "Just

my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they'd curl up and die like the Black fat slugs that only pretended."(11). Acting on this conviction, Maya becomes a voluntary mute, Mr. Freeman's death having provoked not only her spiritual death but also her quasi-isolation from her world. Her mother's family accepts her silence at first as temporary post-rape trauma, but they later become frustrated and angry at what they perceive to be a disrespectful behaviour. To Maya's relief, but Bailey's regret, Maya and Bailey return to Stamps to live with Momma. Momma manages to break through Maya's silence by introducing her to Mrs. Bertha Flowers, a kind, educated woman who tells Maya to read works of literature out loud, giving her books of poetry that help her to regain her voice. The experience of being silent for years after being raped by her mother's boyfriend and its deadly consequence, and reading at every opportunity helped to develop Angelou's ear for dialogue and for rhythms. The trauma of rape has a far reaching effect than the physical manifestations in the victim. Angelou is quoted in Elliot (1998:9) condemning it, "'I'm goin' to tell it,' Miss Angelou said, 'because rape and incest are rife in the black community.' ". The medical term Rape Trauma Syndrome (RTS) addresses the different responses survivors have to rape. It is believed that one aspect of rape response is withdrawal and detachment. As a survivor, Angelou freezes her speech to avoid further injuries. The years of silence therefore become a process of re-organisation of thought as well as the moment of acceptance of what happened.

The appearance of Mrs. Flowers during the years of silence made a remarkable improvement and a turning point in Angelou's path to recovery. Mrs. Flowers introduces the young girl to an assortment of literary classics, including the works of Charles Dickens. This educational encounter proves to be a vital turning point, reminding us of an important aspect of American slave narratives. Angelou explains the sensation of listening to Mrs. Flowers as she read from *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859):

> I heard poetry for the first time in my life. . . . Her voice slid in and curved down through and over the words. She was nearly singing. I wanted to look at the pages. Were they the same that I had read? Or were there notes, music, lined on the pages, as in a hymn book? Her sounds began cascading gently. (84).

It is Mrs. Bertha Flowers, Stamps' black intellectual, who is finally able to get Maya to talk, having her read from works that are demanding recitation. The therapy is so effective that it appears to have been carried over into the writer's own poetic career, in

the production of such poems as “Still I Rise” and “Phenomenal Woman” as expressed in the excerpts from both poems as quoted below:

> You may trod me in the very dirt
> But still, like dust, I’ll rise. . . .
> Did you want to see me broken?
> Bowed head and lowered eyes?
> Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
> Weakened by my soulful cries.
> Does my haughtiness offend you?
> Don’t you take it awful hard
> ‘Cause I laugh like I’ve got gold mines
> Diggin’ in my own back yard.

The following lines make up the second poem’s conclusion:

> Now you understand
> Just why my head’s not bowed.
> I don’t shout or jump about
> Or have to talk real loud.
> When you see me passing
> It ought to make you proud. . . .
> ‘Cause I’m a woman
> Phenomenally.
> Phenomenal woman,
> That’s me.

As Maya gets older, she is confronted by more overt and personal incidents of racism, such as a white speaker's condescending address at her eighth-grade graduation, her white boss's insistence on calling her Mary. Maya also observes the entire community listening to the Joe Louis heavyweight championship boxing match, desperately longing for him to defend his title against his white opponent Primo Carnera. Although the Joe Louis victories in the boxing ring in the 1930s were occasions for street celebrations that caused tens of thousands of blacks to parade, sing, dance, and derive all the joy possible from these collective victories of the race, it was a grotesque counterpoint to the normal way of life in Arkansas. The importance of Joe Louis' world championship boxing match to the black community demonstrates the desperate nature of the black community's hope for vindication through the athletic triumph of one man and reveals the dearth of publicly recognized African American heroes. This quest for collective role models speaks of the commitment and communality of both sexes in Walker’s womanist theory. Louis’ championship becomes a common and unifying position for the achievement of the dreams of both African American men and women and the commitment to the survival and wholeness of the community.

Sadly, Angelou remembers her graduation from elementary school not as the customarily exciting and happy occasion for the young graduates and their families and friends but as a dramatization of the painful injustices of a segregated society and an underscoring of the powerlessness of blacks within that society. As she listens to the insulting words of an oblivious and insensitive white speaker, the young girl perceives a terrifying truth about her racial self and about the desperation of impotence, especially about the impotence of black people in the South of the 1930s: "It was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense. We should all be dead."(54). Yet, her momentarily mixed feelings of despair, shame, and anger on her graduation day at the seemingly hopeless future for young blacks in racist America are surmounted by her pride in blacks when the Negro National Anthem is sung. As Maya consciously joins the class and audience in singing, she unconsciously, from her perspective in time, also predicts her own future as a poet:

> We survived. The depths had been icy and dark, but now a bright sun spoke to our souls. I was no longer simply a member of the proud graduating class of 1940; I was a proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race. Oh, Black known and unknown poets, how often have your auctioned pains sustained us? Who will compute the only night made less lonely by your songs, or by the empty pots made less tragic: by your tales? If we were a people much given to revealing secrets, we might raise monuments and sacrifice to the memories of our poets, but slavery cured us of that weakness. It may be enough, however, to have it said that we survive in exact relationship to the dedication of our poets (include preachers, musicians and blues singers). (56).

In the final scenes, Angelou confronts and overcomes the numerous questions about her sexuality which she believes is verging on lesbianism: why is her voice so heavy and her hands and feet so far from being feminine and dainty? For weeks, Angelou seeks answers to these questions, probing into unsatisfying books and into her own mind without finding a morsel of peace or understanding. Taking matters into her own hands, she decides to offer herself to a neighbourhood youth; and, at age sixteen, she becomes pregnant, bearing the consequence of an unsatisfactory experiment. By the end of the autobiography, Angelou, the young adult, has succeeded in freeing herself from her cage by assuming control of her life and fully accepting her womanhood. The interplay of history and memory merges in the two distinct voices of narration; that of Angelou, the

mature narrator and the girl child "Maya character" and as Braxton (1999:5) puts it "the mature autobiographer consciously fingers the jagged edges of her remembered experience, squeezing out a tough lyric of black and blue triumph".

Basically, Maya Angelou has reconstructed her personal history in this autobiographical tale whose protagonist is the child narrator, Maya. In reality, she becomes the collective consciousness of Angelou's past experiences. As a character, Maya has many obstacles to overcome including her sense of abandonment, her grandmother's rigid fundamentalism, the racism of Stamps, and poverty. Like the Bildungsroman novel formation, the Maya character follows through the pain of learning about life, coming of age and self-acceptance as she struggles for in life in a cruel racist society. The process of maturity is long, arduous and gradual, coming after a traumatic experience of rape. The mood of the text is both tense and nostalgic. As Angelou remembers the past, the narrator is sometimes frightened, indignant, amused, and her narration is laced with adult commentaries and explications. However, in the course of narration, Angelou exploits symbols, objects and figures as abstraction for representation of ideas and concepts. The most prominent being the store. Momma's store is a central gathering place in Stamps and the center of Maya's childhood. There, she witnesses the cycles of nature and labour, tending to workers in the cotton-picking season and canners during the killing season. The store symbolizes the rewards of hardwork and loyalty and the importance of a strong and devout community. By this, it provides the site, a meeting point for mutual agreement and corresponds to Alice Walker's Womanist recommendation of the commitment "to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female".

Secondly, the lavender taffeta dress that Momma alters for Maya on Easter symbolizes Maya's lack of love for herself and her wish for acceptance through transformation. She believes that beauty means white beauty. Hanging by the sewing machine, the dress looks magical. Maya imagines that the dress will reveal her true self to people who will then be shocked by her beauty. This perception is closely related to Pecola Breedlove, Toni Morrison's heroine in *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Pecola is a young black girl who denies her beauty but believes she would be pretty, happy and loved if only she had blue eyes. For Maya, harsh reality strikes on Easter morning when she realizes that the dress is only a white woman's over used dress and cannot in any way take away her black nightmare. She learns later, though, that her transformation will have to take place from within.

The narrative exploits the presence of strong female characters. Though Maya struggles with insecurity and displacement throughout her childhood, she has a remarkable number of strong female role models in her family and community. Momma, Vivian, Grandmother Baxter, and Bertha Flowers feature prominently in Maya's process of self growth and their impact pose a positive path for Maya's healing. These women though they have different personalities and views on life, they all chart their own paths and manage to maintain their dignity and self-respect. Angelou notes at the end of Chapter 34 that the towering character of the black American woman should be seen as the predictable outcome of a hard fought struggle. Thus:

> The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power. The fact the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance.

Many black women fall along the way. The ones who can weather the storm of sexism and racism obviously will shine with greatness. These women have survived, and therefore by definition, they are survivors.

In African American literature and especially black women narratives, naming is an important tool of self writing. Angelou's first autobiography charts a continuous motion of becoming, consciously interrogating every manifestation of an emerging and emergent self – "Marguerite", "My Sister", "Sister", "Rita", "Ritie", "Reet", "Maya". Maya's real name is Marguerite, most of her family members call her Ritie. She accepts to answer Maya as an adult name, a name given to her by her brother, Bailey, indicating the depth of love and admiration she holds for him. Thus, finding a loving family, is connected with finding her name and her identity. Maya notes that for African Americans in general, naming is a sensitive issue as it provides a sense of identity in a hostile world that aims to stereotype blacks and erase their identity and individuality. Consequently, pejoratives like 'nigger' so often used to cut down blacks are interpreted as damaging and insulting. The significance and cultural relevance of naming is at the core of African traditional values. Renaming Marguerite to Mary by the white lady Mrs. Cullinan, is therefore carrying forward that enslaving technique designed to subvert her identity. Besides the fact that Mrs. Cullinan does not take the time to get Maya's name right in the

first place, she wishes to manipulate Maya's name for her own convenience thereby inspiring Maya's first act of resistance, breaking the china.

I Know Why the Caged Birds Sings appeared in 1970. In the same year appeared Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Louise Meriwether's *Daddy Was a Numbers Runner*, Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, and Nikki Giovanni's *Black Feeling, Black Talk/Black Judgement*. In these and other notable works of the 1970s – including Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1976) – black women writers have debated the effects of black sexism, and many have asserted that they must find identity not merely in opposition to the traditions for the woman that the black culture imposes. Angelou has put herself apart by using the autobiographical mode to achieve this feat. On the other hand, it is observed that many African American texts of this era were written to create a particular political impact. As such one can hardly ignore the political conditions in which the slave narratives were composed or the political impact their authors intended them to have. Even African American texts that are not obviously part of a protest tradition are received in a political context. Pierre A. Walker (2009:18) attests:

> So important is the political to the experience of African-American literature that it comes as no surprise that the increasing incorporation of the African-American literary tradition into mainstream academic literary studies since 1980 coincides exactly with the increasingly greater significance of the political in the prevailing critical paradigm: what better for a political literary criticism to address than an overtly political literature?

Angelou exploits the autobiographical mode in telling a political story of how undeservedly her novel's protagonist was relegated to second-class citizenship in her early years and by extension demonstrating the sustained fight against racism. The problem is that African American literature has, on more than one occasion, relied on confirming its status as literature to accomplish its political aims. Since slavery relied on a belief that those enslaved were not really human beings, slave narrators responded by writing books that emphasized the fact that they themselves were humans who deserved to be treated as such. Since emancipation, African American authors have used the same strategy to fight the belief in racial hierarchies that relegated them to second-class citizen status. There is remarkably large number of African American poets who provide

examples of this strategy in their works like Claude McKay, Countee Cullen's "Yet Do I Marvel" and James Weldon Johnson's "O Black and Unknown Bards".

Perhaps a better understanding Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is inevitably echoed in her most powerful poem "Caged Bird". This poem tells the story of a free bird and a caged bird. The free bird floats leisurely on 'trade winds soft through the sighing trees' and even 'dares to claim the sky' and equally 'name the sky his own'. Unlike his unbound brother, the caged bird leads a life of confinement that solely inhibits his need to fly and sing. Trapped by the unyielding bars of its cage, the bird can only lift its voice in protest against its imprisonment and the 'grave of dreams' on which he perches. Little wonder that:

The caged bird sings
With a fearful thrill
Of things unknown
But longed for still
And his tune is heard
On the distant hill
For the caged bird
Sings of freedom

Although he sings of 'things unknown', the bird's song of freedom is heard even as far as the 'distant hill'. His song is his protest, his only alternative to submission and entrapment. Angelou knows why the caged bird and all oppressed beings must sing. As long as such melodies are sung and heard, hope and strength will overcome defeated dreams. However, as the novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* concludes, Maya Angelou has succeeded in focusing almost entirely on the inner spaces of her emotional and personal life, crafting a literary autobiography that becomes not merely a personal record but also a stage on which the sins of the past can be recalled and rituals of healing and reconciliation enacted.

SELF AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CONTINUITY IN MAYA ANGELOU'S *GATHER TOGETHER IN MY NAME*

This is the second volume in Angelou's series of six autobiographies. The novel begins three years after *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* capturing the period within her 17th to 19th birthday. Angelou is not afraid to bare her soul and admit to bad judgment; she takes us through sometimes devastating consequences and the challenges faced by seventeen year old mother. The period is chronologically covered through different episodes, journeys from job to job, relationships with men coloured by her romantic

fantasy and occasional brush with trouble in the process of self-discovery. The story of Maya's teenage struggle coincides with the years following the World War 2. She takes her first job as a cook at a San Francisco Creole restaurant. Between the steamy page and fragrant menu at the restaurant she opens up to relationships with men. She comes in contact with drug users, gamblers, con artists, pimps, and prostitutes. While living in San Diego becomes an "absentee manager" for two lesbian prostitutes, when threatened with incarceration and losing her son for her illegal activities, she escapes to her grandmother's home in Stamps, Arkansas. In Stamps, she confronts two white women in a department store and her grandmother sends her back to San Francisco out of fear for her safety. Back with her mother, Angelou attempts to enlist in the Army only to be rejected during the height of the Red Scare because she had attended the California Labor School. Later, she falls in love with Tolbrook who seduces her and introduces her to a life of prostitution which he justifies as appropriate. Her mother's hospitalization makes her leave her young son in the hands of a caretaker, Big Mary who disappears with her son, Guy. Angelou is overwhelmed by the emotion of losing her baby and she finally traces him and reunites with her son, she understands the uniqueness of their bond better. As the novel ends, her encounter with a drug addict helps her realise the effect of substance drug addiction and the need to make something out of her life for both herself and her son.

Angelou's second novel *Gather Together in my Name* centers on her life and her brother's move away from their grand-mother. This transition takes place from her later teen years through her mid-twenties, focusing on her experiences as mother, creole cook, a madam, a tap dancer, a prostitute and a chauffeur. As Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu (2006:13) puts it "*Gather Together in my Name* deals with the disparity between fantasy and reality in amatory relationships". Maya's human environment is littered with troubled males: drug users, pimps, pushers, gamblers, and the despondent, the latter category being one that includes her brother. While she acknowledges the dehumanizing pressures on many of these men, she finds her relative naiveté, loyalty, and straight forwardness abused by those who profess to care for her. Her body becomes a tool for the furthering of their personal and professional goals, an often sexist breach of trust that requires healing and much positive support from her mother as well as a cluster of female friends.

The novel opens with the euphoric feeling of a post war Black American community:

> Black men from the South who had held no tools more complicated than plows had learned to use lathes and borers and welding guns, and had brought in their quotas of war-making machines. Women who had only known maid's uniform's and mammy-made dresses donned the awkward men's pants and steel helmets, and made the ship-fitting sheds hum some buddy. Even the children had collected paper, and at the advice of elders who remembered World War 1, balled the tin foil from cigarettes and chewing gum into balls as big as your head. Oh, it was a time.... And at last it had paid off in spades. We had won. Pimps got out of their polished cars and walked the streets of San Francisco only a little uneasy at the unusual exercise. Gamblers, ignoring their sensitive fingers, shook hands with shoe shine boys. Pulpits rang with the "I told you so" of ministers who knew that God was on the side of right and He would not see the righteous forsaken, nor their young beg bread. Beauticians spoke to the shipyard workers, who in turn spoke to the easy ladies. And everybody had soft little preparation-to-smile smiles on their faces. I thought if war did not include killing, I'd like to see one every year. Something like a festival. (3-4).

Even with the excitement of after war, the milieu of the post-World War 11 was fraught with evil. Maya ends up living along the periphery of the society dinning with kings and queens of the underworld. It is an environment where the need to support herself and her son leads her to some quick and easy choices.

It appears that between the conclusion of *Caged Bird* and the beginning of *Gather Together in My Name*, there is virtually no break in the narrative. As the first ends with the birth of her son, the second starts when Guy is only a few months old. The novel tells the story of his first three years and focuses on a young single mother's struggle to achieve respect, love, and a sense of self-worth. Her battle to win financial independence and the devotion of a faithful man could hardly have been easy in the years immediately following World War 11, when racial discrimination and unemployment were all on the rise. In spite of her initial optimism, which is incidentally, shared by many members of the post-war black community who fervently believed that:

> There was no need to discuss racial prejudice. Hadn't we all, black and white, just snatched the remaining Jews from the hell of concentration camps? Race prejudice was dead. A mistake made by a young country. Something to be forgiven as an unpleasant act committed by an intoxicated friend. (4).

Angelou soon realizes that her dreams for a better America are still too fragile to survive the stark realities of black life after the war, her narrative captures the desolate environment recovering from the aftermath of war-torn America:

> Those military heroes of a few months earlier, who were discharged from the Army in the city which knows how, began to be seen hanging on the ghetto corners like forgotten laundry left on a backyard fence. Their once starched khaki uniforms were gradually bastardized. An ETO jacket, plus medals, minus stripes, was worn with out-of-fashion zoot pants. The trim army pants, creases trained in symmetry, were topped by loud, color-crazed Hawaiian shirts. The shoes remained. Only the shoes. The Army had made those shoes to last. And dammit, they did. Thus we lived through a major war. The question in the ghettos was, Can we make it through a minor peace? (5).

While the dream for a better society still falters, Angelou challenges the burden of guilt that rests on the shoulders of the seventeen year old mother who desperately believes that she must assume full adult responsibility:

> I was seventeen, very old, embarrassingly young, with a son of two months, and I still lived with my mother and step-father. They offered me a chance to leave my baby with them and return to school. I refused. First, I reasoned with the righteous seriousness of youth, I was not Daddy Clidell Jackson's blood daughter and my child was his grandchild only as long as the union between Daddy and Mother held fast, and by then I had seen many weak links in their chain of marriage. Second, I considered that although I was Mother's child, she had left me with others until I was thirteen and why should she feel more responsibility for my child than she had felt for her own. Those were the pieces that made up the skin of my refusal, but the core was more painful, more solid, truer. A textured guilt was my familiar, my bed mate to whom I had turned my back. My daily companion whose hand I would not hold. The Christian teaching dinned into my ears in the small town in Arkansas would not be quieted by the big-city noise. My son had no father – so what did that make me? According to the Book, bastards were not to be allowed into the congregation of the righteous. There it was. I would get a job, and a room of my own, and take my beautiful son out into the world. (5-6).

Armed with this disposition, Maya moves from home, going from city to city in search of a job and an atmosphere conducive to raise her young son in a society just recovering from the war.

The novel's narrator attempts an episodic series of adventures whose fragments are reflections of the kind of chaos found in actual living. By altering the narrative structure, Mary Jane Lupton (1999:130) argues that Angelou:

> Shifts the emphasis from herself as an isolated consciousness to herself as a black woman participating in diverse experiences among diverse class of peoples. As the world of experience widens, so does the canvas.

However, Angelou maintains a hopeful outlook and a determination to support and protect herself and her infant son from the insecurities she faced as a child. She understands that the hurdles she has to cross on her road to success are often higher than those set by her own expectations and standards of performance. Although she spends the first few years of her son's life in California, she often faces racial discrimination reminiscent of her childhood experiences in the South. At one point in the novel, when she suspects that her striving business as a madam of two prostitute house will soon be uncovered by the Police, Angelou returns to Stamps with her son.

Not long after her arrival, she comes face to face with the double standards of racial discrimination during an unpleasant confrontation with a salesclerk in the white-owned general merchandise store. Although she attempts to explain to her grandmother why she refused to accept the clerk's humiliating insults, Momma warns her that her "principles" are all too flimsy a protection against the unrestrained contempt of bigotry:

> "You think 'cause you've been to California these crazy people won't kill you? You think them lunatic cracker boys won't try to catch you in the road and violate you? you think because of your all-fired principle some of the men won't feel like putting their white sheets on and riding over here to stir up trouble? You do, you're wrong. Ain't nothing to protect you and us except the good Lord and some miles. I packed you and the baby's things, and Brother Wilson is coming to drive you to Louisville. (93).

Momma slaps Maya for verbally assaulting two white saleswomen in a clash that is both painful and final. While Maya argues for "the principle of the thing", Momma's slap is well intended as she seeks to protect Maya from "lunatic cracker boys". The "new" Maya, who has been to the city and found a sense of independence is caught in the clash between her recently acquired "principles" and Momma's fixed ideology. Thus the slap – and the intention behind it – will remain in Maya's memory long after Angelou has been separated from Annie Henderson's supervision.

Although Angelou's narrative demands respect for the working mother, the extended family, and for other mothers, Siphokazi Koyana (2009:72) observes that "Maya's struggle demonstrates the tensions inherent in belonging to a group that values these notions of family, while living in a larger society that devalues them". This tension is evident in Maya's feelings of rejection in childhood to her frustrations when faced with the responsibility of raising Guy. While pursuing self-fulfilling career ambitions and living her own life often means relying on kin to help care for Guy, in the mid-twentieth century in America, the ethical ideological norm seems to be that good mothers are unselfish, meaning they put their children's needs before their own. By following in the footsteps of other black mothers through determination to protect and provide for her son against all odds, Maya testifies her allegiance to the larger cultural expectations that a mother stays with her child at all times. The novel appears to project the psychological split Angelou experiences from the cultural dichotomy. Firstly, she literally follows a pattern of departure from home and return to family. These cyclical movements illustrate the place of journey as a controlling metaphor in black American autobiography. At a personal level, it reflects Maya's quest for self-knowledge, a move from disorder, misunderstanding, chaos towards order and reconciliation. Returning and leaving provides the enabling environment to make peace with the past and evolve a self-identity. Secondly, Koyana (2009:73) offers that "Angelou presents her double-consciousness, her oscillation between her intrinsic Afro-American and her imposed Euro-American cultural identities, in literary terms, by contrasting reality with fantasy". This juxtaposition is most evident in her portrayal of differences between her experience of marriage and its idealization in the larger American culture.

The most dramatic mother-child episode in the novel occurs while Maya is working as a prostitute. She leaves Guy with her baby sitter, Big Mary. Returning for him after several days, she learns that her son has been kidnapped. Angelou finally recovers her child unharmed; at that moment she realizes that they are both separate individuals. With the emotional reunion with her son, she writes:

> Separate from my boundaries, I had not known before that he had and would have a life beyond being my son, my pretty baby, my cute doll, my charge. In the plowed farmyard near Bakersfield, I began to understand that uniqueness of the person. He was three and I was nineteen, and never again would I think of him as a beautiful appendage of myself. (192).

Angelou's awareness of the inevitable separation of mother and child, expressed here for the first time, is a theme that she will continue to explore throughout the remaining autobiographical volumes.

While Maya is indeed in the process of developing an independent personality, she is nevertheless is obsessed by her yearning for "a man, any man, to give me a June Allyson screen-role life with sunken living room, and cashmere-sweater sets, and I, for one, obviously would have done anything to get that life." The second volume of Angelou's autobiography ends just before she decides to settle down with a man she pictures as an "ideal husband", who is in fact a heroin addict and gambler. She learns on time and regains her innocence through the lessons a compassionate drug addict:

> He had exposed himself to me to teach me a lesson and I learned it as I sat in the dark car inhaling the odors of the wharf. The life of the underworld was truly a rat race, and most of its inhabitants scurried like rodents in the sewers and gutters of the world. I had walked the precipice and seen it all; and at the critical moment, one man's generosity pushed me safely away from the edge.... I had given a promise and promise and found my innocence. I swore I'd never lose it again. (213-214).

Angelou identifies the discrepancy between her fantasy of marriage and the actual experience, noting that despite the social propaganda, marriage fails to bring normality and stability to her life.

Basically, Angelou's unique probing of the interior self, her distinctive use of humor and self-mockery, her linguistic sensibility, as well as her ability to balance the quest for human individuality with the general condition of black Americans distinguish her as a master of the genre. Siphokazi Koyana (2009:67) observes that Angelou uses her "maturing understanding of family and community to project an individual's attempt to forge and maintain a healthy sense of self within a group that is undergoing a cultural transition". Relying on her experience of black culture, wherein self-reliance and motherhood are integrate, Maya rejects the option of seeking government assistance, a decision which leads to work situations that highlight how racist capitalism drives black women into poverty that is not only financial but at times also moral. Maya's work experiences show how the lack of skills and the racist practice of excluding blacks from meaningful employment are the real culprits for despair and drug abuse, and not just working outside the home. A clear example of the exclusion of black mothers from

constructive economic engagement arises when a white personnel supervisor fails Maya in a simple test that would qualify her to be a trainee operator. Consequently, she ends up as the bus girl who must wait on white girls who had been.

The novel shows how an individual can be involved in many experiences and still be severely limited. Angelou as quoted in James Robert Saunders (2009:7) explains the choice of her second autobiography's title:

> *Gather Together in my Name*, though it does have a biblical origin, comes from the fact I saw so many adults lying to so many young people, lying in their teeth, saying, 'You know, when I was young, I never would have done.... Why I couldn't.... I shouldn't.... Young people know when you're lying; so I thought for all those parents and non-parents alike who have lied about their past, I will tell it.

And tell it she does. Recapitulating events that took place over a three-year period leading up to her nineteenth birthday, Angelou portrays what it was like having to scratch for every penny, holding jobs such as short – order cook, nightclub waitress and dancer, prostitute, and madam in charge of her own house of prostitution. We watch aghast as Angelou takes her first great slide down into the slimy world, volunteering to be a prostitute for a married man, Louis Tolbrook, who is old enough to be her father. Tolbrook is involved in organized crime, owes money to the mob, and in desperation, helps Maya reach this rationalization:

> "L.D., if a woman loves a man, there is nothing too precious for her to sacrifice and nothing too much for him to ask." I had to make him know that I was as capable of doing him a favour as his aging wife. He said nothing. "Love is blind and hides a multitude of faults. I know what you're talking about, and prostitution is like beauty. It is in the eye of the beholder. There are married women who are more whorish than a street prostitute because they have sold their bodies for marriage licenses, and there are some women who sleep with men for money who have great integrity because they are doing it for a purpose". (159-160).

In a different context from Maya's situation, the above statement would have been examined in the light of its feminist merit, but we detect Tolbrook's manipulation and at the same sort of desperation that earlier had led to her teenage pregnancy.

Angelou's autobiographies seem to fit the requirements of Alison Easton (2000:175) paradigm of counter-memory:

> Counter-memory is a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal. ...Counter-memory looks to the past for the hidden histories exclude from the dominant narratives. But unlike myths that seek to detach events and actions from the fabric of any larger history, counter-memory forces the revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past.

Gather Together In My Name depicts Maya's search for self- discovery, and dignity in a difficult environment of racism, and how she, like other African Americans, were able to rise above it. Her search is expressed both outwardly through her material needs, and inwardly, through love and family relationships. The loneliness that ensues for her is a one that becomes, at times, suicidal and contributes to her unanchored self. This uncertainty makes her unsure of herself, so she tries a variety of roles in a restless and frustrated way as adolescents often do during this period of their lives. Angelou uses her many roles, incarnations, and identities to signify multiple layers of oppression and personal history. What Angelou describes is a particular type of Black woman at a specific moment in history and subjected to certain social forces which assault the Black woman with unusual intensity.

Finally, by recognising the centrality of remembering and rewriting the history of black mothers while underscoring the intricate connection between maternal concerns and the racial or economic politics of her country, Angelou radicalizes autobiography and acknowledges its contribution to the struggle for racial equality. Ultimately, by analyzing her own experience of motherhood, Angelou is able to challenge the prevailing notions of maternity through questioning the feasibility of a domesticated motherhood for working-class black women and by dispelling the idealization of marriage. The interplay between mother and child creates the thematic continuity and highlights the significance of motherhood as a unifying element in the narration.

MEMORY AND JOURNEY IN MAYA ANGELOU'S *THE HEART OF A WOMAN*

This fourth volume of the continuing autobiography of Maya Angelou chronicles the years 1957 – 1963 – the early days of American civil rights struggle – and finds her in transition across the country to New York City to join John Killens in the Harlem Writer's Guild and to perfect her writing skills after years of performing as a singer and dancer. As a single mother struggling to support herself and her son, she

recounts the racial discrimination she encounters in order to rent a house in Los Angeles. The story begins in California where Angelou and her twelve year old son, Guy, find themselves unexpectedly entertaining a houseguest, the legendary jazz singer Billie Holiday. Nearing the end of her life, Holiday seeks solace and comfort in the normalcy of Angelou's life, eating together and singing Guy to sleep with a repertoire of jazz standards. Although Holiday plays the role of the spoiled diva and rants in a string of curses during her stay, Angelou chooses to look beyond the rough image and instead appreciate the tenderness Holiday displays in her interactions with Guy. Angelou meets and joins the work of Martin Luther King, Jr., who recruits her as the northern coordinator of Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a post she held for six months. As an activist, she helps organize a demonstration at the United Nations, protesting the 1961 assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Congo.

While the Civil Rights work plays an important role in her life, Angelou imagines herself as a domestic goddess, preparing delicious, wholesome meals in her kitchen while waiting for her man to come home. As her son grows into a teenager, she dreams of a steady male influence in the home, and soon enough she meets Vusumzi (Vus) Make, an African freedom fighter. Make utilizes his considerable African charms to woo Angelou, though they never actually have a wedding ceremony, the two live together as husband and wife. Vus takes Guy as a son and begins to teach him what it takes to be an African man. All seems to be going well until telltale signs of Make's infidelity arise. To make matters worse, the bills begin to pile up as such Angelou confronts Vus with both problems and the solution is for the family to move to Cairo. Once in Egypt, Angelou falls in love with Africa but her ignorance of the language and Islamic traditions puts her at the mercy of a male-dominated society. While her problems with Vus still feature prominently, she accepts an associate editorship post on the staff of *Arab Observer*, becoming the only woman editor in an office filled with men. Angelou plans her exit strategy as Make still continues chasing other women, she relocates to Ghana with her son in order for him to enrol at the University there. The novel concludes with Guy's recovery from a serious automobile accident and his subsequent move away from home to college.

It is at the beginning of *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), that Angelou regretfully confides, "In his nine years of schooling, we had lived in five areas of San Francisco, three townships in Los Angeles, New York City, Hawaii and Cleveland, Ohio. I followed the jobs, and against the advice of a pompous school psychologist, I had taken Guy

along." James Robert Saunders (2009:10) observes that "in actuality, Guy himself is struggling for identity in the midst of a world that becomes increasingly inhabited by a multitude of celebrities, including the likes of Billie Holiday and Abbey Lincoln". Having ventured, by now, into the literary arena (particularly the Harlem Writers Guild), Angelou adds other acquaintances of note, including Paule Marshall and James Baldwin. By the year 1959, the multitalented artist has been asked to replace Bayard Rustin as northern coordinator of the Martin Luther King led Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Angelou's friendship circle of notables has expanded dramatically and continues to grow as she broadens her horizons to include even more employment fields. Drama was the vehicle whereby Angelou had gotten involved in SCLC work linking her with the aspiring actor-comedian Godfrey Cambridge. They had worked diligently to produce a play, the proceeds of which were to go to that Civil Rights organization. Upon completion of that work, she immediately engages herself in related pursuits, eventually landing a role in Jean Genet's play, *The Blacks*. As members of the cast are being introduced to each other, we are awestricken at the Who's Who of black entertainers:

> Godfrey Cambridge is Diouf. Roscoe Lee Brown is Archibald. James Earl Jones is Village. Cicely Tyson is Virtue. Jay Riley is the Governor. Raymond St. Jacques is the Judge. Cynthia Belgrave is Adelaide. Maya Angelou Make is the White Queen. Helen Martin is Felicity, or the Black Queen. Lou Gossett is Newport News. Lex Monson is the Missionary. Abbey Lincoln is Snow and Charles Gordone is the Valet.

Among other things, her political involvements lead her to meet the exiled South African freedom fighter, Vusumzi Make. Concluding that he must be "the ideal man," she struggles to be a housewife. While Vusumzi and Guy are enjoying themselves talking, Angelou eavesdrops:

> tried to overhear their interesting conversations, but generally I was too busy with household chores to take the time. . . . I washed, scrubbed, mopped, dusted and waxed thoroughly very other day. Vus was particular. He checked on my progress. Sometimes he would pull the sofa away from the wall to see if possibly I had missed a layer of dust.

Perhaps a better understanding of the novel *The Heart of a Woman* would be informed by an assessment of a poem by Georgia Douglas Johnson, the source for the novel's title:

> The Heart of a Woman
> The heart of a woman goes forth with the dawn,
> As a lone bird, soft winging, so restlessly on
> Afar o'er life's turrets and vales does it roam
> In the wake of those echoes the heart calls home.
>
> The heart of a woman falls back with the night,
> And enters some alien cage in its plight,
> And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars.
> While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars.

Just like Dunbar's poem, "Sympathy", there is the haunting metaphor of a fluttering caged bird and invocations of dreams deferred. However, the significance of Johnson's poem above for Angelou this time is somewhat different. Having traversed since the events recorded in the first autobiographical instalment *Caged Bird*, over more of "life's turrets and vales", the author is in search of a home.

Believing, at the beginning of their relationship, that she has found it with Vusumzi Make, she in actuality has returned to the cage, an increasingly "alien cage" in which she is ultimately tormented, remembering all the promise that her life once held. Angelou was certainly prepared to make the sacrifice it took to ensure her family's stability. But Vusumzi's level of commitment is at the very least questionable. At a diplomatic party in New York, "he was dancing with the little sexy woman, holding her too close, gazing too deeply in her eyes". At other times, Angelou discovers the telltale lipstick and perfume, while Make insists, "My dear, there are no other women. You are the only love in my world. You are the only woman I've ever wanted and all that I have"(186). He is a talented liar but inept at handling his own financial affairs. At one point, they face eviction, and after, they are forced to move to Cairo, Egypt, where Angelou decides to get a job as an associate editor of the *Arab observer*. When Vusumzi discovers her accomplishment, he is livid and calls her to task: "You took a job without consulting me? Are you a man?"(226). His tirade continues while she is sitting quietly, "watching him, listening and thinking". The relationship for all intent and purposes has ended as she arrives at the conclusion that she is no longer in love, and he becomes "a fat man, standing over me, scolding". The text identifies the discrepancy between Maya's fantasy of marriage and the actual experience as one that shows how, despite the social

propaganda, marriage fails to bring normality and stability to Maya's life. She attempts to attend the ever-elusive American Dream, the dream life common in movies by creating imagined realities as a contrast to life's realities. Maya Angelou chose to exercise her own quote, "there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you", through her various autobiographies to draw the reader's attention to her extraordinary past and possibly learn from it. She understands and communicates movingly, the pain and fury that informs every aspect of being a black American woman. Her works explore her increasing involvement with the civil rights movement

Initially, autobiographies such as the slave narratives were historical treatises. Black writers of autobiography were especially rooted in this historical format, often leaving out information about the writer's personal life. Angelou's success is seen in her ability to transcend the borders of not only narrating the general lifestyle of the time and place but incorporating her personal life experiences as well. Harris (2003) affirms that Black women have started writing more personal details of their lives, such as how they handle different kinds of relationship situations, family issues, financial problems, and personal events that could affect their acceptance in their communities, workplaces, and society in general. Although political issues are important, the discussion of personal lifestyle issues can undoubtedly reveal how the writer copes with everyday hardships. However, Angelou's contribution to the Civil Rights Movements is as important to the narrative as the discussion of the personal. Infact, (Harris 2005:42) highlights the relevance of this aspect as a careful blend of the requirements of an autobiography. Thus:

> When writing my autobiography I found it difficult to write from a strictly personal perspective, because it was just as important for me to write about political issues that were happening at certain times in my life that also affected me personally. I could not have written my autobiography without writing about the civil rights movements or about moving from the segregated South to the home of my White foster parents in the northeast. I therefore intertwined the two perspectives to tell what I feel is a comprehensive story.

The writing of autobiography is therefore a way of creating self and community and the Black woman who writes it becomes the literary historian of her Black community.

Apparently Angelou's achievement in *The Heart of a Woman* includes an adept string of episodic series of adventures in the process of movement from city to city to tell a story of a black woman involved in diverse experiences. She beams a light in her memory to represent black woman's life as experienced by an authentic black woman.

Black women critics have affirmed that the journey motif is an integral part of self assertion and consciousness raising for the black woman in African American literary texts. In the words of Grace Okereke (1997:91) "mobility is fundamental in the construction of consciousness". Also, Deborah E. McDowell (1993:165) attests that one recurring theme in the novels of Black women writers is the motif of the journey. The black female's journey, though at times touching political and social like Angelou's activists involvements, is basically a personal and psychological journey. Equally Mary Helen Washington (1980:43) observes that the female character in the works of Black women is in a state of becoming "part of an evolutionary spiral, moving from victimization to consciousness". In the light of the novel under review, these assertions remain valid.

It appears that unlike some Black women writers of autobiography who often fail to discuss feelings of anger and rage that may accompany their experiences of marginalization, harassment, and hostility associated with racial bigotry; Angelou's narrative is different as it gives detailed accounts of emotional outburst in situations requiring such responses. Her writing of autobiography provides the means of harnessing the negativity that black women encounter and survive. In this sense, Audre Lorde (1984:129) writes on the centrality of survival in combating humiliating life experiences, she says:

> women of Color in America have grown up within a symphony of anger, at being silenced, at being un-chosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service. And i say symphony rather than cacophony because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart. We have had to learn to move through them and use them for strength and force and insight within our daily lives. Those of us who did not learn this difficult lesson did not survive. And part of my anger is always libation for my fallen sisters.

However, another recurrent motif in Angelou's work is her insistence on probing the relationship between struggle and change: a probing that encompasses the pain of black people's lives, black women's lives against which the writer protests. Barbara Christian (1985:82) affirms that such pain sometimes results in growth, precisely because of the nature of the struggle that must be borne, if there must be a change. Angelou's peculiar voice, the specific mode through which her deepening of self-knowledge comes,

seems to have much to do with her willingness at all times to challenge the fashionable belief of the day, to re-examine it in the light of her own experiences and of dearly won principles that she has previously challenged. In all, Angelou's achievement can be linked to Temple (2012) assertion that African American women's autobiographical record are the legacy of cultural memory and of models of visionary activism.

CHAPTER FOUR

TERRY MCMILLAN : NARRATING THE SELVES IN THE SOCIAL SPACE

This chapter interprets three selected narratives of Terry McMillan *Waiting to Exhale*, *A Day Late and a Dollar Short*, and *The Interruption of Everything* with a view to scrutinizing her exploration of the internal crisis among individuals in the family and the aspirations of specific sentiments in her novels. Her texts set in the baby boom generation of the 90s, function as a dialectical process that contends the innovative form she develops in her prose, and reinforces her radical perspective to black female consciousness. We begin with a review of the author's biographical information and sensibilities.

Terry McMillan was born October 18, 1951, in Port Huron, Michigan, the oldest of five children and daughter of Madeline Washington Tillman and Edward McMillan. After her parents' divorce when McMillan was thirteen, her mother supported the family by working in a factory. Later, the library job she had opened up a world of books for her, although initially reading black authors was a thing of embarrassment and fear. She attended City College of Los Angeles and enrolled in an African American Literature where she became acquainted with works of James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes and Frederick Douglass. After her studies at Los Angeles City College, McMillan spent six years as a student at the University of California in Berkeley, where she initially considered majoring in sociology but later majored in journalism. Upon completion of her studies, she moved to New York on the advice of Ishmael Reed and joined the Harlem Writers Guild. With the encouragement of her other writers in the guild, began her writing career. In 1983, while a single parent to her son Solomon, a graduate student on the M.F.A. program in film at Columbia University, and a typist,

McMillan enrolled for a two-week stint at an artists' colony in New York, where she completed a draft of what would be her first novel, *Mama*.

After the completion of her formal education, McMillan began her teaching career. She has held positions at Stanford University, the University of Wyoming, and the University of Arizona in Tucson where she gained tenure. Following her teaching career, McMillan began to focus all of her attention on writing full-time. Her first novel, *Mama* (1987), gave her wide recognition; however, it is her second novel *Disappearing Acts* (1989) that brought her fame. Her third novel, *Waiting To Exhale* (1992), became an instant *New York Times* bestseller and remained on the bestsellers list for thirty-eight weeks. The novel then became an award-winning motion picture. According to Gabriel Packard (2012) McMillan's major breakthrough came with her third novel, "the runaway bestseller *Waiting To Exhale* (1992) and its equally successful movie adaptation starring Whitney Houston and Angela Bassett". With the success of the movie, African American women across the United States gathered in theatres where applause and cheering were heard as the protagonists of the film claimed their right to self-actualization. Her fourth novel, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1996), also became an instant success and was also transformed into a major motion picture. She has also written *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* (2001), *The Interruption of Everything* (2005), *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Fiction* (1990), *It's Okay If You're Clueless* (2006) and *Getting to Happy* (2010).

THE CHANGING ROLES OF WOMEN IN TERRY MCMILLAN'S *WAITING TO EXHALE*

The first chapter of the book begins with Savannah getting ready for a New Year's Eve party. Her younger sister encouraged her to meet a guy named Lionel, who is the friend of Sheila's husband. While she is getting ready she explains that she is moving to Phoenix and one of the reasons is because "the men are dead in Denver". When she arrives at the party she is nervous and not happy about the way she looks, but that doesn't stop her. She didn't really know what Lionel looked like so she sat at an open seat. She hopes that this is the right guy and wants to have fun tonight. She waits for an hour and finally bumps into him surprised. After talking for awhile, they decide to dance; while they were dancing she is swept off her feet and believes that he is the guy that she has been waiting for all her life. After the dance is finished they return to their seats and that's when she finds out that Lionel is at the party with another woman.

The novel tells a story of four intelligent and attractive black women residing in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1991. The women support each other through personal and professional challenges and successes. They are savvy enough to manage every element of their lives, except finding fulfilment in love. The book's title stems from their collective anticipation of exhaling only when they have achieved satisfying relationships with a man. The women think that they are doing everything possible to enact the change they seek in their lives but stereotypes and bad habits seem to undermine efforts. Each of the novel's four strong characters are narrators of their story and it is largely comments about their lives, their relationships with each other, with men, careers, families, problems. Savannah Jackson is single, bright, ambitious, and recently moved to Phoenix as a PR executive for a cable television station. Bernadine Harris is one of Phoenix's wealthy wives in the middle of divorce. She abandoned her own career and desires of having a catering business to raise a family. Her husband of eleven years is now leaving her for a white woman and she must raise her two kids alone. Robin Stokes is a high-powered executive and an insurance underwriter. She has been Russell's mistress for a long time and after dumping him, she has problems finding a decent man to love. Gloria Matthews is a beauty salon owner and single mother raising her teenage son, Tarik, who is preparing to leave home and travel round the world. After years of being alone and finding out that her ex-husband David, the father of her son, is also gay, she falls in love with the new neighbour Marvin King. Taken together, these women epitomize what it means to be a girlfriend, endlessly teasing, commiserating, and celebrating together as they navigate through the torrent waters of romance.

Terry McMillan's third novel, *Waiting To Exhale* (1992) is structured in the classic four – woman pioneered by Louisa May Alcott in *Little Women.* McMillan balances four main characters – Savannah, Bernadine, Gloria, Robin, as they struggle through and overcome familial, romantic, and career relationships. The novel portrays the complications and hardships between Black men and women. Each of the four strong and high – energy women are in their mid-thirties and successful in terms of everything but relationships. Savannah is single, bright, ambitious, recently moved to Phoenix as a PR executive for a Cable television station. Bernadine, a wealthy wife and mother of two, is getting divorced from her husband of eleven years who is leaving her for a white girl. Robin, an insurance underwriter is adventurous and gullible with men, while Gloria owns and runs a salon and has raised her teenage son by herself. Robin and Savannah narrate their story in the first person, while Gloria Bernadine's stories are told in the third person.

By alternating the chapters, the author tells each person's story. Her choice of words and sexual frankness may have facilitated the novel's broad mainstream appeal. These women epitomize the bond of female friendship as they commiserate and celebrate together while navigating through the dangerous waters of romance. McMillan's heroines are holding their breath, waiting for the elusive blessing of love and learning the true value of independence and pride. The novel, *Waiting To Exhale* draws attention to such concerns as inter - racial relationships between black men and women as a major cause of concern for the Black woman. McMillan therefore traces this through Gloria's overview of black female experience. Thus:

> in the seventies, when she was still living in Oakland, everywhere she went she saw black men with white women on their arms. Back then, the men seemed to be doing it more to prove a point. Then things cooled down for a few years. Now Gloria was wondering if "our" men were running to white women again because *we* were doing something wrong?... Did white women have *something* we didn't? (112).

The novel garners attention because of its portrayal of the complications and hardships between black men and women. Although the novel has been assigned a negative controversy within the African American community for its assumed unrelenting bashing and stereotyping of black men, the novel has achieved a significant mark in black publishing world with its overwhelming financial success as it sold over four million copies. McMillan's novels continue to beam on and foreground the complex lives of middle-class Black women as they struggle and triumph over adversities in their familial and romantic relationships. Her work addresses a significant core within the community of middle class African American women who are successful professionally but who consider themselves failures in their lives. Instead of highlighting the long standing history of racial politics, she exposes the deep fissures of sexual politics within the African American community. McMillan emphasizes the quest for personal liberty instead of championing civil liberty for the race as a whole. This does not mean she glosses over oppressive forces that curtail freedom of black people; rather she is more interested in examings how individuals empower themselves and define their own sense of freedom. The novel, *Waiting to Exhale* shows that the author is interested in questions of personal responsibility and choice, as are her characters who exhibit human flaws. Yet McMillan's heroines are almost all women of substance who reflect her generation's unprecedented success as professionals in the mainstream American society. She

challenges her characters to grow and attain greater levels of personal integration, hence, celebrating the healing power of transformation in her works.

The choice of professionally successful black women as characters in the novel may be attributed to the trend in the 1990s where the population of working class women increased drastically. According to Paulette Richards (1999:24) "by 1980, over 50 percent of all women were in paid workforce, and 38 percent of all mothers with children under one year old worked outside the home". McMillan draws resources from the changing roles of women as at the time of writing. Instead of creating heroines who depend on the hero for economic support, her heroines had successful careers or owned profitable businesses; and many plots of the time reflected contemporary women's dilemmas over balancing their careers with marriage and family life. Time to pursue their own interests and indulge their own whims becomes a precious commodity for many women. During this period, Richards (1999:25) opines that the "Romance novels had also grown progressively more explicit in their representations of erotic love, and readers seemed to appreciate passionate lovers more than sensitive helpmates". These factors as well as the rise in women's popular fiction could be attributed to McMillan's phenomenal success. She incorporates the African American cultural inflections to her representations of black love and portrays a network of relationships within a self-contained black community in a bid to extend the liberating power of written narrative to a vernacular audience of black readers.

The four characters, Savannah Jackson, Bernadine Harris, Robin Stokes and Gloria Matthews are all in their late thirties; Gloria the oldest is thirty-eight, Robin the youngest is thirty-five while Savannah and Bernadine are both thirty-six. As at 1990 when the novel is set, these women fit Codrington & Marshall (2004) generational classification of baby boomers, those born between the 1940s and 1960s and corresponds to the paradigm prescription of perceived membership in a common generation; common beliefs and behaviours; and a common location in history. In the novel, McMillan makes ample reference to popular songs and events such as the war in the Persian Gulf which sets the story in time around 1990. To be thirty-something at that moment in time is to be part of the baby boom – a generation that has grown up with a shared sense of identity defined by the mass media and popular culture especially the reference to the newly invented CD player. Popular culture during the decade of the 1980s and 1990s shifted from the highly political, socially engaged activity of the previous two decades to an obsession with music videos, cable television, and personal computers.

McMillan demonstrates how the experience of women born in the early years of the baby boom has redefined the role of women in the American society. Her characterisation dramatizes the changing mores that offered women of the baby boom unprecedented freedom to define their own sexuality. According to Richards (1999:118) "the invention of the birth control pill and the legalization of abortion were two landmark events that contributed to a climate of changing social mores known as the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s and 1970s". The women characters of *Waiting to Exhale* like the trend of their generation, regard the search for sexual fulfilment as a valid human endeavour. The author demonstrates her awareness of this when she allows Savannah to provide a comic description of a lover who growls like a bear during the sex act. Earlier generations of women readers might have judged Savannah negatively as a "loose woman" instead of acknowledging her frank description of what a woman does and does not look for in a lover. Thus, the novel strikes a chord similar to that of other forms of popular women's fiction, such as the romance novels, which also invites women readers into a dialogue about new roles women can play in intimate relationships.

Waiting to Exhale turns on the possibility that there are more women than men as well as the revelation of the female perception that there is a shortage of eligible men, particularly in the African American community. McMillan prioritizes the changing definition of what constitutes an "eligible man" in the eyes of successful African American women. For most, this means a man from a similar socioeconomic background. Put differently, an eligible man should have at least as much education as the woman, he should earn at least as much but preferably more money than she does, and should be somewhat older than she is. The possibility that African American women born during the first cohort of the baby boom started out facing a demographic disadvantage that was magnified by these eligibility expectations seems apparent. Even more challenging is the loss of potential black male spouses to homosexuality, imprisonment and the increasing number of black men who choose to marry outside their race all in a bid to live the "American dream" of inclusion. As such, definitions of the "eligible" may be revised to include men of lower socioeconomic status or even men who have a primary attachment to another woman. McMillan's changing definitions of some concepts for her female characters is relative to June Edmunds and Bryan Turner's (2002) classification of generation as sources of opposition, challenging existing societal norms and values. Clearly, McMillan's projection of successful female characters drives the concept of social change through a new generational re-programming and aspiration.

When it is important for McMillan to present an eyewitness account of incidents that build the dramatic tension in Bernadine's storyline, Bernadine serves as the view point character. For instance, McMillan gives readers direct access to Bernadine's thoughts and emotions when she hears from her children that their father got married and their new "mommy" is expecting a baby. Bernadine replies, "This is the best god-damn news I've heard all day" (334). Then she storms out of the room and locks herself in her bedroom. The developments in Bernadine's divorce are also the subject of reflection and discussion among other characters. Gloria finds out about the divorce from Phillip, who works in her beauty shop. As they style customers' hair, he reveals, "John left her, honey. Get ready for this: for a white girl!" (79). In this way, Bernadine's attracts attention and keeps the readers interested in what happens next. For Bernadine and her circle of friends, John's preference for a white woman is the ultimate betrayal and in a fit of rage, she burns all his designer clothes. Being the only one of the friends who is ever married, the failure of Bernadine's marriage represents the failure of a common dream. Despite their strongest wishes and expectations, all four women find themselves facing the prospect of a life that may never include a male partner.

Structurally, it appears that McMillan gives Bernadine a happy ending: final divorce settlement in court of almost one million US dollars – more than three times what John had initially offered. Symbolically, Bernadine wins justice, often an elusive commodity in the lives of African American women. As the novel closes, she also wins the love of a civil rights attorney, James Wheeler, who has agreed to relocate to Phoenix. James plans to fight to make the state honour the federal holiday on Martin Luther king, Jr's birthday. Thus, Bernadine's lover stands for justice. Furthermore, the fact that his first wife was a white woman who died of breast cancer and he has now chosen Bernadine restores the racial honour that John had tarnished at the beginning of the novel. In creating assertive female characters, McMillan has rightly confronted the mammy stereotype of black women in Barbara Smith's (1985:5) essay by extrapolating alternative images designed at expanding black women's consciousness. Lorraine Bethel (1982:177) validates that "black women writers have consistently rejected the falsification of their Black/female experience, thereby avoiding the negative stereotypes such falsification has often created in the white American female and Black male literary traditions". In synthesizing elements from the body of popular women's fiction as well as from the traditions of African American Oral and print literature, McMillan has discovered a powerful strategy for creating fictional spaces in which a black female

worldview can occupy the centre rather than the margins of mainstream American reality.

Contrastively, McMillan uses Gloria's high blood pressure and obesity as an example of how health problems are common in the black community and frequently claim people well before their time. Gloria has been using food as her lover and coping mechanism for years. While she owns one of the most successful African American beauty salon in town, she wears a size eighteen and weighs over two hundred pounds. As a single mother, her son Tarik, becomes the centre of her life, but at seventeen, her son is beginning to assert his manhood and leaves home which will require her to re-define her own interests in life. In the midst of these life adjustments, Gloria also gets caught up in a crisis at her shop. One of her stylists is gay and sick with AIDS and as such has to stop working. Another hair-stylist quits, Gloria has a difficult time finding a skilled replacement and tries to cover more of the clients herself. Her poor health habits catch up with her and she suffers a heart attack. With love and support from her family and friends Gloria recovers and opens up to the possibility of a romance with her widowed new neighbour. Marquita Pellerin (2012:76) observes that "contemporary media provide a venue to promote anti –Black woman" representation with stereotypical portrayals. McMillan response to these stereotypes is to create strong female characters who confront societal ills as well as personal health and perceived mis-guided sexual orientations. The task of African American women writers of McMillan's generation by Edmunds and Turner's (2002) is to act as agents of social change and carriers of intellectual and organisational alternatives to the status quo.

It appears that the desire for justice and the search for romantic partners are two motivations that drive the plot of the novel under study. Generally, one could say that the novel is about women's growth and personal development. Bernadine and Gloria have grown to a point of achieving their happy ending, in contrast, Robin does not learn much over the course of the story. She has what seems like miserable luck with men primarily because of the poor choices she makes solely on physical attractiveness. Since she does not ask the right questions in the beginning of a relationship, she ends up involved with men who are committed to other people or who have serious personal problems as drug addiction. Although Robin demonstrates competence in her work as an insurance underwriter, frequently arranging multimillion dollar deals, her personal finances are in shambles. Despite her pathetic choices, Robin's friends appreciate her spontaneous, fun-loving personality. Unfortunately, she uses her familiar negative patterns of undisciplined

shopping and sexual addiction to escape from family problems especially the tragedy of her father's Alzheimer's disease. While the other women offer Robin their friendship, they clearly disapprove the choices she makes and frequently lose patience with her willingness to let Russell and other men take advantage of her. Thus, McMillan leaves Robin pregnant with Russell's child but disillusioned with the man. Robin suits the classic naive narrator and the author deliberately manipulates the dramatic ironies of Robin's self-delusion to make a powerful comment on women who depend on men to validate their existence.

McMillan utilizes the scene of Gloria's birthday party to concretize the meaninglessness of waiting: a test of their ability to endure the dreaded time barrier, a lengthy period of waiting during which the passage of time has little importance. This emphasis on waiting draws markers with Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Musing about their dilemma, the ladies take turns in the commentary:

> "We're all good catches," Bernadine said. "Why are we all such good goddamn catches?" Savannah asked, leaning forward on her elbows and motioning for the other bottle of champagne.... "Well, since you know so damn much, why are we having such a hard-ass time meeting Mr. Wonderful?" Robin asked. (348).

However, McMillan puts a twist to the pull of dejection by crafting strong female bonding among her characters. Girlfriends assume top status in the hierarchy of important relationships for women. These women provide solace to one another in a way that family members, husbands, and boyfriends did not. They partied together, cried together, and ultimately, recovered together. What becomes apparent in the novel is a commemoration of powerful female relationships as a spring board for women to band together and summon the courage to tell their stories. To this end, Cheri Register (1993:170) agrees that female friendship has served as "a forum for women, helped to provide role-models, promote sisterhood, and augment consciousness–raising". Register adds that such a bond promotes honest self-expression that is not constrained by pre-existing standards. Prevailing in black women narratives is the intensification of these female bonding. In fact, Lorraine Bethel (1982:179) reinforces the inclination and argues that "women in this country have defied the dominant sexist society by developing a type of folk culture and oral literature based on the use of gender solidarity and female bonding as self-affirming rituals".

Black women have a long tradition of bonding together in a community and over time, this bond has been a source of survival, information, psychic and emotional

support and in the words of Bethel (1982:187) "the concept that when Black women come to each other as Black woman –identified women, we are at the end of our pilgrimage to know and be ourselves". By the end of *Waiting to Exhale*, the four women have come to the end of the quest and long dull waiting through the support of friendship. McMillan's novel becomes an attempt at the redefinition of women's experience and women all over find that they can relate the experiences of the female characters to their own lives. Although, McMillan's is criticised for not addressing racial issues, such criticism ignores the context out of which her fiction grows. What she does is a skilful representation of political and economic problems, not as abstract principles, but as realities that affect intimate relationships in the lives of her characters.

Remarkably, McMillan's new novel *Getting to Happy* (2010) offers a sequel to *Waiting to Exhale*. *Getting to Happy* resumes some fifteen years after *Waiting to Exhale* ends. All the four women are back in their fifties grappling with middle-age issues unlike the earlier years of romantic fantasy. Now, there are children and grandchildren from failed relationships, along with failed businesses and second mortgages. Savannah is unhappily married to Isaac, a landscaper, who spends more time with the computer than with his wife. Robin, a single mother and compulsive shopper, still clings to the dream of getting married in a white dress. She has recently discovered online dating and its new hobby. Bernadine's children are away in school, leaving her alone to mourn the woes of a defunct restaurant and the betrayal of her second husband. Now she retreats into prescription drugs and spends most of her days sleeping off the effect of drugs. Gloria is the only one happily married and she is happy though the happiness is only in the early pages of the novel. Now she manages her salon, her son is policeman with three children and a wife of questionable character. These women are faced with all kinds of contemporary, elderly mothers, addict brothers and sisters, and a changing job market. They have gained weight, gone through menopause and suffered memory loss. They are lonely and have stopped being social creatures. They earlier loud conversational pattern of "run(ning) their mouths on the phone half the night", has now been replaced by e-mail and text messages. Savannah sums it up with these lines:

> Times have certainly changed. We're all busy. We don't hang out like we used to, don't run our mouths on the phone half the night the way we used to, don't gossip about each other the way we used to. We send e-mail or text. . . . Forget about happy hour. (Do they still have them?) We haven't been drunk since 1999. Haven't set foot in a nightclub since Rick James had his last hit. We dance at home. Apparently, we're too damn old to have fun in public places. I don't

> know why we stopped being social creatures, but it's why Gloria came up with the idea of having Blockbuster Night. Once a month we kick up our heels at one of our houses. It's something to do. Bernadine cooks, since she's our black Julia Child. We make our husbands and children disappear. We don't care where they go, as long as they're gone for at least four hours.(3).

In all these, they decide individually and together to upgrade their lives to "get happy".

McMillan has plotted a chain of progression from *Waiting to Exhale* to *Getting to Happy*. For these women, it is no longer about the perfect man or job. Life appears more complicated as they confront life suffocating issues especially prescription drug addiction. Clearly, the theme addiction re-echoes through the novel. Bernadine struggles with antidepressants, Robin is addicted to shopping with her frequents to malls and Gloria struggles with food. All these struggles are the different ways of expressing addiction. The notion of "getting to happy" therefore becomes the point of doing away with self-delusion. The outrage and disillusionment of the early chapters of the novel melts into forgiveness, self-acceptance, and understanding. As such, McMillan's success is achieved in the narrative as she makes her characters undo their vices, as it were, and to visualize better lives through meditation and 'breathing'. Here meditation speaks to the individualism of a younger generation of black women writers of which McMillan represents. This generation is what Christel Temple (2012:27) describes as "African American post-enslavement generations" who "capture the hopes, dreams, and promise that enslavement denied to their parents and generations came before".

WRITING DYSFUNCTIONALITY IN TERRY McMILLAN'S *A DAY LATE AND A DOLLAR SHORT*

McMillan's novel, *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* focuses on Viola and Cecil Price and their loving but dysfunctional family. The Price family: mother, father, three daughters, and a son are in various stages of life's crises. Disillusionment and disappointment controls Viola and drives into constant bitterness with her children. At the opening, everyone is at odds with each other. Viola and her husband Cecil have separated after a tumultuous, 38-year marriage. Viola's second oldest daughter Charlotte and she are not speaking. Viola is troubled by a situation with her youngest daughter Janelle. The only son, Lewis, is an alcoholic, in and out of jail and alienated from the family because he feels he is the "failure" among his middle-class sisters. Paris, who admittedly is living out her mother's dream, is the only one at peace with Viola. But even

Paris is harbouring secrets. Meanwhile, Charlotte is not speaking to Paris because she feels Viola and Paris triangulate against her. The whole family is in turmoil.

As the text begins, Viola is in the hospital recovering from a devastating asthma attack, and she decides to turn her life around, even if it means causing her large, unruly clan a little discomfort. Lewis, Viola's only son, is a drifter, handicapped both by his genius IQ and his alcoholism. Janelle, the youngest child, is perpetually searching for the perfect career, while ignoring signs that her 12-year-old daughter is in trouble. Viola's relationship with her perpetually angry middle daughter, Charlotte, is so volatile that Charlotte periodically hangs up in the middle of phone conversations, while Paris, Viola's eldest, appears to be brilliantly successful, but is actually desperately lonely and has developed a dependency on pills to maintain her superwoman act. To add to the confusion, Cecil, Viola's husband of several years, has moved in with his girlfriend, Brenda, a welfare mother pregnant with a child that may or may not be his. The story of how the family puts it back together is told from the perspective of all six main characters, and McMillan moves easily and skilfully from voice to voice. A sudden, severe asthma attack lands Viola in the hospital, the clan gathers in Las Vegas to be near her, eager to help and of the belief that their father's unexpected desertion triggered the attack, even though their mother insists that it happened because she was, as usual, worrying about them. Cecil Price insists that he just walked out when he couldn't take one more minute of Viola's bossing and bad temper.

The Price children – Paris, Charlotte, Lewis, and Janelle - struggle with sibling jealousies, marital infidelities, child abuse, alcohol, and drugs. They have grown apart since all but Charlotte moved from Chicago to Los Angeles and Las Vegas, and time and distance aggravate divisions among the siblings and their parents. Each of them finds it hard to let long-maintained personal defences down, even when their lives fall apart. Paris, the oldest and the "perfect one," can't reveal her loneliness since her divorce; addicted to painkillers, she maintains a punishing career schedule. Confronted with the fact that her second husband has been molesting her teenage daughter, Janelle has to choose between financial security and protecting her daughter. Then there's Lewis, the alcoholic, suffering from rheumatoid arthritis and drowning in a river of troubles. A strong matriarch, Viola struggles to hold the family together while she loses the softness within that had held her marriage together. McMillan has each family member tell the Price family history from his or her own perspective until the family reassembles after Viola's death.

The novel recreates love and bond between adult family members as opposed to between sisters, friends and between men and women. It is also about family falling apart, and family coming back together. As such, this novel is a testament to the love between parents and their children, brothers and sisters. Through the literary device of the talk story, McMillan explores the ups and downs of the Price family. McMillan's fifth novel, *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* (2001) opens with the novel's narrator, Viola Price, who is in the hospital after suffering a severe asthma attack. She is unable to speak because she is connected to a respirator, and readers are invited into her consciousness and are able to hear her thoughts. A divorced mother with four children, Viola tells the story of the family's conflicts and their celebrations. Paris, the eldest daughter, is world – renowned chef and a single parent of a teenage son. While her life appears easy, she suffers the pains of loneliness and the dangers that come with prescription drug addiction and her mother tells of her gullibility with the men in her life:

> Now, Paris is the oldest. And just the opposite of Charlotte. Probably too much. Never gave me no trouble to speak of. And even though you love the ones that come afterwards, that first one'll always be something special. It's when you learn to think about somebody besides yourself. At the time, was sixteen and watched too many movies, which is how I got it in my mind that one day I was going to Paris and become a movie star like Dorothy Dandridge... Paris sure don't know how to pick no man. Every one she ever loved had something wrong with him.... The kind of men that drain you, drag you down, take more from you than they give, and by the time they done used you up, got what they want, they bored, you on empty, and they ready to move on to greener pastures. (11-12).

Even as Paris is loaded with weaknesses that make her crave drug prescription addiction, among the four Price children, she appears to be the most successful and corresponds to *Waiting To Exhale* model of characterisation. In creating assertive and professionally successful female characters, McMillan has rightly confronted the mammy stereotype of black women in Barbara Smith's (1985:5) essay by extrapolating alternative images designed at expanding black women's consciousness. Lorraine Bethel (1982:177) validates that "black women writers have consistently rejected the falsification of their Black/female experience, thereby avoiding the negative stereotypes such falsification has often created in the white American female and Black male literary traditions". In synthesizing elements from the body of popular women's fiction as well as from the traditions of African American Oral and print literature, McMillan has

discovered a powerful strategy for creating fictional spaces in which a black female worldview can occupy the centre rather than the margins of mainstream American reality.

According to Beaulieu (2006:648) African American writers rich literary voices continue the boundless connection between all African American mothers, who captivate their daughters with age-old wisdom and a compelling sense of belonging. Their voices continue the tradition of the souls of many mothers lifting and supporting each other, timeless and eternal. As the novel begins, Viola introduces her children, each with the mother's unique knowledge of their character:

> Can't nobody tell me nothing I don't already know. At least not when it comes to my kids. They all grown, but in a whole lotta ways they still act like children. I *know* I get on their nerves but they get on mine, too– and they always accusing me of meddling in their business but, hell, I'm their mother. It's my job to meddle.

Viola talks from an unquestionable position of the mother who has the right to meddle in her children's business. The images of motherhood in African American literature are rooted in the foundations of African culture. In African family unit, the relationship between mother and child is the foundation for a healthy kinship group. African mothers therefore forge deep and life long bond with their children. Grandmothers are not left out as they hold a special place in African family units as the holders of family history, folk lore and other traditions thus commanding a very high status in African society and they are perceived as occupying a special place between the earth bound families and the ancestors. They are an integral part of the familial relationship and are deeply respected. The transcending resonance of the experiences of all African mothers lingers in the heart of African American mothers. Motherhood as an institution as Collins (1990:50) observes occupies a special place in transmitting values to children about their proper place.

Apparently, Viola epitomises the strong black matriarch who pulls her house together in the face of crises. She is metaphoric of survival, socio-economic stability. However, unlike the matriarch, Mama Lena, in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the sun*, her perspective is more radical and as she combines humour with serious contemporary issues which seem to overwhelm her yet, she does not renege her position. Even in death her influence is significant. What McMillan does is to project a black matriarch who rills a good degree of control over many aspects of life that range from, but are not limited to,

family, socio-economic and interpersonal relationship. According to Elizabeth Beaulieu (2006:250), "through Viola, readers learn the importance of self empowerment, family connections, personal and self love." Viola therefore represents a very strong view point of survival and growth, and she teaches her family about love, hope and forgiveness.

In the novel, Charlotte, the second born, spends most of her relationship with Viola in conflict. Unfortunately, her self-perceived independence is the very thing that threatens her relationship with her siblings. From the way Viola sees it, which incidentally is the title of the first chapter, Charlotte's compulsive demand for attention is as a result of her childhood rivalry with Paris, the eldest daughter:

> Charlotte just likes people to kiss her ass, but I kissed their daddy's behind for thirty-eight years, I ain't here to pacify my kids. No, Lordy. Them days is over, especially since they're all damn near middle age. Charlotte came too quick. Ten months after Paris. I did not need another baby so soon, and I think she knew it. She wanted all my attention then. And still do. She ain't never forgiven me for having Lewis and Janelle, and she made sure I knew it. I had to snatch a knot in her behind once for putting furniture polish in their milk. Made 'em take a nap in the doghouse with the dog and fed 'em Alpo while I went downtown to pay some bills. Had 'em practice drowning in a bathtub full of cold water. How many steps could they jump down with their eyes closed without falling. The list goes on... (7).

Interestingly, Charlotte is the only character in the novel who aspires for the inclusion in the American dream concept of beauty. Like Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) Charlotte despise her colour believing that a fair complexion with long wavy hair is the true definition of the beauty she aspires. Thus Viola concludes that Charlotte is a child that one could never praise enough, she will always want more.

It appears that Lewis, the third of the Price children, struggles with demons from his past. Once married to Donneta, Lewis cannot seem to move beyond the memories of his embattled marriage. He is unable to recognise that his trouble with relationships began early in his life when he was sexually abused by his older cousins. Without the insight into the connections between his early traumas and his present state, Lewis self-medicates with drugs, alcohol, and women. Described by his mother as a genius, he is unable to complete anything, especially high school, in order to be a more productive citizen. His contribution to society is measured in the criminal activities that continually land him in jail. In retelling Lewis story, McMillan admits us into the ritual journey of

characters that are being put in situations where they are being tested and how they reconcile and manage things in such situations:

> Which is why I could strangle Lewis my damnself. He is one big ball of confusion. Always has had an excuse for everything, and in thirty-six years, he ain't changed a lick. In 1974, he did not steal them air conditioners from the Luck Lady Motel that the Police just happened to find stacked up in the backseat of our LeSabre way out there in East LA. Lewis said his buddy told him they belonged to his uncle. And why shouldn't he believe him? ...Said he couldn't help it if folks was always giving him stuff to fix or things he didn't even ask for.... Lewis was always at the wrong place at the wrong time, like in 1978 while he waited for Dukey and Lucky to come out of a dry cleaner's with no dry cleaning and they asked him to 'Floor it!' and like a fool he did and the police chased their black asses all the way to the country jail... But he wasn't a good criminal, because, number one, he always got caught; and, number two, he only stole shit nobody needed: rusty lawnmowers, shovels and rakes, dead batteries, bald tires. . . Every time he got caught, all I did was try to figure out how could somebody with an IQ of 146 be so stupid? His teachers said he was a genius. Especially when it came to math. His brain was like a calculator. But what good did it do? I'm still waiting for the day to come when all them numbers add up to something. (2).

What does not add up in Lewis adult life is the terrible secret he keeps from his family. The blunder he makes becomes a result of the psychological effects of the experience of being sexually abused in childhood by his older male cousins. In this, McMillan's statement seems to be that people do not tell everything no matter how much siblings love each other and such secrets are disruptive of familial relationships.

Janelle, the youngest of the Price children, struggles with naiveté and low self – esteem. After divorcing her child's father, Janelle has an affair with a much older married man, George. Eventually, George leaves his wife and marries Janelle and becomes Shanice' stepfather. Unfortunately, it is soon discovered that George has been molesting Shanice, thus the reason for her strange behaviour such as pulling out her hair. Viola tells about Janelle thus:

> Sometimes I feel like they made a mistake in the hospital when they handed Janelle to me. She a case study in and of herself. Been going to college off and on for the past fifteen years and still don't have a degree in nothing. Hell, she should *be* the professor by now. Every time I turn around

> she taking another class. One minute it's stained glass. The next it's drapes and valances.... The chile live from one holiday to the next. If you don't know which one is coming up, just drive by her house. For Groundhog Day, you can bet a grounghog'll be peeking up from somewhere in her front yard. On St Patrick's Day: four-leaf clovers everywhere. On Valentine's Day: red and pink hearts plastered on everything. She had seven Christmas trees one Christmas, in every room in the damn house, and a giant one in the front yard! And now here come Easter. (16 -17).

From the above, Janelle's vulnerability is similar to Robin in *Waiting To Exhale*. The difference is, while Robin seems to be gullible with her choice of men, Janelle is both gullible with men and totally clueless as to what to do with her life and career yet she never stops trying. Through Janelle, McMillan validates the role of determination as the motivation for survival. Her resolve to save her daughter Shanice from her husband's sexual overtures takes her through a process of concrete self-awareness and assertion. By presenting the evolution of Janelle's character, McMillan shows both the benefits and frustrations women experience in defining themselves as mothers and individuals. Basu Shymasree (2013:23) argues that "exploring selfhood by transcending the roles prescribed by society is not an easy task". McMillan's novels are examples of transcending such roles.

Cecil, Viola's ex-husband and the father of her children, plays a major role in the narrative as he struggles with Viola's resentment toward him for leaving their marriage and getting into a relationship with a much younger woman, Brenda, thus Viola echoes:

> I just heard it through the grapevine that he over there living with some welfare huzzy who got three kids. He must really think he John Travolta or somebody. But his midlife crisis done lasted about twenty years now. Hell, he pushing fifty-seven years old. I can't lie. Cecil was driving me nuts after he took early retirement from bus driving for the school district, and on top of that, he had to quit putting in time at the Shack altogether, ... Cecil didn't know what to do with so much free time on his hands.... he started hanging around the crap tables and at the same time discovered he could still drive his truck: ram it into some little dumb cunt who probably thought she'd found herself a genuine sugardaddy. Unfortunately, Cecil's truck ain't had no pickup in years so what this chile is getting I don't know. (21-22).

Unlike the earlier criticism of negative male portrayal in her narrative, McMillan does not present Cecil as an evil man. He becomes estranged from his wife because she is

often mean to him. Cecil's move away from his family is viewed in light of Viola's meanness. McMillan considers the possibility that it is not always the husbands who wound up running off with other women, but that some women give men enough reasons to walk away.

At its core, *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* (2001:1) is about family – good, bad and indifferent- and its lasting influences on its members both individually and collectively. Viola compares her chronic medical condition to her chronic relationship with her family and muses in the opening text:

> Can't nobody tell me nothing I don't already know. At least not when it comes to my kids. They all grown, but in a whole lotta ways they still act like children. I *know* I get on their nerves but they get on mine, too – and they always accusing me of meddling in their business but, hell, I'm their mother. It's my job to meddle. What I really do is worry. About all four of 'em. Out loud. If I didn't love 'em, I wouldn't care two cents about what they did or be the least bit concerned about what happens to 'em. But I do. Most of the time they can't see what they doing, so I just tell 'em what *I* see. They don't listen to me half the time no way, but as their mother, I've always felt that if *I* don't point out the things they doing that seem to be causing 'em problems and pain, who will? Which is exactly how I ended up in this damn hospital: Worrying about kids. I don't even want to think about Cecil right now, because it might just bring on another attack. He's a bad habit I've had for thirty-eight years, which would make him my husband. Between him and these kids, I'm worn out. It's a miracle I can breathe at all. (1).

Basically, Viola justification of her concern for her family as maternal is both stifling and harmful. The weight of the Price family crisis is so enormous that the author symbolically relates it to the haunting effects of Asthma Viola is battling with. As such the fight for life becomes the only option available. However, as the novel concludes and Viola dies, she finally achieves the unity she promoted among her children through the letters addressed to each family member, read during the Thanksgiving after her burial.

The Price family suffocates under Viola's reign and dramas of their own making. The family portrait is not pretty and she is not afraid to point out the ugly from a range of hard choices to sexual inclinations. No vice is hidden before the matriarch as each member of the family strives to survive amidst the choking grips of life's adventure. And, perhaps, that is McMillan's point in highlighting Viola's life choices as well as her children's choices through her reminiscence:

> I made two mistakes: the first man who was nice to me, who showed me some unfiltered attention and gave me endless pleasure in bed. But because of my particular kind of ignorance, my second major mistake was dropping outta high school at sixteen to have a baby.... There was no guess-work to our lives. But over the years all of it melted and turned into some kind of love, that much I do know. Speaking of heat. All my kids are too hot in the ass – which they got from their daddy's side of the family – and Paris ain't no exception. It's probably the reason they all been divorced at least once (except for Charlotte, of course, but that's only 'cause she just too stubborn to admit defeat). All four of 'em married the wrong person for the wrong reasons. They married people who only lit up their bodies and hearts and forgot all about their minds and souls. To this day I still don't think they know that orgasms and love ain't hardly the same thing. (12).

Although Viola tells it all, the mission is not about airing dirty laundry. They were raised better and some of their behaviours do not reflect the values passed to them. Yet, instead of just pointing out the dirt, McMillan's achievement is in crafting a narrative about people and situations that are causing them harm and how well they strive in such situations.

In the set up, after each character is introduced, he or she is sandbagged by some major dilemma or conflict. Using six first-person viewpoints, one for each family member, *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* explores many contemporary concerns, such as single parenthood, divorce, incest, molestation, alcoholism, homosexuality, and prescription drug addiction. Through Viola, McMillan attests to the importance of family connections, self – love, self- empowerment, survival, growth, love, hope, and forgiveness in her novel and makes implicit reference to the relevance of family; "one thing I do know about men and kids is that they always come back. They may be a day late and a dollar short, but they always come back". (26). Viola's assessment, though it echoes the failure of kids and men who fall short of expectations, promotes the family as the bedrock where love covers all forms of weaknesses. In this novel, mama knows best. She likens her brood to a variety of animals:

> I had 'em so fast they felt more like a litter, except each one turned out to be a different animal. Paris is a female lion who don't roar loud enough. Lewis is a horse who don't pull his own weight. Charlotte is definitely a bull, and Janelle would have to be a sheep – a lamb is closer to it – 'cause she always being led out to some pasture and don't know how she got there. (1)

Subsequently, McMillan propels the narrative from each of the adult children's view point and from Cecil to explore the black family and highlight their physical and psychic difficulties. McMillan's metaphors of chronic illness and dysfunction extend beyond the Price family to include the general state of the Black community in America:

> The more I think about it, I'm beginning to wonder if we ain't one of them dysfunctional families I've seen on T.V. A whole lotta weird shit been going on in the Price family for years. But, then again, I know some folks got stuff that can top ours. Hell, look at the Kennedys. Maybe *everybody* is dysfunctional and God put us all in this mess so we can learn how to function. To test us. See what we can tolerate. I don't know, but we don't seem to be doing such a hot job of it. I guess we need to work harder at getting rid of that d-y-s part. I just wish I had a clue where to start. I won't lie: none of my kids turned out the way I hoped they would, but I'm still proud to be their mother. I did the best I could with what I had....I tried to teach 'em the difference between right and wrong, good and bad, being honest, having good manners, and what I knew about dignity, pride, and respect. What I left out they should a learned in Sunday school. Common sense is something you can't teach, which is why there's some things kids should blame their parents for and some shit they just have to take responsibility for on their own. (20).

The Price family struggle with sibling jealousy, marital infidelities, alcohol, child abuse and drugs. The distance from Chicago to Los Angeles and Las Vegas aggravates divisions among them and depicts a black family apart but bound together by similar constraint.

Ultimately, the appeal of McMillan's novels is prominently accessed through her unique choice of language of narration. Features of the Black Vernacular are extensively explored in this novel of three generations of a family and as each chapter is narrated by a different family member, the dialogue reveals the strained relationships among the family members. These features include but not limited to phrases with multiple negation, habitual 'be', final consonant cluster simplification, 'it' for 'there' 'was/is' in place of 'were/are'. Thus, in conversations by the less educated characters like Viola, Cecil and Aunt Suzie Mae, McMillan reinforces this vernacular dialect to address the dialectical tension between the Price family members:

> 'Did I wake you up, baby?' 'Aunt Suzie?' 'Yes, it's me.
> Was you sleeping?' 'Naw, I just dozed off for a minute.
> How you doing?'... I been saving.' 'Hold it a minute.

> First of all, when was the last time you drove a car?' 'In 1978, I thank it was. Some thangs you don't never forget how to do, baby, if you get Aunt Suzie's drift.' (183).

This black vernacular is often referred to as Ebonics. The term was originally coined in 1973 by Robert Williams to refer to the study of the language of black people in all its cultural uniqueness. It is a combination of two words, 'ebony' and 'phonics' where ebony refers to black people and phonics, the study of sounds. Put differently, Ebonics is the study of the sounds of black people in the America.

Basically, Vernacular is a term with variant meanings. Its origins are in discussions of language use, as in Dante's choice to write in Italian rather than Latin, the language or dialect native to a region or country. Keith Byerman (2005:254) observes that in folklore studies, it connotes "a style of artistic or technical and especially architectural expression employing the commonest forms, materials, and decorations of a place, period, or group". Within African American culture, the vernacular includes the conventional genres of folklore (tales, songs, beliefs, material culture) as well as performative aspects of storytelling, call-and-response, verbal contests, and religious practices. These oral forms and practices are generally understood as constituting the basis of African American culture. Vernacular expression in African American culture is a product for what may be termed as an 'everyday use" to borrow Alice Walker's coinage. It is the style of storytelling, sermonising, or blues singing that is crucial in part because the content is already known to the audience. In this, the African American novel maintains its reputation for linguistic and rhetorical innovation, through reinvention as a narrative construct and the intensity of its social meaning. In the African American novel, the world may be real or imagined, history can continue to haunt and anger, and the reader confronts the terrible silences of a shared history.

McMillan uses witty dialogue from a combination of unique characters in one family to tell the story. She departs from the long held view that African American literature should focus on race, racial pride, protest and racism in American society. This is not to say that her works is devoid of social criticism and issues dealing with race. What she does is adapt to new challenges, to changing situations and the diversity of blacks in the American society. Her narrative expresses a characters subjective response to individual situations and she achieves this through her use of stream of consciousness that invites the reader to follow through the knotting and unknotting of events in the story.

WRITING THE FEMALE SELF IN TERRY McMILLAN'S *THE INTERRUPTION OF EVERYTHING*

The novel begins with the life of Marilyn Grimes, a 44 year old African American wife and mother who works part time at a crafts store and whose life is in the middle of total chaos. She loves buying craft items and creating artful things out of them. Instead of pursuing her career she dedicates most of her life in taking care of her husband, Leon, her three grown children (Sabrina, Simeon and Spencer), her mother-in-law Arthurine, her drug addicted adopted sister, Joy, and her own mother, Lovey. Leon is a workaholic and has little or no time for his wife, he seems to be going through a mid-life crisis wearing outfits way too young for him. Marilyn is also juggling a troublesome live-in mother-in-law, a mother who may be developing Alzheimer's disease and a foster sister who is battling drug addiction and neglecting her two children. While she is having hot flashes and other general discontent pre-menopausal signs which her friends are positive its menopause, a trip to the doctor's office reveals that she is pregnant. Marilyn has reached a turning point in her life when she feels dissatisfied by marriage to Leon and dissatisfied with her lot in life. Marilyn regrets never having pursued her love of art. When Marilyn begins to suffer bloating and weight gain, her two best friends, Bunny and Pauline, convince her that she is going through menopause. After a consultation with her physician, Marilyn is shocked to discover that she is pregnant.

Gabriel Packard (2012) notes that the novel, *The Interruption of Everything* was written as a way for McMillan to process events in her life during the time her marriage began to fail. In the novel, Marilyn's husband Leon is going through a serious midlife crisis. He has resorted to dying his hair darker, wearing stinky cologne, going on a fitness kick and buying a motorcycle. When Marilyn delivers her pregnancy bombshell, Leon is quite disturbed by the news. Leon does not offer Marilyn any support system or a shoulder to lean on. Increasingly, Leon has been away from home and Marilyn is beginning to suspect that he is having an affair. At the same time, Marilyn's daughter Sabrina delivers the news that she and her husband are expecting a baby and moving to London. Marilyn's life truly begins spiralling out of control when she miss-carries the baby, Arthurine elopes with a senior citizen named Prezelle. Lovey, Marilyn's mother, begins showing the classic symptoms of Alzheimers, Joy's drug abuse escalates and Leon

becomes a shadow of the man she married. As chaos erupts within Marilyn's family, it is up to her to piece together the fragments of her shattered family. With the help of her two best friends, Bunny and Pauline, Marilyn is determined to make it through the interruptions by staying strong. The characters are flaunted with all sorts of unique character personalities.

Marilyn the protagonist and narrative voice engages in struggles that the author closely associates with midlife crises among other complications that directly affect the female self in African American community. Like Packard's (2012) description of the uniqueness of McMillan's protagonists, Marilyn undertakes a personal appraisal of her life through the use of fresh and colloquial language. At this point, she comes to terms with issues that outweigh her initial conception of midlife crises. Her discovery highlights that she is embroiled by struggles that have interrupted everything in favour of her fulfilment and satisfaction. These interruptions include midlife crises, family crises, dissatisfaction and failing marriage. She sets out to end them through self examination:

> What the hell am I doing? Here. Not in this store. But *here*: in this world, in northern California, in February 2004. Worrying about my hormone levels? Not only. I need to breathe. To stop pretending. What I do know is that I'm forty-four years old. That I have been attached to my husband and kids for so long I need to find out what kind of person I'm capable of being as Marilyn Dupree and not just as Marilyn Grimes: mother and wife. But how do you make changes in your life without upsetting everything and everybody around you? I'm scared. But I have to do something or the spirit I still have left is going to petrify. I just can't believe that I grew up and became one of those women who got married and had kids and forgot all about my personal dreams. At first I just tucked them away and then as the years passed, they got buried and I felt embarrassed or ashamed to have had them in the first place. I figured after I finished raising my children I'd at least get back the interesting man I married (didn't happen) and become reacquainted with my other self and pick up where I left off. (9–10).

The process of self examination entails her review of her ambition, dreams, passion, health and family. For example, when she appraises her family life, she discovers that she is hunted by deferred dreams and lack of fulfilment despite her selfless involvement in the needs of family members. Also with her discovery of Leon's unfaithfulness and her failing family life she invents ways of holding things in place. With her discovery, she navigates her way to her dreams and self fulfilment. Although

Leon feels lost too, he adjusts to mid-life challenges by make-shift solutions such as dressing like a hip-hop teenager and having an affair with a younger woman. McMillan's narrative explores as it were, the damaging effects of mid-life crisis and its intractable undertone in familial relationships. Mid-life gives the idea of a past to reflect on and a future to think about in finite terms. It becomes an opportunity to reflect and make sense of what has happened, and either accept responsibility for the past or blame someone else. In a sense, mid-life becomes the time for an assessment of the quality of life lived.

Marilyn Grimes is the apotheosis of middle-aged boring life of a housewife. She has set aside her own educational and career aspirations to be a wife and mother to her three children. She fills the void with a part-time job at a craft store, being and unwilling cook, driver, and caretaker for her aging mother-in-law. She realises her life has been mortgaged for the fulfilment of the desires of others, and as such, she is clueless how to start paying attention to herself. While her world appears bleak, she grapples with self-examination to regain her dreams. The novel, *The Interruption of Everything* echoes in equivocal terms the haunting realities of the plight of a black woman, caught up in a marriage that takes more out of her life than she realises of which she seeks to revise. A study of how black women writers depict black female characters over time has raised questions of aesthetic and sociological questions that illuminate vividly the intricate connections between the two. Largely because degraded images of black women have persisted throughout history, both in and out of literature, McDowell (1987:284) affirms that "black women novelists have assumed throughout their tradition a revisionist mission". This stance corresponds with McMillan's Marilyn who is restless for change in her marriage. Changes like what Marilyn conceives is often upsetting and promotes the interruption of everything earlier thought to be stable. It appears that McMillan subscribes to the radical fiction of Black women writers who have the foresight to dig into the root of a social and racial dilemma, and anticipate the shifting positions and advocates through imagined possibilities ways of community building.

Apparently, McMillan's novels address black woman's experience with the dialectical tension between personal and professional life. While redefining herself, characters in her novels challenge female gender role expectations held by the society, men, and the African American community. Males and females are socialised to accept and ascribe to certain gender roles. L. Hunt and J. Hunt (1987:194) describe gender roles as "cultural constructs that emerge in particular social and historical contexts to organise human life. These constructs impose physiological sex artificial dichotomies in

personality and activity that deny both males and females opportunity to ... develop." Put differently, gender role expectations create multiple identities deemed "appropriate" when both sexes adhere to these traditional norms and behaviours that oppress self-definition. In turn, females across all racial and cultural boundaries who break traditional gender role expectations struggle between self-definition and "norm deviation". McMillan critiques the justification behind divorce and unfaithfulness. Trudy has a record of unfaithful husbands, in her words, she retreats "I've managed to marry three cut from the same exact mold. Go figure. They think their paychecks and their penises equal making a physical contribution, which is why we're always too tired to fuck them". (5). Trudy and Maureen grab at craft because it has become the only thing that has nothing to do with children or husbands. They are not particularly fascinated by art or beauty, but they are grateful for the distraction it offers away from discussions of various forms of payment for unfaithfulness in marriage: karma, child support and alimony.

In this novel, McMillan has managed successfully the balance between domestic and romantic relationships. Narrated from a first person point of view, the novel is written in a conversational tone that invites readers to enter in the private world of a middle-class African American woman in the twenty-first century. The central tension arises from Marilyn's realisation that in focusing so closely on the care and needs of others. Thus Marilyn laments "For a long time i have felt I inadvertently got master's in How to Take Care of Everybody Except Yourself and then a PHD in How to Pretend Like You Don't Mind. But I do mind." (11). McMillan conveys perfectly the expectations put on so many women today. Everyone in the family, from sister to mother to husband to children depend on Marilyn to save the day. She shows how a woman has to put her own life on hold in order to keep the rest of her family going:

> They call us housewives. But contrary to popular belief, we're not all trophies like Maureen or as uneducated as Trudy, no malice intended. In fact, I did more than go to college. I got a degree, although I've almost forgotten what i majored in. Might as well have been Intro to First Husbands 101 (Gordon) the soul mate i let get away, and after two summer sessions of nothing close to intimacy, was coerced into repeating the class and enrolled in Second Husbands 101A (enter Leon). But then, after I'd barely flipped my tassel and was taking a one-year sabbatical before heading back to grad school because I thought being a social worker would help me steer as many unfortunate folk-black folk in particular-as far from self-destruction and poverty as they could get, but then surprise, surprise, here comes what I thought was only going to be a temporary interruption: Daughter 101 (Sabrina, a.k.a

> Isn't-She-Cute-and-Smart-Those-First-Eleven-Years, and then The-Rebellious-I'm-Already-Grown-and-Having-Sex-and-Getting-an-Occasional-Buzz-I-Could-Strangle-Her-Teenager-Years), who is now twenty and did a 360-degree turn. (10).

Clearly, McMillan combines boisterous humour and real compassion both for the old and the underclass and her novel is a triumphant testament to the fact that detour is the path.

Interestingly, McMillan's dependence on stream of consciousness narrative technique, her use of language continues to appeal to her readers, because of the change in society. Her generation of black writers are the new breed, free to write as they please and extremely radical because of the way life has changed. Despite manifestations of a rapidly changing world, one thing still remains fundamentally the same for most women of this generation: the search for happiness and fulfilment continues. Therefore, the quest for self-fulfilment is unequivocally projected in her female characters. Her narrative raises questions like "how do you lose so much and not notice when it starts evaporating? How comfortable can numbness be?" Marilyn seems to provide the answers in the following lines: "You could say I've been living somewhere in the neighbourhood of Mediocrity but have been waiting for a reserved parking space to open up in Happy Hills" (8). McMillan throws up pointers to 'breathing' in several places in the novel correlating to her earlier novel, *Waiting to Exhale*. The reference here is to highlight the importance of happiness and show how people can be distracted by stress such that they do not realise they are not breathing as a result of thinking intensely about something.

McMillan's remarkable success, then, is that in *Waiting to Exhale, A Day Late and a Dollar Short and The Interruption of Everything,* she manages magnificently to produce a novel, using the stream of consciousness technique that reveals the dynamics and the inner life of a group of women actually engaged in and responding both to the massive upheaval and the crisis of family pressure.

CHAPTER FIVE

MAYA ANGELOU AND TERRY McMILLAN: THE WRITING DIFFERENCE

Though two decades separate Maya Angelou's first narrative *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*, a close reading of the selected novels for this study reveals that the text derive qualitative interpretations from the unique difference in ideas and aesthetics represented by Alice Walker, bell hooks and other Black feminists. Angelou's novels validate a genre of expression known as the autobiography. In her sequence of five autobiographical volumes, written between 1970 and 1986, Angelou continues, adapts and possibly alters the narrative begun by the fugitive slaves, and with changes both on how the past is memorialised, and herself a subject – in – time. Harris (2005:42) captures this trend of using autobiography to tell an all encompassing story:

> when writing my autobiography I found it difficult to write from a strictly personal perspective, because it was just as important for me to write about political issues that were happening at certain times in my life that also affected me personally. I could not have written my autobiography without writing about the civil rights movement or about moving from the segregated south.... I therefore intertwined the two perspectives to tell what I feel is a comprehensive story.

Similarly, Maya Angelou's exploration of her traumatic experience with Mr. Freeman is balanced by the atmosphere of pervasive uncertainty of racist devaluation in the Black South. Angelou explains that although she was writing autobiographically as quoted in Jeffrey M. Elliot (1989:117)

> I wasn't thinking so much about my own life or identity. I was thinking about a particular time in which I lived and the influences of that time on a number of people. I

> used myself—as a focus to show how one person can make it through those times.

She sees herself as a symbolic character for every black girl growing up in America. Basically, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) exemplify the breaking of women's forbidden stories into literary history-an event that reverberates far beyond their heroes' individual histories to reshape their sense of cultural past and its possible future directions. The Black woman who writes autobiography therefore becomes the historian for her black community.

However, Alison Easton's (2000:177) analysis of history as a constituent of identity and the forms of our past in writings defines autobiography as "an unfinished story". Maya's sexual history is reminiscent of, yet also contrastive to the sexual violations endured by women slaves, and suggests the aftermath of slavery in damaged relations between black men and women. The adolescent Maya attempts some degree of autonomy, typical of that constructed in male slave narratives, in seeking a white person's job, but she is constantly pulled from that trajectory by the demands of motherhood. Motherhood was the keynote of the female slave narrative: the slave mother fought to keep her children and often lost. Angelou herself becomes a mother and her fight to raise her son is one of the key themes across all the five volumes, as she seeks both to protect her child and encourage in him a masculinity that will neither oppress women, nor be destroyed by the white world.

In addressing the importance of memory in autobiography, Tess Cosslett (2000:4) situates autobiography with 'recovering a past (as well as with the projection of a future) and depends on the deployment of an often shifting, partial, and contested set of personal or collective memories'. Memory, then becomes inter-subjective and dialogical, a function of personal identifications and social commitments. While it is uniquely ours, it is also objectified, a matter of public convention and shared rituals and can equally have a political dimension. Angelou's life story is told in a series of outspoken encounters, confrontations, and conversations. It is a life in a dialogue with whites and African Americans. Despite the appearance of openness, her story has its silences. She quotes a black American as not being open: "If you ask a Negro where he's been, he'll tell you where he's going". This gives a signal of the existence of a black world that still cannot be shared.

However, Terry McMillan through the use of the romance novel form portrays female protagonists who demand their right to be in touch with their passions - something

women are traditionally socialized to repress. Her novels serve to revise the narrative of what it means to be a woman in today's society as Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu (2006:616) puts it. The female characters in her novels come to the realization that their oppression is borne out of the refusal to let go of dominant ideologies of womanhood. Characters discover that self – empowerment and liberation come when one defines herself on her own terms. Richards (1999:40) affirms that McMillan's works portray all forms of "black-on-black love". She continually counters stereotypes about African Americans that deny the existence of loving, supportive relationships within black families and black communities. It is observed that not until the late 1980s that African American women writers like McMillan began to assert that the definitions of "the political" could encompass assertions of the power of love.

DIFFERENCE IN SOCIAL CONCERNS

Set in the '50s and '60s, Maya Angelou's autobiographical works are heavily influenced by the dynamics of the Civil Rights Movement. The political struggle becomes an undeniable presence in her works especially in *Gather Together in my Name* and *The Heart of a Woman*, and Angelou's primary social concern is with the need for enacting social reform. The America described by Angelou is still a racist one. As a black woman angered by this persistent racism, Angelou infuses her autobiography with her thoughts on the nation's racial strife. Beaulieu (2006:11) argues that her works show a consistent theme of struggle to maintain a healthy sense of individuality amid the unrelenting social terrors faced by black Americans from within a national machinery of racial and sexual oppression. In the novel, *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Maya's rape experience and its resultant silence, the racist experience with a white dentist, are all trails of the larger American society oppressive strictures of the black community especially black women. Angelou reconstructs the black woman's image throughout her autobiographies, through the use many roles, incarnations, and identities in her books to signify multiple layers of oppression and personal history. Her autobiographies have the structure of giving a historical overview of the places she was living in at the time, how she coped within the context of a larger white society, and the ways that her story played out within that context. While her works are still concerned with the questions of what it means to be a black female in the US, the focus is directed at a certain point in history.

Such issues as the colour of her skin, the kinkiness of her hair, and the fullness of her lips all contribute to socially engendered feelings of physical inadequacy bordering on self-hatred, prominent in the black racist south community where Maya grew up, provide the social content of Angelou's text in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Gather Together In My Name* and *The Heart of a Woman*. In fact, Suzette A. Henke (2009:108) exemplifies this, thus:

> During the 1930's the American social ideal of white female beauty was touted in newspapers and in ladies' magazines and, most powerfully, in romantic cinematic representations.... To be young, gifted, and Black in Stamps, Arkansas meant, quite simply, to be lonely and to be doubly marginal – twice removed from the dominant power group and handicapped by a burden of racial and gender stereotypes.

Basically, in retelling young Maya's migration South, Angelou portrays the experience as a traumatizing social condition of all black Americans in the 1930s. The child's migration is retold as a symbolic act recalling social displacement in the African American historical experience. The experience is transformative while the motif of movement is influenced by the slave narrative.

On the other hand, McMillan's works may not address the long history of racial politics in America, but she expertly exposes the deep fissures of sexual politics within the African American community. By portraying relationships of romantic love as the most important issue facing African American characters, McMillan's fiction defies modern critics' expectation that African American literature must privilege racial conflict. Racial uplift and social protest are filtered through a different lens in her works and require new critical models of analysis. In fact, one may contend that what constitutes the mass appeal of McMillan's work is the trend among the 90s generation of Black artists to discard the anxieties of a bygone era. These writers include Bebe Moore Campbell, Walter Mosley, Susan Taylor, and Octavia Butler who have tapped a somewhat neglected market of women, gays, and African American readers hungry to see their lives and interests reflected in the pages of these mass – produced romance, mystery, and science fiction books. *Waiting To Exhale* effectively demonstrates that Black culture is not monolithic and that Black readers respond to a range of stories of Black life. What emerges become a literature that has turned to the Black experience, the

sense of self, and power of recovery rather than the earlier focus on the horrors of racism and oppression.

According to Paulette Richards (1999:46) McMillan emphasizes the quest for personal liberty instead of championing civil liberty for the race as a whole by poising questions of personal responsibility and choice. Her heroines are almost all women of substances who reflect her generation's unprecedented success as professionals in the mainstream society. Richards further adds that during the 1920s, writers sought an 'authentic' cultural voice, the 1960s and 70s saw the link between dominant ideology and the values we attached to literature. Although each generation has had its discontents, it would seem that Black writers in the 1990s are staking out new ground. Their writing demonstrates that they are acutely aware of literature and its engagement in a broader cultural and political arena. It is this struggle in the contested terrain of cultural value and cultural authority that now engages Black writers.

The shift in the literary marketplace, during the 1990s, toward popularity, celebrity and entertainment brought more attention to the field of African American literature, increasing readership and the reach of black authors and their works. This however, helped to continue the long-held literary divide between "scholarly" and the "popular", where books that appeal overwhelmingly to popular audience and receive widespread commercial success are often assumed to have little literary value. The reference to popular culture and consumer goods such as movies, television shows, magazines and name-brand fashions in McMillan's works is not an emphasis on materials goods but a specification that identifies with her target audience, the audience within which her literary generation featured. In recognition and identification of this generation, she portrays the same demographic characters in her works: young, urban, upwardly mobile or middle-class black females. For this generation, as well as her characters, possession of - or the desire for – these material goods serves as an outward or tangible marker of economic status and class.

However, McMillan's focus on family relations in *A Day Late* although the emphasis is on its ugliness, re-echoes the Black community's value for the family. The statement, "I am because we are" as quoted in Beaulieu (2006:313) belies an ideology of the African community that speaks to their sense of connection and family. For Africans and African Americans, family is not only significant; it is essential. It is a socializing unit; and the black family especially, has had to fight to maintain its stability in a society that is filled with racism, poverty, sexism and fear. In spite of the hardships the black

family faced during and after slavery, they were still expected to behave according to the mainstream's standards. To some extent, they expected it of themselves. These standards included maintaining the structure - husband, wife, children - and the function of the nuclear family. For the black man, this meant that he was to be the main, if not sole, provider for the family. The standards of providing and protecting his family were challenges the black man faced because he was not economically fortunate like his white counterpart. He often discovered the difficulty in finding employment that could provide for a family or finding employment at all. Also, the practice of lynching, which plagued the country for many generations after slavery's end, ensured that the black man knew his place. He was not to achieve too much, and he was not to assume that he could confront white masculinity, no matter what white men did to his person or his home.

However, Alison Easton (2000:178) observes that Angelou's novels are primarily concerned with the underlying commonalities in her experiences and the sense of a shared culture. The long - string of anecdotes in these volumes are part of a larger narrative about 'slavery' of her people and freedom. Tensions between white and black are a constant given in her texts, and although, like the nineteenth century narrative, her story represents a battle for freedom and justices, unlike that narrative it shows that while battles can be won, the war against racism goes on and on.

DIFFERENCE IN LITERARY CONVENTIONS

The civil rights and feminist movements both created new professional opportunities for black women as well as expanded society's perceptions of womanhood. McMillan's characters embody these advances as their quest for educational and professional opportunities move them away from their communities and homes and from traditional notions of domesticity. Their search for fulfilling heterosexual unions takes them beyond idealized notions of love and marriage. At the same time, on this new journey - to new geographic spaces, new economic wealth and new relationship roles – McMillan's characters encounter new obstacles. They respond by creating new paradigms of contemporary domesticity and redefining gender roles within heterosexual unions.

In terms of characterisation, McMillan's characters are almost always college-educated, middle class, ranging in age from their 20s to their 40s and concerned mostly with family, career, friendships and romantic relationships. Many are searching for

husbands that equal their educational and professional success; careers that allow them to be creative but also financially independent; and friendships with like-minded females that share and thus, validate their own experiences. While McMillan's focus may appear narrow, it is one that has not been widely represented in African American fiction. In contrast, Angelou's fiction favours the post-slavery settings to support a historical emphasis; tales of northern migration to illuminate the effects of overt racism; abusive and loveless marriages with black men to emphasize black female independence; and tight-knit monolithic black communities to emphasize a distinction from the white mainstream.

McMillan replaces the presence of Southern power in African American narrative with that of a domestic power in her fiction. The immediate, identifiable and oppressive power that serves as the catalyst for her characters' migration is not the threat of racial or sexual violence that Maya Angelou faced in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, but the threat of stifling domesticity and economic stagnation. Instead of monolithic communities, McMillan's novels include a contemporary post – integration settings; stories of women moving away from their communities to the suburbs; unsatisfying and disappointing relationships with black men; an exploration of the possibilities and problems of being single; imperfect and dysfunctional black family relations and elements of intra – racial strife perpetuated by economic and class distinctions. Mobility is what gives McMillan's characters the impetus to craft a future different from the previous generations. The importance of mobility is exemplified in characters desire to expand their knowledge and experiences and to create a different future for themselves. McMillan's focus is on how her characters operate in their new settings: the friendships and new communities they create; the challenges they face with new careers; and how they maintain their closeness to family and friends despite the physical distance. While most authors use the return home to evaluate their characters' perceptions of history, family and/or community, it is on the "quest" for domestic success where McMillan's characters are forced to re-evaluate home and community, especially their relationships with the female relatives they have left behind, and thereby their perceptions of womanhood as well. As a result, these characters create new paradigms of contemporary domesticity which require the freedom to move around and call a number of places home; to have the 'financial freedom' to own, build and manage their homes; and finally, to be home alone, that is to exist outside the restrictions of traditional marital norms. It is on the journey that the characters realise alternative domestic situations.

Structurally, McMillan relies on the extensive use of dialogue to capture the voices and internal tensions of her characters. This is achieved through the stylistic device of stream of consciousness. Angelou, on the other hand, utilizes the child narrator technique to tell her story with commentary and pauses quipped in by the writer. As the narrative progresses and the child becomes an adult, we follow through the narrative as she fashions a path for history and remembrance as a tool for both physical and psychological healing and growth. Angelou's texts document role models in sports and athletics while for McMillan, current role models are intellectuals and professionally successful individuals. However, one unique structural difference between the two authors under study is McMillan's choice of chapter labelling. Her chapter titles are situation and context based chosen mostly from slangs or phrases and reflexive of the characters expression of intent. "The way I see it" begins *A Day Late* from Viola's perspective, while "Liquid Jesus" is the caption for the chapter that addresses Lewis alcoholic addiction in the same novel. *Waiting to Exhale* opens with the captioned title "Not Dick Clark". Interestingly, the novel begins with a New Year Eve party and Dick Clark is a radio anchor for such programmes on the network. Additionally, Dick Clark is symbolic of the quest for an eligible man that the four characters are waiting for.

Overall, literature by Black women writers provides the most comprehensive view of Black women's struggles to form positive self definitions in the face of denigrated images of Black womanhood. Portraying the range of ways that African American women experience internalized oppression is a prominent theme in Black women's writing. Fictional African American women characters use drugs, alcohol, excessive religion and even retreat into madness in an attempt to create other worlds apart from the ones that produced such painful Black female realities. Charlotte and Janelle in *A Day Late* both demonstrate an attachment to alcohol and drugs that allows them to ignore. Denial is another characteristic response to the controlling images of Black womanhood and their accompanying conditions. While documenting the process of personal growth toward positive self-definitions Black women writers also portray a range of responses that individual women express concerning their lives.

DIFFERENCE IN LANGUAGE USE

Notably, a major point of divergence between the Maya Angelou's works and Terry McMillan's is the question of language use. While Angelou's writing is simple and

straightforward probably conditioned by its autobiographical form, McMillan's prose give insights on her ability to use the dialect in translating the oral culture of her primary audience. Remarkably, the most important element of McMillan's style of language is her ability to evoke an urban vernacular that Black readers recognize as their own language. Richards (1999:112) opines that, "rural southern black dialects have distinctive variations in pronunciation and vocabulary; yet, in terms of word choice and syntax, all four characters sound the same". McMillan exploits this technique by artistically representing vernacular black speech that allows her to engage her readers more effectively than absolute authentic transcriptions of dialect would. In *Waiting To Exhale* Savannah's opening monologue on the book's first four pages reveals McMillan's ability to capture the rhetorical style of black English even while conforming to the rules of standard English grammar usage, thus:

> Sheila's got three kids, doesn't work, and has never lived anywhere except Pittsburgh. "This'll make the fourth city you've lived in in fifteen years. I can't keep track, Savannah. When are you gonna be still long enough to settle down?" All I could say was, "When I find what I'm looking for." I didn't feel like telling her for the umpteenth time what it was, because she doesn't understand it. . . .Of course she didn't bother asking this time. But Sheila did manage to remind me for the zillionth time that I'm running out of time, because here I am all of thirty-six years old without so much as a prospect in sight; and on top of that, she said that my swinging-singles lifestyle doesn't amount to shit, that I run the gamut when it comes to stereotypes of buppiedom because i put too much energy into my career, that without a husband and children my life really has no meaning, that I'm traversing down that road less travelled, and that by now I should've been divorced at least once and be the mother of at least 2.5 children. (4).

Ultimately, the appeal of McMillan's novels is prominently accessed through her unique choice of language of narration. Features of the Black Vernacular are extensively explored in this novel of three generations of a family and as each chapter is narrated by a different family member, the dialogue reveals the strained relationships among the family members. These features include but not limited to phrases with multiple negation, habitual 'be', final consonant cluster simplification, 'it' for 'there' 'was/is' in place of 'were/are'. Thus, in conversations by the less educated characters like Viola, Cecil and Aunt Suzie Mae, McMillan reinforces this vernacular dialect to address the dialectical tension between the Price family members:

> 'Did I wake you up, baby?' 'Aunt Suzie?' 'Yes, it's me. Was you sleeping?' 'Naw, I just dozed off for a minute. How you doing?'.... 'I been saving.' 'Hold it a minute. First of all, when was the last time you drove a car?' 'In 1978, I thank it was. Some thangs you don't never forget how to do, baby, if you get Aunt Suzie's drift.' (183).

This black vernacular is often referred to as Ebonics. The term was originally coined in 1973 by Robert Williams to refer to the study of the language of black people in all its cultural uniqueness. It is a combination of two words, 'ebony' and 'phonics' where ebony refers to black people and phonics, the study of sounds. Put differently, Ebonics is the study of the sounds of black people in the America.

Geneva Smitherman, (1986:112) an African American linguist, identifies four basic communicative modes in vernacular black English to include: call and response, signification, tonal semantics, and narrative sequencing. All McMillan's novels under study fall into the narrative sequencing, or storytelling mode. Also, in Savannah's monologue and throughout the novel, examples of the other three communicative modes abound. However, McMillan incorporates the signification mode most prominently in Savannah's monologue. "Signifying" is a complex mode of commenting, indirectly and usually unfavourably, about people and situations. Literary critics like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., have analyzed the ways that African American writers use this rhetorical device. The first sentence provides the clue that Savannah's entire monologue is an ironic commentary when she uses the phrase "all geeked up" to describe her attire for a formal New Year's Eve party. Originally, as Richards puts it, a "geek" was a carnival or sideshow entertainer who performed outlandish stunts. The term came to signify a "weird" person, but since the 1970s, "geek" has meant "an intellectual" in black slang. This connotation reflects the black community's distrust of those who value book learning over mother wit or lived experience. Savannah's use of the term signifies on the pretentiousness of the new black middle class by implying that this social scene is all an outlandish performance. The word "geek" itself is common in American slang, but the way Savannah uses it with additional connotative meaning instantly alerts readers familiar with vernacular black English that Savannah speaks their mother tongue. Similarly, Viola's opening monologue about her children in *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* (2001:1) draws attention to McMillan's expert use of the narrative sequencing or storytelling mode:

> I had 'em so fast they felt more like a litter, except each one turned out to be a different animal. Paris is a female Lion who don't roar loud enough. Lewis is a horse who don't pull his own weight. Charlotte is definitely a bull, and Janelle would have to be a sheep – a lamb is closer to it – 'cause she always being led out to some pasture and don't know how she got there.

In fact, Richards (1999:24) contends that McMillan brings to bear the African American cultural inflection to her representations of black love. McMillan does not simply transcribe contemporary black vernacular speech; she captures an urban black vernacular style while conforming to the rules of Standard English grammar and usage. Thus, in conversations between characters this peculiar language use becomes prominent. The excerpt below from *Waiting to Exhale* (1992:224) and A Day Late (2001:4-5) respectively exemplify this stylistic quality:

> "What'd you tell him about me?"
> "That you lived in Phoenix."
> "That you still hadn't found that special somebody."
> "Well, hell, he asked me if you was married yet...."

> "I ain't got no friends with that kind of money.'
> 'It's tough out here for black men, Ma,
> and especially if you handicapped.'
> 'Don't you know that?'
> 'I didn't know you was handicapped.'
> 'I got arthritis.'
> 'Uh-huh. And I'm three months pregnant with triplets.'
> 'How come don't nobody ever believe me when I tell the truth?'

Ample references abound in McMillan's works while Angelou's by its autobiographic form, has little or no marked use of contemporary black vernacular speech.

CONCLUSION

The voices of African American women writers have become, not those of victims, but of survivors. Their ideas and actions suggest that not only does a self-defined, articulated Black women's standpoint exist, but its presence has been essential to Black women's survival in the United States. African American women encounter controlling images not as a disembodied symbolic message but as ideas that should provide meaning in their daily lives. Black women's work and family experiences create the conditions whereby the contradictions between everyday experiences and the controlling images of Black womanhood become visible.

However, the socioeconomic conditions of black women have progressively changed, across generations of Black American female writers. Issues of black female sexuality witnessed a more profound approach in terms of language use in the latter generation. This marks a keen sense of the departures and continuity of which a tradition of difference exists between the writings of Maya Angelou and Terry McMillan. The exploration of African American female experience as depicted by the texts studied are gendered and explore at different levels the peculiarities of their literary generation. Although the novels equally differ in stylistic configuration, they are powerful literary creations reflecting authorial commitment, biographical affinity and critical awareness of the socio- cultural milieu of the black female experience in America.

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