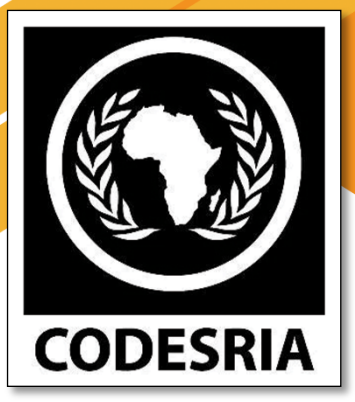

Thesis

By

MOGU, Francis Ibe

THE SCHOOL OF POSTGRADUATE STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS

The Question for Fulfilment by Black Females in the United States: a reading of four Novels by Wright, Ellison, Baldwin and Hughes

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THE QUEST FOR FULFILMENT BY BLACK FEMALES IN THE UNITED STATES: A READING OF FOUR NOVELS BY WRIGHT, ELLISON, BALDWIN AND HUGHES

By

FRANCIS IBE MOGU

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that the thesis:

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By

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DEDICATION

To Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, into whose hands I commend the souls of my departed parents, Simon Ijing and Julia Nkom Mogu.

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ABSTRACT

This study critically explores the persistent claim by feminists that black male writing in the United States "has been systematically discriminatory against women." The critics insist that African–American women in the male authored works are portrayed as playing unimportant roles that make the male protagonists emerge as the 'real black heroes.' No black female, they argue, is accorded heroic status in texts by these male writers. They are also dissatisfied with the fact that some male authored works completely exclude black women and their experiences.

This study addresses most of the issues raised by the critics by revealing how the quest for fulfilment by black females in the United States is central to the feminist efforts of black women in the male authored texts. Aspects of the female quest for the realisation of their aspirations include the pursuit of advanced education, economic and political empowerment, social equality and cultural expression.

The study highlights the heroic contributions of individual black women to the advancement of the African-American community in the United States in works by Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and Langston Hughes. Novels by two renowned black women writers, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, are regularly referred to in order to provide portrayals of African-American women by black women writers.

The study concentrates on 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. These female characters are shown as deriving great satisfaction from the challenges posed by the oppressive circumstances in which they find themselves. Their persistent self-application is evident in the works and underscores the fact that the writers realistically capture a particular phase in the black females' march towards self-realization. The black women in these works are therefore regarded as pioneers who are conscious of their roles and perform these roles with great fortitude, hope and sense of fulfilment.

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INTRODUCTION

Feminists in the United States criticise what they consider to be negative portrayals of black women in literary works by black males. They frown at the perceived failure of the writers to reflect the unique sensibilities of females and the complete exclusion of black women and their experiences from some works. The critics argue that the male writers are not able to project women effectively because, as men, they "have portrayed male heroes and male protagonists almost exclusively, and the complexity and vitality of black female experience have fundamentally been ignored".[1] The feminists insist that, "the depiction of black women in the two most acclaimed black novels of the twentieth century, is not convincing because black females do not feature prominently in those works. Hence, they assert that black male writing has been 'systematically discriminatory' against women. They further maintain that:

> It is always something of a shock to see black women, sharing equally (and sometimes more than equally) in the labor and strife of black people, expunged from the text when that history becomes shaped into what we call tradition.[2]

These critics also affirm that black male writers employ elements of Marxist and Existentialist philosophies that highlight the role of males in the society. They argue that in so far as Marxist-influenced literature concentrates on class conflicts in the economic sphere involving mainly men, the brand of Marxism in the male writers' works is suspect. Activities discussed by Marxists such as

the means of production, the exploitation of workers and labour (outside the home) are perceived to be male-dominated.

Similarly, the feminists posit that existentialism (which emphasises individual initiative – as opposed to group action, in a presumed absurd and senseless world) when combined with Christianity, often affirms male superiority, drawing its support from *The Holy Bible*. Such concepts, they opine, foster the domination and exploitation of females by males.

African-American feminists view themselves as spokespersons for other black women and want a radical change that would bring women to the fore and enable them to partake fully in mainstream activities in America. They consequently criticise writings by black males like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and Langston Hughes, four African-American male writers generally acclaimed to be the central and most influential figures of the black literary tradition in the United States. For instance, Hernton argues:

> 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.[3]

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' and, although it is an aspect of feminist theory, it seeks to explore phenomena relating to both genders from an unbiased and healthy perspective. Unlike mainstream feminism, which is perceived to be decidedly against men, womanism, according to Walker, admits shortcomings and strengths on the part of both women and men 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.

This approach when applied to the issues examined in this research, points to the fact that both the writings by black males and the criticisms of such works by feminists are not meant to foster divisions, but are geared towards attaining loftier heights in the black literary canon in the United States. Since womanism "assumes that it can talk both effectively and productively about men" and is "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, female and male...," it creates a conducive atmosphere for the discussion of issues of mutual interest. Womanism has been embraced by many black feminist scholars and critics in the United States because it is anchored on mutual

respect for both genders. Their present engagement in the criticisms of works by black male authors which serves as an attempt to promote the uplift of black women in America, is central to this study.

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 mirrors this trend 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 the 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.[4]

But in spite of the fact that black females are often 'absent' or 'unaccounted for' in the written records of the black literary tradition in the United States, a feminist scholar and critic, Sherley Anne Williams suggests that African–American women should engage black men constructively in a dialogue to resolve perceived differences and grievances. While arguing for Alice Walker's brand of feminism i.e. 'Womanist Inquiry'- which is said to be "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, female and male", Williams states:

> 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.[5]

Therefore, an application of womanism to the analysis being under taken here serves to place matters in a clearer perspective, while fulfilling the desire of these black women -centred critics for a meaningful vocabulary and approach which in turn fosters the sense of community and tranquility in black America.

The feminist expression of displeasure with portrayals of black females in works by males, seeks to cast the black woman in a positive light - which is by implication, a quest for fulfillment. What is immediately glaring however is that these critics adopt new yardsticks (some of them questionable) to try to ensure the realisation of their objective of articulating and sensitising people to recognise and enforce the rights of women which are presumed to be denied them by men. The new yardsticks adopted by feminists include the application of newer critical theories and modes of assessment such as deconstruction to older works set in the past.

Deconstruction as a concept points to many readings. It exposes the strategies a writer employs in marshalling experience, thereby subverting traditionally accepted interpretations of a work of art as it reveals new meanings.Its approach to criticism is underscored by a belief in the impossibility of language achieving absolute and coherent engagements with the world. A deconstructed

work can be further deconstructed because new ideas emerge regularly to replace old ones. Deconstruction "acknowledges the way in which the writer attempts to order things but then points to the contradictions and problems in the text, the complications that the writer cannot pull into her or his system".[6] The Deconstructive approach is derived from the works of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, who was actively concerned with the seemingly limitless potentiality of words in a language. Deconstruction which to some extent is a reaction against Structuralism, is also central to the works of scholars and critics like the American, J. Hillis Miller. John Peck argues that, "the deconstructive critic is centrally concerned with looking for the aporias blindspots or moments of self-contradiction where the text begins to undermine its own presuppositions".[7]

Deconstruction has influenced feminist readings of texts in the sense that it has been employed by them in their challenge of what they perceive as the traditional male - inclined order which,

> "has been constructed at the expense of ethnic groups, women, the poor, indeed anyone who did not fit into that old order".[8]

Roger Fowler states that the relevance of deconstruction to literary studies "is not through a critical method...nor in the finality of given interpretations (there are no final interpretations) but in the theoretical and conceptual insights..."[9] The strong phallic symbol which, according to Peck and Coyle, is

the focus of the 'symbolic order of language and culture' also irritates feminists and yet this study reveals how the female characters in the texts strive for a kind of 'manliness' or strength of character to bring into reality their dreams for a fulfilled life.

Through these newer concepts, feminists seek to subvert and reject older orientations such as Marxism and Christianised Existentialism which they argue, actively encourage the domination of females by males. And, through their criticisms of writings by black males, black feminists in America hope to push the African-American woman to the mainstream of activities. In this way, they would help to accelerate her quest for fulfilment in strategic areas of the society.

Using recent black criticisms as a guide, this study highlights the heroic contributions of black women to the advancement of the African-American community in the United States by exploring individual black females in selected texts written by black males. This is in light of the argument that black women are unaccounted for and portrayed poorly in those texts. Through this method, key areas of persistent quests by black females for full participation in the American experience are revealed.

The research, though prompted and informed largely by feminist criticisms of works of African-American males, focuses on the quest for fulfillment by black

women in the texts and by extension, the larger American society. It is reasonable to state that such quests actually exist, despite apparent lapses in the depictions by the male writers identified by feminist critics. Areas of such quests for fulfilment by black women embrace intellectual pursuit, economic emancipation, political relevance and social equality.

Feminist theory proceeds from the premise that the human society is generally dominated by males, but that this should not be the case. The theory seeks to subvert that domination by privileging the desires and aspirations of women within the society and ensuring their centrality in the scheme of things. Feminists resent the present structure of the society which they view as patriarchal, since it is "organized on terms dictated by men, and to the advantage of men."[10]

As feminist criticism is influenced by other radical theories and moral orientations, so are African-American feminists influenced by other feminists within and outside the United States. Though feminists manifest differences in their view of some issues, they share some similarities. But, generally, they are not agreed on a common solution to the perceived issue of male domination of females. Often too, in literary and extra-literary discourses, intentions are hidden, under-stated or over-stated. Hence, a reading of some feminist positions reveals a yawning gap between the aim and the outcome of efforts. A few examples sould suffice here: An Anglo-American feminist critic, Annette

Kolodny, has stated the aim of feminist criticism to be "the re-enfranchising of women writers into the mainstream of our academic curriculum through fairer, non sex biased, and more judicious appraisals of their work."[11] However, a Nordic feminist critic, Toril Moi sees such a position as "an unusually modest framework for the feminist struggle within academia." She further states that, "it is worth pondering whether such reformism may be the inevitable outcome of a feminist analysis based on an unquestioned acceptance of so many aspects of New Critical doctrine."[12]

Another Anglo-American feminist critic, Elaine Showalter, observes that in spite of efforts by feminists to end the assumed male domination of the world, the woman-produced text is male-oriented:

> One of the problems of the feminist critique is that it is male-oriented. If we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles women play in literary history, we are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be.[13]

Here, Showalter implies that in spite of efforts by women to bring their experiences and presence to bear on the available methods and media of communication, those avenues are still dominated and manipulated by men. Moreover, she views theory as a "male invention that apparently can only be used on men's texts." Instead, she advocates a "turn to 'gynocritics,' the study of women's writings." She further observes that, "Gynocritics' frees itself from pandering to male values and seeks to focus... on the newly visible world of

female culture".[14] This view presents some difficulty because Showalter tends to shift to the dream-fictional and utopian realm where a 'newly visible world of female (only) culture' exists. Her rejection of a theoretical framework for feminist studies only serves to reinforce the need for a sound, durable and sustainable feminist theory which, apparently, is beginning to emerge. In this context gynocriticism metamorphoses into a theory. So, Showalter avoids a theoretical framework, but finally embraces one.

Again, another critic, Myra Jehlen, detects contradictions between the various readings and interpretations of feminism. She observes two distinct readings which she terms 'appreciative' and 'political'. She then argues for 'radical comparativism' – a term she coins as a basis for feminist studies as a whole. Jehlen accuses Showalter and other feminist critics of suffering from "exclusive focus" on the female tradition in literature. She deplores the "feminist tendency to create 'an alternative context, a sort of female enclave apart from the universe of masculinist assumptions." She instead desires "women's studies to become the investigation, from women's viewpoint of everything."[15]

In the preface to *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory, (1990)* Toril Moi asserts categorically that:

> 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 position from which it is speaking; simply to say that one is speaking as a feminist is not a sufficient response to that responsibility.[16]

Moi finds some ambiguities in Jehlen's argument and concludes that a reliance on patriarchy to anchor feminism as Jehlen appears to suggest, is not the solution to feminist discourse. She notes that that has always been the case. She reaffirms that: " Feminist criticism actually began by examining the dominant male culture (Ellmann, Millett) and there is no reason for women today to reject this aspect of feminist work."[17] In criticising Jehlen's stand, Moi states:

> Instead of shifting the earth, Jehlen wants to shift feminism back on the 'male ground' - but that is of course, precisely where feminism, both women-centred and otherwise, has always been ... If there is no space uncontaminated by patriarchy from which women can speak, it follows that we really don't need a fulcrum at all: there is simply nowhere else to go."[18]

From the foregoing, 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 the woman should be bettered and that man has dominated activities on earth to the detriment of the woman. But, how to go about redressing the perceived imbalances is another bone of contention. Moderate and extreme positions are held by feminists on the modalities for attaining their avowed objectives. Some

exponents favour dialogue and co-operation with men to end the male domination of society. Others advocate blatant and outright rejection of such olive-branch methods.

Differences have also emerged in the perception of what feminism can and should do. For instance, African-American Women, owing to their humiliating experience of bondage, racism and gender discrimination in the United States, have somewhat more militant or revolutionary expectations. So, those that are feminists are usually very blatant and bitter in their quests and their lists of demands or expectations sometimes appear outrageous. Moreover, they now reject what they consider to be white western feminism. However, we also have moderate and extreme feminists among African-Americans. But, feminism has rather compounded issues for the black female in the United States since it has brought to the fore and in very clear focus, the full complexities of females. Feminist readings tend to push females to adopt radical positions on issues in the society. Hence, the formulation by black women of a model of feminism that promises to satisfy the yearnings and aspirations of black females in particular, and black people as a whole. The model 'womanism' is currently embraced enthusiastically by African-American women.

It is necessary at this juncture to observe that, for the African-American, the lopsided American society is at the root of the problems encountered. This is acknowledged by womanists. For instance, the dichotomies between the

genders and races are regularly over emphasized. But this same society with glaring divisions, is touted as 'God's own country' – the best on earth, and everything possible is done to engender a sense of normalcy, opportunity and fulfilment. These of course remain utopian and a case of self-delusion to most Americans.

Since feminists more or less adopt a radical approach to address their grievances - which can be summed up as the desire 'for the recognition of the claims of women for rights (legal, political, economic, etc.) equal to those possessed by men,'[19] their long term objective appears to be parity with men in all ramifications. Probably, that is why feminist readings approach, examine and interpret phenomena from the woman's angle. In the literary circle, according to Sherley Anne Williams, feminists seek to achieve their objective by challenging "the fundamental theoretical assumptions of literary history and criticism by demanding a radical rethinking and revisioning of the conceptual grounds of literary study that have been based almost entirely on male literary experiences."[20] This is currently being done with much commitment, vigour and zeal. By implication therefore, feminists have embarked on a mission to 'feminize' among other things, literary studies which is also viewed as male - inclined. This they believe will result in a greater sense of fulfilment for them since it would root out a major source of friction i.e. male domination of this sphere of endeavour.

For African-American women today, the problem promises to be quickly resolved with the adoption of a common orientation - 'womanism' to attempt to approach issues in an amicable and all - embracing manner. Although there is a marked genesis of current black feminist efforts in the United States, there is no projected end in sight. Sherley Anne Williams observes that, serious interest in black feminist studies "began in the confrontation of black women readers in the early seventies with black female portraiture (or its lack) in fiction by black male writers."[21] Deborah E. McDowell, in an article titled "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," argues that:

> Of course there are feminist critics who are already examining Black Male Writers, but much of the scholarship has been limited to discussions of the negative images of Black Women found in the works of these authors. Although this scholarship served an important function in pioneering Black feminist critics, it has virtually run its course. Feminist critics run the risk of plunging their work into cliché and triviality if they continue merely to focus on how Black men treat Black women in literature.[22]

The feminist interest in works by black male writers has assumed a new dimension, as the women now affirm that they are looking for "the possibility of changing one's reading of the world and of changing the world itself through the perspective of woman."[23] In this regard, 'new dimension' means that women want a total and unsparing reinterpretation of phenomena from the female perspective. They discountenance all superficial gestures and

shallow compromises on the part of men - the male writers. They hope that such endeavours would ultimately lead to a more egalitarian society than that currently prevailing.

It is through literature that feminism has so far found the strongest expression. And, while feminist critics recognise the fact that their approach amounts to more than a critical assessment of individual authors and their works, that it involves a new assessment and reading of the literary tradition - which could possibly lead to a reformulation of that tradition, black feminists in the United States are very firm in their conviction that reading the African-American literary tradition in 'new ways' is desirable. They therefore point out that:

> ...a world in which the female is made subordinate is like a body with one eye bandaged. When the bandage is removed, the body is filled with light: "It sees a circle where before it saw a segment. The darkened eye restored, every member rejoices with it". 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.[24]

Thus, the goal of the black feminist in the United States is to 'create' a new world; a new globe or a 'circle' where equality between men and women in the social strata would now exist and be nurtured and sustained in all ramifications. It is for this reason that African-American women scholars through the medium of contemporary feminist criticism employ literature and

criticism to attempt to address imbalances which they argue exist between the male and female genders in the society. They criticise the manner in which the society has been structured and run, the mode of depiction of women by men in their literary works and the alleged dominant roles of males in all spheres and strata of the society. As a result, they seek to create a society which will accord more rights, privileges and equity to females in particular, and ultimately more humane conditions for the nurture of all its members.

However, even a cursory examination of their writings will show that feminists, like Marxists, are engaged by and large in a kind of proscriptive criticism, and the intentions behind their approaches and judgements only partially overlap. Feminism and Marxism appear to have rather fixed, narrow and limited perspectives on what literature should accomplish, while devaluing other literary aims and achievements. In both frameworks, the political goals and commitments are too obvious. Both theoretical approaches seem to value literature not so much for itself but as a means of achieving what for them is a greater end.

It is therefore necessary to attempt to explain the feminist conception of their literary criticism as a means of changing society and also, what they hope to gain by applying such an essentially contemporary perspective to older literature written within quite different world-views and dispensations.

In the light of the feminist allegations of misrepresentations of black females and the total exclusion of them in some texts written by black males in America, it has become necessary to explore the quest for fulfilment by African-American women especially in works by black male writers regularly charged with such perceived lapses. Black female characters in texts by Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and Langston Hughes are consequently explored in their struggle to better their lot, make themselves visible and contribute to the improvement of their society. The texts under analysis include: Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and Hughes' *Not Without Laughter* and *The Big Sea*.

In order to get a clearer picture of the situation, it has become necessary to refer to portrayals of characters in some works written by black feminist [women] writers. The texts are Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Morrison and Walker are currently at the apex of the black literary endeavour in the United States. The study explores key areas of quests by black females such as the acquisition of higher education, freedom from economic bondage and social inequality and participation in mainstream American politics. This is done in a bid to address the feminist charges as well as suggest alternatives. The primary texts and writers were chosen for this exploration because they are among those regularly criticised

by feminists and, moreover, they are among the core of writers and texts in the African –American literary tradition. More importantly, the exploration of the black female quest for fulfilment in the United States, establishes clearly whether African-American women were credibly portrayed or totally excluded as alleged by the critics in literary texts by black male writers such as those listed above.

The unique point about this study is its focus. Unlike previous exercises which tended to dwell on stock themes such as slavery, racism and neo-colonialism, this research shifts attention to the emerging trend of black feminist literary criticism of dominant texts by black male writers. This trend in itself, is a quest for fulfilment by black women in that, through such criticisms, they seek to not only equal, but surpass (where possible) black male efforts. African–American women have actively adopted the feminist movement to try to attain many of their goals and objectives. The quest by these black females to fulfill their aspirations as reflected in the texts for this study is explored against the background of such feminist criticisms. Some of the black females symbolise many positive trends as they manifest competence in intellectual, economic and other socio-political preoccupations. Therefore, instances where they are repeated, are meant to emphasise such multiple engagements.

Contrary to the notion by some black male critics in the United States that the feminist criticism of works of African–American male writers is essentially destructive, a close scrutiny suggests other readings. Rather than merely destroying achievements recorded by black males, the criticisms appear aimed at exposing and subverting negative creative efforts by these writers. In view of the fact that both the creative writings by black males and the critical appraisals by feminists manifest strengths and shortcomings, such artistry should aim to promote the black literary tradition and the welfare of all African-Americans as the womanists argue. The central theme of this study aims to foster such. To this effect, the Alice Walker and Clenora Hudson-Weems' models of feminism [womanism and Africana womanism respectively] are viewed here as possible springboards for the attainment of the desired fulfilment by African-American women.

CHAPTER ONE

WOMANISM AS AN ANSWER TO THE PROBLEM OF REPRESENTATION OF CHARACTERS IN TEXTS WRITTEN BY BLACK MALES.

The process of discovering new meanings which contradict previous ones is central to Jacques Derrida's deconstruction. The womanist perspective in feminism draws upon some of the tenets of deconstruction to criticise the writings of black males in the United States in its bid to advance the African – American sense of community which is gender-sensitive. Womanism is an aspect of feminism which represents the black woman's response to gender discrimination in the United States. Unlike core Western feminism which tends to favour the separation of the sexes, womanism argues for a union of males and females in joint endeavours to advance the human race. Hence, it claims that it is 'traditionally universalist,' 'capable' and "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female."[1]

Another brand of womanism has recently been enunciated by Clenora Hudson- Weems. It is referred to as 'Africana Womanism' and it purports to comprehensively cater to the needs, yearnings and aspirations of African people in the continent and diaspora. It goes beyond Walker's womanist philosophy by completely dissociating itself it from all forms of Western feminism. It also views Walker's brand as inherently tied to the Western feminist orientation. It further 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 while paying lip-service and token recognition to non-white females such as African-American women.[2]

Hudson-Weems' Africana womanism is 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. It is grounded in *'African* Culture' and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of Africana women."[3] She argues that her ideology "critically addresses the dynamics of the conflict between the mainstream feminist, the black feminist, the African feminist, and the Africana Womanist."[4] She clinches her argument by asserting that:

> Africana Womanism and its agenda are unique and separate from both White feminism and Black feminism; moreover, to the extent of naming in particular, Africana Womanism differs from African feminism Clearly there is a need for separate and distinct identity for the Africana woman and her movement. Some white women acknowledge that the feminist movement was not designed with the Africana woman in mind.[5]

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:

> Africana men and women do not accept the idea of Africana women as feminists. There is a general consensus in the Africana community that the feminist movement, by and large, is the white woman's movement ... .[6]

Whereas Hudson-Weems' Africana Womanism concept offers a plethora of points for regular and useful reference for this study and for Africanists in general, Walker's womanist orientation will be more integral to this analysis which is clearly focused on the quest by black women in America for uplift in their predominantly white society. Again, one is not so sure of what to make out of Hudson-Weems' categorical and complete excision of her concept from the feminist movement which, in any case, provided the raw ingredients that in turn prompted this analysis. It is the feminist criticisms of the works of African-American male literary artists and the desire to find an accompanying feminist fold which is accommodating, racially uplifting, but essentially American that elicited this study. Hudson-Weems' model is indeed useful and commendable but it applies more to Africans worldwide than specifically to African-Americans as a resilient minority within the United States.

In addition, Hudson-Weems argues that gender issues have never been of primary focus among African people and that, "In general, Africanans focus on tangible things that can offer an amelioration of or exit from (white) oppression, which are of utmost importance for survival in the Africana community."[7] She thus distances the African woman from the white Western woman. But, while agreeing with her contention that problems militating

against the survival of Africans such as white oppression, economic and political issues dominate the agenda of black people, it would be wrong for her to dismiss lightly the issue of gender difference among African people. For indeed, gender matters play a major role in our daily life and decisions. For long in Africa, the male child has been desired, sought after and accorded greater respect than the female offspring. Hudson-Weems does not deny this reality, but Alice Walker and other feminists are very vocal in their condemnation of such a practice. They want equal treatment for males and females – children and adults alike in the community.

An interesting phenomenon observable from this critical inquiry is that some of the black females in, especially, the male authored works reflect more than a single trend. It is common to encounter a black woman endowed with high intellect who, in addition to obtaining lofty academic qualifications, equally manifests great acumen in economics, politics and other social concerns. Consequently, they are viewed as 'rounded characters' and are cited fairly regularly to buttress instances in the analysis.

The feminist criticism of primary male-authored works therefore brings into sharp focus some weaknesses and lapses in those works as a step towards encouraging the rectification and reordering of portrayals to reflect a balanced and humane society which is currently perceived to be lacking. This preoccupation is central to the womanist orientation.

Above all, the cardinal issue being contended is the perceived patriarchal structure of the society which feminists argue, is reflected in all facets of life on earth, but which womanists mitigate by actively initiating and fostering dialogue between women and men as a way to reconcile the two genders and encourage cooperation among them. But, in spite of these efforts there is a lingering feeling that exponents of the various shades of feminism seek to subvert the male domination of the human society to their advantage.

Since womanists desire a better deal for all, it would be useful to view their assessments of literary texts written by black males as an on-going attempt to attain fulfilment not only for women, but for every one in the society. Their assessments of texts try to counter divisive appraisals of the writings by Western-oriented feminists.

To the womanists, the reflection of females in works by male writers needs not remain a contentious issue because they envisage mutually acceptable, enduring and sustaining solutions to such unwholesome reflections. In addition, they adopt a patient, community-affirming, (non-sex biased) approach to try to resolve the perceived discrepancies. In an essay, "(En) gender(ing) Discourse: Palaver-Palava and African Womanism, "Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1996) posits womanism as a sure and durable panacea to

not only literary, but also other socio-political problems in the society. She displays feminism in the process:

> 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.[8]

Similarly, Barbara Christian praises Walker for 'turning the idea of art on its head' through the enunciation of the concept of Womanism. Christian observes that, instead of adhering strictly to the demands of traditional Western feminism, Walker pioneered womanism which subsequently became integral to the African-American woman's quest for uplift 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 women who had transformed the material to which they had had access into their conception of beauty: cooking, gardening, quilting, story telling. In retrieving that low ground, Walker not only reclaimed her foremothers, she pointed to a critical approach. For she reminded us that Art, and the thought and sense of beauty on which it is based, is the province not only of those with a room of their own, or of those in libraries, universities and literary

> Renaissances – that creating is necessary to those who work in kitchens and factories, nurture children and adorn homes, sweep streets or harvest crops, type in offices or manage them.[9]

The cooperation with men eagerly sought by womanists for the sake of community-affirming endeavours runs contrary to traditional western feminist objectives. A look at some of their writings and criticisms shows that core western feminists have other unexpressed intentions. In addition to fundamentally reforming literary writings by men, they seek to subvert and overturn such works in their desire to empower women. Their attempt to generate fresh readings which benefit women is deconstructive. Derrida's deconstruction which was subsequently applied to literature by Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller at Yale University in the United States as already noted, suggests endless readings to a text.

The 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. For instance, feminists single out two black male writers Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison for scathing criticism:

> The male authors have portrayed male heroes and male protagonists almost exclusively, and the complexity and vitality of black female experiences have been fundamentally ignored. 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, until recently, black writing in the United States has been systematically discriminatory against black women.[10]

On the other hand, womanists make allowance for male writers. Sherley Anne Williams argues:

> Having confronted what black men have said about us, it is now time for black feminist critics (womanists) to confront black male writers with what they have said about themselves. What is needed is a thoroughgoing examination of male images in the works of black writers. This is a necessary step in ending the separatist tendency in Afro-American criticism and in achieving in Afro-American literature feminist theory's avowed aim of challenging the fundamental theoretical assumptions of literary history and ctiricism'.[11]

Ogunyemi *(1996)* ascribes womanists' ability to confront the perceived lopsided male-prone society by their flexibility and maturity which is in conformity with their maternal disposition, steadfastness of purpose and their all-inclusiveness or communality. She therefore joins Walker in characterizing the approach as:

> Whole, "or as 'round' women-women who love other women ... who also have concern, in a culture that oppresses all black people... for their fathers, brothers, and sons, no matter how they feel about them as males," especially as husbands.[12]

Although Wright and Ellison have been criticised for lapses in their portrayal of black females in literary works, both feminist (womanist inclusive) and non-feminist writers recognize their centrality to the black literary tradition in the United States. Indeed, the renowned African-American scholar, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. observes in the introduction to the ground-breaking anthology, *Reading Black, Reading Feminist,* that:

> Much has been made – too much of the supposed social animosities between black men and women and the relation between the commercial success of the black women's literary movement and the depiction of black male sexism... But no literary movement can be understood apart from the institutional and demographic facts of reading and writing that sustain – or fails to sustain – the author and her audience. This tradition within a tradition is often related to, yet stands independent of the black male tradition and its triangle of influence, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison.[13]

In other words, despite the feminist rejection of Wright and Ellison's texts as models, womanists view them as central to the development of the black literary tradition in the United States. Furthermore, while the feminists criticise Wright and Ellison for perceived lapses in the depiction of black women, a reading of Baldwin's and Hughes's works - especially their key texts, '*Go Tell It On the Mountain* and *Not Without Laughter*', tells a different story.

In evaluating feminist criticisms of primary African-American male-authored texts, it is obvious that one cannot avoid the charges levelled against such

works. In "The Darkened Eye Restored: Notes Towards a Literary History of Black Women," Mary Helen Washington attributes the exclusion or misrepresentation of African-American Women in texts by black male writers to their literary tradition which "has so often been used to exclude or misrepresent women."[14] Washington points out that black men have employed that tradition to oppress and suppress black women in America. She mentions pioneer black literary geniuses such as Alexander Crummel, Francis Grimké, and W.E.B. Du Bois who influenced later writers like Wright and Ellison, as examples of black male writers who were decidedly opposed to the admission of women to membership" of the Negro literary and intellectual organisation, since they "proposed from the beginning that the American Negro Academy – a kind of think tank for that intellectual black elite called the Talented Tenth – be open only to "Men of African descent.'"[15] It is therefore legitimate for feminists to feel aggrieved over such remarks which foster disaffection. Their uncompromising stand widens the gender divisions within the black community and sets them apart from the womanists.

According to Sherley Anne Williams, the womanist orientation encourages a return to certain unique ideals of the nineteenth century black men which emphasized nobility of stature, self-restraint and physical self control as avenues to moral superiority over the white society, and which enabled the "black patriarch" - the black man, to provide for and protect his 'dependents' (family) rather than wield authority or exploit their dependency to achieve his

own privilege."[16] The examples of Frederick Douglas - a former Slave, and Josiah Henson - the model in Harriet Beecher Stowe's "*Uncle Tom's Cabin*" (1852), are cited as reflections of nineteenth century black men that manifested such trends. Williams maintains that, at the time:

> Black male heroic stature was most often achieved within the context of marriage, family, and black community – all of which depend on a relationship with, if not a black woman, at least other black people.[17]

Although feminism is not a new concept, contemporary Western feminism employs current theories and yardsticks to criticise books written in the past. Such a practice is not new, but it can only be viable and meaningful if the original contexts and informing visions of such works are taken into account. It is necessary for instance to adopt a historical perspective to examine the central texts whose authors - renowned black male writer, have so often been charged with poor portrayal of women in their texts. There is a significant time gap between contemporary feminism and the sensibilities and preoccupations of earlier periods which may have influenced the writings of those authors more than the fact of their gender classification. But the time factor is not an excuse for writers to misrepresent anybody in creative undertakings. However, a clear awareness of germane issues which dominated the literary and socio-cultural scenes at the period the books were written enhances our understanding of how and why these writers portrayed people and events the way they did. Issues

such as the Great Depression and the two world wars for example, influenced and shaped such writings.

In addition to the foregoing, the theoretical and ideological bases of the writings should be taken into account. Womanists appear to have done this by being willing to expand their scope to include portrayals of black males instead of limiting their focus to what has been written about women.

It has increasingly become obvious that these writers were concerned with the prevailing economic, racial and class structures of the time which tended to de-emphasise the role of women and which took precedence over all other factors. For instance, the concerns of Marxist theory underscored much of *Native Son* and other writings in the 1930s. In other words, feminists are right in observing that black females are few and are accorded scanty portrayal in *Native Son* but the truth is that the author seemed more motivated by other issues than a phobia for women or a deliberate desire to make a caricature of black females.The uncompromising stance adopted by core western feminists and their apologists towards creative works of black male writers like Wright and Ellison probably informed Walker to pioneer the concept of womanism. A major influence on Wright at the time of writing *Native Son* and *Black Boy* was Marxism. Writers in the western hemisphere at this period, especially those from downtrodden African-American backgrounds embraced Marxism because it seemed to hold out a glimmer of hope for poor people who were oppressed

and exploited under the capitalist system. Even writers who did not go so far as to join the Communist Party were influenced by Marxist analysis in their portrayals of their society and factors shaping individual lives. Particularly in the era before World War II, many African-Americans, having suffered so long under slavery, racial and economic discriminations, placed their hope in the Marxist collective struggle to create a new society as a means to actualise their dreams of equality and economic uplift.

Marxism is a theory which asserts the equality of all people and races. It raises the possibility of people living full, useful and rewarding lives. The Marxist maxim, 'to each, according to his needs,' appears to answer the yearnings of the oppressed and downtrodden peoples for fulfilment and equality. Writers such as Wright and Ellison were fascinated with the concept at some point in their lives, although both authors later abandoned it.

Marxist-influenced literatures concentrate on class conflicts in the economic sphere of human activities, particularly aspects which have historically involved men more than women. Also, according to Marxist theory, problems of racial and gender discrimination can only be understood as effects of Capitalism and its structure of economic exploitation by class. Marxism as an all-informing philosophy holds that:

> The idea of class struggle is central; the connections between literature and the economic structure of

> society in which it was written must be made evident.[18]

These issues should be taken seriously in the criticism of *Native son, Black Boy* and *Invisible Man.* Feminists are however very sceptical of the brand of Marxism and Christian Existentialism which regularly affirm male superiority in literary works. Hence, they reject them as they maintain that these ideologies propagate male domination or exploitation of women which feminists endeavour to challenge and expose. 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. But, 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 emphasises 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.[19]

From this it is clear that Walker views white feminism as compounding the old problem 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."[20] She further argues that, "although she (Walker) speaks from the point of view of sisterhood with all women... all women must understand that sexism and racism in America are critically related.[21] This then informs her opposition to white feminism.

Womanism is an arm of the feminist movement specially formulated by black women in America to actualise their dreams of equal opportunity and fulfilment in life. It is cardinal to this analysis. The whole endeavour of reassessing and redefining female character portrayal in writings by black males is therefore viewed in the context of the quest for fulfilment by black women in the United States. As the women-centred critics reappraise creative works of black male writers, their efforts are equally being examined by other critics and scholars. This fits in with the practice of deconstruction which envisages limitless interpretations of phenomena.

An exploration of some of the texts of black male writers accused of dented depiction of women reveals that, although the women-centred critics are accurate in many of their assessments, the male writers too have established an ethos and created a legacy by contributing to the blossoming of the African-American literary tradition in the midst of the predominant, hostile white tradition in the United States. Thus, by writing, the male authors have made a significant contribution upon which other scholars and critics are drawing from. The thrust of this study is to analyse the quest for fulfilment by black females in America in texts written by black American males which are usually condemned by extreme feminists for poor black representation in order to demonstrate how black females strive relentlessly to redefine themselves as they grapple with problems in the society. Emphasis is shifted from a criticism of the male writers and a repudiation of the women-centred criticisms to a preoccupation with something more life-affirming and beneficial to both genders in the debate. 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.

At the time Hughes, Wright, Ellison and Baldwin wrote their masterpieces, black people in the United States were generally preoccupied with warding off racism and other forms of humiliation and oppression visited on them by

whites. The generic name for human beings then tended to be 'man', 'mankind', 'manhood'. Calvin Hernton (1987) argues :

> Historically, the battle line of the racial struggle in the United States has been drawn exclusively as a struggle between the men of the races ... The central concept and the universal metaphor around which all aspects of the racial situation revolve is 'Manhood'.[22]

In that era too, the theme of social protest was central to writings by black males. Gender issues appeared to be peripheral in the American society. In what became known later as the manifesto for black writers, Langston Hughes made racial uplift - which is an aspect of social protest, the central theme in his 1926 essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain:"

> We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased – we are glad. If they are not, it does not matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure does not matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.[23]

At the time Hughes made this declaration - though it embraced both genders, it would have been counter-productive to divert attention from the black people's struggle for recognition and equality in the predominantly white American society to gender differences and other related issues between male and female African – Americans. This is not to imply however that the struggle

against racial injustice is an excuse for black or white men to dominate or oppress black or white women. The point to note is that African-American people were just emerging from almost three centuries of severe slavery. Coloured people were just beginning to unfetter and enletter themselves, since: "During 250 years of slavery, it was a legal crime for blacks to read and write."[24]

Hughes's manifesto however was all embracing and vividly reflected the ideals of womanism, especially with its emphasis on mutual or joint endeavours which foster the well-being of all. Barbara Christian is encouraged by black male writers such as Hughes who strive to balance their portrayals of people and issues. She believes that Hughes and his likes have motivated black women to speak and act because they seek to establish a tradition which, while not discriminating against males, reflects their genuine aspirations and sensibilities as black females. This view is completely in consonance with Alice Walker's womanistic goals:

> For those of us who came out of the sixties the vision of women moving all over the world was not solely a claiming of our rights but also the rights of all those who had been denied their humanity ... We were now able to speak and to listen to each other, to hear our own language, to refine and critique it across time and space, through the written word. For me that dialogue is the kernel of what a black feminist literary critic tries to do. We listen to those of us who speak, write, read, to those who have written, to those who may write. We write to those who write, read, speak, may write,

> and we try to hear the voiceless. We are participants in a many-voiced palaver of thought/feeling, image/language that moves us to move-toward a world where, like Alice Walker's revolutionary petunias, all of us can bloom. We found that in order to move beyond prescribed categories we had to "rememory" – reconstruct our past.[25]

The discourse unfolding here is borne out of the dissatisfaction and frustration of women-centred critics over representations of black females in some black male-authored texts and this accounts for their great emphasis on the evolution of a feminist literary tradition within the African-American literary tradition - which is currently viewed as pro-male. As the critics express disaffection with such writings, they are inadvertently aspiring for greater uplift, while at the same time, prescribing for future writers. But such 'prescription' is subject to further readings – a function of deconstruction. This of course further propagates the intellectual process since deconstruction implies multifarious interpretations. Christian therefore feels free to apply new interpretations to old phenomena in order to justify her faith in the promise of womanism. This is in essence a subversion of Western feminism which she terms "Western philosophical theorizing." Such revisioning is literary as well as political since it is subversive. The feminist orientation which she is at variance with, originally set out to fight for the rights of all women, but focused rather exclusively on matters affecting white women. Hence, her acceptance of womanism as a positive alternative to traditional feminism. Womanism, in her

estimation, empowers black females to realise their potentials much more than Western feminism. She justifies her conviction by observing that:

> Because language is one (though not the only) way to express what one knows, feels, even when one doesn't know one/knows it, because story-telling is a dynamic form of remembering/recreating, we found that it was often in the relationship between literatures and the world that revisioning occurred; it is often in the poem, the story, the play, rather than in Western philosophical theorizing, that feminist thought/feeling evolves, challenges, and renews itself... It has often been through our literatures that women have renamed critical areas of human life: mothering, sexuality, bodies, friendship, spirituality, economics, the process of literature itself.[26]

The renewed interest in women's studies exhibited by black females has led analysts to conclude that a new form of scholarship is emerging. This scholarship matches the writer with his/her texts as a way to appraise the practicability of such a writer's newly emerging concepts. It does not treat the text in exclusion of the writer. The interest has also been attributed to a 'gravitation' which is perceived to have occurred. This is already yielding positive dividends:

> As a result of that gravitation, we have moved to excavate the past and restore to ourselves the words of many of our foremothers who were buried in the rumble of distorted history. We have questioned the idea of great works of literature, preferences clearly determined by a powerful elite. We have asked why some forms are not considered literature.[27]

In "Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity," Michele Wallace argues that black feminist creativity (which includes criticism) emanated from the fact of the non-recognition of black women's contribution to literature and the arts by the dominant male-prone establishment in the United States. She further reasons that:

> Prevented from assuming a commensurable role in critical theory and the production of knowledge by a combination of external and internal pressures, it is confined to the aesthetic and the commercial. To compensate for the ghettoization, black feminist creativity's concentration in music and now literature has become provocatively intense. And yet it is still difficult, even for those who study this music and literature, to apprehend black feminist creativity as a continuous and coherent discourse.[28]

Wallace's anxieties and fears need to be allayed because, since its inception, the concept of womanism has been embraced by more and more black women scholars and critics to try to solve the twin problems of male domination of women and the limitations of traditional western feminism. Womanism, like Western feminism proceeds by attacking the status-quo in order to destroy it so as to erect new structures favourable to women. But, unlike feminism, Womanist inquiry creates ample room for mutually benefiting dialogue.

It has generally been argued that black women were accorded poor representations in literary writings by African-American males. Some women – centred critics go as far as alleging that black females were completely left out

by these writers in some of their works. Accordingly, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison were cited to buttress the allegation. Furthermore, a scrutiny of the male – authored writings reveals that many of the accusations are valid. It is also worthy to note at this point that Wright and Ellison are only two African-American male writers, so it might therefore appear mischievous to generalize from their creative efforts. But, they form the core of the black literary canon in the United States. However, the analysis here is not trying to aggravate the situation further by allotting blames and praises. The aim here is to assess womanist inquiry as a possible panacea to the problem of representation - or misrepresentation - of black women in texts written by black men. It is equally germane to draw attention to the fact that other factors actively influenced the writers so listed at the period they wrote. Moreover, other very renowned black male writers such as James Baldwin and Langston Hughes who are equally central to the African-American literary canon are appraised for greater objectivity on the matter. So, is womanism an all-encompasing solution to the issue of poor or improper representation of women by male writers in African-American literature? In other words, is womanist inquiry really the answer to the alleged domination of women by men , using selected literary texts as our basis or reference points?

Prior to her enunciation of the concept of womanism, Alice Walker became acutely aware of her "diminutive individual self" as an African-American woman writer in the gendered and racially-inclined American society. She

consequently wrote a poem, "On Stripping Bark from Myself", to reflect her new awareness:

> I find my own
> small person
> a standing self
> against the World
> an equality of wills
> I finally understand.[29]

The realisation of herself as woman and as a black writer in a fiercely discriminating society where individuality - as opposed to communality prevails, helped to raise this consciousness in her. To counter this apparent western tendency to individualise, Walker initiated a community and by extension, African-based concept which she subsequently referred to as 'womanist'. This terminology is now synonymous with a 'black feminist or feminist of color'.[30]

The womanist inquiry is therefore well-equipped to contend with, and resolve the issues of black male writers' misrepresentations and, occasionally, total exclusion of black females in their texts. This conclusion is premised on the fact that the framework of womanism projects itself in a dynamic, all-embracing, and compromising mode. These attributes contrast sharply with the stance of traditional western feminism which is regularly seen to be exclusive and discriminatory by non-white and non-Western feminists. More importantly, the distinguishing factor in the womanist orientation appears to be its ultimate goal of fostering unity between men and women, while dialoging to settle

lingering points of contention in order to build trust and ensure community in the practical sense. Thus womanism promotes the advancement of women in the intellectual and non-intellectual circles, while recognising the inseparable bond between women and men. Its approach to problems such as the controversial portrayals of black women in literary works by black male writers is simply to draw attention to such issues, support the instances with convincing evidence, suggest possible remedies which include the desire to engage the male writers and critics alike in mutually rewarding dialogues so as to sort out the problems and proceed subsequently in joint, whole community-affirming endeavours. Such an approach, no doubt, manifests wisdom and responsibility and is worth encouraging in our crisis-ridden world.

Womanist practice is however not entirely bereft of the confrontation and subversion common in traditional feminism. Sherley Anne Williams admits that womanism:

> Is as much *bolekaja* criticism as "feminist" theory, for black women writers have been urging black men not so much to "come down (and) fight," as to come down and talk, even before Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike coined a critical term to describe our chanllenge.[31]

Whereas Wright and Ellison are criticised for according fleeting and superficial depictions to black women such as Mrs. Thomas, Bessie Mears (*Native Son*) and Mary Rambo (*Invisible Man*) Baldwin and Hughes are commended by all

shades of feminists for projecting African-American females like Elizabeth Grimes (*Go tell It on the Mountain*) and Aunt Hager Williams (*Not Without Laughter*) positively because they delved into details about these characters and displayed remarkable understanding of the activities and peculiar nature of the black females in their portrayals.

Wright and Ellison are further accused of focusing exclusively in projecting male heroes and protagonists in their texts. On the other hand, Baldwin and Hughes - although they too reflected male protagonists in their writings - are praised for placing these central characters squarely under the positive influence and protecting hands of black women who, as mothers and grandmothers, nurture and guide the heroes to positive ends. Womanism's chief desire regarding all categories of male writers appears therefore to be to encourage them to be more objective in their representations of characters and events and to strive to bring to bear in their creativity the unique features and sensibilities of the black woman. This study views all such efforts by womanists as a dimension of the quest for fulfilment by black females in the United States.

Finally, womanist inquiry, with its promise of greater objectivity and sense of community, should, unlike Western feminism, be able to assess the black woman projected in texts by pioneering black male writers (such as those being studied) as starting points for subsequent creative efforts. In every pioneering

endeavour, there are normally lapses and short-comings. So, as this category of women's studies seeks to redefine the image and role of the African-American female in those texts, it should emphasise more the positive promise possessed by those women rather than the limitations imposed on them by their society or by the male writers.

CHAPTER TWO

THE QUEST FOR INTELLECTUAL ADVANCEMENT BY AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN

A major area of contention by feminists over creative works written by older African-American males especially between 1930 and 1960, is the portrayal of black females in their quest for advancement in relevant areas of society such as education (formal), economics and politics. Feminist critics assert that:

> The black woman is America's favorite 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.[1]

An awareness of the usefulness of intellectual advancement by African-American women has prompted them to seek high-level education with which to equip themselves to face challenges in their society. In the extract above, a black feminist critic, Sondra O'Neale voices her pent-up anger in a blatant and unsparing condemnation of the American society's attitude to African-American women. She resents the one-dimensional, male-prone stereotype portrayal that regularly characterises "images of Black women in the national psyche". Resentments such as these help to sensitise the wider American public

to the presence and unique dilemma and desires of African-American women. The mere expression of such feelings and yearnings serves to channel attention from the prevailing dominant power structures and further acts as a catalyst to accelerate the realisation by these women of their cherished aspirations. Black females in the United States, desire to be heard and seen clearly like other Americans. They seek to assert that visibility in various fora and media. Apparently, they now realise that the intellectual vehicle offers the surest hope for the attainment of such goals. Hence, the great importance they attach to the acquisition of formal education.

With an awareness of the many benefits offered by a sound and balanced formal education, black women in the U.S.A. now criticise their projection in works of art, as well as in the larger society by males especially black males. They do this through the feminist movement which is seen as the umbrella body that champions their crusade for the improvement of the lot of women world-wide. Such black feminist criticisms appear aimed at accelerating the advance of black women in the educational, economic and political endeavours in America. This, the women believe, would in turn catapult them into mainstream American life.

But while some critics view such reappraisals of works of early black male writers as an essentially negative endeavour, others see in it the potential to illuminate the efforts of black women in the United States to attain greater

recognition and fulfilment in the American society. Specifically, whereas some feminist orientations criticise the projection of black women in texts authored by black males without recommending comprehensive, objective and enduring solutions, other varieties such as the womanists (both the Walker's and Hudson Weems' brands) tend to acknowledge positive elements in such depictions. They also go a step further to try to rectify the anomalies in such artistry by recommending sustaining models and situating such characters within the renewed quest for fulfilment by African-American Women in their society.

Thus, while Alice Walker argues for womanism as a brand of feminism "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female," and whereas Clenora Hudson–Weems proposes an ideology which is equally whole or all-embracing with a decided relevance to people of African descent - hence her terminology 'Africana womanism', other varieties of feminism are vehemently opposed to compromise or understanding on the issue of poor representation of female characters in the works of male writers. The level-headedness and inclination toward dialogue, understanding and compromise exhibited by womanists has reinforced the quest motif observed among black females in the male authored texts. So that, as the women in those works are engaged in one form of pursuit or the other in their bid to realise their potentials and survive in their American setting, it is apparent that they seek to

better themselves for themselves, for their male compatriots, and ultimately, for their society at large.

For these black females therefore, the acquisition and internalisation of intellectual excellence as an avenue to open up new vistas of opportunities, forms the primary focus as exemplified by some of the black women in the primary reference texts for the study. Sound, formal education is also seen as the key that would ultimately unlock the treasures of the proverbial paradise – that is, glories of the dominant white American world, to the African-American people. In Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter*, Harrietta Williams amplifies this theme when she rebukes her sister, Annjelica Rodgers (Annjee) for attempting to stall Sandy's educational pursuit. Sandy is Annjelica's son and Harrietta's nephew:

> Good Lord, Annjee, you ought to be ashamed ... This boy's gotta get ahead – all of us niggers are too far back in this white man's country to let any brains go to waste! Don't you realize that? ... He's gotta be what his grandma Hager wanted him to be – able to help the black race, Annjee! You hear me! Help the whole race![2]

How is the black female quest for intellectual uplift portrayed in the primary male- authored works for this study? How is it depicted in the novels by the two foremost black women feminist writers? Are black women engaged in educational pursuit in the societies mirrored in the novels? If so, what is it geared towards? Is it as a legacy for up-coming generations?

Generally speaking, most of the African-American women projected in the selected prose texts by black male writers are either stark illiterates or semi-literates. Very few are highly educated. But, in spite of this, the women exhibit keen admiration for formal, high-level education. They desire it and regret their lack of opportunity to imbibe it. This informs their sustained active support for their offspring and wards (females and males alike) to acquire, internalise and externalise sound and practical education for the envisaged complete emancipation of African-Americans from ignorance. This is also to try to make up for their inability to acquire education. Although women-centred critics are against such portrayals in the works of the male writers, nevertheless, by depicting black females such as the illiterate Mrs. Thomas and Aunt Hager Williams, the male authors are not charting a negative course for other black women or black writers to follow. They instead provide a model which reflects the situation at the time and which in turn has sensitised more African-American women to acquire formal education to fully realise their potentials as well as pass on the benefit of intellectual uplift to younger generations. More importantly, the two black matriarchs (Aunt Hager and Mrs. Thomas) are shown to be caring, hardworking and protecting – qualities which tend to be largely lacking among white women of a similar disposition. Thus, even though in terms of formal learning these women may be lacking, their chief role in the texts is to serve as mothers or central figures giving hope and direction to their offspring.

In Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), Mrs. Thomas (the protagonist - Bigger Thomas's mother) is cast in the mode of a black matriarch who provides single-handedly and cares for her three children – a daughter and two sons. She is illiterate and poor, but she actively encourages her children to learn. She sends them to school and also enrols her daughter, Vera in a sewing school for practical vocational application. Learning a trade after embracing other basic levels of literacy she believes, would ensure quick employment for her children. Although Mrs. Thomas and her children live on the fringes of the American society (due largely to white racism against blacks and owing to their recent migration from the Southern sharecropping States), they are determined to prosper through striving even though such an opportunity is largely denied them. From sharecropping farms in the deep American South therefore, Mrs. Thomas and her brood - like other recent arrivals from Southern U.S.A., settle in Northern urban ghettoes and slums such as the Chicago Southside.

One would therefore opine that, although Wright did not give a detailed and lengthy projection of Mrs. Thomas and her daughter, Vera, it would be inappropriate and harsh to describe their portrayal as "decrepit nagging bitches" the way Calvin Hernton does. The American society conditioned them to be poor and invisible. Mrs. Thomas in *Native Son* thus foreshadows subsequent black females such as Ella Wright (Richard Wright's mother) in

Black Boy owing to her interest and love for formal education for utilitarian goals.

Similarly, in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (1953), the American society more or less discourages the education of black women. Those who defy the odds end up 'half-baked' or semi-literate. We discover a tendency for African-American females to focus greater attention on the education of their offspring - especially the male children, as a way to make up for their own inability to acquire enhanced literacy. This is aptly demonstrated in Sister Rachel's attitude towards her children: Florence - who is the elder child and Gabriel - who is younger and male. Sister Rachel cares for Gabriel's intellectual uplift and does everything within her reach to keep him in school. However, Gabriel is not interested in formal classroom education. Florence who is keen to attend school is denied the chance because she is female:

> Gabriel was the apple of his mother's eye. If he had never been born, Florence might have looked forward to a day when she would be released from her unrewarding round of labor, when she might think of her own future and go out to make it. With the birth of Gabriel, which occurred when she was five, her future was swallowed up. There was only one future in that house, and it was Gabriel's to which since Gabriel was a manchild, all else must be sacrificed ... And he needed the education that Florence desired far more than he, and that she might have got if he had not been born. It was Gabriel who was slapped and scrubbed each morning and sent off to the one-room school house – which he hated, and where he managed to

> learn, so far as Florence could discover, almost nothing at all. And often he was not at School, but getting into mischief with other boys ...[3]

This situation, though somewhat modified, is repeated in Elizabeth's prime focus on her son, John's educational pursuit in the same novel. John is Elizabeth's first child and because she could not attain high-level education, she now pinned her hope on John to get educated and be a leader of the black race in America and free them from ignorance, poverty and discrimination.

In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), as in Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* (1930), we find black females cast in a matriarchal mode anxiously encouraging their wards and offspring to obtain sound and advanced education so as to become 'redeemers' – leaders and spokes-persons of the black race in America. Mary Rambo in *Invisible Man* recalls Aunt Hager Williams in *Not Without Laughter*, for both of them envision their male wards and offspring as future saviours of the African-American people. In Ellison's novel, Mary Rambo advises the youthful protagonist 'invisible man' to be an educator and leader of the race since he is already learned:

> It's you young folks what's going to make the changes,' she said. 'Y'a ll's the ones. You got to lead and you got to fight and move us all on up a little higher ... No, it's you young ones what has to remember and take the lead.[4]

Aunt Hager Williams in Hughes's novel declares that her grandson, Sandy would have to scale 'hurdles' and impediments so as to attain the highest level of education available in the land:

> ...But they's one mo got to go through school yet, an' that's ma little Sandy. If de lawd lets me live I's gwine make a edicated* man out o'him. He's gwine be another Booker T. Washington!...'I ain't never raised no boy o' ma own yet, so I wants him to know all they is to know, so's he can help this black race o'our'n to come up and see de light and take they places in de world. I wants him to be a Fred Douglass leadin' de people, that's what.[5]

Unlike Sister Rachel in Baldwin's book however, Aunt Hager actively promotes the formal education of her daughters. She has three daughters, namely, Tempy, Annjee and Harriett. All of them acquire education, but only Tempy completes her high school – which was a rare feat at the time. Tempy thus secures steady employment with a white lady as personal maid and secretary, while Annjee and Harriet who drop out of School owing to prevailing racism among other factors, do not get steady, well-paying jobs. Like the archetypal black matriarch therefore, Aunt Hager Williams brings up her children and grandchild, channelling them to aspire towards lofty ideals such as enlightenment. She also instructs them to be morally-upright and courageous in the face of prevailing vicissitudes such as the white racial segregation of blacks.

In *Black Fiction* (1974), Roger Rosenblatt observes that, Aunt Hager "is a former slave whose enormous strength of will provides the novel (*Not Without Laughter*) with its force of gravity." He further notes with conviction that:

> In *Not Without Laughter*, despite the implication of the title, the potential means of breaking a cyclical pattern is education, both in a formal sense and as it applies to the acquisition of an intelligence capable of dealing with a system which regularly works to domesticate it.[6]

Though she is illiterate - during slavery, blacks were barred from acquiring formal education, Aunt Hager values education greatly and seeks to obtain it for her children. Within the confines of her bleak disposition and surroundings, she works relentlessly to encourage them to learn the ways of the white man and also uphold and advance their rich African cultural heritage. Since she is illiterate and a 'domestic' who washes white folks' clothes for a living" Hager resolves to ensure that her offspring are educated and become reckoned with in their American society:

> Hager Williams – despite her poverty and the austerity of the general circumstances in which she struggles – never surrenders hope. Although conditions do not permit her to be a great leader of her people like a Sojourner Truth, she nevertheless ensures that her grandson will be such a person by giving him all her love and a sound moral and cultural foundation. She is "gwine to make a educated [sic] man out o' him and wants him to be a leading' de people." Again and again, the grandmother tells the grandson he is "gwine to count to something in this

> world." And the grandson (Sandy – young Langson) knew what she meant. She meant a man like Booker T. Washington or Frederick Douglass, or like Paul Laurence Dunbar, who did poetry writing.[7]

In assessing the benign matriarch, Aunt Hager, Calvin Hernton observes that the tendency by African-American women to inculcate lofty and sound intellectual values in their children and wards is equally age-old. He notes therefore that: "This selfless giving, teaching and inspiration of the grandmother is something every black person can relate to, it runs deep in the life experiences of black Americans."[8]

Although Tempy and Harriett - two of Hager's daughters, acquire basic literacy and attain high status in their racially-ordered society, they ultimately pin their hopes and expectations on Sandy (their sister - Annjee's son) to obtain the best and highest education available in the land in order to be a leader and spokesperson for the black race like W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington or Frederick Douglass. Tempy for instance becomes a realtor, owning and renting out houses to tenants, while Harriett succeeds as a show business queen. Both of them variously lend vitally needed support to Sandy's educational pursuit when Aunt Hager dies: they ensure that Sandy remains in school. He is therefore groomed to succeed far and above the black females who were born before him into their family.

Aunt Hager's regular emphasis on high intellectual attainment for her grandson, Sandy in *Not Without Laughter* parallels Sister Rachel's special preference and maximum encouragement for Gabriel in *Go Tell It On the Mountain*. To an extent too, it recalls Mary Rambo's counselling of the protagonist in *Invisible Man*. Furthermore, this trend is repeated in Elizabeth's active encouragement and support for John's education in *Go Tell It On the Mountain*. However, it is attitudes like these that feminists berate and oppose. They view such portrayals as outdated and obsolete, representing an old, fading order since they seek gender equality. A reading of *Go Tell It On the Mountain* for example, reveals that Florence Grimes is denied the chance to achieve her burning ambition of attending school and acquiring formal education to equip her for a more relevant and positive role in the society simply because she is a woman.

While many of the black male-authored works portray black females acquiring education, but pinning their hope for eventual racial uplift on male children, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) projects a young black female, Nettie, as the enlightened persona - the intellectual who undertakes a missionary journey to Africa to educate people as well as preach Christian ideals and tenets to them. Nettie thus becomes a saviour of sorts, for she goes on pilgrimage but returns home to America with enhanced experience to help avert the imminent collapse of her household and family which is ravaged in her absence by Mr ----

(Albert) and his children, but midwifed by her Sister, Celie. Thus, in Walker's text, the black woman is her own saviour and hope. The menfolk regularly are cast as the culprits.

African-American women writers, in their bid to project female characters purely from their own perspective as a way to correct the perceived negative portrayals in the works of black male authors, expectedly should have, in addition to projecting black females positively as people who now begin to effectively preside over their destinies, accorded similar positive projections to black males. But the men in Walker's and Morrison's texts are, in addition to being portrayed as culprits and brats, shown to be essentially destructive and divisive. Thus, the women authors appear to be repaying black male writers with what feminist critics have accused them of doing - reflecting black women in a bad light in their literary works. Both the Alice Walker and Clenora Hudson-Weems' brands of womanism actively advocate the positive reflection of the black race in real life endeavours as well as in artistic creations, so there is no reason for further biased depictions of characters either by male authors or women writers.

Black females are similarly portrayed in both the male-based and the female authored texts questing after education as a way to improve their lot in the white - dominated society. Their quest is not hitch-free however since racial

and gender-discriminations try to thwart such efforts. But, the women never give up striving. This is amply manifested by Tempy and Harriett *(Not Without Laughter)* and Mary Sampson Patterson and Carrie Hughes *(The Big Sea).* Nettie in *The Color Purple* equally mirrors this positive trend because she acquires high-level education and in turn becomes an educator to the extent that she becomes a missionary and travels to Africa where she shares her learning experience.

These African-American women desire education because they realise its many benefits. Hence, they work diligently to acquire it. Subsequently - as can be established from the experiences of Tempy, Mary Sampson Patterson and Nettie, they employ their education to enlighten other people in their communities. At the same time, owing to their enhanced literacy, these black females begin to rise steadily in their careers and social status. They also impart their education to the younger generation of African-American people, thereby ensuring that the learning process continues in the black community in America.

On the other hand, in Wright's *Native Son* and Ellison's *Invisible Man,* one rarely finds credible black females aspiring meaningfully to acquire and internalise high quality education. Although the black women therein indicate

a love and desire for education, their racially-structured society does not allow them to translate their dreams into reality. At best, they hope for their offspring to eventually accomplish what they themselves are deprived of. The American society reflected in virtually all the texts being studied actively stifled attempts by African-Americans (especially women) to acquire formal education. White Americans planned to keep Negroes in perpetual bondage - the worst form of bondage is intellectual deprivation – illiteracy, so they closed all channels to the acquisition of formal education by blacks – especially during slavery. African-Americans were therefore intended merely for menial, servile and brawny tasks as opposed to unfettered, intellectual applications and responsibilities.

The acquisition of sound and balanced education empowers African-American females to, among other things, assert themselves positively in their society and ward-off racism as well as become actively engaged in mainstream politics and economics. In Hughes's *The Big Sea* (1940) for example, the author's mother, Carrie fights and thwarts racial discrimination in her son, Langston Hughes's school successfully owing to her sound education at the University of Kansas[9] and her dogged commitment to the uplift of the black race in America. The young Langston narrates a particular racial encounter which remains fresh in his memory. The incident occurred at the Harrison Street School in Cleveland, Ohio:

> I went to a "white" School in the downtown district. At first, they did not want to admit me to the School ... They wanted to send me to the Colored School, blocks away down the railroad tracks. But my mother, who was always ready to do battle for the rights of a free people went directly to the School board, and finally got me into the Harrison Street School.[10]

This resolve on Carrie's part to keep her son, Langston in a qualitative, hitherto all-white school recalls Aunt Hager's firm resolve to sustain Sandy in school in *Not Without Laughter.*

In *Not Without Laughter* also, Harrietta Williams – a 'smart' or very intelligent girl, is however forced by the prevailing harsh racial circumstances (locally referred to as 'Dixie' or 'Jim Crow') to tow the line by working variously in such sundry occupations as housemaid and as waitress in a local restaurant. Early in her life, it is established that she possesses latent talent for, "she could sing! Lawdy! And dance, too!"[11] Later she harnesses these potentials fully to develop herself. Thus, she achieves fame and an enhanced status as "Princess of the Blues."[12] She further assists her sister, Annjee and sustains her young cousin, Sandy in school.

Harriett is vehemently opposed to the prevailing racist laws in her American society. Consequently, she voices resentment and bitterness by quitting her menial occupations and fighting racial segregation in her own way: She opposes

and defies segregated schools, classes and peer-groups motivated by race. Unlike her mother, Aunt Hager, Harriett is intolerant of white ways and disapproves of black people worshipping the same God through the same Christianity practised by whites. Racially-motivated incidents such as the constant reminder by whites of her black skin-colour hurt her a lot and serve to form a defence mechanism within her:

> A very unexpected stab at the girl's pride had come only a .few weeks ago when she had gone with her classmates, on tickets issued by the School, to see an educational film of the undersea world at the Palace Theatre, on Main Street. It was a special performance given for the students and each class had had seats allotted to them before hand; so Harriett sat with her class and had begun to enjoy immensely the strange wonders of the ocean depths when an usher touched her on the shoulder. "The last three rows on the left are for colored," the girl in the uniform said. "I-But-But," I'm with my class," Harriett stammered. "We're all supposed to sit here." "I can't help it," insisted the usher, pointing towards the rear of the theatre while her voice carried everywhere. "Them's the house rules. No argument now – you'll have to move.[13]

This event effectively repels Harriett, forcing her to leave the theatre abruptly instead of accepting the degrading place assigned to "colored people" by whites. And throughout her life in her public and private engagements, she is unrelenting in her opposition to such negative tendencies. Harriett is therefore the author's voice against racism, injustice and ignorance. She vividly recalls Hughes's militant and assertive declaration of black racial equality with other races in 1926.[14]

At the period that black male writers who are faulted by women-centered critics wrote, African-American people as well as other racial groups in the United States were just beginning to recover from the ravages of the Great Depression and the two world wars. These major upheavals dislocated and impoverished many families – especially blacks who were already at the rung of society's socio-economic ladder in America. Black women were particularly affected by this negative trend. Most black females therefore could not afford to attend school. The few that went to school were singularly privileged. It is therefore not surprising to find within the pages of works by black writers - males and females alike - during this period, a predominance of stark illiterate or semi-illiterate black women and men! Therefore, at this point in time, the quest for intellectual uplift by African-American females was hampered by social, political and economic factors bordering on the cataclysmic upheavals mentioned above. This reality apparently guided the portrayals of black female characters in the texts by black male writers. However, this is not to say that such portrayals are perfect or unbiased. Indeed, in any creative work, there is always some room for improvement, especially with the passage of time. Therefore, writers should manifest greater objectivity in their portrayals of people and issues.

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* [1977] which is a novel by a black feminist female, depicts Ruth Foster (later, Ruth Dead) as an African-American woman

from a very dignified background. She is the only child of the only black doctor - a very renowned doctor - residing in 'Not Doctor Street' in their town. Ruth is enlightened, having been trained by her medical father, Dr. Foster, in various elite schools. Later she meets and marries Macon Dead, an upcoming realtor who is barely educated. Subsequently, she has three children, two daughters and a son. Both daughters attain a high level of education, but the son does not. Like his father – Macon Dead, Sr., Macon Dead, Jr. – or Milkman – engages in the real estate business to complement him and, both of them amass substantial wealth. The problem with educated black females in Morrison's text is that they cannot get employment commensurate with their training or level of education, so they increasingly find it hard to fit into their society and, in most cases, become frustrated. A glaring example of this manifestation is Corinthians Dead who, despite her college education in America and France, had to become a domestic (housemaid) to a local white lady writer, Miss Michael-Mary Graham:

> Unfit for any work other than the making of red velvet roses, she had a hard time finding employment befitting her degree. The three years she had spent in college, a junior year in France, and being the grand -daughter of the eminent Dr. Foster should have culminated in something more elegant than the two uniforms that hung on Miss Graham's basement door.[15]

A Similar fate visits Corinthians' sister, Magdalena Dead, as she cannot find suitable employment or a husband after her college education. The reference to

some novels by the two famous black women writers (Morrison and Walker) is meant to reveal that works authored by black females also manifest problems and shortcomings. Thus, it is not only the black male – authored texts that exhibit gender-related problems or biased representations of people and events. The *Color Purple* and *Song of Solomon* apparently leave room for improvement. This is where the womanist orientation comes in handy.

In Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), Elizabeth is cast in the mode of a dutiful, diligent, self-sacrificing black female who aims high and hopes for maximum intellectual attainment. She is however frustrated by unforeseen contingencies such as her mother's demise and her subsequent forceful separation from her father by her aunt. Elizabeth had learnt earlier to read and write, but the instability resulting from her family's break-up, terminates her formal education and deprives her of her parents' love and care which she so earnestly desires:

> For when her mother died, the world fell apart; her aunt, her mother's older sister, arrived, stood appalled at Elizabeth's vanity and uselessness and decided, immediately that her father was no fit person to raise a child, especially, as she darkly said, an innocent little girl. And it was this decision on the part of her aunt, for which Elizabeth did not forgive her for many years, that precipitated the third disaster, the separation of herself from her father – from all that she loved on earth.[16]

These events inform Elizabeth's zeal later when as a young mother she put in all her energies to ensure her children's educational attainments. She is particularly anxious for her first child, John, who shows early signs of intelligence:

> For John excelled in School, though not, like Elisha, in mathematics or basketball, and it was said that he had a Great Future. He might become a great Leader of His People.[17]

Elizabeth's preoccupation with inculcating sound and balanced education in her children, is similar to the commitment shown by Aunt Hager Williams to her grandson, Sandy's education in Hughes's *Not Without Laughter.* It also recalls Mary Sampson Patterson's and Carrie Hughes's devotion to the young Langston's academic pursuit in *The Big Sea.* Elizabeth lays a sound academic foundation for her son, John, in the way Aunt Hager does for Sandy. Indeed, John and Sandy are groomed to be "leaders and spokespersons" for their people. A variation of the same trend is reflected in Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), where we encounter an African–American woman, Mary Rambo advising and sensitising the novel's youthful male protagonist 'invisible man' to "fight and move us all up a little higher" and to "take the lead" among black people in America. This preoccupation further reveals the concern and care shown by black females towards the growth and progress of the black race as a whole in the United States.

A negative trend which is apparent in some of the texts under appraisal is the quest for intellectual growth among black women as a way to 'attain' what they perceive to be the hallmark of perfection in their American society – aping white females i.e becoming 'white' instead of 'black' in mannerisms and skin-colour. This tendency, though negative, is a form of quest for fulfillment by black females. This category of black females was projected to show that not all the black women sought education for positive ends. The writers portrayed them in a bid to discourage other black women from aping white attitudes and mannerisms. The author's clear message is that black women should be proud of themselves as black people. In *Not Without Laughter*, Tempy Arkins Siles - Aunt Hager Williams' eldest daughter, fits vividly into this category of African-American women. Equally, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Florence Grimes - Sister Rachel's daughter, reflects that trend. Prior to her marriage, Tempy works as a 'personal-maid' to Mrs. Barr-Grant, a white female writer and activist. This recalls Corinthians Dead's job as personal-maid to Miss Michael Mary-Graham, a white lady writer [poet] in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. In all intents and purposes, Tempy worships Mrs. Barr-Grant and apes her attitude or mannerisms. Her mistress duly acknowledges Tempy's efforts, but points out that one 'quality' lacking in her maid is that she is not white, but black. Tempy thus pleases her mistress "by being prompt and exact in obeying orders and appearing to worship her puritan intelligence. In truth Tempy did worship her mistress."[18]

Furthermore, Tempy imitates her mistress's "manner of speech" and acquires "her precise flow of language." She also reads her books and becomes" "interested in things that most Negro girls never thought about." This gets to the point that her mistress commends her, but with a tinge of racism and irony, although Tempy seems not to realise this. However, her white mistress and employer viewed Tempy's unique talents as out of place since, in the view of whites in her day, African-Americans could not manifest positive attributes normally assigned to whites such as intelligence, neatness and punctuality to duty.

Florence, on the other hand, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, is cast as a black woman who is desperate to become white, in the hope that that would solve her problems in America because white society actively encouraged other races to strive to become white in attitude as well as in skin-pigmentation. White skin colour was regarded as synonymous with 'goodness and purity or perfection' under Caucasian Aryan racial myths and codes. For Florence therefore, intellectual advancement means becoming white in every respect. Remaining black and Negro on the other hand, suggests ignorance, backwardness and poverty. She thus bleaches her skin so as to lighten - whiten - the tone. While with her husband, Frank, in their bedroom, and prior to their marital break-up, "She sat before the mirror and rubbed bleaching cream into

her skin" late in the night, and her husband voices resentment over such a habit before she retires to bed for the night. He further admonishes her:

> Is you coming to bed, old lady? Don't know why you keep wasting all your time and my money on all them old skin whiteners. You as black now as you was the day you was born., And, Florence replies:
>
> 'You wasn't there the day I was born.. And I know you don't want a coal-black woman'[19]

Florence's quest for advancement in the educational, economic and social spheres is therefore stillborn. These are further compounded by the potentially terminal illness – cancer, which afflicts and ravages her after her break-up with her husband.

It is clear from these manifestations that Hughes and Baldwin portrayed Tempy Siles and Florence Grimes to show that some black females in the United States despised and denigrated their black cultural heritage. The aspirations of this category of women, especially their quest for educational advancement, were geared toward attaining the status and semblance of white females for themselves in their American society. Tempy for one, despised her cultural heritage and anything that served to remind her of her 'blackness'. For instance, she "never bought a water melon," because, "white people were forever picturing colored folks with huge slices of watermelon in their hands."

She therefore ignored watermelons in order to prove to whites that some black exceptions existed:

> Well, she was one colored woman who did not like them. Her favorite fruits were tangerines and grapefruit for Mrs. Barr-Grant had always eaten those and Tempy had admired Mrs. Barr-Grant more than anybody else - more, of course, than she had admired Aunt Hager, who spent her days at the wash-tub, and loved watermelon.[20]

For Tempy, intellectual uplift among African-American people should be geared towards the attainment of white ideals. She felt that, "colored people certainly needed to come up in the world,...up to the level of white people – dress like white people , talk like white people, think like white people – and then they would no longer be called 'niggers," (*238*). She shared these views with her husband - Mr. Arkin Siles. Simply put, both of them believed that 'white was good and black was evil'. They also believed that, since white people had money, African-Americans (Negroes) who wanted any of the money, had to learn "to be like the whites," and the sooner black people realised this, the better for the whole race:

> The Whites had the money, and if Negroes wanted any, the quicker they learned to be like the whites, the better. Stop being lazy, stop singing all the time, stop attending revivals, and learn to get the dollar – because money buys everything, even the respect of white people. Blues and spirituals Tempy and her husband hated because they were too Negro. In their house Sandy dared not sing a word of *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, for what had darky slave songs

> to do with respectable people. And rag-time belonged in the Bottoms with Sinners.[21]

The acquisition of formal education for this class of black females, should serve to enlighten and possibly turn Negroes into completely white people, according them not only white status but also the material possessions of whites. The long-term, positive, culturally-enhancing and racially-affirming objective of embracing formal education to accept themselves as blacks and contribute to the uplift of their race and culture, is sadly relegated by Tempy Siles, Florence Grimes and their category of African-Americans.

Florence who is denied formal education by her discriminating mother in preference for her brother Gabriel, however learns to read and write on her own. She therefore corresponds with her childhood friend in the South upon getting to the North. Deborah - Florence's childhood friend, had in the course of time wedded Gabriel Grimes - Florence's junior brother, although she subsequently died:

> Deborah had written her, not many times, but in a rhythm that seemed to remark each crisis in her life with Gabriel, and once, during the time she and Frank were still together, she had received from Deborah a letter that she had still: it was locked tonight in her handbag, which lay on the altar...[22]

To back up her strong resolve to progress significantly in her intellectual, economic and social aspirations, Florence abandons an aging and sickly mother and an incorrigible brother in the South and heads for the North. Her journey from the Southern U.S.A. to the North becomes symbolic in the sense that it represents her rejection of her black folk roots and her acceptance of white urban culture. She buys "a railroad ticket to New York" and:

> The center of her mind was filled with the image of the great white clock at the railway station, on which the hands did not cease to move.[23]

The "great white clock at the railway station," represents everything white western culture stands for, especially its time-consciousness and precision. It also signifies a civilization erected on meticulous or thorough assessment of phenomena.

Unfortunately however, although Florence succeeds in getting to New York - the 'North', she does not realise her long-cherished dream of a fundamental improvement in her living standard. Indeed, her status and resources dwindle rather than appreciate even after she secures employment and marries. Owing to her lack of meaningful formal education, she gets employed as 'a cleaning woman' "in a high, vast, stony office-building on Wall Street."[24] (Wall Street is the key financial center in New York City).

Florence marries Frank and hopes for rapid improvement in their status and material possessions. She also believes erroneously that her husband would aspire readily towards white ideals and accumulate sufficient material possessions such as a house, but her dreams are shattered before her very eyes as Frank never meets her expectations. Consequently, she rebukes him:

> I thought I married a man with some get up and go to him, who didn't just want to stay on the bottom all his life! But Frank replies: And what you want me to do, Florence, You want me to turn white?[25]

In an essay on the writings of Richard Wright, Barbara E. Johnson berates *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, arguing vehemently that:

> It would be easy to read *Native Son's* depiction of the relations between black men and black women as unhealably troubled; indeed, to read the novel as itself an act of violence against black women.[26]

However, she proceeds to "shift the ground of this interpretation slightly In order to ask: where, in Richard Wright does the black woman stand with respect to the black man's writing."[27] This, then, becomes the thrust of her argument. For, she believes and advances reasons to back up her contention that, Wright, as a black male writer, was fundamentally repelled by black women. She reviews the scene in *Native Son*, in which the protagonist, Bigger Thomas writes a ransom note in the 'silent' presence of his girlfriend, Bessie

Mears – a black female, and argues that the African-American woman is endowed with the intellect to read, understand and interpret writings by African-American males correctly. Johnson asserts: "The black woman, then, is a reader whose reading is both accurate and threatening."[28] The threat is directed against the black male since black females are able to expose black men's hidden intention in their writings. Thus, from now on, the black woman is announcing her visibility on the literary and social scenes: She is not only there to be seen, but heard clearly and effectively. To Johnson therefore, it seems that a major reason for the black female quest for intellectual uplift is to ultimately understand her male counterpart accurately as a way to subvert and prevent him from further dominating the intellectual pedestal i.e. the academia. Thus, she opines:

> Bessie Mears is a silent (silenced) presence in the scene in which Bigger Thomas writes. As Bigger completes the ransom note, he lifts his eyes and sees Bessie standing behind him. She has read the note over his shoulder and guessed the truth. She looked straight into his eyes and whispered, 'Bigger, did you kill that girl?" Bigger denies that she has interpreted his writing correctly but he formulates a plan to kill her and to prevent her from saying what she knows.[29]

Johnson concludes that, "dead women are not the only women present in these scenes of writing, and in both cases the 'other woman' is a black female writer whose reading cannot be mastered by the writer. As we have seen, Bessie reads Bigger's ransom note and begins to suspect that he has killed Mary Dalton.

Later, his scheme is thwarted, Bigger first rapes then kills Bessie in order to prevent her from talking, in order to gain total control over a story that has been out of his control from the beginning."[30] For Johnson, it appears that the quest for intellectual empowerment by African-American females assumes that black women are envisioned to discern as clearly and correctly as their male folk and that, given the opportunity they could excel them in that field of endeavour. For the present time, and as if to confirm that trend, Hernton argues that:

> ...both on the sub popular and popular level the *defacto* situation is that a black feminist perspective pervades contemporary Afro-American literature. The perspective governs the aesthetic. The aesthetic informs the landscape and vision. The literature, moreover, marks a significant juncture in the character of relations between black male writers. For the first time, the status of black women writers is no longer relegated below the status of the males... the literature of the women is expansive and liberating. Unlike in the past when women were supposed to be seen and not heard, the women of today are recognized writers in all fields and genres.[31]

It is true that black women have consistently aspired like their male counterparts to acquire sound and advanced education. However, the American society portrayed in the texts by black male writers was simply not ready to accommodate educated African-American women. Various forms of segregation such as racism and possibly, gender actively worked against the aspirations and strivings of black females. For instance, try as they did, this category of women

could not secure employment commensurate to their education, as the example of Carrie Hughes in *The Big Sea* - which is reinforced by Corinthians' and Magdalena's experiences in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, shows. Carrie, an African-American female and graduate of the University of Kansas, cannot get a job befitting her level of education and is forced to work as a waitress 'serving tables' in a local restaurant and bar just to sustain body and soul. The writer, Langston Hughes recalls:

> My father hated Negroes, I think he hated himself, too for being a Negro. He disliked all of his family because they were Negroes and remained in the United States, where none of them had a chance to be much of anything but servants – like my mother, who started out with a good education at the University of Kansas,... but had sunk to working in a restaurant, waiting on niggers, when she wasn't in some white woman's kitchen.[32]

Despite the racial segregation in employment matters however, which denied black people equal employment opportunities with whites, Hughes's mother, Carrie is very creative and talented. In addition, Hughes's grandmother, Mary Sampson Patterson, a black woman who also "went to college"[33] and taught the author many things about life and how to be brave, helped to groom the young writer who subsequently manifested great talent. Hughes speaks of his mother thus:

> It had never occurred to me to be a poet before, or indeed a writer of any kind. But my mother had often read papers at the Inter-State Literary Society, founded by my grandfather in Kansas. And occasionally she wrote original poems, too, that she gave at the Inter-State. But more often, she recited

> long recitations like "Lasca" and "The Mother of the Gracchi," in costume.[34]

The feminist critic, Calvin Hernton (*1987*) points out that the contemporary situation regarding the status and acceptability of African-American women has improved greatly. He notes that, armed with sound and lofty intellectual credentials, black females are now employed and are excelling in virtually all sectors of the American economy. Hernton however observes that in the literary realm, black women - especially black women writers, have been treated very unfairly by their male counterparts until recently. To him therefore, the systematic and aged-old oppression of African-American women began from the white power structure and continued to the black male power establishment. Tendencies such as these made black women to perceive themselves as 'geometrically oppressed' and as 'bearers of a triple consciousness':

> Black women have contended with the mountain of racism in America. 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 bearers of what Barbara Smith calls, "geometric oppression." They are therefore bearers of a triple consciousness."[35]

In "The Darkened Eye Restored: Notes Towards a Literary History of Black Women," Mary Helen Washington corroborates the trend of the "triple consciousness" of African-American women when she argues that: "Without exception Afro-American women writers have been dismissed by Afro-American

literary critics until they were rediscovered and re-evaluated by feminist critics." She further observes that the bias towards black females by black males extended to writings by black women since the literary critics were mainly males. But, she happily acknowledges that the tendency by black male critics to consciously ignore or discredit creative efforts by black women has now given way to massive recognition of the potentialities of this category of females. Consequently, their works have come to dominate the contemporary African-American literary scene. In this regard, Hernton notes:

> What we are witnessing is an entire movement on the part of contemporary black women in general, and not just on the part of the so called creative writers. Many of the women are Renaissance women, multiple in talent and endeavors, at once poets, novelists, mothers, scholars, workers, professors, intellectuals, and activists.[37]

The practice whereby African-American females harness their intellectual and sundry potentials to excel in their various callings, is reflected in some of the texts being appraised here. For instance, some of the women in Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* and *The Big Sea*, correspond to this tendency. In *Not without Laughter*, Harriett and Tempy represent the trend, although Tempy is limited by the fact that she despises her black cultural heritage and prefers white culture and people to African-Americans and their heritage. In *The Big Sea*, Hughes depicts two black female singers – Florence Embry Jones and Bricktop Ada Smith as crystallising this temper. These African-American females rise from

very humble and unassuming backgrounds to positions of prominence through sheer hard work as they fully realise and exploit their talents to maximum use.

In *Not Without Laughter*, Harrietta Williams and Tempy Siles embrace formal education up to the level of the secondary or high school . Harriett however is forced by circumstances to leave school prior to graduation even though she is adjudged to be "smart" and "intelligent". The harsh racial segregation in school, coupled with her humble background and other factors, do not allow her to continue. Tempy nevertheless completes High School studies and secures good employment as secretary and maid to a white feminist activist and writer. Upon her withdrawal from school, Harriett gets a job – menial employment, as serving-maid in a hotel, but abandons it in view of her inability to condone the condescending attitudes of whites on blacks. Early in her school days, she is identified as possessing the talents to sing and dance: "Now, because she could sing and dance and was always amusing, many of the white girls in high school were her friends."[38] Harriett therefore harnesses her talents as singer and dancer effectively and, at the close of the story, she attains renown and fame. She is subsequently referred to as "The Princess of the Blues."[39] Her appearance at the 'Monogram Theatre' in Chicago confirms her newly acquired royal status:

> .....stepping out from among the blue curtains,
> Harriett entered in a dress of glowing orange,

flame-like against the ebony of her skin, barbaric,
yet beautiful as a jungle princess.[40]

Thereafter, Harriett dedicates herself to sustaining her nephew, Sandy in school in order for him to attain the lofty intellectual status which she was deprived of and, in line with her mother, Aunt Hager's wish to turn Sandy into an educated man, leader and spokesperson of the black race in America.

In *Not Without Laughter* also, Tempy Siles is projected as a black female who uses her high school education to empower herself to survive in her predominantly white society. Her dislike for black people stems directly from the menial tasks and low stations assigned to them in the American society. She therefore believes firmly that African-Americans should actively emulate whites and quest for big money, powerful positions in society, property, hard work and good quality education. To her, it is only through the effective aping of, or imitation of white people, that blacks can make meaningful progress in America. Tempy shares this belief with her husband, Arkins Siles, and both of them pool their resources to run their real estate business successfully.[41]

In his childhood autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940), Langston Hughes shows how firm determination, focus, and perseverance in hard work yields huge dividends. He recounts how background, manner of birth or skin-colour played no significant roles in shaping the lives and attainments of two youthful African-American female entertainers who became so renowned away from

their American background through persistent application that the extent of their fame greatly influenced the course of events, particularly the Harlem Renaissance in the United States. Indeed, these two black women – Florence Embry-Jones and Bricktop Ada Smith, became worthy ambassadors for other African-American females to actively emulate for all times. The fact that the two ladies went overseas and applied their talents as musical entertainers and were able to impact their foreign and domestic environments positively, raised much hope in other black American women. Therefore, in the 1920s they became pioneers for other African-American singers and dancers. The foundation laid by these two women has produced a plethora of stars in the American and world entertainment scenes that is yet to be paralleled anywhere. Florence for instance, is described as "a famous entertainer ... who snubbed millionaires". She is further depicted as "the beautiful brown skin girl from Harlem - New York, who sang". She works in Paris at *Le Grand Duc Hotel* where: "A great many celebrities and millionaires came to ... drawn by the fame of Florence Embry – known simply as Florence." She employs her talents as singer and dancer to enhance not only her status as an African-American female, but to raise awareness of the condition of women - black American women especially - and African-American people in general. By raising the consciousness of other people to the plight and problems of black people in the United States, she unconsciously lends support to recent, all-embracing philosophies which have manifested themselves in a bid to address the problems of black women essentially and black people as a whole in the long

run. Thus, Florence is unconsciously an early voice in support of the current womanistic efforts of Alice Walker and Clenora Hudson-Weems in the sense that she employed her talents and enlightenment to try to improve the lot of the less-privileged people, particularly women just as Walker and Hudson-Weems are doing today.

Owing to her unique talents, she draws people of all colour-shades, religions and nationalities to the club-house where she entertains. But she regards and treats them as equal human beings because she believes in the principle of equality of all human beings, in spite of their class, racial and gender differences. She snubs the rich folks probably to get a message across to them that all humans are equal and so as to make them pay even more for her entertainment at the club:

> Part of Florence's reputation was based on snobbishness, no doubt, a professional snobbishness which she deliberately cultivated because outside the club she was as kind and sociable a person as you would ever wish to find. And those who worked with her, from musicians to waiters, loved her... In the snob world of *de luxe boite de nuit* society it was considered a mark of distinction for Florence to sit for a moment at your table.[42]

Florence's strategy as a 'professional snob' apparently works since it yields high dividends, although the club management at the time seems not to be conscious of the potentialities of her ploy. In addition to her talents as an enlightened entertainer, Florence Embry-Jones is described as physically very beautiful:

> ....She was very pretty and brown, and could wear the gowns of the great Paris couturieres as few other women could. At that time she went home every morning and got plenty of sleep, and would come to work every night looking as fresh and lovely as a black-eyed Susan from some unheard-of Alabama *jardin de luxe* where sophisticated darkies grow.[43]

Like other African-American females in 1924, Florence Embry-Jones is largely denied access to advanced formal education in the United States and like Harriett in *Not Without Laughter*, Florence notices her musical and dance talents early in life. As a result, she exploits these talents in her calling. She also employs the talents to fight for gender and racial equality. In her time therefore, Florence is a feminist and a critic to the core. Like her counterpart of the same name in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Florence stands up valiantly for the rights of women. Just as Florence Grimes in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, points out to her younger friend Elizabeth:

> ...Look like ain't no woman born what don't get walked over by some no count man. Look like ain't no woman nowhere but ain't been dragged down in the dirt by some man, and left there, too, while he go about his business.[44]

so does Florence Embry-Jones react to her employer's poor treatment of a white, lowly-paid, pregnant French attendant *danseuse* at the club. The attendant is fired and assaulted by her equally French employer, but Florence Embry-Jones comes to her rescue in the meleé that ensues. Florence says:

> Don't touch that woman! She's a woman and I'm a woman, and can't nobody hit a woman in any place where I work! Don't put your hands on that woman ...' 'A woman and a mother, ...' 'and nobody can hit a woman and a mother. I've got a mother and nobody can't hit my mother.[45]

These incidents show the awareness and feminist inclinations of the two black females. This is in spite of their being denied access to high level education in America. One can therefore affirm that they set the tone for contemporary African-American feminist scholars and critics as they tried to 'raise women to the level of the men' in their society.

Florence Embry-Jones is equally portrayed as one of the few blacks to not only stand up to, but look down on whites – even affluent whites, in the racially-inclined western society. The author therefore admits that:

> It was the first time I had ever seen a colored person deliberately and openly snubbing white people, so it always amused me no end to watch Florence move away from a table of money spending Americans, who wanted nothing in the world so much as to have her sit down with them.[46]

Bricktop Ada Smith is described as a folk black female who defies all odds and surmounts all obstacles along her path to attain stardom in her profession. From 'Connie's Inn,' New York, Bricktop comes to Paris as a replacement for Florence Embry-Jones who had recently left *Le Grand Duc Hotel* to set up her own club - which she names after herself:

> The famous Chez Florence that became, and remained, the place in Montmatre (Paris) for a number of years, blessed by theatrical celebrities, millionaires, and the Prince of Wales.[47]

Bricktop is fairly educated and well-mannered. Unlike Florence Embry-Jones, she does not snub anyone. She uses her enlightenment to spread hope to other people - black and white alike. Like her predecessors, real and fictional, Florence (*The Big Sea*) and Harriett (*Not Without Laughter*), Bricktop discovers her musical and dance talents early in life and sets about developing them. Therefore, she works very hard at her singing and dancing and eventually achieves fame. Her open and simple disposition towards life aid her in this. She is not as physically attractive, charming or beautiful as Florence. She is described in an apt and plain manner:

> She was short and freckled and slightly lighter than mustard. She was plainly dressed. She had reddish hair and was not very pretty. But she went around and met everybody in the place and shook hands with each one, and smiled. And you liked her right away.[48]

Hughes's main reason for projecting these black females who rose to fame from humble beginnings - coupled with their little or no formal education, appears initially to show the outcome of will-power or determination in the face of great odds. A closer look however reveals that the writer envisaged them to be fore-runners of the contemporary African-American feminists or womanists as their lives and conduct reveal. The manifestation of the quest for intellectual

attainments by black females in the United States therefore takes many forms. Owing to the fact that the American society reflected in all the texts under appraisal, is virtually closed to black people - closed in the sense that it limits the ability and possibility of African-Americans to harness their individual and collective talents to their utmost benefits, blacks still surprise their fellow white Americans by initiating and excelling in intellectual and other related endeavours.

Thus, black females who are fore-runners of the contemporary African-American women feminists are, by their behaviour, not restricted to Hughes's work. Harrietta Williams (*Not without Laughter)* and Florence Embry_Jones (*The Big sea)* recall Florence Grimes in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and Pilate (*Song of Solomon)* or Shug Avery in *The Color Purple* owing to their commitment to the uplift of the black woman in America and their shared vision on other socio-economic and political engagements in their various communities.

Viewed from the premise of recent feminist criticism of black male writers for their alleged negative portrayal of African-American women in creative works, it would be informing to posit that the women so projected, largely fit into the society then prevailing. Very few, if any, black females had the opportunity to attend school to imbibe and internalise extensive formal western education, despite the affluent and promising American background. Racial

discrimination of blacks by whites and the resulting illiteracy of African-Americans owing to such negative policies, prevented many black females from enrolling in school. The twin issues of prevailing era and sensibilities in the American society must be at the background of any criticism of canonical texts by black male writers for such criticism to be meaningful.

In spite of the fact that very few African-Americans were enrolled in the school system at the time the black male writers wrote their books, some black females were cast in a positive and dynamic manner. In Baldwin and Hughes's texts these women were accorded very dense depictions as they played major and heroic, life-affirming roles which benefited their entire communities. As Praying Mother Washington ensures strict compliance with rules governing the behaviour of members of the Temple of the fire Baptised - the black store front pentecostal church in Harlem, New York, in Baldwin's *Go tell It on the Mountain*, so does Carrie and her mother, Mary Sampson Patterson (*The Big Sea*) and Aunt Hager Williams with her daughters (*Not Without Laughter*) lead successful campaigns for self-reliance, discipline and racial integration in their local school system. In Wright's and Ellison's books, the black females, though 'fleetingly' described, symbolise the same dynamism, perseverance and industry as the women in the other texts above. Thus, for the African-American women we encounter in the texts under review, assuming leadership positions in their families and communities seemed to be the rule rather than the exception, even for those of them with little or no formal education. It would therefore be

useful to perceive some of the character sketches of black females as pointers to the future.

In other words, the briefly illustrated female characters viewed in the background of fleetingly projected black male heroes appear to fit into the literary determinism trend adopted by some of the writers to realise their art. Therefore, with the demise of the era and with newer awareness and methods of assessing literary works, the symbolic import of the women seems to matter most. As some of the women-centred critics rightly argue, it is not only women that were accorded scanty, negative or absurd descriptions, some of the male characters appear unconvincing and incredible. Despite his lofty intellectual quest, the male protagonist in Ellison's *Invisible Man* in the long run became barbaric and nihilistic in his political engagement against his less educated Rastafarian opponents.

Some of the black male authors of the texts in this inquiry draw a picture of black women becoming educated and in turn, educating others. They therefore validate the age-old statement that 'female education benefits the entire community, while that of males may just benefit the individual'. In other words, women as mothers, pass on the benefits of their education to their children, while the men are not necessarily prone to nurturing and educating offspring.

In Black Boy, it is one of such black females that propels Wright, sensitising him thus to the existence of literary creativity through a story she tells him. The 'coloured' school teacher, Ella, "a young woman with so remote and dreamy and silent a manner that I was as much afraid of her as I was attracted to her," shares the Wright's apartment as a tenant. The youthful Richard Wright is fascinated with Ella's persistent reading of books and becomes increasingly curious and anxious:

> I had long wanted to ask her to tell me about the books that she was always reading, but I could never quite summon enough courage to do so. One afternoon I found her sitting alone upon the front porch, reading. "Ella," I begged, "please tell me what you are reading."[49]

Unknown to the young Wright, his grandmother had already forbidden Ella from discussing literary matters or works with him. But, Wright is bold and defiant as he persuades Ella to enlighten him on literature through story-telling and discussion. Ella thereafter narrates a very interesting story to Richard (Wright). The story of *Bluebeard and His Seven Wives* enthralls and transports the young Wright to the realms of imagination and fantasy, so that, he subsequently confesses that:

> She whispered to me the story of *Bluebeard and His Seven Wives* and I ceased to see the porch, the sunshine, her face, everything. As her words fell

> upon my ears, I endowed them with a reality that welled up from somewhere within me... The tale made the world around me be, throb, live. As she spoke, reality changed, the look of things altered and the world became peopled with magical presences. My sense of life deepened and the feel of things was different, somehow. Enchanted and enthralled, I stopped her constantly to ask for details. My imagination blazed. The sensations the story aroused in me were never to leave me....[50]

The story the young African-American female school teacher, Ella tells Wright, lays a firm foundation for his subsequent creative impulse and writings, since it literally set his imagination alight. Clearly, this youthful black female school teacher is a rare and gifted person, especially if she is viewed in the light of the period or dispensation then prevailing. Ella therefore stands in sharp contrast to other African-American women reflected in *Black Boy*.

Returning therefore to Sondra O'Neale's criticism of African-American male writers "writing in this century" and being arguably unable to 'free' the images of Black Women in the national psyche", it is clear from an analysis of the primary texts for this study that such criticism would better apply to more contemporary writings which may have been done by black males with a biased perspective. For Wright, Ellison and other notable black male writers then, the crucial issues at stake gave no room for frivolities in the rendition of art works and where present, were accidental, not deliberate. An appraisal of the texts charged with serious lapses in the portrayal of African-American women as they quest for intellectual uplift, shows that the black women, few as they may

seem, aptly reflected the period and dispensation then in America and were actually pioneers in that endeavour setting a positive trend for future black females in the United States and beyond. Regarding the question of in-depth portrayal by the male authors, it has already been acknowledged that the critics are right regarding some of the texts, but that the black feminists or womanists point the way forward for dialogue between the two genders to foster an acceptable and objective mode of depiction of women - and men - in literary works. Therefore, both the fictional and non-fictional characters attempt to match - or were meant to appropriate - the real situation then in the larger American society. Even the few African-American females who imbibed high-level education manifested attitudes and mannerisms in vogue at that time. It is only recently that the doors of equal opportunities in the educational and other fields have been flung open for all Americans, irrespective of their race, gender, religion or colour.

Feminist criticism of writings by African-American males would be more meaningful in the contemporary situation if it takes into account the contention by womanists that such criticism and appraisals be directed at improving the creativity, ensuring productivity and wholeness of the black race. The previous tendency of applying western feminist yardsticks to the assessment of works by black writers appears to be destructive and divisive since such widens the gulf between males and females in the African-American community. The potentialities for understanding and rapport apparent in both Walkers' and Hudson-Weems' womanist philosophies would, tellingly, lead to

greater camaraderie and fruition of shared ideals in the black community if these principles are honestly applied to the critical analyses of these male-authored works. Consequently, the search by black women for intellectual uplift in the American society would benefit the entire community and with time, may just be viewed as the quest for enhanced literacy among all African-American people without the need to resort to gender or sex in the classification or implementation of this lofty ideal.

Under the womanist assessments in other words, the black females in the male-authored works searching for enhanced education, symbolic as they may appear, are viewed from a positive perspective. Their mere presence or inclusion in the male-based texts - even though some of them should have been reflected in more generous and comprehensive terms, points to other interpretations. In other words, their role in the texts is to serve as pioneers laying the foundation for subsequent generations of black women to improve upon their achievements by getting the best education available in the land When viewed from this angle it becomes clear that much progress has been recorded since the controversial portrayals of African-American females in texts written by black American males. For the black woman in the United States today, the motto tends to be : 'Onward Forever!' Feminist criticism of writings by black males would more tellingly be applied to the post *Brown vs Board of Education (1954)* era when, for the first time in the United States, racially integrated schools which facilitated racial and gender representation in the classrooms were legalised nationally by the American Supreme Court.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SEARCH BY BLACK FEMALES FOR ECONOMIC EMANCIPATION

Owing to their experiences over time in the United States, African-American women now effectively desire full economic freedom in their society. Therefore, they have shifted from a position of reliance on their menfolk to self-reliance. The black females reflected in the primary texts here represent a pioneering group of such women. Feminists claim that black females have not fared as well as their male counterparts in America. Womanists too tend to corroborate this assertion and explore avenues to try to resolve the matter by bridging the perceived gap. According to Michele Wallace (1978), the percentage of black women bread-winners presiding over families has been on the rise for some time now. This is in stark contrast to the situation up to the early sixties. However, she argues that this development has been tempered by the fact that black men and whites still have advantage over females:

> From 1965 until 1976 the percentage of black families with female heads increased from 23.7 percent to 33 percent. During that time, among black families headed by women, the percentage below the poverty line went from 56.3 percent to 52.2 percent, only a slight decrease. Black families headed by men, however, went from 25.3 percent below the poverty level in 1967 to only 13.5

> percent as of 1976. And the unemployment rate for black men with families is 6.7 percent, only 2.2 percent higher than whites in this category.[1]

But these statistics do not necessarily represent the whole picture. Moreover, the data in Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* appears outdated and seems to have been overtaken by more current developments in the United States. The thrust of this chapter is the exploration of black females in selected prose works by black male writers as the women quest for economic self-reliance in America. Black females in these texts are assessed as they initiate efforts to assert or imbue themselves with economic self-sufficiency as a way to promote their welfare and status. These African-American women are therefore representative of the black females in their era as they aspire to become economically emancipated. The African-American women projected in both the male-authored texts and the female-based ones mostly indicate a preference for self-sufficiency or independence in economic matters, but the larger American society seems to connive to frustrate many of their aspirations and efforts on a rather regular basis. But, the women do not give up trying and some actually attain a measure of economic freedom. Such dogged determination which results in surprising achievements for some of the women sets the tone for subsequent attainments by other African-American women in their American milieu.

In *Native Son* and *Black Boy'* the black females do not seem to achieve much out of their efforts to sustain their families. They are largely illiterate and lack professional skills, although they are in charge of their families. Racism and other subtle discriminations do not allow blacks - especially females, to acquire formal education which is a necessary tool for economic empowerment anywhere. The situation is largely similar in *Not Without Laughter* and *The Color Purple* but is slightly different in *The Big Sea* and *Song of Solomon*. The difference in the status of black women in the last two texts lies in the fact that they are highly educated. But, even then, like their illiterate counterparts in the texts listed earlier, they lack the take-off capital to initiate sustaining business ventures or the wherewithal to preside effectively over their families. Their high-level education does not guarantee them commensurate employment. Thus, these women preside over their families and work diligently to sustain members. They all seek to become economically self-sustaining and devote all their energies to achieve this objective. In addition, they counsel their children and wards to work effectively towards economic self-sufficiency. Unfortunately, the American society works against the attainment of such a goal in a way that, no matter how much they assert or apply themselves in their various occupations, they cannot earn enough to meet their families' needs. Although they are mere washerwomen, Mrs. Thomas and Aunt Hager Williams exude pride and confidence in their job, since it affords them the means of livelihood. They are both illiterate, but very hardworking. They are also saddled with the heavy responsibility of fending for their many

children and grandchildren . Though they are illiterate, the two black women are quite aware of events and maintain a grasp of the nitty-gritties in their communities by keeping abreast of all developments in their neighbourhood. The income they generate as laundry women however cannot sustain them. Therefore, their children and grandchildren work to supplement their upkeep.

In contrast to the African-American women above, three black females – Mary Sampson-Patterson, Carrie Hughes (*The Big Sea*) and Ruth Foster-Dead (*Song of Solomon*) are highly educated. However, since they are not white, they cannot secure appropriate and commensurate employment with which to cater fully and effectively to their dependants needs. Mary Sampson Patterson for instance, had her college education in Oberlin, Ohio, while Carrie Hughes attended the University of Kansas where she had a good education. However, 'Negroes' (African-Americans) who became educated and "remained in the United States" at the time, had no "chance to be much of anything but servants". To confirm this trend, Carrie Hughes "started out with a good education at the University of Kansas," but "sunk to working in a restaurant, waiting on niggers, when she wasn't in some white woman's kitchen."[2] Nevertheless, these African-American women endure and survive their ordeals in spite of sustained efforts by the dominant white establishment to oppress and suppress them.

A point worth noting in all the texts being reviewed is that, all the African-American women reflected in them are busy, for they occupy themselves with one form of activity or the other in a bid to make ends meet for themselves and their families. Not a single black female in the texts is idle. Both young and old, the women preoccupy themselves with working hard in order to ensure survival in their highly discriminating society.

Whereas both Mrs. Thomas and Aunt Hager Williams are laundry women in their respective Chicago, Illinois and Stanton, Kansas societies, and whereas both of them are black females who are resolved to ensure proper upbringing for their offspring, it is obvious that some differences exist between the two women. For example, Mrs. Thomas is younger and the mother of three young children - a girl and two boys. They all live in the crowded Chicago suburban Southside* slum. Aunt Hager on the other hand, is a mother and grandmother who witnessed slavery and was a slave herself. She never gives up toiling despite the fact that her children are now adults. She equally lives in a smaller and less turbulent southern town, Stanton which contrasts sharply with the sophistication of the sprawling North American city - Chicago. Although the two African-American women work relentlessly for the white establishment, they never derive sufficient funds to cater for their individual and family needs. However, the situation affects Mrs. Thomas so negatively that she becomes

* Southside, like Harlem, New York, is the predominately African-American Settlement in Chicago, Illinois.

over-tasked and virtually exhausts her patience. On the contrary, Aunt Hager, who was a former slave and is now advanced in age, still washes to earn an income - but never complains. She neither exhibits anxiety nor despair. She is forever hopeful and tolerant as she has internalised the virtues of patience, forbearance and hard work.

Roger Rosenblatt (1974) argues that Aunt Hager's "occupation is washing clothes; yet she also seems forever to be scrubbing and polishing, as if in an effort to make amends for her own blackness."[3] (It should be noted that Blackness is the colour many white people disapprove of and seek to suppress always). However, this apology by Rosenblatt does not arise because Aunt Hager is very proud of her black skin and her African-American heritage. This is revealed in the way she imparts black cultural attributes and values to Sandy - her grandson. The stories she tells him and the grooming and love which she accords the lad go a long way to affirm this trend on the part of African-American grandmothers. Sandy thus accepts her teachings and responds positively to her love and nurture. He grows up vowing to fulfil her dream of his becoming a leader and spokesperson for the black race in America. Of further significance is the fact that, while Mrs. Thomas and her children are tenants in a suburban slum, Aunt Hager and her children own the house they live in. Thus, they do not pay rent. Indeed, this situation is made clear as soon as Aunt Hager dies:

> Now the little house where Sandy had lived with his grandmother belonged to Tempy, who kept it rented to a family of strangers.[4]

Though the African-American women in the texts are not as economically emancipated as today's black females, some of them begin to move progressively towards asserting or attaining economic independence within their largely lopsided society. The women show strong opposition and abhorrence to the male-domination of the economic aspect of their lives. In *Invisible Man* Mary Rambo symbolises that trend. In *Black Boy* Aunt Maggie represents that attitude and, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Not Without Laughter*, *The Big Sea*, *Song of Solomon* and *The Color Purple* Florence Grimes, Tempy Siles, Harrietta Williams, Florence Embry-Jones, Bricktop Ada Smith, A'Lelia Walker, Hagar Dead and Shug Avery with Nettie and Celie respectively, desire and begin to actually assert some measure of economic independence in their various settings. They all resent relying on their menfolk for their needs and this attitude informs their various responses to life and work.

Mary Rambo (*Ellison 1952*) for instance, owns and runs a tenement in Harlem – the predominantly African-American section of New York, by dint of hard work and firm resolve. She is clearly successful as she is fully in charge of her surroundings, issuing instructions, orders and directives to staff and folks around her. More importantly, she uses her earnings to promote the welfare of other African-Americans, especially very needy ones like the invisible man

protagonist. Mary is however, not intellectually accomplished. She therefore sensitises the youthful black male protagonist to the realities of urban life among blacks in the United States. Mary thus establishes an ethos or legacy of economic independence and a sense of black pride for other African-Americans to emulate.

In *Black Boy*, Wright projects Aunt Maggie as a very caring, hardworking independent-minded, but restless black female. Maggie is initially shown with her husband, Uncle Hoskins, who runs a prosperous saloon in Elaine, Arkansas. Uncle Hoskins' prosperity arouses the envy and hatred of Southern whites who discriminate intensely against blacks. They subsequently kill him and take-over his business, thus forcing Maggie into widowhood. In spite of her widowhood, Aunt Maggie resolves to begin life afresh:

> Uncle Hoskins had been killed by whites who had long coveted his flourishing liquor business. He had been threatened with death and warned many times to leave....
>
> There was no funeral. There was no music. There was no period of mourning. There were no flowers. There were only silence, quiet weeping, whispers, and fear. I did not know when or where Uncle Hoskins was buried. Aunt Maggie was not even allowed to see his body nor was she able to claim any of his assets....
>
> Shocked, frightened, alone without their husbands or friends, my mother and Aunt Maggie lost faith in themselves and, after much debate and hesitation, they decided to return home to Granny and rest, think, map out new plans for living.[5]

Eventually, Aunt Maggie regains hope and charts a new strategy for survival. She remains restless, but determined and hopeful. She however resettles elsewhere up North to try to overcome the shock of her loss and disappointment. Ella - Wright's mother, shares these traits with Maggie, although her efforts are checked by a violent and enduring stroke which she suffers and which render her half-paralysed and inactive. Prior to this sickness, Ella and Maggie become employed in order to sustain their family. Wright recalls: "My mother and Aunt Maggie cooked in the kitchens of white folks."[6]

James Baldwin (1953) portrays Florence Grimes as a fiercely determined African-American lady who aspires to emancipate herself not only from the clutches of racism and men, but from the pangs of hunger and economic bondage. Hence, in spite of the fact that her aged mother is very sick and at the point of death, Florence, abandons her to her brother's care and leaves for the 'North' in order to advance her economic status:

> In nineteen hundred, when she was twenty-six, Florence walked out through the cabin door. She had thought to wait until her mother, who was so ill now that she no longer stirred out of bed, should be buried – but suddenly she knew that she would wait no longer, the time had come...[7]

She subsequently tells her brother,Gabriel, "If you ever see me again,...I won't be wearing rags like yours," as she opens their house gate violently and moves "out into the road." [8]

In New York, Florence vigorously asserts herself in her new and strange surroundings, goaded on by the greater sense of freedom and opportunity for blacks which seems to prevail there. She aims high and hopes for the best, although, soon it becomes clear that her aspirations boil down to attaining the status of whites and possibly bleaching or altering her skin to a white colour. For Florence Grimes,' white skin colour becomes the yardstick for measuring ideals of purity and perfection. She subsequently meets and marries a fellow African-American, Frank and tries unsuccessfully to influence him to aspire to money and material possessions, but to her dismay, she fails. She then complains and nags: "I thought I married a man with some get up and go to him, who didn't just want to stay on the bottom all his life!"[9] Frank however remains adamant and finally abandons her. Florence becomes very bitter, but never stops aspiring to attain economic self-reliance. She works in various establishments to sustain herself. While working as a cleaner she meets and befriends Elizabeth who later marries Gabriel, Florence's brother. Her aspirations are rudely checked however by the terminal cancer which attacks and gradually destroys her.

Of related significance in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, is the projection of Elizabeth. She is forced to fend for herself very early in life owing to upheavals in her family and the sudden death of her boyfriend, Richard. Elizabeth thereafter secures employment as a cleaning woman in an apartment. Richard's

death meant that Elizabeth was to be a single mother since she had become pregnant for him, prior to his death. She therefore relies on her meagre employment for her child's and her own upkeep. Baldwin (1953) describes Florence's and Elizabeth's schedules thus:

> Florence and Elizabeth worked as cleaning-women in a high, vast, stony office-building on Wall Street. They arrived in the evening and spent the night going through the great deserted halls and the silent offices with mops and pails and brooms. It was terrible work, and Elizabeth hated it; but it was at night, and she had taken it joyfully, since it meant that she could take care of John herself all day and not have to spend extra money to keep him in a nursery.[10]

Ultimately, it becomes clear to both Elizabeth and Florence that economic independence would mostly be accelerated and finally attained through joint, instead of individual efforts. But, they do not explore such an option.

In the texts under exploration, the quest for economic emancipation and its eventual attainment by black females is most vividly realised in Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* and *The Big Sea*. Even the ancillary texts by black women writers - *Song of Solomon* (Morrison) and *The Color Purple* (Walker) do not depict black females with the same level of economic attainment as those portrayed in Hughes's works. In *Not Without Laughter*, Tempy Siles and Harrietta Williams initiate the impulse of black female economic emancipation, while in *The Big Sea*, Florence Embry-Jones and Bricktop Ada Smith amply mirror that trend. It

should be recalled that Florence and Bricktop are two African-American female entertainers (singers and dancers) who make it to the limelight in their professions. Both of them leave America for Europe where they become famous. Like Tempy and Harriett, Florence and Bricktop come from very humble backgrounds. Through hardwork, they progress and assert economic independence, rising from obscurity to fame and prominence in their communities.

Tempy and Harriett are Aunt Hager's children and Aunt Hager herself is a former slave who single-handedly rears three children - all daughters and a grandson upon losing a vital ingredient in her life - her husband and bread-winner. Through sheer determination, grit and dogged perseverance, Tempy acquires formal education up to high school level. While there, she gets a job as personal maid to a white woman who fights for women suffrage in the United States. She so excels in her job that the white woman not only pays her well, but wills a house to her. The white lady - Mrs. Barr-Grant dies later and Tempy takes possession of the house. She also acquires other houses as she forays into the real estate business:

> When the white lady died, she left one of her small houses to her maid as a token of appreciation for faithful services. By dint of saving, and of having resided with her mistress where there had been no living expenses, Tempy had managed to buy another house, too ...[11]
>
> Tempy no longer worked out, but stayed home, keeping house, except that she went each month to

> collect her rents and those of her husband. She had a woman to do the laundry and help with the cleaning...[12]

On the other hand, although Harriett is unable to complete her high school studies, she later excels in her singing and dancing career owing to her perseverance and hardwork. It would be recalled again that Harriett is frustrated out of secondary school by the harsh racial discrimination which prevails in the school system and by her firm and uncompromising attitude on the matter. She however possesses natural talents as singer and dancer which she develops. It is not surprising therefore that she undertakes to perfect these qualities and eventually gains prominence from her efforts. In Chicago, Illinois, Harriett achieves the status of *Princess of the Blues* through singing and dancing:

> One hot Monday in August Harriett Williams, billed as "The Princess of the Blues," opened at the Monogram Theatre on State Street. The screen had carried a slide of her act the week previous, so Sandy knew she would be there, and he and his mother were waiting anxiously for her appearance... and he and Annjee managed to get seats in the theatre, although it was soon crowded to capacity and people stood in the aisles.
>
> * * *
>
> Then, stepping out from among the blue curtains, Harriett entered in a dress of glowing orange, flame-like against the ebony of her skin, barbaric, yet beautiful as a jungle princess.[12]

Clearly then, from the position of a young orphan and black female, Harriett attains celebrity status through hardwork and determination. She rises from very humble beginnings to great fame. Harriett's experience in *Not Without Laughter* compares favourably with that of Florence and Bricktop in *The Big Sea.* Florence and Bricktop leave the United States as unknown black peasant entertainers to Paris, France. While there, they work assiduously to attain recognition and renown to the point that, for Florence, many important personalities and celebrities visit the club house where she entertains, just to catch a glimpse of, or possibly meet with and hear her sing and dance:

> A great many celebrities and millionaires came to *The Grand Duc* in those days, drawn by the fame of Florence Embry – known simply as Florence – the beautiful brown-skin girl from Harlem who sang there. Anita Loos and John Emerson, young William Leeds, the Dolly Sisters, Lady Nancy Cunard, various of the McCormicks, the writer, Robert McAlmon, and Belle Livingston with her son and daughter, Fannie Ward looking not so very young, Prince Tuvalou of Dahomey, Sparrow Robertson of the Paris Herald's sport page, Joe Alix, who became Josephine Baker's dancing partner, the surrealist poet, Louis Aragon, all came – and Florence would notice none of them unless they were very celebrated or very rich.[13]

For Bricktop Ada Smith, the situation is largely similar, especially after the exit from Paris of Florence Embry-Jones. Bricktop is a short, freckled, plain African-American female from New York, U.S.A. She sings "in a cute little voice, with nice wistful notes." She also:

> Danced a few cute little steps and went round to all the tables and was pleasant to everybody – from guests who could afford only one quart of Champagne to those who bought a dozen bottles. French, or American, tourist or diplomat, white or colored, were all the same to Brick - and really all the same. She liked everybody and made everybody like her. Her professional manner was simply her own manner, in the club or out.[14]

Hughes (1940) then concludes that "Bricktop was simply a good old girl of the kind folks called 'regular'" and that, "Ten years later, Florence was dying on Welfare Island in New York, and Bricktop was the toast of Montmatre (Paris), with dukes and princess at her tables."[15]

In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, just as in Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* and *The Big Sea*, a folk African-American female, Shug Avery rises from bleak beginnings to attain stardom through her musical and dance entertainment. Like Harrietta Williams and Florence Embry-Jones, Shug Avery becomes the toast of her community. Thus, through perseverance in toiling, she gains renown as well as becomes economically self-sustaining to the point that she now provides basic and sundry needs for her black male friend and husband, Grady.[16] In Morrison's *Song of Solomon* on the other hand, although Pilate has an affluent brother (Macon) and though she is not rich, she prefers to rely on herself and work very hard to sustain herself and her family - a daughter, Rebecca or Reba and a grand-daughter (Hagar).[17]

It has been noted earlier that at the period the African-American male writers who are regularly accused by feminists wrote, there were great economic and political upheavals such as the Great Depression, the 1929 Stock Market Crash and the Second World War and people in the Western Hemisphere found it increasingly difficult to make ends meet. For the African-Americans - then referred to as Negroes, subsistence became even more harrowing. Black women did not fare any better in this regard. The trend of quest for survival and economic uplift is reflected in all the primary texts for this research. Langston Hughes (1940) argues that the Great Depression marked the end of an era for the 'New Negro' – and by extension, the renaissance initiated by them:

> That was really the end of the gay times of the New Negro era in Harlem, the period that had begun to reach its end, when the crash came in 1929 and the white people had much less money to spend on themselves, and practically none to spend on Negroes, for the depression brought everybody down a peg or two. And the Negroes had but few pegs to fall.[18]

Negroes - African-Americans - "had but few pegs to fall" during the depression and the stock market crash because they were already at the bottom of society's socio-political ladder and, "he who is down needs fear no fall." The image of the black female too at this period veered more towards folk illiterates than the talented tenth (the educated African-Americans). It is noteworthy too that, just prior to the great upheavals in the western hemisphere – especially the

United States and Europe, a massive migration of African-Americans (former slaves who consisted mainly of folks from the Southern to the Northern United States) had just occurred and most of these peasant blacks settled in ghettoes and slums of large Northern cities and proceeded to embrace urban or metropolitan sophistication, while at the same time gradually dropping their rural folk sensibilities. This is amply reflected in virtually all the texts under discussion.

So, the African-American women we initially encounter in these literary texts are more concerned with settling down in a new, strange and challenging environment and ensuring a regular source of sustenance for themselves and their dependants. In *The Negro Novel in America*, Robert Bone (1958) posits that:

> The Great Migration... was the most important event in the history of the American Negro since his emancipation from slavery. In the course of this migration, centuries of historical developments were traversed in a few decades. It was not merely a movement of the colored population from South to the North, or from country to city; it was the sudden transplanting of debased feudal folk from medieval to modern America. From 1890 to 1920, ... the base of the Negro social pyramid was shifting from a peasantry to an urban proletariat. In these decades more than 2,000,000 Negroes left the farm for the factory.[19]

The Migration from the rural South to the urban North in the United states is central to Wright's *Native Son*, for the African-American folk characters we

encounter in the book are part of the recent migrants to the vast Northern urban ghettoes. The behaviour of these folk characters therefore fits the response expected from unsophisticated people who are suddenly thrust into an extremely sophisticated environment. Survival or self-preservation is a non-negotiable factor for this category of people and they normally would stop at nothing in their quest for it. This reality probably informs the behaviour of the novel's protagonist, Bigger Thomas, his mother- Mrs. Thomas and his siblings Vera and Buddy. It is reasonable to assume also that it influenced the behaviour of Bigger's girl friend, Bessie Mears.

As a single parent who is poor and black and, having recently migrated with her children from a Southern plantation to a Northern metropolitan ghetto, Mrs. Thomas is faced with the daunting task of fending for herself and her three children. Although she accepts the challenge and sets out to do her utmost to sustain them, the dominant environment catches up with her. The racially-conditioned American society soon envelops them in a choking manner that suffocates and defeats their determination to succeed in their struggle. Like a ravenous beast, the American setting spreads its tentacles and destroys the basic humanity of these black slum-dwellers. The response of some of these African-American peasants therefore tends to be like robots at one extreme and like monsters at the other extreme. As Mrs. Thomas and her children are crammed into a single, choking, rat-infested and dilapidated room in their Chicago city slum, her whole personality, dreams and expectations are held in

check by the white, racially-inclined American society. Hence, her pent-up feelings are let loose in emotional and angry outbursts of directives or instructions to her children. At other moments, she takes solace in Christian songs and Biblical teachings and injunctions. Her ultimate hope is that her children would eventually secure employment and contribute to the family upkeep, while at the same time enhancing their status in the society. Thus, Mrs. Thomas is regularly seen issuing crisp and brief instructions and commands to her children:

> Buddy, get up from there! I got a big washing on my hands today and I want you - all out of here.
>
> * * *
>
> You going to take that job, ain't you, Bigger?'... 'If you get that job, 'his mother said in a low, kind tone of voice, busy slicing a loaf of bread, 'I can fix up a nice place for you children. You could be comfortable and not have to live like pigs'.[20]

Since she is peasant African-American female, Mrs. Thomas is ill-equipped to cater fully to the needs of her young and upcoming children. She therefore attempts to actualise her desire for a better and fulfilling life by encouraging them to attend school, learn a trade and become fully employed. Her efforts which are aimed at attaining a better life for her children than the one she has so far led, fit into the trend of African-American mothers tasking themselves mercilessly so as to ensure a brighter future for their offspring. Such a trend equally manifests itself in the other texts being analysed.

On the other hand, as a black woman that is illiterate, Bessie Mears gropes from one menial employment to another in white neighbourhoods. She does chores such as laundry, cleaning, cooking and other sundry tasks that are designed for her from time to time by her white employers. She is underpaid - and is sometimes not paid at all. Thus, she increasingly relies on alcohol and her boyfriend to try to escape the harsh reality of black female life in the United States. Bessie's boyfriend, Bigger Thomas takes advantage of her and gets her assistance to commit crimes - mini thefts and burglaries. As a result, she becomes increasingly frustrated and takes to excessive drinking. Her future career and life are however terminated abruptly, as she is brutally murdered by her boyfriend, Bigger.

It is such types of portrayals which attract the anger and condemnation of feminists - womanists inclusive. The manner in which Bessie is murdered by Bigger is particularly shocking and irksome and draws the wrath of all humane and conscientious readers. Womanists therefore desire the reflection of black women who surmount obstacles, which they face in the society as a way to encourage succeeding generations of black females. They also want more sympathetic and understanding black men who treat their female partners as their equals and confidantes, not those who, out of fear, resort to committing heinous crimes.

Bessie is essentially a young, single and lonely black domestic. Like Mrs. Thomas, she lives in a run-down tenement in the Chicago Southside slum. Most blacks in American metropolises lived in such ramshackles in specially designated slum areas outside city centers. Bessie Mears is a teenager who lived alone in a rented room where, occasionally, her boyfriend, Bigger Thomas visits her. Although she hopes for a better and more fulfilling life, she does not enrol herself in school to become learned since she cannot afford it, coming from a poor background. She remains a domestic in white households where she is further exposed to blistering racism and degradation. Wright (*1940*) therefore projects Bessie Mears as a youthful African-American female in a strange and hostile environment who gropes frantically for meaning in her rather stunted and absurd society, but fails to derive fulfilment and joy out of life. Consequently, frustration sets in as even her menial employment cannot translate to economic emancipation for her. Her frustration over the white treatment of blacks is reflective of similar attitudes manifested by other coloured people in the racist Jim Crow American society.

It is true that very few African-American females are reflected in Wright's *Native Son*. It is also true that to a large extent, they are not accorded in-depth portrayal. The racially-segregated American Society which ensured perpetual instability among blacks in a continually shifting landscape accounted for these oversights. *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* have been described as examples of

literary determinism, which is an extreme expression of the naturalistic novel. In such works, one does not expect to see fully-rounded characters for, within the conventions of this tradition, people are portrayed as being defined and limited by the conditions of their environment.

Both texts have also been identified as belonging to the tradition of the absurd. It would therefore be inappropriate to criticise the lack of meaningful human relationships within this tradition. Thus, one does not expect a plethora of characters or a detailed mirroring of them in such an unstable, stained and shifting scenery. Absurdism portrays the individual in a senseless world, where no matter how he struggles, no fulfilment or meaning for his life seems achievable:

> The absurd sensibility is an acute consciousness of human crisis: It celebrates man's desperate struggle to order the moral universe, without recourse to powers outside of himself... Albert Camus writes that the most crucial of all considerations in the climate of the absurd is man's reflection upon the significance of his own life... The absurd is that kind of man who wills to discover – or to impose meaning upon an existence for which he has been able to determine no real purpose.[21]

It is also a fact that none of the black females reflected in *Native Son* is economically independent. The African-American women shown in it are mostly engaged in menial occupations which largely fail to meet their basic needs, yearnings and aspirations. However, the author shows within the limits of his literary orientation that even at the period he wrote, African-American

women could muster enough courage to take on vitally significant tasks and roles even when their white-dominated society tended to deny them such opportunities, thereby keeping them at the bottom of the social ladder. Thus, the few black females in *Native Son* - and even *Black Boy* and *Invisible Man,* distinguish themselves in their assigned tasks, no matter how menial or humble such tasks are. In spite of the threats of censure from the dominant white American society which tended to negate their goodwill and positive efforts, these African-Americans persevere and hope to finally prevail. Similarly, in Walker's *The Color Purple*, Celie, Nettie and Shug overcome their obstacles through striving. The men are portrayed as the villains. But in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, the black women have a problem which is largely unresolved at the end, since the key black females die in the course of their quests and those of them that are lettered cannot get really gainful jobs and remain mostly dormant.

Apparently then, a close scrutiny of the various texts reveals a tendency by black women to aspire to establish independence either purely from an individual, female-only perspective or in joint endeavours with other people – such as offspring and dependants. At the period most of the male-authored texts in question were written, African-American women tended to actively support and encourage joint economic efforts with the men in their lives. Clenora Hudson-Wèems' Africana womanism' tends to support schemes between black men and women based on mutual consent and trust for greater

progress in the black community. It is therefore not surprising to find a yawning gap in the women so portrayed. Some of the women manifest this tendency through their behaviour. It is only the active presence of their men which encourage them to exude confidence and endure situations with a sense of direction and security. Indeed, in some cases, black females jettison their aspirations to economic emancipation and self-confidence upon the death or exit of the men in their lives. They also begin to progress towards paranoia as shown by A'Lelia Walker (*The Big Sea*), Annjelica Rodgers (*Not Without Laughter*), Margaret Hoskins (*Black Boy*), Florence and Elizabeth (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*) and Hagar in *Song of Solomon*. Robert Bone (1958) argues that, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Elizabeth:

> fell in love with Richard during the last summer of her childhood, and followed him North to Harlem. There they took jobs as chamber maid and elevator boy, hoping to get married soon. Richard is sensitive, intelligent, and determined to educate himself. Late one evening, however, he is arrested and accused of armed robbery. When he protests his innocence, he is beaten savagely by the police. Ultimately he is released, but half hysterical with rage and shame, he commits suicide. Under the impact of this blow, Elizabeth retreats from life.[22]

Responses such as that exhibited by Elizabeth defeat the desire of black women for economic emancipation. But, losses such as that suffered by her were common in the African-American community owing to the experience of slavery and acute discrimination based on race which expressed itself in the form of regular white ostracism and regimentation of black people. This in

turn led to unemployment, frustration and regular family break-ups such as that resulting from Richard's death and another, following uncle Hoskin's death in *Black Boy*.[23]

Although 'economic independence, here would suggest a state of total self-reliance by African-American women, in practice such a condition hardly prevails in the primary texts. What obtains even with the most gainfully employed black females, is a community with shared interests, assets and liabilities. In *Not Without Laughter* for instance, when Harrietta Williams runs off from home with the carnival troupe and then runs out of funds it is her mother and sister that sacrifice their meagre savings to rescue her from certain destitution and famine.[24] Similarly, when Annjee and Sandy become stranded in Chicago and Sandy cannot continue his education, Harriett comes to their rescue by ensuring that Sandy remains in School.

Furthermore, as Annjee literally elopes to Detroit, Michigan, to meet her irregular and wandering 'husband' – Jimboy Rodgers, she abandons their only child, Sandy, to the care of her aging mother, Aunt Hager Williams – who subsequently dies. It is her sister, Tempy's quick and decisive intervention that saves the situation for the young Sandy, thus preventing him from wandering like his blues and fun-loving father, Jimboy. Tempy takes Sandy to live with her and her husband. In the process she enrols him in school, corrects his English from folk slang to acceptable standard usage. Sandy too - to his

surprise and happiness, is given a complete room to himself and is further encouraged to read assiduously. He accepts the challenge, studies hard in school, disciplines himself and begins to excel in his lessons and examinations. More importantly, Sandy is properly nourished and manifests sound health and confidence as he begins to assume full charge of himself while striving to understand his surroundings.

The communality which manifests in the extension of assistance and support to less fortunate members of the family by black females derives directly from the African culture whereby affluent members of the society assist less-endowed and needy members. Such practice cements common bonds of love, culture and kinship, breeding in turn, goodwill and camaraderie. The unique point here is that even less-affluent members of the African-American community - especially the women, also share the little they have with other people in the society. The black community therefore contrasts sharply with the white western one which emphasizes individuals instead of groups. According to Clenora Hudson-Weems, a sense of community and camaraderie always surrounds the 'Africana' setting. To her understanding, the term 'Africana' embraces people of African ancestry all over the world and 'Africana Womanism' – the concept she pioneers, has the potential to cater to the needs of all African people anywhere on earth. Unlike Western culture and concepts which largely emphasise the individual in the society, African culture and customs emphasise the group or the entire community in their application.

Hudson-Weems therefore believes that people of African descent should pool their efforts and resources together to create more jobs and opportunities for 'Africanans' in general. She reasons that:

> *The real challenge for Africana men and women is how to create more economic opportunities within Africana communities.* Many people talk about the need for enhanced Africana economic empowerment. If our goal in life is to be achieved – that is, the survival of our entire race as a primary concern for Africana women – it will have to come from Africana men *and* women working together. If Africana men and women are fighting within the community, they are ultimately defeating themselves on all fronts.[25]

On the contrary, apart from being centred on the individual, Western culture appears largely to be anchored on the concepts of existentialism which has been diluted with aspects of Christianity, but which nevertheless, still focuses on the individual character in his daily struggle to understand the universe i.e his surroundings. The existentialist concept, according to Simpson and Werner:

> Concentrates on the existence of the individual, who, being free and responsible, is held to be what he makes himself by the self-development of his essence through acts of the will (which in the Christian form of the theory, leads to God).[26]

In the context of this exploration therefore, recent feminist allegations that black male writers failed to accord positive and dense portrayals to black women in their texts is not totally true. While some of the primary works reflect these women poorly, other texts give a positive and more valid picture of the situation in vogue.

The resilience of most of the African-American women in the male-authored works and the bold economic strides of some of them deflate the accusations. This is especially so when viewed from the fact that the feminist criticisms were made long after these texts were published. In other words, the texts and characters being criticised belong to a different milieu and generation, while the criticisms and critics belong to another and more recent generation.

Alhough some of the African-American females in the relevant primary texts appear to be largely illiterates, oppressed and dependent on factors - such as their family, men folk and offspring for sustenance, the fact of the reality then – the world war, the Great Depression with its harsh economic impact, coupled with the recent migration of blacks from Southern sharecropping plantations to Northern urban slums - where they struggled to find their feet in their new and strange society, add up to negate some of the feminist criticisms.

From the foregoing therefore, the quest for economic emancipation of African-American women would better be pursued in the context of the community and family instead of gender or sex. This is the central position of the womanist orientations of both Walker and Hudson-Weems. The existence of good rapport and camaraderie in the community and family among any group of people helps to shift emphasis from selfish and less-relevant, to mutually benefiting endeavours. Sherley Anne Williams argues that:

> Often, feminist concerns are seen as a divisive, white importation that further fragments an already divided and embattled race, as trivial mind games unworthy of response while black people everywhere confront massive economic and social problems. I don't deny feminism's potential for divisiveness, but the concerns of women are neither trivial nor petty. The relation between male and female is the very foundation of human society.[27]

Through this statement, Williams unwittingly lends support to joint community and family-based efforts to overcome problems - especially in the economic front, as opposed to exclusive gender and sex-based endeavours. Williams, interestingly, is a staunch advocate of the womanist framework in feminist studies. Ironically, it is the male African-American feminists such as Calvin C. Hernton who tend to view all black male endeavours as oppressive of the black female. To this category of critics, everything in the American society seems to be conceived and executed purely from the male perspective. Even economic and literary enterprises are perceived to be dominated and dictated by males. Hernton (*1987*) argues for instance that, it is:

> a mean irony and a down-right shame that the men authors and gate-keepers of Black American Literature have historically ignored, belittled, suppressed the women authors and the works they have produced. Historically, the racial struggle in the United States has been drawn exclusively as a struggle between the men of the races. Everything having to do with race has been defined and counter-defined by the men as a question of whether black people were or were not a race of Men. The central concept and the universal

> metaphor around which all aspects of the racial situation revolve is 'Manhood'.[28]

However, Hernton's allegations are negated almost immediately in his subsequent observations that today, "new, younger women are scaling the traditional Sexual Mountain of Afro-American Literature with an avalanche of explosive writings," adding that, "the writings of these women, and many more like them, constitute the celebration of the black women's literary fourth of July for the first time in the United States."[29] But, by far, the point that tells more about the current economic disposition of the African-American woman in the American literary establishment especially and which reverses Hernton's arguments further, is his remark that:

> Meanwhile, there are black women writers, poets, novelists, dramatists, critics, scholars, researchers, intellectuals, politicos and ideologues - hard at work ... Collectively, it is the *mass presence* of literature written by black women that is unprecedented. In the past one had to search for black women-authored literature. Today the literature seeks you out. Similar to women's writings in general, writings by black women enjoy a large audience. The audience comprises a heterogeneous readership of both blacks and whites, women and men. It is a popular audience.[30]

If the trend of excellence by black females in the literary enterprises is viewed in the backdrop of humble initial efforts by a few African-American women, it becomes clear that much progress has been recorded. The foundation for such breakthrough was however put in place by black females like those depicted in the primary texts here. Black women realised that they could not surmount

their economic problems alone, so they put their heads together or banded. They banded together not necessarily on family or sororal basis, but on mutual and friendship affinities. Instances of such joint efforts prevail in many of the texts under appraisal. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Florence and Elizabeth band and work together. They therefore share their problems and prospects. The situation is similar in *Not Without Laughter* where Harriett Williams and Maudel Smothers band together and work to earn a living.

An outstanding trend in almost all the primary texts by black male writers and the ancillary works by black women authors is the preponderance of black female bread-winners who also preside over large families. These women - most of them, mothers, are often saddled with the responsibility of tending younger members of their families single-handedly due to the absence of their husbands. This prevailing scenario energises black women to become economically self-sustaining by working extremely hard to ensure bread and butter on their tables. The trend whereby black men usually abscond from, or become self-effacing in their families has its roots in Slavery during which white slave masters prevented black men from active family involvement.

In *Black Boy* for instance, Wright's father, Nathaniel absconds from home, abandoning his wife, Ella and his young children Richard and Alan. As a result, Ella strains herself to ensure the children's survival. Similarly, in *The Big Sea*, James Nathaniel Hughes abandons his country (the U.S.A.), his wife, Carrie

and child, Langston and relocates to Mexico in pursuit of wealth. The young Langston Hughes is therefore brought up by his mother and grandmother. In another twist, Mrs. Thomas (*Native Son*), Aunt Hager Williams (*Not Without Laughter*) and Elizabeth (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*) respectively, lose their bread-winners and husbands through death and begin to fend alone for themselves and their families. Mary Rambo on the other hand in *Invisible Man* fends for herself and owns an apartment in Harlem, New York, with which she accommodates needy African-American folks, especially those searching for jobs. She is therefore cast in the mode of a mother caring for and protecting her children.

So, the fact that African-American women are more stationary in their American setting than the men, more or less, places responsibility for tending children squarely on them. Therefore, the deliberate and sustained effort on the part of black females to advance themselves economically impinges on the facticity of their experience in America. Based on this appraisal, it is clear that although feminists level many of their criticisms in a bid to promote the status of African-American women, some of these accusations are easily reversed by prevailing realities. When feminists accuse black male writers of poor and negative portrayals of women in their texts, a close scrutiny of such texts affirms the truth and therefore places matters in their correct perspective. And, the truth is that, while black females in some texts (such as by Wright and Ellison) are accorded fleeting projections, those in texts by Baldwin and Hughes

are projected at length. At the same time, black male characters in works by major black women writers - Morrison and Walker for instance, are predominantly cast as villains, while black women are accorded positive, life-affirming portrayals. What womanists desire therefore is a situation whereby the black community as a whole will be positively emphasised in literature and other social endeavours, not where a particular gender or group would be cast in negative or derogatory terms. In short, the womanists, while fighting for the uplift of women, equally seek the advance of men for the good of the entire community.

Finally, the texts perused so far show that black women engage in economic ventures and contribute actively to the sustenance of not only themselves, but the society as a whole. Some actually attain economic independence and assist other members in the community to climb the socio-economic ladder. In this regard, black females such as Tempy and Harriett (*Not Without Laughter*), Mary Rambo (*Invisible Man*) and Florence Embry Jones and Bricktop Ada Smith (*The Big Sea*) readily come to mind.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SEARCH FOR POLITICAL RELEVANCE BY BLACK FEMALES IN AMERICA

'Political relevance' in the context of this analysis is not limited to, but extends beyond its traditional - and rather limiting definition of one being useful to one's community and playing an active role which enhances such a society - or a group of people making their voices and actions heard and felt in a given setting - to embrace all efforts geared towards inculcating a discerning ability among African-American females which in turn enables them to participate fully in mainstream American life. In this respect, the twin acts of reading and sensitising other people fit into this wider definition.

Hernton (*1987*) argues that, from its beginning, black writing has been 'mission conscious' and that this resulted from the harsh treatment meted on black people during slavery in America:

> From the beginning black writers have written a literature of social protest and human enlightenment – and black writing has always been under siege. During 250 years of slavery, it was a legal crime for blacks to read and write... What motivated blacks to write was the condition of

> oppression, and what they desired of their writing was for it to ameliorate their condition.[1]

He further observes that African-American writers are expected by their fellow black people to communicate their wishes and possibly bring about a fruition of such wishes. He feels that, "since writers possess the Word and the Word is Powerful, the people feel it is the inherent duty of writers to communicate the wishes of the people and, if need be, lead the people against those who oppress them."[2] He also observes that, "being a black writer is an ennobling exigency," adding that, "black literature constitutes one of the supreme enrichments of black culture and black life". But, he is disappointed that black male writers seem to always arrogate to themselves the task of interpreting events affecting black people only from the male perspective despite the fact that black females constitute half of the black population in the United States:

> It is therefore a mean irony and a downright shame that the men authors and gatekeepers of Black American Literature have historically ignored, belittled and suppressed the women authors and the works they have produced. [3]

The interpretation of phenomena affecting African-Americans only from the male point of view effectively prevents blacks females from active participation in the shaping or determination of affairs in their society and such matters affect them to the core. Hernton ultimately recommends a change in attitude on the part of black men, especially the writers. He then notes with growing

satisfaction, the trend of displacement of black male writing with black female-authored works. To him, such a development marks the beginning of emancipation for black females and also, the genesis of their political relevance or empowerment in America.

Through the acquisition of sound and balanced education, African-American females are becoming really enlightened and contributing actively to the 'newly emerging' African-American literary tradition. The new tradition, unlike the previous mode, is perceived to be more egalitarian because it is more representative of the genders in their individual and collective existence. 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. These females hope for continuous 'positive' change. Thus, they reject the black male-oriented mode:

> Obviously we will have to learn to read the Afro-American literary tradition in new ways, for continuing on in 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 that insists on black women as central to that 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.[1]

Such a rejection of previous literary trends in the African-American community informs the criticisms of male authored works by feminists – especially the portrayals of black females and the roles assigned to them in those works. This is purely political even though it utilises the medium of literary criticism to propagate itself. A close scrutiny of the central male-authored texts and some ancillary black female-based works in the black literary canon would help to clarify matters and put them in their correct position. In this regard, the quest for political relevance by African-American females in key, mainly fictional literary prose texts written by selected black male authors, forms the exploration in this chapter.

In *Native Son*, although black females are presumed to be accorded sparse and negative depictions, Mrs.Thomas is nevertheless cast as a committed and concerned mother whose paramount concern is the welfare of her children. She regularly encourages them to get the most out of their surroundings, despite the racist-inclination of their society. Thus, she enrols them in school and later advises them to learn a trade so as to be relevant in their setting. She does these in the firm belief that through such avenues, her children would finally empower themselves to face challenges anywhere. Her faith in the ability of

African-Americans to surmount obstacles in their society is summed up in her song:

> Life is like a mountain railroad
> With an engineer that's brave
> We must make the run successful
> From the Cradle to the grave ... [5]

However, women-centred critics in the United States argue that black females such as Mrs. Thomas should have been projected by the author as round characters – women fully in charge of their destinies who, instead of being anxious only for their children's uplift, ought to work to improve themselves as black women successfully. As it is now, these critics suggest that Mrs. Thomas is cast as a character perpetually chasing shadows and equally being continually chased by a whirlwind. To them therefore, she is an archetype of someone on the fringes of society who, despite her strivings, remains on the outskirts of her surroundings.

In spite of the fact that Wright wrote *Native Son* at a period of great turbulence and upheavals, when African-Americans suffered untold deprivations, he imbued his black female characters with a clear insight and an ability to understand and predict the future accurately. This enabled them to cope with the unfolding scenario. For an illiterate woman presiding over three growing and sensitive children, Mrs. Thomas exhibits a rather alarming accuracy of judgement of people and events. She predicts catastrophe and doom for her

son, Bigger, if he continued to act instinctually and nonchalantly – and it comes to pass soon after. Again, she divines that Bigger would complicate their lives by making it impossible for them to continue residing in even the Chicago Southside slum. This too happens following Bigger's instinctual murder of Mary Dalton - their landlord's and his employer's daughter.

Mrs. Thomas's importance lies in the fact that she symbolises the trend of persistent hope for the final emancipation and integration of blacks in the American setting in spite of the many odds against them. Though fully American, black females were at the time *Native Son* was produced, just becoming aware of their potentials and attempting to interpret phenomena from their own perspective as a way to contribute their own unique endowments to their society. The trend is equally manifested in *The Big Sea, Not Without Laughter, Go Tell It on the Mountain* and in the novels by black women authors. The talents which black females exploited to excel assert their presence consisted of both the ordinary everyday preoccupations and the technical or sophisticated endeavours. These have been aptly categorised as 'the highs and lows' of creativity.[6]

Michele Wallace posits that black women employed their talents to excel in fields such as music, opera, modelling, cooking, weaving, farming, among other areas, even when they had no access to formal education. The quality of their work made them to become 'visible' and left an indelible mark in such

endeavours. She draws our attention to Alice Walker's book of essays, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*, where African-American women are relevant politically and socially not necessarily because they are lettered, but because they showed a lot of devotion to and thus excelled in whatever tasks they assigned themselves or were assigned to. These tasks were not directly related to the academic discipline. Wallace then reminds us of her mother, Faith Ringgold who symbolises that trend:

> Faith was then (and still is) involved on a daily basis in making a politically engaged black feminist art out of quilting, soft sculpture, sewing, painting lettering, and performance. My interest in visual art and art criticism – which was shaped by Faith's involvement with artists on the left organising to protest the Vietnam war and the racism and sexism of establishment museums – was perhaps the largest influence on my notion of what black feminist creativity could mean at that point.[7]

Thus, African-American females could make themselves felt and their voices heard despite the perceived closure of 'regular and popular' channels such as the academia to them. Viewed from that perspective, black women such as Mary Rambo, Florence Embry-Jones in *Invisible Man* and *The Big Sea* respectively, Florence Grimes (*Go Tell It on the Mountain)* and Aunt Hager Williams *(Not Without Laughter*) are very informing. In the ancillary texts authored by black women, characters like Pilate (*Song of Solomon*) and Shug (*The Color Purple*) readily come to mind. These women, illiterate as they are,

assert views and beliefs on crucial socio-political issues and influence other people, especially younger up-coming folks in the African-American community.

Like Tempy Siles in *Not Without Laughter* Mary Rambo in *Invisible Man* has a tenement which she rents out to tenants. Unlike Tempy however, Mary specifically rents out her apartments to fellow blacks, especially young, promising ones. She does not stop there, but caters to their basic needs and sensitises them to the realities in their community. For instance, she advises and encourages the novel's youthful protagonist to aspire to lead the black race through selfless service. This undertaking on her part amounts to political education and propels the protagonist to a leadership role and position in Harlem as he fights to ward off racism. Mary Rambo advises the invisible man to do "something that's a credit to the race", adding that the young man should take care of himself and not allow the rough and raw New York environment to abort his dreams. She therefore tells him not to "let this Harlem git you. I'm in New York but New You ain't in me, understand what I mean? Don't git corrupted". She concludes by advising the protagonist:

> It's you young folks what's going to make the changes... Y'all's the ones. You got to lead and you got to fight and move us all on up a little higher. And I tell you something's else, it's the one's from the South that's got to do it, them what knows the fire and ain't forgot how it burns ... it's you young ones what has to remember and take the lead."[8]

In spite of other assumed lapses in her portrayal as alleged by feminists, Mary Rambo is cast here as a black female who becomes relevant in her community's politics by proving to be an anchor of support for displaced, aspiring black youth and then preparing them for their future roles by sensitising them to the needs of the black race in America:

> *You take it easy, I'll take care of you like I done a heap of others, my name's Mary Rambo, everybody knows me round this part of Harlem, you heard of me ain't you? ... you needn't worry, son, I ain't never laid eyes on you before and it ain't my business and I don't care what you think about me but you weak and cain't hardly walk and all and you look what's more like you hungry, so just come on and let me do something for you like I hope you' do something for old Mary in case she needed it, it ain't costing you a penny....*[9]

Thus, as the invisible man encounters her for the first time, Mary convinces and reassures him of her genuineness, reliability and kindness. By politically fine-tuning the invisible man to the realities of Harlem, New York - and, by extension, the larger American society, Mary Rambo manifests her relevance to her society in not only the political, but also the social, economic and cultural spheres. Her role in *Invisible Man* recalls the roles of Mary Sampson Patterson in *The Big Sea*, Aunt Hager Williams in *Not without Laughter,* Florence Grimes in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and Pilate Dead in *Song of Solomon*. As grandmothers, mothers and aunts, these black females groom their offspring and impart wisdom, knowledge and the politics of living under the racial 'Jim Crow' laws in America to them. ('Jim Crow' refers to racially discriminating laws which are

based on the myth of white supremacy over blacks i.e. the presumed superiority of white people and the inferiority of black people in the United States). All the black females listed above nurture their wards and offspring to aspire to lead the black race in America.

Calvin Hernton (*1987*) in "Black Women in the Life and Work of Langston Hughes," vividly remarks concerning Aunt Hager that:

> Although conditions do not permit her to be a great leader of her people such as a Sojourner Truth, she nevertheless ensures that her grandson will be such a person by giving him all her love and a sound moral and cultural foundation. She is "gwine to make a educated man out o'him and wants him to be aleadin' de people." Again and again, the grandmother tells the grandson he is "gwine to count to something in this world.[10]

He further remarks that Aunt Hager "personifies Afro-American or black folk Christian Temperament, social background and attitude toward life," adding that:

> She is endowed with intuitive knowledge and wisdom inherent in the black folk past (rural slave life), which can best be defined as an 'earth mysticism' that reflects the tolerance and faith peculiar to black life under slavery and continued oppression.[11]

Aunt Hager's character is unique, as her "nurturing and compassion ... transcend racial barriers" to embrace "whites as well as blacks." It is clear

therefore that Hager, as an African-American woman, is integral to her community and society and relevant in both the social and political arena in her setting. She is the bedrock and center of attraction in her Stanton, Kansas community for she commands the respect of her African-American people as well as that of her mostly racist white neighbours.

In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, on the other hand, Elizabeth Grimes is portrayed as a black woman who, because she could not realise her earnest and cherished yearning to acquire advanced education with which to lead other black people, now places all her hope for such attainments on her first born child, John. She realises the evil and foul nature of her Harlem, New York background and resolves to prevent her offspring from being overtaken by that evil. She therefore sensitises John through subtle hints regarding the right attitude to life and aspirations as a black youth:

> You know you your mother's hand man?' ...
> You getting to be,' ...a right big boy.
> You going to be a mighty fine man, you know that?
> Your mama is counting on you.'
> And he knew again that she was not saying everything she meant; in a kind of secret language she was telling him today something that he must remember and understand tomorrow....[12]

By the mere fact of the enlightenment which her eviction from a Harlem tenement provides, Mrs. Primus Provo becomes relevant and integral to her community. Being an elderly black woman living with her equally aged

husband, Mrs. Provo is forcibly evicted from her apartment by mean, white, racially-inclined real estate agents. The eviction exposes the acute poverty and misery of Negroes in the neighbourhood slums. It educates the outside world on the true living conditions of blacks in American urban ghettoes. This revelation consequently sets off a street riot in Harlem - the black section of New York, thus positioning blacks directly against the white establishment.

A militant unnamed West Indian woman takes advantage of the unfolding situation to voice her feelings and sentiments against the white racial segregation ad oppression of blacks. At this point of the ensuing meleé, there is a glimmer of hope that at least, some of the racially motivated anomalies and injustices would begin to be rectified. Like the novel's protagonist who remains nameless and 'invisible', the West Indian woman remains nameless to show that black people in the United States at this point in time were not actively accounted for or considered to be fully human. In fact, whites viewed blacks as renegade humans or apes - that is, beasts of burden in the society.

The poor, old, helpless black couple (the Provos) had invested all of their energies serving the white establishment which exploited and abandoned them to rot to death. Unlike her husband who seemed to be acquiescent and resigned however , Mrs. Provo is very firm as she protests and resists their eviction. Her singular act of resistance draws members of her community to her rescue. Her plight is consequently endorsed as representing and symbolising the difficulties

of black urban life in the United States. It thus becomes part of the political agenda of rival political groups who adopt the issues as their political manifesto to foster radical positive changes in the living conditions of African-Americans. To prevent their eviction, Mrs. Provo and her husband return to their apartment with their miserable junk belongings under the pretext of going in to pray. They are jealously protected by neighbouring blacks. Although the white real estate agents attempt to prevent them from coming back to the tenement, the old couple burst into the house, led by Mrs. Provo who declares:

> All we want to do is go in and pray,' she said, clutching her *Bible*. 'It ain't right to pray in the street like this'... It happened so quickly that I could barely keep up with it: I saw the old woman clutching her *Bible* and rushing up the steps, Her husband behind her and the white man stepping in front of them and stretching out his arm. 'I'll jug you," he yelled, 'by God, I'll jug you!'[13]

The confrontation between the old black couple and the white evictors quickly escalates into a race riot which positions black folks against whites. As more people gather around the scene of the eviction, political statements are made and the problems affecting African-Americans are pushed to the fore. At the same time the black couple's racially-motivated eviction becomes a reference point for other blacks in their quest for political relevance in America.

The society and people portrayed in the primary male-authored works and the black female-authored novels are disadvantaged by one or more factors. The

main negative factor in this regard is the inability of white Americans to view black Americans as fellow human beings possessing similar yearnings and aspirations. Thus, the writers reflect an absurd world with characters striving to define themselves in their society with limited success. The status of black American women - which at the period these texts were written appeared to be largely subservient to that of black males and whites - reflects the situation then prevailing. To black people in the United States then, such an anomaly; such an absurdity needed to be expunged from society's framework for meaningful human relations to thrive.

Since there is limited presence of fundamental intellectual awareness among African-Americans in most of the texts, there is also limited level of political participation and assertion by the characters. Black people mostly fail to unite and assert their presence and relevance as a group. They instead act individually in unsustained and sometimes destructive schemes. But this is exactly what womanists such as Clenora Hudson-Weems oppose. They would prefer a situation whereby black people would band together and work to achieve goals beneficial to the whole race. Hudson-Weems specifically espouses 'collective struggle' as a panacea to the survival of African people. The society depicted in some of the works under appraisal has therefore been aptly adjudged to be "a hell called heaven" by Roger Rosenblatt in *Black Fiction* (1974). Such a description appropriates the absurd consciousness dwelt on by

Albert Camus and Jean Paul Satre in their Existentialist philosophies. Regarding Wright's *Native son*, Rosenblatt argues that:

> We are travelling through a hell called heaven, through a labyrinthine kind of madhouse where, in one way or another, everyone has lost his head. There is a great deal of hysteria in the novel... in the outcries of Bessie and his (Bigger Thomas's) mother. It is also a feature of this madhouse that everybody in it accuses everybody else of being crazy... In the madhouse people do not wish to be looked at, and yet in one way or another everyone is blind, so the fear of exposure is groundless.[14]

With this reality therefore, the black female quest for political relevance is compounded. This situation is replicated in Ellison's *Invisible Man* where the characters enact a bizarre drama of existence in a strange and confused society. For instance, Mary Rambo who advises the youthful black protagonist to aspire to lead the black race to greater heights and who also urges him to act honourably at all times in relation to other people, is apparently disappointed since her advice appears to have been subverted by the invisible man in view of his subsequent behaviour. This seems to negate her quest and relevance at that point in time. Such tendencies probably informs Rosenblatt's assessment that:

> As a romance, nothing is at the end of the quest; as a *bildungsroman*, nothing is the product of the education; as a *tour de force*, nothing is the vehicle. The hero progresses from South to North to nothing; from Capitalism to Communism to nihilism. He makes a long and arduous pilgrimage which finishes in a basement; he starts out heading for the future, and settles down in the nineteenth century; he begins life believing in a network of

> illusions, and ends as an illusion himself, describing his invisibility to those who cannot see him, and in addressing his narrative to white people, explaining himself to those who made him, or wish to make him to remain inexplicable.[15]

However, this negative situation is mitigated considerably in Hughes' texts where African-Americans – black females especially, begin to make themselves heard and felt as a result of both their intellectual and economic empowerment. This trend is also portrayed in recent works by black women writers in the United States. In Hughes *Not Without Laughter* as in *The Big Sea*, black women are very active in their communities where they emerge as spokespersons on matters affecting their welfare, in addition to providing basic necessities for their families. In this regard, these women are visioners for their various communities because they plan and project into the future for the benefit of other black people.

Michele Wallace argues that the politics of race and gender have connived effectively to prevent black women and black feminist creativity "from assuming a commensurable role in critical theory and the production of knowledge by a combination of external and internal pressures." She opines that this trend has forced black females and black feminist creativity to resort to music and literature in order "to compensate for ghettoization."[16] The implication of Wallace's statement is that, since African-American females perceive themselves to be effectively barred from active critical and intellectual

endeavours by what they view as the male-ordered politics of their society, the women have resorted to options that are still open to them to make their voices heard and their feelings known. These options include music and literature.

The foregoing trend is very conspicuous in Hughes autobiography and novel. In *The Big Sea*, Carrie Hughes writes poems and performs as an actress in plays, while Florence Embry-Jones and Bricktop Ada Smith sing and dance to entertain respectable audiences. In *Not Without Laughter,* Harrietta Williams equally sings and dances not only to earn a living, but to put across her views on the American racial situation and her pride in the black cultural heritage.

Like Florence and Bricktop in *Not Without Laughter* and Shug Avery in *The Color Purple* (Shug also sings and dances to entertain audiences in order to earn a living), Harriett is very talented and gains rapid prominence through this preoccupation. It gets to the point where she assumes the title and position of "Princess of the Blues"; by all accounts, a star performer.

As part of her radical stance on the white oppression of blacks in the United States, Harriett chides her mother, Aunt Hager Williams and sister, Annjelica Rodgers for their 'soft' attitude toward whites:

> ... You and Annjee are too easy. You just take whatever white folks give you – coon to your face, and nigger behind your backs – and don't say nothing. You run to some white person's back door for every job you get, and then they pay you one

> dollar for five dollars worth of work, and fire you whenever they get ready'.[17]

Owing largely to her experience in the American Mid-West, Harriett vehemently abhors whites and tells her family and neighbours that white people would, "if they could help it," prefer blacks not to be in their midst:

> They wouldn't have a single one of us around if they could help it. It don't matter to them if we're shut out of a job. It don't matter to them if niggers have only the back row at movies. It don't matter to them when they hurt our feelings without caring and treat us like slaves down South and like beggars up North. No, it don't matter to them.....
> White folks run the world, and the only thing colored folks are expected to do is work and grin and take off their hats as though it don't matter...O, I hate 'em![18]

Harriett's abhorrence of racist whites fits into the politics of exclusion which they practice on blacks. It further projects her blatant and firm position on the politics of race relations in the United States. Her views on such matters however run contrary to her mother's. Aunt Hager Williams (Harriett's mother) is accommodating and benevolent towards white folks.

Since black people were from the outset motivated to write by their condition of oppression, and since they desired their writing to 'ameliorate their condition, black women equally desire that the emancipation sought through such writing be extended to them. Hence, through the feminist movement,

they seek to ensure that their male colleagues do not turn round and subjugate black women after these women have assisted them to wrest freedom from whites. This desire prompted contemporary black feminists to re-assess works of black male writers, using women-centred yardsticks and criteria. Their aim is to verify the depictions of black females in such works in order to foster a more positive image for black women generally. Womanists are central in this regard as they persistently seek to create a more balanced and representative world within the black community. Writing in this regard, is essentially utilitarian and therefore, political in the sense that the critics are not just keen to appraise the artistry of such works but are rather anxious to establish the prevalence or lack of black female characters in the black male-authored texts. It is clear from this that some feminist critics tend to sacrifice basic and standard literary yardsticks in their assessments of works. They instead opt for propaganda or gender and sex-inclined analyses.

In *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978), Michele Wallace argues that, "Richard Wright's *Native Son* was the starting point of the black writer's love affair with Black Macho." What Wallace infers here is the negative consequence on black women of the presumed macho instincts of the black American male when translated into real daily living and vicarious experiences. She implies that Wright imbued the black male character with exaggerated strength while suppressing or emasculating the black female persona. In *Native*

Son the protagonist, Bigger Thomas drives his employer's drunken daughter (Mary Dalton) home after an outing:

> ...barely escapes raping her, murders her accidentally, and burns her in the furnace in the basement. Lest we should doubt his viciousness, he then rapes his own black girlfriend and throws her out of a window. Bigger, Wright would have us believe, had gained an identity and realised himself as a man for the first time in his life through these acts of violence.[19]

Wallace's assessment falls in line with the desire of African-American female writers that black writing in the United States should not only "ameliorate" the condition of oppression experienced by blacks, but also ensure equal representation for them in the scheme of things in their society for both males and females. African-American women generally seek to assert their relevance in the politics of their nation ranging from the domestic and local arena to regional, national and international fora. By rebuking Wright, Ellison, Baldwin and other black male writers, Wallace is only being a spokesperson for black females and ensuring that they become and remain a vital part of the politics of the United States. She therefore tempers her appraisal of the individual black male writers and declares a preference for Baldwin when compared with Wright:

> I began reading James Baldwin when I was about twelve and he remains one of the black writers whom I respect, not because I agree with everything he has to say or even the way he says it, but because he has paid more attention to black women, to actual mechanics of the black male/female relationship and to the myths that have been

> working on it, than any other black male writer ... Baldwin seemed wiser than Wright because he maintained a sense of the double reality of being black: the white man's vision of the black man and the man the black man had to be himself. Baldwin had in mind a more humane manhood, a manhood that would take into account the expensive lesson the black man had learned from oppression, a manhood that would perhaps turn even America's corrupting influence into something beneficial.[20]

When viewed against the background of the black feminist struggle for gender equality and political empowerment of women, Wallace's assessment appears to make sense. For, although there are black females in Wright's and Ellison's texts who become relevant in their communities through striving, they are nevertheless handicapped in the sense that they are largely illiterates and are therefore ill-equipped to fully grasp and grapple with their ever changing environment. The African-American women in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain'* (1953) and other primary black male-authored texts - including even the novels by black females, tend to exhibit a quick grasp of circumstances and events surrounding them. Florence Grimes is, for instance, denied access to formal education unlike her younger brother, Gabriel, but she appears to decipher and appreciate the set of values which operates in her society better than he does. She is a feminist of sorts who understands the reality that black females still lag behind males in a lot of respects and disciplines. She therefore sensitises her equally illiterate mother, Rachel, in a bid to alter her perception of issues – especially her strong preference for male children. Though she does not succeed in convincing her mother to enrol her in school like her brother,

Florence puts across her feminist-inclined message of equal opportunity and equal treatment for all genders. Owing to her personal experience, she gradually comes to believe that:

> ...all women had been cursed from the cradle; all, in one fashion or another, being given the same cruel destiny, born to suffer the weight of men.[21]

Florence further opines that black men are yet to know how to treat black women properly. She thus implies that the perceived male oppression and suppression of females is still being manifested:

> ...I don't believe the nigger's been born what knows how to treat a woman right... Look like ain't no woman born what don't get walked over by some no count man. Look like ain't no woman nowhere but ain't been dragged down in the dirt by some man, and left there, too, while he go on about his business.[22]

In addition to frowning at the attitudes of males towards females, Florence berates what tends to be a rule, rather than an exception in the society i.e. that the men folk cause problems in their settings and then take an easy exit, leaving women to face those problems. The men either die or run away, leaving women to tend the children and home. To Florence, it is rarely the reverse:

> Yes,' said Florence, moving to the window,' the menfolk, they die, all right. And it's women who walk around, like the *Bible* says, and mourn. The menfolk, they die, and it's over for them, but we women, we have to keep on living and try to forget what they done to us. Yes Lord![23]

The overall impression that the African-American women in the male-authored texts being appraised convey to the reader is that they are at the threshold of positive, all-embracing change in their society. They all appear poised for that expected moment when their perceived freedom from domination would dawn on them. As the primary texts reveal, harbingers of this expected emancipation already exist by way of the few but noteworthy black females who set the tone for that great expectation. Whereas Mary Rambo signals this intention in *Invisible Man*, Florence Grimes dictates the pace in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and, in *Not Without Laughter* and *The Big Sea* we have black females such as Harrietta Williams, Tempy Siles, Florence Embry-Jones and Bricktop Ada Smith who actually begin to harness their talents potentials to assert their presence and relevance in their settings to the point that men generally begin to reckon with them, confiding and involving them in matters affecting the welfare of their communities. That trend is further consolidated in the texts written by black females. In *The Color Purple* and *Song of Solomon* as in *Not Without Laughter* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, black women voice their feelings or opinions on issues freely. They equally exercise their independence from male supervision and work in various occupations – even those previously barred to women . This enables them to also begin to attain economic self-sufficiency. Thus black women start to become even more relevant at this point through sustaining their families and dependants.

In *The Big Sea*, the quest for political relevance by African-American women assumes a potent and pragmatic dimension as exemplified in the utterances, lifestyles, occupations and increasing self-assertion of the women so depicted. Indeed, of all the texts and authors listed for appraisal, it is in *The Big Sea* (Hughes 1940) that we begin to find black women who mirror the trend of massive and dominant black female empowerment, assertion and relevance to the politics of living in the society so aptly reflected. For instance, it is here we find a black woman who not only achieves fame through singing and dancing in her predominantly white, racially-organised society, but who uses her talents and fame to taunt and suppress rich, mainly white folks. By so doing, she makes it abundantly clear that black and white people are equal and that what was lacking to blacks and women was equal opportunities and facilities for them to match whites in achievements and even begin to outshine them as exemplified by her own meteoric rise from 'grass to grace'. Florence Embry-Jones not only excels in her career, but stamps her unique personality traits and abiding faith in the equality of not only the black and white races, but also that of the male and female genders. She is a pragmatic feminist and she vividly recalls Harrietta Williams – the fictional "Princess of the Blues" in Hughes's *Not Without Laughter*.[24]

Florence Embry-Jones is quick to assert herself, voice her opinion on issues - whether controversial, taboo or not and come to the rescue of oppressed people

- black and white alike. She is compassionate and humble in spite of her fame and status. Her belief that women worldwide be liberated from male-domination, poverty and ignorance is shown in the brawl at the restaurant where she entertains guests. A poor, white French woman employee *'danseuse'* is sacked by her employers for 'answering back at them.' Florence intervenes to try to prevent her from being fired and rebukes the men at the club house:

> Nobody 'll mistreat a woman in front of me, '...'cause I'm a woman, and nobody's gonna mistreat a woman in front of me.
> Everybody's got a mother'... 'and that poor little French girl's going to have an *enfant*,'...
> 'You men ought to be proud of any woman what has an *'enfant'*, 'cause it takes guts to have an *enfant*. None of you men ever had a baby! *Ecoutez! Je dis*, it takes all kinds of guts to be a mother! You hear me'.[25]

In Walker's *The Color Purple*, Shug Avery manoeuvres herself to a position in which she is not only relevant to the men around her, but actually controls and regulates them. To Mr -------- (Albert), she acts like a mother to an over-pampered or spoilt child. She therefore disciplines him by limiting his excesses, even though she is his mistress. Shug also makes Grady to rely completely on her for economic, and emotional succour. She is very alert to the realities of her society and is conversant with every development in the social and political arena in America. Thus, she briefs her husband about recent trends and developments. She also educates Mr.------- (Albert) on current events. Furthermore, she reveals to Celie (Mr. -------'s wife) that Mr.-------- has been

hiding her letters - the ones sent by Celie's sister, Nettie, who is on a missionary assignment in Africa.

A reality that is apparent to the average reader of virtually all the texts in question is that, although the African-American women portrayed in them do their utmost to engage in various worthwhile endeavours as a way to register their presence in their settings, the American society at the time of the portrayal seemed to be unprepared to countenance the notion of black female empowerment. Thus, contrary to Hernton's argument that African-American male writers connived to put down, exclude or misrepresent their female counterparts in all levels of undertakings in the society, it is apparent that other factors such as the lopsided, racist American setting which was structured to accord prominence to white males and females before other racial and gender groups, did more to harm black females than any other thing. Racism by whites, as American history reveals, was so pervasive that it blurred most people's view of other realities in the United States.

In addition, as the history further reveals, the political frame work and the social realities prevailing then, tended to emphasise the male gender as an inclusive and comprehensive representation of both the male and female sexes among blacks in social issues and classifications. This reality also applied to other races - even the majority whites. Therefore, gender distinction in decision-making, the running of affairs and even religious worship, among African-Americans was deemed not to be paramount then. For example,

between the First and the Second World Wars - a period of unequalled and unparalleled upheavals and dislocation of humans and other assets - when all the primary texts for this study were published, emphasis appeared to be always placed on males in what was considered to be the major social strivings – warfare, leadership of nations, leadership of business establishments, leadership of religious organizations, leadership of political organizations, among others. It was after these upheavals, when peace became gradually restored, that attention began to be focused on matters such as those now seen to be crucial and relevant by feminist scholars and critics.

Again, and perhaps of greater significance, a major point raised earlier but which should be reiterated is the fact that black women tended to sacrifice their resources and energies to ensure the proper upbringing and ultimate welfare of their offspring - including male members. This practice appeared to be predicated on the then prevailing belief that male offspring eventually grew up to assume leadership roles and positions in the society and catered to the needs and well being of all members. It is only recently that women seem to have lost confidence in the ability of their men to lead all members in the society. Hence, through the feminist movement, they are advocating the overthrow of the perceived male dominance in the running of affairs. This development, innovative and grand as it appears, is part of the subversive import of feminism and is geared towards the empowerment of women to the level of the men. This deconstructive inclination of feminism has also placed

male scholars on the red alert and they are busy utilising principles and potentials of the same orientation to try to secure their 'territories' and 'safe areas' from further erosion by women.

What these boil down to is the need for dialogue and compromise on both sides of the gender divide so as to foster positive, cooperative, gender-blind endeavours that benefit the community at large. This desire is central to the efforts of black womanist scholars and critics. The concept of feminism purports to fight for the rights of women in all spheres of the human endeavour in order to bring them to the level of men - who are perceived to be disproportionately favoured on account of their assumed dominance of virtually all strata of affairs. It is in itself political by nature because it articulates, lobbies and assumes positions on issues in the society on behalf of women. When, for instance, feminists such as Mary Helen Washington accuse the African-American literary establishment of paying lip-service attention to literature produced by black American women, they are clearly stating that black males have dominated the establishment and are preventing black females significant representation in that set-up. They are also subverting that establishment in their bid to have greater access to it by dismantling the tradition and redefining it or erecting a new structure that would take into full cognisance the plight and views of the women.

Through such criticisms, it is clear that feminists are in the final analysis advocating a comprehensive change which would be fully inclusive of black female concerns. This is sexual and gender politics which seeks to heighten the relevance of African-American women in their settings. Washington points indirectly to that conclusion:

> I mention this egregious example of sexism in the black intellectual community ... because it underscores an attitude toward black women that has helped to maintain and perpetuate a male-dominated literary and critical tradition.
> Women have worked assiduously in this tradition as writers, as editors, sometimes, though, rarely, as critics, and yet every study of Afro-American narrative, every anthology of the Afro-American literary tradition has set forth a model of literary paternity in which each male author vies with his predecessor for greater authenticity, greater control over his voice, thus fulfilling the mission his forefathers left unfinished. Women in this model are sometimes granted a place as a step-daughter who prefigures and directs us to the real heirs (like Ellison and Wright) but they do not influence and determine the direction and shape of the literary canon.[26]

Finally, it would be useful to see African-American women in both the primary and ancillary works being referred to as precursors or fore-runners of the contemporary black female in the United States. Their portrayals which posit them at the threshold of meaningful and sustaining socio-economic and political developments are meant to serve as pointers to a more relevant and fulfilling future. Such artistic depictions, far from being ends in themselves, are intended as starting points for a dynamic process i.e. as vicarious impetus for

future generations to draw from. Other categories of feminists, just as their womanist counterparts, should recognise and embrace this fact and opt for mutually beneficial endeavours to try to redress their grievances. An enduring solution to a problem is not derived through creating further problems in the attempt to resolve a lingering one. It is amply evident as attested to by Hernton and other feminist critics that since the black male-authored texts were produced, a lot of progress in the area of black female empowerment has been made. Feminists cannot claim all the credit for these apparent achievements. Such black male-produced texts had to exist in order to set the tone for subsequent literary developments in the black community to be recorded. Nothing genuinely positive thrives in a vacuum, literature inclusive. Black male writers blazed the trail and unwittingly set the trend for others - black females among them, to draw from. Black women have drawn so much from these initial, mostly black male-centred efforts that, now, they appear to be outdoing the men in the business of literary writing and criticism and, indeed, other fields of human endeavour such as politics and the economy in the United States.

Alice Walker's concept of feminism which she terms 'Womanist Inquiry' and which according to Sherley Anne Williams is all-embracing and:

> Committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, female and male, as well as to 'a valorization of women's work in all their varieties and multitudes,[27]

should be explored further since it tends to hold much promise for resolving the misunderstandings arising from the feminist,non-feminist and male-inclined views of issues in the society. Other feminist approaches as Williams notes, appear too radical and divisive to be espoused by a majority of members of the African-American community. Since the 'womanist orientation' in feminist studies avows commitment to the welfare and survival of both genders in the black community and, since it vouches that "it can talk both effectively and productively about men(and women)," it follows that both the male and female African-Americans can assume a common, unifying position to attain common goals, dreams and objectives. Through joint efforts, they can assert their relevance in the American political landscape to their mutual and long-term benefit.

Recently too, an update on Alice Walker's orientation which manifested itself by way of Clenora Hudson-Weems' concept of Africana Womanism and which purports like Walker's Womanist Consciousness to work effectively for the unity, progress, wholeness and survival of all 'Africana people' – people of African origin anywhere on earth, but which, unlike Walker's orientation, detaches itself effectively from western feministic practices and theories, is engaging the critical attention of Africanist scholars. These two concepts of womanism hold the potential to actively confront and ultimately resolve gender-related divisions in the African-American community which threaten positive achievements or progress when conscientiously applied in a collective manner for the benefit of all.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE PERSISTENT QUEST FOR SOCIAL EQUALITY BY BLACK WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues in his introduction to *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, (1990) that:

> One muffled strain in the silent 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 ... The "other side" has not been represented by one who "lives there". And not many can more sensibly realise and more accurately tell the weight and fret of the "long dull pain" than the open-eyed but hitherto voiceless Black Woman of America ...[1]

In the United States, African-American people have been consistently relegated to a second fiddle position in the scheme of things since the days of slavery and colonialism. In this regard too, black women perceive themselves to be further relegated to a third fiddle position. This discrepancy was 'enunciated' and implemented by Euro-American whites. The single greatest factor accounting for why whites in the United States discriminate against blacks is the apparent difference in skin pigmentation . 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 civilised; the centre 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 realisation, the women began to band together and voice concern to try to assert mutual equality with black men and then with whites. Hernton assesses this trend in "The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers" 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.[2]

One sure way to realise gender and racial equality in America, black women believe, is through writing to express their desires, feelings and expectations. Literature is viewed by them as a powerful medium of communication and exchange of ideas in the modern society. They realise too that black male writers employed that medium to voice the conditions of bondage and oppression on behalf of other blacks. This was done so effectively that white oppressors began to be prevailed upon to change for the better in their treatment of black people. Such writings by black males during slavery, post-

emancipation and contemporary times included those of Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa), Frederick Douglass, William E.B. Du Bois and Richard Wright. Since black women realised that writing by black people was 'mission-conscious', they adopted that medium to equally voice concerns peculiar to them. Hernton emphatically argues that:

> Black writing did not come into being as a result of some black person's desire to exercise the "inspirational muse." What motivated blacks to write was the condition of oppression, and what they desired of their writing was for it to ameliorate their condition.
>
> Black people, moreover, including the writers themselves, have summoned and even harassed writers to report on and define the condition of the race and its struggle. Since writers possess the Word and the Word is powerful, the people feel it is the inherent duty of writers to communicate the wishes of the people and, if need be, lead the people against those who oppress them. By virtue of its origin, nature and function, black writing is mission-conscious and is necessarily a hazardous undertaking.[3]

Having realised the potency in writing therefore, African-American women are employing that mode to quest for social equality in their country, for they perceive that certain fundamental areas in the United States are still closed to them. So it is not surprising to find black feminists who claim to speak on behalf of other African-American women in the United States writing profusely, either to accuse black male writers of poorly depicting black women in their creative works or attempting to produce what for them, is a truer image of the black female.

An assessment of the portrayals of African-American women in their quest for equality in the primary male-authored texts and the ancillary female-produced works equally informs the exploration in this unit. The exercise is consequent upon the preponderance of criticisms by feminists in America which boil down to the issue of improper and negative depictions of black women by male writers. Sometimes, these critics suggest that the male writers deliberately excluded black female characters in their texts, thereby relegating and suppressing black women. The womanist approach which, while pointing out lapses in portrayals by the male authors, creates ample room for dialogue to resolve established problems necessarily informs the exploration as in previous chapters.

The fight for social equality by the African-American women in the male-produced works under appraisal appears to be waged on two fronts. Indeed, upon a first reading of the texts, it would seem that the black females so portrayed only complement the black men to try to wrest power and recognition from the white power structure and by so doing, establish equality with whites. However, a close scrutiny reveals a different preoccupation. It shows that the black women equally endeavour to assert practical equality and rapport with black men. In Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, African-American women, like their men folk, essentially work to bring about social equality with whites in America. However, in Baldwin's *Go*

Tell It on the Mountain and Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* and *The Big Sea*, they go a step further to begin to reprimand black males for perceived wrongs, discriminations and inequalities. They thus begin to assert in real terms their equality with men. In Walker's *The Color Purple* and Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, black women are initially shown to be in absolute subservience to black men who oppress and repress them. But eventually these females subvert the domination by the males and actually begin to lord it over them, dictating to them and ensuring compliance. In *The Color Purple*, Mr. -------(Albert) and Grady are helpless to the whims and dictates of the entertainer, Shug Avery, while in *Song of Solomon*, Milkman (Macon Dead, Jr.) is subdued by his Aunt, Pilate Dead despite his decidedly, macho-inclinations.

In *Invisible Man,* Mary Rambo is preoccupied with grooming young black people to lead the 'Negro' race to attain equality in all ramifications with white Americans. Therefore, she works relentlessly to actualise her dream by accommodating and fending for young African-Americans in need. She further encourages and advises them to aspire to lead the black race to the sublime so as to be fully part of the great 'American Dream.' By doing this, she refocuses their attention and aspirations, thus activating their dormant potentialities. To Mary, it is only when African-American people have acquired the skills possessed by whites that they can channel their energies towards the real uplift of their people. For the moment however, she believes that all efforts should be geared toward the attainment of full racial equality with whites. Mary

therefore counsels the young black male protagonist to do things that would serve the interest of the black race. Initially, she asks him what he plans to make of his life, but the protagonist appears to be in a dilemma. She therefore advises: "Well, whatever it is, I hope it's something that's a credit to the race." As the invisible man replies: "I hope so," Mary retorts, "Don't hope, make it that way."[4]

The trend then for black females to effectively subsume their gender issues and instead pool their energies and resources with those of black males to fight white racial discrimination of African-Americans in all facets of life in the United States, is manifested not only in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, but also in Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. Nowadays however, feminists frown upon such manifestations, arguing that it empowers black males while weakening the already prone position of black females in the society. But, womanists tend to support this tendency since it has potential to strengthen and unite the whole black race in America. Clenora Hudson-Weems strongly advocates a union of black female and male efforts to work for the overall good of the entire black race. Black women in *Native Son* and *Black Boy* do not spend their time worrying about being left out of the scheme of things by their men folk. Indeed, in the society painted, some of the black men die and leave their wives as widows. Others just abandon their wives for other women and relocate to start a new life. But, the black females here summon all their reserve energies to

withstand the traumas resulting from these negative developments and still work assiduously to provide for their offspring and wards.

However, the African-American women in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* and *The Big Sea*, not only seek to end racial inequalities and injustices in the United States like their male counterparts, but equally seek to terminate gender discrimination – especially those emanating from fellow black males and females. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain* for instance, Florence Grimes more than any other black female symbolises that trend. From her childhood, Florence is sidelined by her mother who believes in the supremacy of male over female children). Florence's mother, Sister Rachel is at this point a single parent having lost her husband through death. She subscribes to the prevailing patriarchal order for the simple reasons that males possess power and the stamina to run the society. She also believes firmly in *The Holy Bible* – the symbol of Christianity - her religion which, from its origin, appears to promote the male domination of affairs in the society. Florence watches helplessly as her mother focuses all her attention on Gabriel in the hope that Gabriel would, as a man, need all the care, while Florence, as a woman, would soon grow up, get married and start her own family. In other words, Gabriel would, as a man, retain and propagate his family's name, while Florence would lose such a name and allegiance through marriage:

> There was only one future in that house, and it was Gabriel's – to which, since Gabriel was a man child,

> all else must be sacrificed. Her mother did not, indeed, think of it as sacrifice, but as logic: Florence was a girl, and would by and by be married, and have children of her own, and all the duties of a woman: and this being so, her life in the Cabin was the best possible preparation for her future life. But Gabriel was a man; he would go out one day into the world to do a man's work, and he needed, therefore, meat when there was any in the house, and clothes, whenever clothes could be bought,...[5]

Florence thus becomes very bitter and rebels against her family. She leaves for the 'North' (New York) abruptly to begin a new life. From this it is clear that, in addition to black males and whites humiliating and dominating black females, some black women - in this instance a black mother, actively connive to put-down black women. Here, an African-American mother effectively reduces the worth of her daughter by discriminating between her son and her daughter purely on gender basis. Such gender-based discriminations are currently perceived by feminists, to emanate from black males. Florence's migration to the 'North' is prompted by her desire to improve her fortunes. Her action is an attempt therefore to prove that black females, given similar opportunities as black males, could be as good or even better people. She thus uproots herself from her Southern, plantation-prone society and resettles in a Northern city where she eventually meets and marries a man of her choice who, unfortunately proves to be a disappointment to her later. In the ensuing distress, Florence reflects with deep sorrow:

> But it had been from the first her great mistake - to meet him, to marry him, to love him as she so bitterly had. Looking at his face, it sometimes came to her that all women had been cursed from the cradle, all in one fashion or another being given the same cruel destiny, born to suffer the weight of men.[6]

Later, Florence counsels her younger friend and colleague, Elizabeth - a single parent and nursing mother at the time of their initial encounter, to take her time and search diligently for a befitting husband that would take proper care of her and her child. She tells Elizabeth with firm conviction: "I don't believe the nigger's been born what knows how to treat a woman right."[7] She further adds with a note of despair and loathing for men in general that it seems every woman in one way or another is a victim of male oppression and abuse.

Florence's remarks, though meant to express sympathy over Elizabeth's plight, more tellingly refers to her brother, Gabriel, who, through reckless living - in spite of his being a pastor in a Christian Church, enters into an adulterous relationship with his younger colleague, Esther, impregnating and abandoning her and her child to their death, while continuing in his religious ministry as pastor.

Florence's quest for social equality in her society is informed by her experiences both within her immediate family and the larger society which is dominated by whites. Even though she has ambition and a clear sense of what she wants, she is crippled by her lack of advanced formal education, lack of a husband with a

"get up and go" attitude to life and, the cancer which eventually attacks and gradually destroys her. A combination of these negative factors frustrates and weighs her down to the point that she begins to swallow some of her pride and criticism of both the male gender and her white-dominated society. Hence, her admission later that women were perpetually destined for oppression by men on earth.

For the African-American woman therefore, judging from Florence's experience, it is obvious that, until all the women acquire formal education and learn necessary skills, which in turn would make them affluent and empower them to surmount challenges and vicissitudes in their communities, the goal of attaining social equality with their black male and white counterparts would remain elusive for them.

The black females in Hughes *Not Without Laughter* and *The Big Sea* however, protest actively against inequalities in the American society resulting from actions and utterances by males and whites and achieve a measure of success in their stride to assert gender equality among African-Americans as a way to address some of their perceived grievances and imbalances.

In *Not Without Laughter*, the first chapter focuses on a violent storm which ravages the otherwise 'sleeping' little Kansas town of Stanton. The storm alters the shape of the town as it destroys a lot of its landmarks. It equally alters the

attitude of people living there because it draws them closer in the wake of the disaster since they now begin to live a communal life, helping one another to weather the catastrophe. Metaphorically, a storm portends far-reaching change that could be destructive or constructive, although, more regularly, it results in greater destruction in the short-term. At the period *Not Without Laughter* was published, the Harlem Renaissance which sought to actively re-define and re-shape the status and role of African-Americans, was at its climax. Black people had begun to effectively reject and overturn the dominant white stereotype projection or categorisation of them. At this period too, the American society experienced traumatic and far-reaching upheavals such as the Great Depression, the Stock Exchange (Wall Street) Crash of 1929 and a rise in the 'Negro' middle-class. The Harlem Renaissance which championed 'Negro' militancy and self-assertion and the accompanying growth of the 'Negro' middle-class, pointed to a clear and fundamental change in attitudes and perceptions on the part of black people towards whites and vice-versa, since African-Americans were no longer willing to be oppressed, ostracised and subjugated by whites as was previously the case. Therefore, the 'Storm' in Hughes's novel foreshadowed change in the American society for African-Americans as well as for whites.

The 'Storm' had actually been brewing for some time, owing to the persistent racial and gender discriminations in the United States. The clarion call for a change in attitudes and perceptions was sounded just prior to the publication

of *Not Without Laughter* and other related texts in that era by black scholars like Du Bois in writings such as *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and Hughes in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (*1926*). The messages, although specifically addressed to white bigots, was equally meant for black lackeys. Hughes's essay came to be regarded as a kind of manifesto of black people for fellow blacks in the United States. In addition to the quest for change being championed by Du Bois and Hughes, other African-American intellectuals also contributed immensely through the Harlem Renaissance movement to propagate the innermost desires of African-American people. Emerging black females, fell back on Du Bois and Hughes's revolutionary messages to fight for gender equality among themselves since they perceived that to be lacking. Thus, the storm in *Not Without Laughter* is by no means a coincidence, since it signals a lot of changes for the people in it. It unravels the restive atmosphere in the town which is previously subsumed under the façade of tranquility. The mistrust and tension result directly from deep-seated racial bigotry between whites and blacks. People - black females among them - begin to renounce and denounce age-old, but lopsided attitudes and customs. Harrietta Williams for instance, refuses to sit in a section in the theatre reserved for black people, arguing for racial equality instead.

She further walks out of the theatre instead of accepting the demeaning position assigned to coloured people. As a testimony of final defiance, she abandons the school system which actively promotes the racial segregation of

black people. By doing these, she makes it very clear that, as an African-American woman, she expects equal opportunities and treatment from the American society whose founding fathers established principles which affirm the worth of all human beings irrespective of their backgrounds and status.

Harriett therefore is the forerunner of the contemporary African-American civil rights leader such as Rosa Parks. She also foreshadows the modern black feminist or womanist. She is the voice for progress and overall racial uplift in the American community. Through her defiance and initiative she put America on notice that 'colored people have had enough of Caucasian subjugation and oppression. Anyone among whites therefore, who had ears to listen to her message, was better advised to take her seriously.

Black women also begin to embark on promising intellectual and economic schemes aimed at situating themselves within their society and assuming equal status with their male counterparts as well as with their white neighbours. Shortly after the violent storm in Stanton, two black residents inspect their neighbourhood to assess the extent of the disaster wrought:

> Black aunt Hager and her brown grandson put their rubbers on and stood in the water-soaked front yard looking at the porchless house where they lived. Platform, steps, pillars, roof, and all had been blown away. Not a semblance of a porch was left and the front door opened bare into the yard. It was grotesque and funny. Hager laughed. "Cyclone sho did a good job, "she said. "Look like I ain't never

> had no porch." Madame de Carter, from next door, came across the grass, her large mouth full of chattering sympathy for her neighbor.
>
> But praise God for sparing our lives! It might 've been worse, Sister Williams! It might've been much more calamitouser! As it is, I lost nothin' more'n a chimney and two wash-tubs which was settin' in the backyard. A few trees broke down don't 'mount to nothin'. We's livin', ain't we? And we's more importanter than trees is any day!" Her gold teeth sparkled in the moonlight. "Deed so," agreed Hager emphatically.
> Let's move on down the block, Sister, an'see what mo' de Lawd has 'stroyed or spared this evening'.[8]

Meanwhile, Aunt Hager's children - all of them female - and grandchild - a male, work to supplement the family's income. Tempy who is married, works to supplement her husband, Arkins Siles's income. On the other hand, Harriett, who is vehemently opposed to the white racial discrimination of blacks, is very vocal and selective as she cannot condone menial, lackey employment in Stanton. She subsequently branches out on her own in a musical and dance career that exposes her rare talents to her world. She therefore gains both prominence and economic emancipation from this engagement. Through this preoccupation, she rises above her petty, racially-discriminating world and stands in a class and world of her own - a feat which is very rare for black women at the time. Harriett shuns discrimination in all forms and mixes freely with her black male and white neighbours. It is the whites that segregate her. Whereas Harriett affirms the black cultural heritage

proudly, her elder sister, Tempy regrets being black and works diligently to ensure her acceptance into the white middle class society.

Tempy is of the view that African-Americans are capable of attaining socio-economic equality with white Americans only if they begin to behave and aspire like them by acquiring advanced education and skills and by making money, then investing it. She therefore tries to live up to the white expectations of blacks. She equally equates 'doing right' with behaving like whites and cultivating their attitudes and tastes: In all, Tempy's efforts are geared towards attaining white mannerisms, standards and heights every endeavour since she believes these to be the key to asserting socio-economic parity with them. She tells her young nephew, Sandy:

> I want white people to know that Negroes have a little taste; that's why I always trade at good shops... And if you're going to live with me, you'll have to learn to do things right, too... Colored people needed to encourage talent so that the white race would realize Negroes weren't all mere guitar players and house-maids... Colored people certainly needed to come up in the world, Tempy thought, up to the level of white people, think like white people – and then they would no longer be called 'niggers'.[9]

For Tempy therefore, social equality is synonymous with blacks renouncing their cultural heritage and adopting the dominant white Euro-American or Western culture. She is fascinated to a great extent by the accomplishments of white civilization or advancement in the educational, economic and political

sectors. But she is naïve when she begins to perceive everything 'white' as good and beautiful, and everything 'black' as bad and ugly. She also exhibits naivety as she interprets her white mistress's insulting remarks as complimentary. Though she benefits materially from Mrs. Barr-Grant, Tempy descends so low as to ape her mannerisms:

> Tempy pleased Mrs. Barr-Grant by being prompt and exact in obeying orders and by appearing to worship her puritan intelligence. In truth Tempy did worship her mistress... Several times the mistress had remarked to her maid" "You are smart and such a good, clean quick little worker, Tempy, that it's too bad you aren't white." And Tempy had taken this to heart, not as an insult, but as a compliment.[10]

Tempy's aspiration to white ideals motivates her to distance herself from her family and folk. She instead embraces the aristocratic and privileged people (middle-class folks) among African-Americans referred to as "the Negro Society of the town."[11]. As events later reveal, this category of 'Negroes' is essentially fake and hypocritical in attitudes because it insulates itself largely from fellow members and problems of the wider African-American community.

It is therefore clear that Tempy's quest for social equality as an African-American woman is motivated more by her desire to miscegenate - to join the mainstream white culture, than by any other consideration. Instead of deliberately and assiduously embarking on measures to improve and internalise the rich potentialities in her African-American culture, Tempy shuns her folk

roots. For instance, since eating certain foods - fruits in this case, was associated with rural, folk - and by implication, negative and backward black culture in the United States, she avoids eating such and opts instead for foods associated with white people:

> White people were for ever picturing colored folks with huge slices of watermelon in their hands. Well, she was one colored woman who did not like them! Her favorite fruits were tangerines and grapefruit, for Mrs. Barr-Grant had always eaten those, and Tempy had admired Mrs. Barr-Grant more than anybody else – more, of course, than she had admired Aunt Hager (her mother),* who spent her days at the washtub, and had loved watermelon.[12]

Tempy (*Hughes 1930*) and Florence (*Baldwin 1953*) have similar perception of issues. They fall into the same category and seem to prefer miscegenation into the dominant white culture as a solution to their quest for social equality in America. However, their conception of such miscegenation is on the basis of strict equality and fair representation with whites. For example, Tempy thoroughly condemns blacks who advocate perpetual servitude of 'Nergoes' to Whites. So, although she admires white people, her admiration and aping of them seem to be to subvert their schemes on black folk by partaking fully in them. Governed by this hidden desire, she motivates and encourages young, aspiring 'Negro' children to adopt accomplished African-American intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois as their role-models instead of Booker T. Washington and his likes who were reputed to encourage perpetual black servitude to

whites. Tempy specifically counsels her nephew, Sandy, to forget Booker T. Washington and instead look up to Williams Edward Burghardt Du Bois for inspiration. Regarding Booker T. Washington, Tempy tells Sandy:

> Teaching Negroes to be servants, that's all Washington did!'... Du Bois wants our rights. He wants us to be real men and women. He believes in social equality. But Washington – huh! The fact that he had established an industrial school damned Washington in Tempy's eyes, for there were enough colored workers already. But Du Bois was a doctor of philosophy and had studied in Europe!... That's what Negroes needed to do, 'Don't talk to me about Washington," Tempy fumed. 'Take Du Bois for your model, not some white folks' nigger'.[13]

To her therefore, if African-Americans emulate Du Bois and his likes, they would be opportuned to advance speedily towards full integration in the American society. On the other hand, if they followed Washington's prescriptions, they would forever remain servants and slaves to whites in the United States.

Although feminists in the United States argue that the African-American woman had been denied the voice and medium for expression and though there is evidence in some black male-authored texts to buttress the charge of questionable portrayal of black females, some of the black women in the said works are very vocal and assertive. Florence Grimes (*Baldwin 1953*) as already observed, is one of such women. Her lack of formal education does not stand in her way as she regularly bares her mind on topical issues. Similarly, in

Hughes's two selected works, virtually all the black females are outspoken and vouch for their rights. Florence Embry-Jones, Mary Sampson Patterson, Carrie Hughes (*Hughes 1940*) and Harrietta Williams (*Hughes 1930*) are paramount in this regard. Among these women, two are highly educated. But, their husbands either die or abscond from them. However, because they are enlightened, they exercise their rights effectively. For example, Carrie Hughes stands up for her son, Langston, when racism threatens the possibility of his enrolment in a good quality school. Hughes recounts this incident vividly in *The Big sea*. He recalls how as an infant he encountered racism in the local school system and his mother had to stand up for his rights as an American citizen. Through her persistent and unwavering efforts, the lad was finally admitted to study in the neighbourhood school reserved previously for only white people. But, as the writer narrates, whites were not really pleased to admit blacks into the same ranks which are supposed to be open to all American citizens. They were not willing to regconise black equality with whites in the system. Indeed, despite the writer's eventual admission to the Harrison Street School, some teachers and pupils:

> Sometimes used to make remarks about my being colored. And after such remarks, occasionally the kids would grab stones and tin cans out of the alley and chase me home.[14]

Hughes's grandmother, Mary Sampson Patterson, on the other hand, teaches him to be proud of his African-American cultural heritage and to always work

hard and be involved in positive, life-affirming endeavours. She further teaches him to spell, read and write. Thus, she imparts vital ingredients which greatly strengthen Hughes for his later encounters in life. In describing her, the writer is nostalgic as he paints a vivid picture of a unique and outstanding personality. Her influence on her young and promising grandson is overwhelming and enduring since it lasts throughout his lifetime. Indeed, as a testimony, Mary Sampson Patterson narrates heroic stories to the young Langston Hughes that leave a lasting impression on him:

> Through my grandmother's stories always life moved, moved, heroically toward an end. No body ever cried in my grandmother's stories. They worked, or schemed, or fought. But no crying. When my grand-mother died, I didn't cry either. Something about my grandmother's stories (without her ever having said so) taught me the uselessness of crying about anything. She was a proud woman – gentle, but Indian and proud. I remember once she took me to Osawatomie, where she was honored by President Roosevelt -- Teddy -- and sat on the platform with him while he made a speech; for she was then the last surviving widow of John Brown's raid.[15]

Another black female in *The Big Sea* proves to be rather forthright and outspoken. Mary (the British–Nigerian girl-friend of Langston Hughes) is overt to the point that she challenges her father's interference in her decision not to marry an official in the British Colonial Service. However, since the young Hughes is not ready yet to settle down and, since Mary too is young and inexperienced, her father's intervention prevails and she is forcibly detached

from Langston Hughes whom she loves. Mary thus represents the emerging and assertive or vocal black female who prefigures the black feminist of today. She cherishes her independence and freedom of initiative and is ready to endure the consequences of her decision. Unlike her West Indian friend, Rosalie,[16] Mary actively believes in the equality of all people and races. She therefore finds it very easy to relate with Hughes who is an American and who speaks American Standard English instead of the British Standard English she is used to and adapt to him, despite her markedly British and African background.

While Shug Avery in Walker's *The Color Purple* prefigures the newly independent black female, Florence Embry_Jones in Hughes's *The Big Sea* attains the status of both superstar and role-model, setting standards and trends for other black women and men to follow. Of all the black male-authored works under review, only Florence challenges both whites and blacks - her employer inclusive, successfully. The standard she sets ensures that social equality is effectively attained by both the males and females and by blacks and whites in her neighbourhood. Florence is from a very humble and ordinary background and is initially described as "Florence – the beautiful brown-skin girl from Harlem who sang."[17] But, from a position of obscurity, she begins to attract a worldwide audience of famous people – mainly the cream of society from various nationalities.[18] In spite of her genesis from very humble beginnings, Florence, in her period of affluence, remains proud of her

African-American cultural heritage. She does not cower before whites and affluent people who use every available avenue to humiliate black people. On the contrary, she dictates terms for her interaction with her aristocratic audiences and keeps them in suspense, unmindful of their status and her humble background. She is able to set standards and assume superiority over her guests because of her talents as singer and dancer and because she is aloof and remote towards them. However, her air of superiority over her mostly white and affluent guests, seems to be her way of getting back at them for discriminating against blacks and poor people. From all accounts, her scheme pays off handsomely:

> Part of Florence's reputation was based on snobbishness which she deliberately cultivated, because outside the club she was as kind and sociable a person as you would ever wish to find. And those who worked with her, from musicians to waiters, loved her. But to the patrons she adopted an air of unattainable aloofness ... In the snob world of *de luxe boit de nuit* society it was considered a mark of distinction for Florence to sit for a moment at your table.[19]

In her quest to entrench social equality between males and females, Florence shuns protocol and abandons the stage upon an evening performance to defend a fellow female who is brutalised by her male employer and other male waiters at her place of work – *Le Grand Duc* restaurant.

Another major African-American female entertainer on the scene, Bricktop Ada Smith who finally succeeds Florence Embry-Jones as star singer and dancer, is plain, reserved and unassuming unlike her predecessor. But, like Florence Embry-Jones, Bricktop believes in the social equality and responsibility of all human beings, unmindful of their race, gender, colour or creed. Therefore, she does not snub people. Neither does she assume airs. She rather works relentlessly to acquire a sound and enduring reputation in her career. More importantly, she accepts everybody - guests and fellow workers - on equal terms and everyone accepts her. She is later reputed to be a better singer and dancer than Florence, though she remains simple, devoted and unassuming:

> Bricktop sang in a cute little voice, with nice, wistful notes. She danced a few cute little steps, tossed her head and smiled, and went around to all the tables and was pleasant to everybody - from guests who could afford only one quart of champagne to those who bought a dozen bottles. French, or American, tourist or diplomat, white or colored, were all the same to Brick – and really all the same. She liked everybody and made everybody like her. Her professional manner was simply her own manner, in the club or out.[20]

Most of the African-American women in the male-authored works tend to believe that the attainment of genuine social equality in their society with other racial and gender groups lies in their acquisition and internalisation of high level education as well as their engagement in gainful employment. This probably informs their relentless quest for fulfilment in these areas. Indeed, virtually all the women apply their energies and skills in job situations;

a few are able to attain advanced education - and this is because white racist restrictions discourage formal learning for blacks. As a matter of fact, the blistering racism then prevailing in the United States actually deprived black people from befitting jobs and equal pay for equal work. The discrimination however emboldened African-Americans to fight for their rights. In due course and with persistent efforts, some of them began to attain higher status and positions in the professions. This new situation affected black females even more positively than males.

In their criticisms of black male writers and their works, feminists imply that the writers are, in addition to being biased toward black females, not competent to fully and objectively portray women since they are not women. In other words, feminists believe that only women writers can adequately and truly reflect women in works of art. These critics further argue that African-American women have contributed equally to the development of their society and culture as black men, but that the men often sideline women and deny them similar status in the scheme of things. Thus, they are inferring that black females in the United States are still regarded largely as inferior and that black males are responsible for this situation. That, as a result of this, black women are now embarking on revolutionary measures to reverse the trend by asserting their worth and equality in all ramifications.

Owing to the demeaning inferiority purportedly forced on the women by the men, feminists opine that even the major and positive contribution of African-American women to the blossoming of black writing in the United States was until recently, not acknowledged by the male-inclined black literary establishment. Neither was it recognized by the white literary establishment. Both male and female feminists are unanimous in this observation. Even womanists share this assessment and seek to alter the situation for the better:

> Black women have been involved in the development of Afro-American writing since its inception, yet no pre-twentieth century black women writers are treated as major contributors to the history of black literature. The black-burner status of female writers persists into the twentieth century too.[21]

By extension, what they are saying amounts to an indictment of black men for allegedly fostering inferiority on black women against their will and relegating them to the background in the process. To buttress the feminist accusation, black women writers point to long-standing precedents for such behaviour by the men. The root of the matter is perceived to be the black literary tradition which from its inception has been viewed as male-oriented. Mary Helen Washington vehemently argues that black men relied on the male-prone literary tradition to exhibit their flawed assessments and portrayals of black women. Hence, the women have been saddled with the uphill task of reversing that tradition so as to assume practical equality in all social ramifications with the men:

> Tradition. Now there's a word that nags the feminist critic. A word that has so often been used to exclude or misrepresent women. It is always something of a shock to see black women, sharing equally (and sometimes more than equally) in the labor and strife of black people, expunged from the text when that history becomes shaped into what we call tradition. Why is the fugitive slave, the fiery orator, the political activist, the abolitionist always represented as a black man? How does the heroic voice and heroic image of the black woman get suppressed in a culture that depended on her heroism for its survival?[22]

A disinterested application of these allegations to the primary, male-authored texts reveals that some of them are indeed genuine. For instance, it is true that African-American women have aided their men folk to fight racism and other social injustices in the United States, but it is not true that black men deliberately belittled the women's role in this regard. As pointed out earlier, rather than under-representing or misrepresenting black women in their texts, black male writers were preoccupied with the prevailing social, economic and political structures in the society. The situation existing at the time therefore largely influenced their art. Thus, the prevailing circumstances then were threatening enough to fully preoccupy these creative artists. Still, such macabre situations did not provide an excuse for the writers to misrepresent female characters or, indeed, anybody in their literary texts. Although feminists criticise the situation of black females, they admit that things are beginning to change for the better. They point with glee to the fact that in endeavours previously thought to be the exclusive preserve of males, black females are

excelling and even over-taking the men. Such a development is no doubt, a radical departure from the efforts of the pioneering females in the texts under appraisal. Feminists also believe that such sterling achievements by contemporary black women have helped greatly to integrate them further into the mainstream American society. Hernton consequently expresses his profound pleasure with this apparent development as he observes that:

> Today black women writers are challenging racism in all spheres of life and culture. Women having no avowed trek with feminism are increasingly engaged in literary activities that nevertheless fall within the scope of contemporary black womanist consciousness... The literature of contemporary black women writers is a dialectical composite of what is known coming out of the unknown. It is an upheaval in form, style, and landscape. It is the negation of the negative. And it proffers a vision of unfettered human possibility.[23]

He is however conscious of the limitations in any human undertaking i.e. he realises that human efforts are never really perfect, but that there is a need for persistence by black women even in the midst of grandiose achievements. He thus advises them to be cautious and to work harder, rather than being contented with their recent breakthroughs and attainments:

> The scaling of the historic mountain of sexism on the part of contemporary black women writers does not mean that there are no differences or controversy between them. It certainly does not mean that their works are flawless and perfect. Some of their assertions are downright bombastic, some of their scholarship is questionable, and some of their quotations are very biased and misleading.

> Rather, the prolific propagation of literature by black women means that the sexual mountain need not remain as a barrier behind which black women writers must perish forever. There is much work to be done. The mountain must not merely be scaled, it must be destroyed.[24]

Behind all the attempts by feminists and women to subvert the status-quo in their desire to attain mutual equality in the society, there appears to be an emerging realisation by them that, in the final analysis, life-affirming mutual endeavours which bind the genders and foster a harmonious peaceful and progressive society are worth initiating. But these women want genuine equality at all levels for both females and males. A womanist scholar and critic, Sherley Anne Williams argues that what black women need most from black men is dialogue i.e. mutually beneficial dialogue that serves to unite African-Americans instead of separating them further. She opines that black males should 'come down' from their 'power positions' and engage black females in a dialogue to resolve prevailing problems and lingering suspicions, especially since women perceive themselves to be in a vulnerable and emasculated position in the society's power structure. In a nutshell, black women want some of the power currently perceived to be exercised by men. In this regard, black women writers in America are at the forefront in speaking on behalf of the generality of African-American women:

> Feminist theory, like black aesthetics, offers us not only the possibility of changing one's reading of the world, but of changing the world itself. And like black aesthetics, it is far more egalitarian than the

> prevailing mode. What follows then, is both a critique of feminist theory and an application of that branch of it Alice Walker has called "Womanist." It is as much *bolekaja* criticism as "feminist" theory, for black women writers have been urging men not so much to "come down (and) fight," as to come down and talk, even before Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike coined a critical term to describe our challenge.[25]

Recent achievements by black females in the United States have gone a long way to reverse feminist allegations that black women are still 'unaccounted for, ignored, belittled and suppressed' by men in the society. But apparently, more still needs to be done to consolidate the achievements of black women. Since the feminist accusations were made against works by black males written in the past, there is a need to revisit salient aspects of the texts with a view to clarifying matters further. The historical factor which places black male writers' texts in the past, while acknowledging the feminist allegations as contemporary would be integral in this respect. Thus, through this factor, there is a recognition of the differences and divergences wrought by the time gap which, necessarily informed the writings of the black males and the criticisms of the feminists. In other words, the sensibilities and engagements of earlier periods - which apparently influenced the writings by black males, and those of contemporary periods upon which feminists base their criticisms, should be considered when delving into these issues. Barbara Christian advises other black women and feminists in America that although they are not wrong in questioning their treatment in the past by men, it would be more useful for

them to channel their attention to areas which bind both genders in the black race. This theme of course, is central to all shades of the womanist orientation:

> 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 women in the world as we define woman. In ignoring their voices (men's voices), we may not only truncate our movement but we may also limit our own process until our voices no longer sound like women's voices to anyone.[26]

What this means for the African-American woman is that bright prospects for attaining gender and racial equality in her world exist and that, through hard work, she can attain similar or even greater heights as other racial and gender groups. Behind the arguments however, it is amply evident that the acquisition of intellectual, economic and political power by women would foster social equality for them. Hence, their vigorous pursuit of these.

It would be useful therefore to regard the male-authored works and the black females reflected in them as harbingers of contemporary African-American women. This is because at the period of their portrayal, black people were just recovering from their humiliating past and beginning to grapple with other fundamental challenges in their society. The black male writer's emphasis at this point in time seemed not to be on gender issues among black people, but, on attaining racial harmony for the whole group as an oppressed segment of the American setting. Womanists tend to embrace such a view. But they would

not tolerate subsequent depictions which deliberately taint or tarnish the image of black women in America and indeed, elsewhere. The persevering efforts of black females in all the texts who work diligently in order to attain a higher status for themselves and their offspring provided the necessary lead for succeeding generations of African-American women to follow, albeit vicariously. Thus, those black female characters can rightly be regarded as for runners of today's black women in the United States.

CHAPTER SIX

THE BLACK FEMALE'S SEARCH FOR CULTURAL EXPRESSION.

From the period of slavery through the European colonisation of Africa, black people universally have been accorded inferior status by whites. In the United States, blacks were enslaved and discriminated against by whites due to their skin colour and African lineage. As African-Americans made concerted efforts to end the discrimination by whites, black females began to perceive that black males were oppressing them further. These women then concluded that they were bearers of a triple heritage:

> Black women are bearers of what Barbara Smith calls, "geometric oppression." They are therefore bearers of a triple consciousness.[1]

Hence the women began to be vocal and assertive and thereafter banded together to ward off the perceived oppression and suppression on the part of their men folk. First of all, black females reassessed and accepted themselves as black women. They then embarked on a relentless search for new models among their fold to replace those depicted by black males and whites in real life and vicarious situations. In virtually all fields of human endeavour in the American society, black women are now applying themselves proudly without any trace of inferiority. They have even turned their 'black' skin-colour to

advantage and are arousing envy and consternation in their various engagements from the majority white population as they are seen to be excelling in such undertakings. The key word or motto for the contemporary African-American woman seems to be 'excellence' in whatever endeavour she is engaged.

In their bid to alter the perceived negative view of them by black males, black females argue that unlike the literature produced by black male writers, the one produced by the women focuses on themselves. In this regard, Mary Helen Washington observes with renewed optimism:

> Without exception Afro-American women writers have been dismissed by Afro-American literary critics until they were rediscovered and reevaluated by feminist critics...
>
> 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... Women talk to other women in this tradition, and their friendships with other women – mothers, sisters, grandmothers, friends, lovers – are vital to their growth and well-being.[2]

In the light of the feminist criticisms and comments, it would be useful to note that, while literary texts by black women writers take "the trouble to record the thoughts, words, feelings, and deeds of black women," some of these works

degenerate to the point of creating an absurd and bizarre society where, surely, the woman reigns supreme, but with a plethora of avoidable problems bedevilling such imaginary worlds. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* are in some respects pointers to that sad trend. The writers here portray black male characters as being one-sidedly awful. Nothing really good comes out of these male characters. They only create problems for the women and these problems magnify and remain largely unresolved. This gets to the point that the black females begin to band together and ignore the men -Pilate, Reba and Hagar in *Song of Solomon,* or pair up and stay away from their men as exemplified by Celie and Shug in *The Color Purple.*

The general trend however which emerges among all the black females in the primary male-authored works is that they are assertive and outspoken. This may not be unconnected with their long and harrowing history of oppression and subjugation under slavery, racism and the current perceived gender discrimination. All the black women in the texts tend to express their unique presence as African-Americans in one way or another in spite of their being overwhelmed by the dominant white culture in the United states. They all encounter trying situations, but are able to muster the necessary stamina and courage to try to surmount such obstacles.

Black females in America and elsewhere are equally noted for their perseverance even in the face of great odds. They are perceived as artistic, industrious and

creative. In addition to being articulate, they are viewed as deeply religious, maternal, caring and loving. These women tend to surmount obstacles and situations which subdue women of other colours and races. Emerging from a background of stiff oppression by way of racism, African-American females respond to challenges with twice the zeal that other females bring to bear on such tasks. In "Black Women in the Life and work of Langston Hughes," Hernton argues that African-American mothers and grandmothers symbolise qualities such as "selfless giving, teaching and inspiration" and that "such attributes run deep in the life experiences of black Americans." He further observes that the grandmothers - and by extension, black women's nurturing and compassion, transcend racial barriers since "it is bestowed on whites and blacks."[3]

Hernton categorically states that grandmothers hold a special place in the life and works of African-Americans because it is from them that black people derive their sense of being in America since they are "endowed with the intuitive knowledge and wisdom inherent in the black folk past." Again, according to him, "the grandmother is the source of great benevolence, comforting and inspiring all who turn to her. Hence, the prototype of the image of the woman the grandmother represents is that of the Earth Madonna."[4]

According to Hernton, 'Earth Madonnna' refers to African-American mothers and grandmothers who are "fecund" and "maternal," because they give birth, instruction and inspiration to their offspring. In *Not With Laughter* and *The Big Sea*, Aunt Hager Williams and Mary Sampson Patterson vividly mirror these qualities. Both women equally reflect basic Christian beliefs, personal dignity and convictions about their brown-skin colour. As already observed, they nurture and groom their offspring and wards for leadership positions among African-American people.

In *Black Fiction*, Roger Rosenblatt (1974) observes among other things that in *Not Without Laughter*:

> The spokesman for Christianity...is Aunt Hager Williams, Sandy's grandmother and the mother of his mother, Anjee (sic). Hager is a former slave whose enormous strength of will provides the novel with its force of gravity. There is no doubt or ambiguity in her Christian devotion. Of all the book's characters it is she who has had the most difficult time, yet she only speaks of doing the Lord's work, basing her faith firmly on the negative principle that as bad as things may be, they would be worse without religion.[5]

Among the salient points raised by Rosenblatt include the fact that Aunt Hager Williams and her daughters -Tempy and Harriett especially, actively advise and train Sandy, her grandson, both at home and in school to aspire to lead the black race. Sandy responds positively and advances speedily in school. Meanwhile, as long as she lives, Aunt Hager vows to keep Sandy in school:

> ... But they's one mo' got to go through school yet, an't that's ma little Sandy. If de Lawd lets me Live, I's gwine make a edicated man out o him. He's gwine be another Booker T. Washington ... I ain't never raised no boy o'ma own yet, so I wants this one to know all they is to know, so's he can help this black race o'our'n to come up and see de light and take they places in de world. I wants him to be a Fred Douglass leadin' de people that's what ...[6]

In addition to sending Sandy to school, Aunt Hager imparts strict moral instructions to him. She brings home to Sandy the existence of the Almighty God who is also the Supreme Being. She further stresses to her grandson the need to overcome all vicissitudes with love. As Aunt Hager gets older and her children - all females, begin to desert her, she focuses all her attention on Sandy. She also draws support from him. More importantly, he alone abides with her. At this point in her life therefore, she instills in Sandy noble qualities of life:

> Hager had turned to Sandy in these lonely days for comfort and companionship. Through the long summer evenings they sat together on the front porch and she still told her grandchild stories ...slavery-time stories, myths, folk-tales like Rabbit and the Tar Baby; the war, Abe Lincoln, freedom; visions of the Lord; years of faith and labor, love and struggle.[7]

Frequently too, aunt Hager reinforces her precerpts and convictions on the young lad and these go a long way to shape him for life in a country characterised by racial intolerance. Indeed, the basic Christian creed that she dispenses to her grandson has a positive impact on Sandy because it shapes his

outlook on society and life.It is therefore horrifying for Roger Rosenblatt (*1979*) to assert that, "Nothing in Sandy's past indicates that his learning or even his native intelligence will make any difference to his future,"[8] for Aunt Hager's teachings condition Sandy and abide with him long after she dies. Specifically, Hager teaches Sandy to love both black and white people, foes and friends alike:

> Tonight Hager talked about love.
> "These young ones what's comin' up now, they calls us ole fogies, an' handkerchief heads, an' white folks' niggers' cause we don't get mad an' rar" up in arms like they does 'cause things is kinder hard, but honey, when you gets old, you knows they aint no sense in getting' mad an' sourin' yo' soul with hatin' peoples. White folks is white folks, an" colored folks is colored, an' neither of 'em is bad as t'other make out. For mighty nigh seventy years I been knowin' both of 'em, an' I ain't ever had no room in ma heart to hate neither white nor colored. When you starts hatin' people, you gets uglier than they is – an' I ain't never had no time for ugliness,' cause that's where de devil comes in – ugliness!"[9]

She further points out the adverse effects of hating people for whatever reasons, to Sandy. To Hager, hatred should never be allowed to accumulate in one's heart, since life is too brief and hectic for such negative tendencies:

> White peoples maybe mistreats you an' hates you, but when you hates 'em back, you's de one what's hurted, 'cause hate makes you' heart ugly – that's all it does. It closes up de sweet door to life and makes ever'thing small an' mean an' dirty. Honey there ain't no room in de world fo' hate, white folks hatin' niggers, an' niggers hatin' white folks. There ain't

> no room in this world fo' nothin' but love, Sandy chile. That's all they's room fo' – nothin' but love.[10]

This orientation compares favourably with that accorded Langston Hughes when he was young by his grandmother, Mary Sampson Patterson, in *The Big sea.* Mrs. Patterson teaches the young Langston virtues of hardwork, self-reliance and the uselessness of crying over anything. The writer states categorically that her grandmother "would never beg --- any thing from anybody," adding that:

> Through my grandmother's stories always life moved, moved heroically toward an end. Nobody ever cried in my grandmother's stories. They worked, or schemed, or fought. But no crying. When my grandmother died, I didn't cry either. Something about my grandmother's stories (without her ever having said so) taught me the uselessness of crying about anything.[11]

These precerpts by Hughes's grandmother are further buttressed in school for him by his female fine-arts teacher who teaches him that: "the only way to get a thing done is to start to do it, then keep on doing it, and finally you'll finish it, even if in the beginning you think you can't do it at all."[12]

An exploration of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (Baldwin, 1953) and *Invisible Man* (Ellison, 1952) reveals another aspect of the black woman's many endowments. A clear manifestation in this regard is the nurturing and training that these women impart to younger members of the African-American community. As already pointed out, Elizabeth Grimes and Mary Rambo respectively, sensitise

and actively encourage their wards - offspring and non-offspring alike, to aspire to be leaders and spokespersons for the black race in America. John is Elizabeth's son, but the unnamed invisible man is not Mary's child. He is initially her ward, a complete stranger who she takes in for the simple reason that he is a needy 'Negro' boy. She subsequently fends and provides for him in the hope that he will grow up to salvage his black brethren from their racially inclined society. Since Elizabeth cannot attain lofty academic and leadership positions owing to her inability to acquire sound formal education in the black community of Harlem, New York, she devotes all her time and energy to nurturing her children and pins her greatest hope on John, her first born. Consequently, she counsels John regularly and reminds:

> You know you your mother's righthand man?' ... You going to be a mighty fine man, you know that? Your mama's counting on you' ... 'there is a whole lot of things you don't understand. But don't you fret. The Lord'll reveal to you in His own good time everything He wants you to know. You put your faith in the Lord, Johnny, and He'll surely bring you out. Everything works together for good for them that love the Lord.[13]

As a result, John studies diligently and grasps his mother's message. Furthermore, he starts to aspire to lofty heights in his quest for excellence. An inspiration which can be likened to that given by Elizabeth to John is also extended by Mary Rambo to the invisible man in *Invisible Man'* (*Ellison, 1952*). The young black boy is no relation of Mary's, but she accommodates and fends for him. She later counsels him on his expected role in the black

community in America. The invisible man who is central in the story arrives Northern U.S.A. from the South upon being expelled from college. He is a complete stranger to the sophisticated New York environment and this realisation bewilders him. An accident in a paints factory where he works initially enables him to meet Mary Rambo who appears out of the meleé like a saving angel to rescue him from both his ailment and estrangement. As a consequence of the accident, he loses his job at the paints factory and that brings home to him his harsh reality. The invisible man at this point realises that his surroundings are not only strange, but evil, unfriendly and artificial.

Mary looks after the hero, accommodates and tends him to sound health and sensitises him to his expected role in the black community. The protagonist on his part tries to understand fully, Mary's relevance to him. He therefore states among other things, that:

> Other than Mary I had no friends and desired none. Nor did I think of Mary as a "friend" she was something more – a force, a stable, familiar force like something out of my past which kept me down from whirling off into some unknown which I dared not face. It was a most painful position, for at the same time, Mary reminded me constantly that something was expected of me, some act of leadership, some newsworthy achievement; and I was torn between resenting her for it and loving her for the nebulous hope she kept alive.[14]

Mary Rambo encourages racial uplift for African-Americans, so she puts her resources and talents at the disposal of black people. She argues that genuine

advancement for blacks in the United States cannot occur until young black folks complement the efforts of their elders. She further voices resentment and disappointment with middle class African-Americans for their apparent levity, hypocrisy and indifference to the plight of the majority of black people in America. This recalls Hughes attitude to this class of blacks in *The Big Sea* and *Not Without Laughter*. Middle class blacks are actually cast as unwittingly assisting white Americans to oppress and suppress blacks instead of helping to ameliorate their hardships. Mary thus gives apt and correct assessments of this category of African-Americans when she says:

> They finds a place for they-selves and forgits the ones on the bottom. Oh, heap of them talks about doing things, but they done really forgot. No, it's you young ones what has to remember and take the lead.[15]

Since she did not acquire advanced formal education and since black females at the period of these portrayals were not actively encouraged to attend school and assume leadership roles and positions, Mary Rambo channels her energy into caring for young black folks and alerting them to do things that would be "a credit to the race." She expects the unnamed invisible man to 'grow up' and lead other black people: "You got to lead and you got to fight and move us all on up a little higher" (*249*). Her expectations are based on her belief that such attainments by the young black boy would equally be her achievements. To Mary therefore, gender issues did not pose the problem, but racial matters: the poor race relations between black and white Americans constituted the

obstacle. Mary's view tallies with that of Clenora Hudson-Weems in her enunciation of the concept of Africana Womanism.[16]

From the foregoing, it would appear that one of the greatest credits or point of excellence for African-American women in the primary male-authored works lies in their proper nurturing and motivation of black youths to assume leadership positions in their communities. The women educate and sensitise these youths to the reality and challenges facing black people in America. These foundations prove very useful to the younger black characters as they begin to display positive inclinations toward realising the ideals set for them by the women. Indeed, from all indications, grooming younger blacks for loftier attainments seems to be the area where their unique traits and identity as African-American women is asserted most. In that endeavour too, black women tend to be uniquely endowed since their maternal instincts and disposition to children transcend racial, gender and class barriers, as attested to by the women in the texts. Sometimes however, this trend is tempered by the presence of extreme hardships such as when the women cannot act or express themselves freely.

Since black females perceive themselves to be triply oppressed in their American society, they go an extra mile to make themselves heard and their impact felt. As an oppressed and marginalised folk matriarch in a modern urban ghetto, Mrs. Thomas (*Native Son*) is a single parent who, in her attempt to

ensure her family's survival, begins to exact and order her children around. Despite their many difficulties, her first child and a son, Bigger is self-willed, nonchalant and aloof. His mother's entreaties to him fall on deaf ears. Rather, Bigger prefers to loaf around playing pool and fomenting trouble, instead of engaging in gainful employment to supplement his family's earnings.

In the long run, it is Mrs. Thomas's persistent pressure that forces Bigger to renege and accept a job as a chauffeur to a white family. But, on his first day at work, Bigger commits a fatal crime, albeit inadvertently, by killing his employer's daughter. Although Mrs. Thomas exacts and orders her children around, she manifests concern and commitment to their welfare. She literally sacrifices herself for them. Her correspondence with her children is characterised by brief and crisp instructions which she issues and expects instant compliance. These instructions reveal her deep desire for the well-being of her children:

> Buddy, get up from there! I got a big washing on my hands today and I want you-all out of here.
>
> Another black boy rolled from bed and stood up. The woman also rose and stood in her night gown.
>
> Turn your heads so I can dress, she said.
>
> The two boys averted their eyes and gazed into a far corner of the room. The woman rushed out of her night gowns and put on a pair of step-ins. She turned to the bed from which she had risen and called' Vera! Get up from there![17]

And, because she desires that her children advance socially and economically through practical, sustaining and positive endeavours, Mrs. Thomas persistently orders and then coaxes Bigger to accept the job offered him by the affluent, white Dalton family in Chicago in order for him to assist her in the family upkeep, since her husband and breadwinner is not alive to assist her:

> You going to take that job, ain't you, Bigger? His mother asked... 'If you get that job, his mother said in a low, kind tone of voice, busy slicing a loaf of bread, 'I can fix up a nice place for you children. You could be comfortable and not have to live like pigs.[18]

Even as Bigger fails to live up to her expectations, owing to two fatal crimes he commits which result in the death of two young women – one white, one black, and his eventual arrest and conviction, Mrs. Thomas's love for her child knows no bounds as Bigger is placed on death row. She embraces him warmly while on a visit to his prison cell and, filled with emotions, refers to him as "My baby..."[19]

In many respects therefore, Mrs. Thomas recalls Aunt Hager Williams in her maternal and matriarchal qualities. She further recalls Elizabeth and Rachel Grimes in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. More importantly however, Mrs. Thomas shares very many traits with Richard Wright's mother, Ella in *Black Boy*, as she toils relentlessly to ensure her children's well being. Indeed,

Mrs. Thomas singly raises three children without the support of a husband in the same way Mrs. Ella Wright raises two sons without their father's support.

Despite her alleged scanty projection in *Native Son* Mrs. Thomas manifests positive attributes and virtues characteristic of African-American women. She does not reject her son, Bigger, because he has committed very serious crimes which make him liable to capital punishment. Instead, as a loving and caring mother, she showers profuse affection on him as his bleak and sordid situation unfolds itself. She is deeply touched and, despite her family's certainty to be ostracised and outlawed by the dominant society, she neither regrets nor renounces being Bigger's mother. She accepts her fate calmly and reaffirms her abiding faith in God - the Supreme Being. Through her deep and profound religious fervour as exemplified in her daily chores, she completely submits herself to her peculiar situation. Mrs. Thomas's religious fervour again can be likened to that of Aunt Hager Williams (*Hughes's 1930*) and sister Rachel Grimes (*Baldwin, 1953*).

It is true that Wright portrayed very few black females in *Native Son*, but the author shows within the limits of his literary orientation and the demands of his immediate setting and time that African-American women perform significant tasks even when the society tends to deny them such opportunities. The few black women depicted in *Native Son* distinguish themselves in their engagements to the point that they exhibit greater positive traits than black

men in the novel. Wright's portrayal therefore rests squarely on events at the time in the American society. In his childhood autobiography, *Black Boy*, for instance, the writer recalls his youth and acknowledges his total indebtedness to black women in America, especially his mother. In that work also, unlike in the earlier text (*Native Son*), African-American women predominate and succeed in revealing their unique cultural identities. They actively take part in shaping the future of their communities by grooming the younger generation of black folks for more active roles and challenges.

Laughter, music and religion have been referred to as "the Negro's saving response to racial oppression" in the United States. These qualities or attributes are also said to be manifested mostly by African-American women. The critic, Robert Bone argues that in Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* "Laughter is the central symbol ... the complex, ironic laughter which is the Negro's saving response to racial oppression. The characters cluster around the poles of laughter and not-laughter..."[20] He thus tries through this argument to advance reasons for the title and theme of Hughes novel. He further rationalises the phenomenon of laughter, attributing it and other related traits as unique features of the black cultural expression. He argues that:

> The author sets out to make a defense of laughter. To those like Tempy who claim that Negroes remain poor because of their dancing and singing and easy laughter, Hughes replies: 'The other way' round would be better; dancers because of their poverty; singers because they suffered; laughing all the time because they must forget."[21]

Laughter among black women in America is intensified by their long history of slavery, racism and gender discrimination. It is only the ability of these women to laugh and smile in spite of their harrowing experiences that gives them the inner strength to forge ahead with hope for a brighter day. Their deep, genuine love and religious fervour which are often expressed in music and dance - as exemplified by Harriett and Aunt Hager (*Hughes, 1930*) enable them to bear the unpleasant situation with the resolve to succeed in surmounting obstacles placed on their path by the dominant white American society. Thus, African-American women are able to bear their burdens and still love and smile at their oppressors as Aunt Hager Williams reveals.[22]

Roger Rosenblatt (*1977*) corroborates the observation that laughter, religion and music played an integral and positive role in the lives of African-American women. He opines that, "the three forces" which underlie *Not Without Laughter* and "which interrelate and occasionally become confused," are the Christian Religion, music - which creates heroines like Harriett - and laughter, which is used to express emotions like love and foster group identity.[23] He observes a heightened religious fervour in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and declares that the novel "draws...heavily on the Christian doctrine." He further observes that the author depicts a "cyclical damnation" in the novel, adding that:

> There is an external and formal tidiness to this book which belies a monstrous internal chaos, a chaos

> made up...of ideas, feeling, spiritual messages and intuitions which hound and confuse the characters. We are shown a half dozen people mountain - climbing under the sight and power of a colossal god who straddles both testaments. We watch them strive toward that god, as God the father, and at the same time see the god grow large, more terrible, and further out of reach.'[24]

Religious practice in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* appears therefore to go beyond the Christian concept of God as contained in *The Holy Bible*, because it is manifested in extreme or monstrous proportions. The situation in that novel compares favourably to what obtains in Wright's *Black Boy* where black women such as Granny and Aunt Addie take religious worship to the extreme and interpret Christian doctrine and phenomena literally, employing strict Protestant ethics in the process. In Baldwin's novel, as Elizabeth encourages her first child, John - who she names after the Biblical John the Baptist, to immerse himself thoroughly in religion, so does Granny encourage and coerce - albeit unsuccessfully, the young Richard Wright to internalise and externalise religion. All these instances manifest efforts by black females to culturally express themselves - in this case, through the Christian religion. Bone (*1958*) observes that:

> The central event of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is the religious conversion of an adolescent boy. In a long autobiographical essay which forms a part of *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin leaves no doubt that he was writing of his own experience. (Although, here the conversion in a store-front Church is of John Grimes

> who is fourteen years old*) During the summer of his fourteenth year, he tells us, he succumbed to the spiritual seduction of a woman evangelist. On the night of his conversion, he suddenly found himself lying on the floor before the altar. He describes his trance-like state, the singing and clapping of the saints, the all-night prayer vigil, which helped to bring him through...[25]

African-American women believed that if their children internalised religion by imbibing the Christian doctrine, they would be able to withstand the racial segregation then common in the United States. So they actively encouraged their offspring to attend church revivals and profess the Christian faith. The attempt by Richard Wright's grandmother to instill religion in him fails because events on the ground differ significantly from the principles she preaches to him. Carl Senna argues that religious principles conflict with the practical reality of the American society reflected in *Black Boy*. He therefore accounts for why Wright actively opposed the Christianity he was confronted with:

> It is easy to see how Richard develops an aversion to Christianity which lasts throughout his life. An awareness of guilt and sin is brutally imposed on him by his grandmother. Even his mother finally finds the atmosphere at the grandmother's too oppressive for them. Richard's greatest sin in his curiousity, and every opportunity his imagination has to expand is promptly squelched...
>
> To Granny, any deviation from her concept of the norm is subjected to the most severe punishments.The hypocrisy of these hard judgements, couched in Christian ideology, does not

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* Brackets are mine.

escape the boy, and he will not forget them as a man.[26]

- *Brackets are mine.*

Although in its strict application in some of the societies portrayed, religion is cast negatively since it is perceived not to be in consonance with its principles. In other instances and among other people, it is applied positively. In *Not Without Laughter*, Aunt Hager Williams leads an exemplary with the *The Holy Bible* as its anchor. Despite all the vicissitudes she and her family encounter, her deep faith and positive disposition to life never flounders. Instead, through her life style and firm conviction in Christianity, she lets other people know that, all that really matters in life is love for one another - genuine and deep love. As a result, in her Stanton, Kansas community, she is highly respected and sought after by both blacks and whites:

> All the neighbourhood, white or colored, called when something happened. She was a good nurse, they said, and sick folks liked her around. Aunt Hager always came when they called, too, bringing maybe a little soup that she had made or a jelly. Sometimes they paid her and sometimes they didn't.[27]

Aunt Hager's profound humanity and her deep, practical Christianity endear her to her mixed racial community so that she becomes a folk heroine and, after her death,even the racist, white-filtered Stanton newspaper, the *Daily Leader* acknowledges her worth by carrying a back-page obituary announcement - back-page no doubt, because in spite of her goodness to both

blacks and whites, Aunt Hager was still a black woman! Whites believed that blacks were only fit for the rear - the back-pages of society, where such pages existed for them at all:

> Hager Williams, aged colored laundress of 419 Cypress Street, passed away at her home last night. She was known and respected by many white families in the community. Three daughters and a grandson survive.[28]

A major point which is readily observed in all the primary black male-authored texts under appraisal is the tendency by the writers to adopt males as central characters in the stories. Although the writers adopted male protagonists mainly, these youthful characters are nurtured, moulded and guided by black women – not by black men! The characters therefore acknowledge and profusely manifest their indebtedness and commitment to their African-American mothers in all that they accomplish. Even the black male writers manifest this recognition and gratitude to black females. Richard Wright for example, dedicates his most famous novel, *Native Son* (1940) to his long suffering mother, Ella Wright:

> To My Mother,
> who, when I was a child at her knee, taught me to revere the fanciful and the imaginative .[29]

However, it would have been refreshing to find a black female - young or old as protagonist in some of the male-authored texts. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (Baldwin, 1953), Florence Grimes seeks to counter and reverse some

apparently negative tendencies among black males in her American society such as hypocrisy in religion and other engagements. Owing to her assertive and blunt nature, she confronts her brother, Gabriel Grimes - a church pastor, for cheating on his wife, Deborah. Florence argues that Gabriel had cheated on Deborah by putting a young, unmarried woman,Esther, in the family way and abandoning her to die in a strange northern city. She opines that, Gabriel "ain't got no right to be a preacher. He ain't no better'n nobody else. In fact, he ain't no better than a murderer."[30]

Unfortunately, Florence does not immediately match her firm resolve with action. She stops short of exposing Gabriel after confronting him and learning the truth. However, when Gabriel reproaches and maltreats his subsequent wife, Elizabeth, over her supposed misdemeanour of begetting a child - John, without first of all being legally married to its father - Richard, who dies prior to the child's birth, Florence speaks up. She reminds Gabriel of his many lapses and shortcomings. Furthermore, she tells her husband, Frank:

> '...You don't know my brother like I do. There ain't but one way to get along with him, you got to scare him half to death. That's all. He ain't got no right to go around running his mouth about how holy he is if he done turned a trick like that.'[31]

According to Michel Fabre (*Kinnamon,ed.,1974*),Gabriel is a sinner who carefully conceals his sins and pretends to be a holy man. It is only his sister, Florence who knows his true nature:

> Elizabeth as well as Johnny is unaware of Gabriel's slip, and Gabriel, like a Pharisee, can consider her as a former sinner whose illegitimate fruit he stigmatizes because his own sin of a similar nature remains unsuspected. Only Florence, a pastor's sister, could reveal his offence, of which she has irrefutable proof in the form of a compromising letter.[32]

In "Fathers and Sons in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*," Fabre argues that, Florence Grimes "appears as Johnny's fairy godmother," having "protected him, just as Elizabeth has, from Gabriel's blazing wrath, and the weapon she holds could make Gabriel vulnerable."[33] Finally, in Baldwin's novel, while rebuking Gabriel for his hypocrisy as they are returning from church, Florence blurts out in direct reference to Esther who he impregnates and abandons to die:

> 'This girl was a mother, too,' she said. 'Look like she went North all by herself, and had her baby, and died – weren't nobody to help her. Deborah wrote me about it. Sure, you ain''t forgotten that girl's name Gabriel!'...
>
> 'You ain't forgotten her name,' she said. You can't tell me you done forgot her name. Is you going to look on her face, too? Is her name written in the Book of Life?''..
>
> Deborah didn't never write,'' She at last pursued, 'about what happened to the Baby. Did you ever see him? You going to meet him in Heaven, too?'[34]

Baldwin further projects Florence as the forerunner and spokesperson for the contemporary black feminist movement in the United States by making her say and do things that amount to an attempt to derive greater franchise for

women. She believes that black women should stand up and fight for their rights. She lacks confidence in African-American males. This mistrust of black men informs her advice to Elizabeth:

> I don't believe the nigger's been born what knows how to treat a woman right... I done heard it said often enough,... but I got yet to see it. These niggers running around, talking about the Lord done change their hearts – ain't nothing happened to them niggers.
> They got the same old black hearts they was born with. I reckon the Lord don't give out no second helpings, I'm here to tell you.[35]

Florence's remark is directed mainly at black men in the United States for their assumed hypocrisy, nonchalance and bigotry. The comments essentially amplify contemporary feminist attitudes toward the perceived male-inclined American society. Her remarks to both her husband, Frank, and her brother, Gabriel, clearly echo comments by another black female - and another Florence - Florence Embry-Jones in *The Big Sea* (Hughes 1940) and similar remarks by Ella Wright in *Black Boy* (Wright 1945).

In *The Big Sea*, Florence Embry-Jones vehemently thwarts attempts by men to oppress and suppress women. Indeed, she sacrifices her prestige and honour in a bid to redress a wrong done to a fellow woman, albeit white. She therefore engages in physical combat in defense of the white French woman:

> Then it was that Florence, the famous entertainer, that same Florence who snubbed millionaires

> nightly, arose from her table near the orchestra to defend the poor little French *danseuse* in her troubles...
> Florence said: "Don't touch that woman! She's a woman and I'm a woman, and can't nobody hit a woman in any place where I work! Don't put your hands on that woman." ... The orchids fell from Florence's hair and her nails dug into the face of any man who came near her, boss, manager, waiters or customers.[36]

Florence Embry-Jones can be likened in many respects to Harrietta Williams (*Not Without Laughter)* and Shug Avery (*The Color Purple*). They are all black females who rise from humble folk beginnings to attain prominence through singing and dancing. Thus, they surmount all racial and gender obstacles and defy all odds against them, to attain celebrity status. They also use their new positions to assert their unique African –American talents and personalities as women and become role models for other black women. Harriett, like Florence, is likened to an 'African queen.' Hughes specifically describes Florence Embry-Jones as "a brown-skin princess who swept across the floor like a handsome tigress,' an observation which aptly fits Harrietta Williams' portrayal in *Not Without Laughter.* As the spotlight beams on the stage of a Chicago theatre where Harriett is billed to perform, the audience waits exprectantly and in the end, are not disappointed, for:

> ...Stepping out from among the blue curtains, Harriett entered in a dress of glowing orange, flame-like against the ebony of her skin, barbaric, yet beautiful as a jungle princess. She swayed towards the footlight,...[37]

Furthermore, Calvin Hernton *(1987)* draws similarities between Florence and Harriett and refers to them as 'warrior women'. He describes them further as "the would–be revolutionary(ies) in the wing, the radical black feminist(s) in the making.[38]

As Florence asserts herself by voicing her total and unalloyed support for women everywhere, so does Harriett display support for women and, indeed, all African-Americans.

Hernton also affirms that, although very much westernised, Florence's and Harriett's black "cultural insides" govern their inclinations: and their style, their walk, their speech, their gestures "are infused with the rhythm of Africa" - which is why he likens them to 'African queens,' even though they are from, and are based in the United States.[39] From this analogy, it is clear that some African-American females still manifest persistent features of their African cultural identity. Apart from their brown skin-colour, and despite their long separation from the African continent, this realisation is very reassuring in the sense that it provides them an alternative anchor from the western caucasian model. These features form part of their unique contribution to the American cultural heritage.

Where as in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Esther, who tries to be honest and unpretentious with herself by shunning religious hypocrisy and relating

intimately and simply with the childless, but married church pastor, Gabriel Grimes, is frustrated and abandoned to die in a strange city - in spite of the fact that she is pregnant for Gabriel; in *Invisible Man*, both Matty Lou and Kate Trueblood - Matty Lou's mother, are impregnated by her father, Jim Trueblood. However, despite the incestuous - and therefore more scathing and shameful relationship, Trueblood, unlike the hypocritical pastor, Gabriel Grimes, assumes full responsibility for his action and provides relentlessly for his family. Indeed, in the final analysis, no one commits suicide or dies as a result of Jim Trueblood's incest with his daughter. On the contrary, both his wife and daughter endure the shame, deliver their children and fend for them. In Baldwin's novel however, the self-seeking Gabriel Grimes abandons Esther to a nasty fate after impregnating her, in order to protect his pastoral ministry and marriage to Deborah who cannot quicken and bear a child for him. Upon realising this absurdity, Esther who, by all accounts, is still a young girl living with her mother, travels North to a vast city whose ways are strange to her and dies while delivering her baby. She does not seek to repay Gabriel for abusing her because she loves him. She instead opts to suffer and eventually die so as to protect him.

In consonance with the general matriarchal stance of elderly African-American females, the authors of the primary texts under appraisal paint a picture of wise, simple, patient or enduring, devoted, hardworking and morally upright elderly women who leave an enduring legacy for younger generations of

African-American people. We have a plethora of names in this regard i.e. Aunt Hager Williams, Mary Sampson Patterson (*Hughes 1930* and *1953*), Mrs. Thomas and Ella Wright (*Wright 1940* - and *1945* respectively) and Mary Rambo (*Ellison 1952*). These black females envision younger members of their communities by imparting their ideals to them. Their charisma, patience, faith and foresight go a long way to sustain those communities in the face of the unwarranted and often racially-motivated provocations from their dominant white neighbours in America. The women therefore succeed in teaching younger folks in the black community to treasure their rich African cultural heritage and to practice and exemplify virtues embodied in Christianity.

In *Not without Laughter*, for instance, Aunt Hager clearly loves all her children and despite her last child and daughter, Harriett's deviation from the community's social norms - she leads a wayward life by becoming a prostitute, Aunt Hager does not reject her but instead yearns and prays fervently for her to 'turn around' by repenting and forsaking her prostitution and ultimately accepting the Christian God. Indeed, when Harriett returns home to Stanton from one of her many trips, her family is elated as they rush and embrace her. Aunt Hager especially, is ecststatic as she hugs and kisses Harriett. She further clasps her to her bosom:

> 'Ma Chile!' she shouted. "Done come home again! Ma baby Chile come home!" Annjee hugged and kissed Harriett, too, as her sister sat on Hager's

> knees - and the kitchen was filled with sound, warm and free and loving, for the prodigal returned.
>
> Ma Chile's come back!' her mother repeated over and over. Thank de Lawd! Ma Chile's back!'[40]

From the foregoing discourse, it is amply evident that African-American women leave their imprints on whatever task they are engaged in. These marks are mostly positive and life-affirming. They also seek to turn occupations and endeavours which are regarded as mundane or ordinary into profound and worthwhile engagements. Alice Walker *(1983)* explores this theme further in her essay, "In search of our Mothers' Gardens," by proving that black females in the United States are not only concerned with excellence on the 'high ground' of Art, but are equally distinguishing themselves in the low ground, transforming, creating material or retrieving and storing these for posterity.

Barbara Christian argues that Walker's "In Search of our Mothers Gardens," broke with the past American cultural legacy which viewed "singing" as "the only art form in which women participated," and revolutionised art by suggesting that those who 'look high' in the province of art, should also 'look low in order to develop a round and enduring picture of black women in the United States. She posits in "The Highs and Lows of Black Feminist Criticism," that:

> 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 women who'd transformed the material to which they'd had access into their conception of Beauty: cooking, gardening, quilting, story-telling. In retrieving that low ground, Walker not only reclaimed her foremothers, she pointed to a critical approach.
> For she reminded us that Art, and the though and sense of beauty on which it is based, is the province not only of those with a room of their own, or of those in libraries, universities and literary Renaissances - that 'creating' is necessary to those who work in kitchens and factories, nurture children and adorn homes, sweep streets or harvest crops, type in offices or manage them.[41]

Through current efforts by feminists in the United States, much of what has been previously adjudged to be mundane is now re-appraised and viewed as unique. The black women in the primary prose texts are seen to be contributing in their own way to building the American nation even though in the past their positive contributions appeared to have been largely ignored or stifled by the dominant white and male - inclined society. Few in number they may be, their efforts are by no means meagre. As black feminist critics opine, African-American women have been instrumental to much of the fundamental changes in their society.

Feminist criticism has an avowed goal of challenging among other things:

> the fundamental theoretical assumptions of literary history and criticism by demanding a radical rethinking and revisioning of the conceptual grounds of literary study that have been based almost entirely on male literary experiences.[42]

But, a detailed analysis of feminist inquiry reveals that the issues dealt with under such exercises by women-centred scholars and critics apparently transcend the academic establishment to include practical socio-economic and political matters. For, when black feminists argue that virtually every facet of human endeavour in the American society which has been touched by black women, is relevant to the assessment of their contributions to the society - be it ordinary or extra-ordinary, then it is clear that the issue goes beyond the realms of academic discourse. However, recent trends in feminist studies have revealed that African-American women and indeed, men are more at home with womanism as a positive and sustaining alternative to core western feminism. This is because Womanist Inquiry tends to cater more to the special needs of black people. In this regard, gender is used to strengthen and unite instead of to weaken and divide. From their initial perceived heritage as bearers of a 'geometric oppression' or a 'triple heritage' African-American females have progressed to the point where they now assert with glee that, "black women writers are among the most exciting writers on the contemporary American literary scene."[43] Black females in the primary texts are therefore viewed as representatives who charted the course for succeeding generations of African-American women. They are perceived as trailblazers since they set the pace for other black females to follow.

The lapses so far established in their depictions have sensitised writers on both sides of the gender debate to be more objective in their creativity. Critics too, owing to emerging evidences, are increasingly avoiding inapplicable and subjective assessments of writings of previous dispensations. The picture that seems to be emerging and which appears to be taking a middle-of-the- road-course benefits both genders in the African-American community - a key concern in both the Walker's and Hudson-Weems' womanist orientations.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine efforts by African-American women in representative literary texts to derive fulfilment for themselves in the United States. The study was informed by the desire to appraise the applicability or otherwise of critical remarks on literary works of African-American male writers made by feminists. The criticisms revolved around what these pro-female analysts considered to be flawed portrayals of black women by the male writers, their inability to reflect the unique sensibilities of black females and in some instances, complete exclusion of such women and their experience from these male-authored texts. The study therefore explored the male-ordered works in view of the criticisms. In the process, various African-American female characters were found questing for fulfilment and uplift in different endeavours in their society. Some of the quests preoccupations of the women included intellectual uplift, economic emancipation, political relevance, social equality and cultural expression.

It was intended that as the study assessed African-American women in the male-authored texts vying relentlessly to meet certain compelling yearnings and aspirations, the feminist concerns would be validated, debunked or seen in a fresh perspective in the light of new evidence emerging from the texts. It is a long established fact that, in a literary work, some unstated - and sometimes unexpected - factors exert influence on a critic's assessment of issues. This

does not imply that feminists, in their appraisal of the black male writings, resorted to hidden and extra-literary intentions to achieve their aims.

Indeed, contrary to the view that feminist readings of works of black males is essentially destructive, a close study points to other interpretations. This is also not to suggest that feminist readings of such texts are devoid of mischief and the resort to hidden, extra-literary and unstated goals. Feminist interpretations of texts is simply politics, and in politics the end justifies the means. For feminists here, since the end thereof is female-empowerment, the apparatus and method of wresting such power - arguably from the men - may not be clearly spelt out for strategic reasons.

However, based on an application of feminist criticisms to literary works by African-American male writers, it is apparent that, rather than just destroying achievements already recorded by these male writers, the criticisms appear aimed at exposing and subverting negative creative efforts by the authors. Really, in view of the fact that both the writings by black males and the criticisms by feminists have their strengths and weaknesses, creative efforts by African-Americans should be to promote the welfare of all members. This is where the quest for fulfilment by black women in America - a central issue in this literary analysis, should be geared towards. The womanist approach as enunciated by Alice Walker and Clenora Hudson-Weems was found suitable for the analysis since unlike core western feminism, it promises to cater to the

fundamental needs of members of the black community. It became very clear in the course of this essay that as feminists criticised the portrayals of African-American women in the black male-authored works, they were striving to wrest more opportunities and rights for women in a society regarded as male-dominated. Such persistent criticisms and quests they believe, would lead to an egalitarian and better society for all; a society where women would finally be placed beside men in the mainstream of affairs.

As we encounter the black women in their daily struggles and engagements, we realise that some of them are quite credible human beings with verifiable human pursuits or quests. We also become aware that the black females who were perceived to be portrayed negatively, were not deliberately pencilled out for such unwholesome depictions by the black male writers. Indeed, even a cursory look at some novels by renowned African-American women writers such as Morrison and Walker reveal a tendency by these writers to be more understanding, conversant and sympathetic with issues pertaining to their peculiar gender.

However, since there is an awareness that the criticism of writings by African-American males is meant to be correctional in spite of some of its negative inclinations, feminist debates in this regard, actually help to popularise the texts the critics are appraising. It is interesting in this regard to observe that, the portrayals of quests by black females for fulfilment in their American

society began with an assessment of the work of black male writers such as those central to this study. The quest by the women has persisted and eventually embraced the feminist debates of literary texts by African-American male writers. In the final analysis, the chief aim of these criticisms by women-centred scholars and analysts seems to be to foster a better and balanced society inclusive of all its members. Indeed, the womanist orientation has this goal as its central objective or concern. It is therefore the study's considered opinion that male and female African-Americans should work towards ensuring greater commonality and camaraderie among themselves. For example, a pooling of vital resources by black Americans in joint, mutually beneficial endeavours would surely enable them to attain similar levels of excellence and sophistication as their white neighbours.

While it is generally recognised that there are useful points in the primary texts by black male writers - most of which were written and published under different milieu and dispensations with somewhat varying preoccupations from those exhibited by critics today, there are also useful lessons to be drawn from the feminist criticism of works of early black male writers who tended to dominate the African-American literary scene for much of the twentieth century. In this regard, and with the intensity of the issue, there is a clear recognition that the black feminist endeavour seeks to right the perceived wrongs which were arguably committed by early black male writers - who in turn, charted the course for the African-American literary tradition in the

United States. The feminists seek to redefine that tradition in a manner which they hope, would be acceptable to all members in the black community.

However, feminists are part of the larger society and where they end up pulling further apart the cord - no matter how tenacious this may be - that holds that society together, then their critical comments would have achieved an end beneficial to no one. Thus, negative feminist commentary should be discouraged and discarded. The same should be done to unwholesome creative efforts by the male writers.

While black feminist writers argue that they positively reflect the centrality of relationships between females and males - but more importantly, between females and females - as exemplified in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, it is also amply evident that these women writers portray males as extremely awful in the sense that they attribute all major upheavals and problems in the society to men, especially those that negatively affect women.

Equally useful in this regard, is the observation by some black male critics and writers that some prominent African-American male writers such as Langston Hughes exclusively focused their literary explorations on black women to the neglect of black men. Even renowned feminist critics such as Hernton accept that Hughes and a few other black male writers dwelt almost entirely on the

experiences of African-American women in their creative or artistic engagements.

These critics point to both the prose and poetic works of Hughes and his category of black male writers. Hernton for example, states that:

> The poet Sarah Webster Fabio once said that Hughes "was for fifty years the spiritual leader of the Black race" ... the most important influence in Hughes's life and one of the most persistent features found in his work (is)* the sensibilities and presence of black women. ...far from being an aberrancy, Langston Hughes's feminist consciousness was an intrinsic part of his rearing and lifelong dedication to his heritage and his people.[1]

The black male critics refer specifically to Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* (1930) which they argue portrayed black females predominantly and positively, showing their domineering and overwhelming presence in the lives of other African-Americans; that even though Sandy is a youthful black male and protagonist in the novel, he is completely overwhelmed and dominated by black women.

James Baldwin who is vehemently repudiated by feminist critics such as Michele Wallace in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Super Woman*[2]

**Brackets are mine.*

is praised by other feminists for being "the only superstar black male novelist who rather persistently portrays black women as persons largely in their own right.[3]

From these assessments, it is discernible that the feminist view of some of the male writers and their works is characterised by inconsistencies and disagreements. While Wallace adjudges Baldwin for instance, to be a 'black Macho' exponent - i.e. to her, Baldwin is just another advocate of the male domination of females, Hernton views him as a black male writer that portrays black women positively and objectively. It thus becomes incontrovertible as we observe the African-American women in the primary texts written by the male writers questing after lofty endeavours and credible aspirations - which ultimately nurse the potential to propel them to the American mainstream society that the writers intended well, but may not have been foresighted enough to fully anticipate future challenges to their creativity like the current intensive and extensive criticisms of their works by feminists. Black females portrayed in the male-authored texts compare favourably with similar characters in other related major literary works anywhere. Aunt Hager Williams (*Hughes 1930*) and Mrs. Thomas (*Wright 1940*) can be likened to African-American mothers and grand-mothers in texts by other male and female writers in the black community in the United States. Like black females in other works, these women nurse and guide their offspring while questing for a positive and rewarding future for them or they complement their men as

integral partners in the family and community. Clearly these two African-American women recall black females such as Lena Younger in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (a fictional play produced and initially staged in 1959), Iola Leroy in Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* and to some extent, Celie in Alice Walker's The *Color Purple* or Pilate in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*.

While some of the females appear gifted with multiple talents, others are endowed with a few qualities and are therefore versatile in only those areas. However, all the African-American women in both the black male - authored and non male - authored works tend to accept that as women and mothers, they owe their offspring the duty to ensure a proper upbringing to enable them face challenges in their world and an awareness to make right choices which in turn, would propel them to greater progress and contentment.

In her essay, "Gloria Naylor's Geography: Community, Class, and Partriarchy in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*, Barbara Christian (*Gates, Jr.,ed. 1990*) argues that:

> Because of their origins and history, African-American women could lay claim to a viable tradition in which they had been strong central persons in their families and communities, not solely because of their relationship to men, but because they themselves had bonded together to ensure survival of their children, their communities, the race.[4]

Christian recalls that in the past, "Afro-American women were denigrated both in black and white society. The African-American mother was punished and maligned for being too strong, too central in her family, for being a 'matriarch' ..."[5] The American society which was characterised by slavery and racism, issues which lie behind many of these manifestations and assessments by feminists, is to blame largely for the lapses, rather than only the black male writers who set out, it appears, to, as much as possible, portray African-Americans and make the American society aware of their presence and contributions to the growth of the society at large. As a result of writings by these early black male authors, some critical social injustices in the American society such as slavery and racial segregation were rooted out or reduced considerably. This was owing largely to the awareness brought to bear on the American and international policy makers and implementers through their writings. Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945) were particularly relevant in this area. Keneth Kinnamon (*1972*) credits Wright with this achievement. In *The Emergence of Richard Wright: A Study in Literature and Society,* Kinnamon argues regarding *Native Son* and Wright that:

> Part of Wright's intention was to make a strong impact on American public opinion about the racial question.
>
> The impact of the novel was undeniably great, but at times in ways different from, or contrary to, those Wright intended ....
>
> *Native Son* was launched with a chorus of critical praise. In her introduction to the novel Dorothy Canfield Fisher compared Wright to Dostoevsky, a comparison frequently made thereafter, and praised

> his "genuine literary skill." Henry Seidel Canby introduced it enthusiastically to the Book-of-the-Month Club, and Edward Weeks judged it "a performance of great talent – powerful, disturbing, unquestionably authentic."...
>
> Also familiar with Wright's first book, Lewis Gannet mentioned Steinbeck again and called *Native Son* " a deeply compassionate and understanding novel" as well as " a supershocker."[6]

In another assessment of *Native son*, Dorothy Canfield Fisher said: "It is not surprising that this novel plumbs blacker depths of human experience than American Literature has yet had."[7]

Therefore, as black females in the male-rendered literary texts quest for self-actualization in their communities, it is obvious that these women share the traits, sensibilities and aspirations of valid African-American women anywhere. This is not denying the possibility that the period in which they were reflected may have influenced their portrayals and made them to appear different somewhat from present day black women. It is also beyond doubt that these women are credible beings with credible and realistic pursuits.

According to John Peck and Martin Coyle (*1993*):

> Art is sometimes defined as the attempt to bring order out of chaos, but in the writings of the second half of the twentieth century it is often order itself that is the problem in the way it is seen to construct and constrict people.[8]

If black feminists desire to challenge the prevailing order with a view to subverting it to their advantage, then they had better realise the multiple

nature of their problem for, the real threat to their attempt to establish what they perceive to be equality with males is not necessarily black men, but the existing dispensation which is not controlled really by black men but by forces which tend to be manipulated by the dominant white, mainstream establishment in the United States.

Peck and Coyle further argue that feminist writings such as those by Walker and Morrison "foreground issues previously skirted over by literary texts," and:

> ...indicate the prominence and importance of women writers in the twentieth century. But in addition, they are part of a radical questioning in the late twentieth century of the way in which traditional order, especially white male order, has been constructed at the expense of ethnic groups, women, the poor, indeed any one who did not fit really into the British or American middle classes. What we see happening in post-colonial literature is the challenge to that old order and an exposure of its values. In place of that old order, we can see, comes a new set of values as writers seek to articulate an alternative and more just sense of things.[9]

If black feminist writings essentially sought to question the prevailing white domination of issues in the United States, their energy would have been channelled in the proper direction and their male counterparts would have actively corroborated their efforts. This is the prevailing view in Hudson-Weems' Africana Womanism ideology. But where their writings threaten to further divide and truncate the African-American community, then such preoccupations are suspect and unhealthy for the black race as a whole.

Sherley Anne Williams is of the opinion that the black female's quest for fulfilment in the American society should not be to engage black men in a senseless war of attrition through the feminist movement in a futile attempt to destroy them so as to inherit their positions of power, it should be more tellingly seen in terms of "community and dialogue." She further reasons that:

> Of course we must keep talking to and about ourselves, but literature, as Chinweizu and Walker remind us, is about community and dialogue; theories or ways of reading ought actively to promote the enlargement of both.[10]

In other words, black men and women should actively complement each other in their quest for fulfilment in various endeavours in the society for the benefit of all members in the black community.

From the foregoing analysis, it is very obvious that a middle course which would acknowledge both the strengths and lapses in the literary creativity of African-American male authors and the critical endeavours of feminists, with the long term objective of fostering compromise and bringing about greater understanding and rapport between the two contending genders as suggested by womanists, is active desired. This in turn should enable both sides in the gender-divide to begin to pool their resources and potentials together to achieve a unified front to confront other more immediate and pressing problems in their American society. That would be a healthy development for the entire African-American literary heritage - and by extension, the black community in the United States.

ENDNOTES

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