Introduction

Black feminism vocalizes black women's demand for empowerment and social justice. A simple description of black feminism is that it is a struggle by black women against race, class, and gender oppression. Black women have been bearing both physical and psychological torments from Whites from the beginning of slavery and even after the abolition of slavery, this torment goes on through memory and trauma. But slavery and racism is not the only suffering they experience because black women are also oppressed by black men. Since black women are the victims of race and gender, they need to protest to make their needs heard because neither the whites nor black men will give them anything on the platter. They realise the necessity of uniting themselves even during slavery but from the mid 20th century they formally organised themselves and gave birth to black feminism. Black feminism weaves together the concepts of race and gender and challenges those narratives that subjugate black women from every perspectives. It challenges the social and historical definition of 'black woman' that presents them as limited in scope. The black women activists demand equality and removal of racism in American society which is still a dream for many blacks.

Black feminism started with the desire to free black women from racial trauma and to bring equality in society. Black feminists like bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Christian, Barbara Smith and Combahee River Collective started raising their voice and writing against every kind of inequality black women were facing. Their works deal with various issues of race and gender, namely black women's position in society, racism and sexual assault, discrimination in wage on the basis of their race and gender, their contribution at home in the face of absentee or irresponsible spouses, negative stereotypes of black women, relative absence of black female voices in literature, institutions and establishments. bell hook writes, "there is a direct and

abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalize via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all black people" (3).

Towards the end of 20th century, black feminists have started focusing on black lesbians. Where black women's conventional way of life is criticised by the mainstream culture their lesbianism is seen as a crime. The sexist society sees women's companionship as a physical desire but seldom as a love between two people. An important contribution of black lesbianism is the idea of sisterhood which permeates any discussion of black women community building. Black lesbians critique the binary identity posited by patriarchy. They see the oppression in heterosexuality suggesting itself as the only normal and finding any other form of identity as an aberrance. Black lesbians break this view by their very presence and suggest the heterogeneity of black women. Barbara Smith presents a complex discussion of lesbianism, as discussed by Madhu Dubey, in her reading of Toni Morrison's *Sula* and she writes that *Sula* "works as a lesbian novel not only because of the passionate friendship between Sula and Nel but because of Morrison's consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual institutions of male-female relationships, marriage, and the family" (55). Her views have a counterpart in the essay by Radicaesbians "The Woman- Identified Woman" which defines lesbians in this manner:

> What is a lesbian? A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion". She is the woman who, often beginning at an extremely early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be amore complete and freer human being than her society-perhaps then, but certainly later-cares to allow her. These needs and actions, over a period of years, bring her into painful conflict with people, situations, the accepted

> ways of thinking, feeling and behaving, until she is in a state of continual war with everything around her, and usually with herself. She may not be fully conscious of the political implications of what for her began as personal necessity, but on some level she has not been able to accept the limitations and oppression laid on her by the most basic role of her society-the female role. (1)

Smith's canonical essay "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism" holds in it major ideas about black feminism, especially the need for black feminist reading of black women's works. Smith begins by confessing that in writing about black women's writing from a feminist perspective, she is doing "something dangerous" (3). This is so because productive and critical discussions of black women's writing has been not done by "white male critics … Not by Black male critics. Not by white women critics who think of themselves as feminists" (3). Smith goes on to include the disparaging remarks white critics address to black women's writing and the sexism black men show in analysing black women's writing. She records how Morrison's *Sula* is seen as unimportant and a waste of Morrison's talent because Morrison is writing about black women. She cites Sara Blackburn's racist statement:

> Toni Morrison is far too talented to remain only a marvelous recorder of the black side of provincial American life. If she is to maintain the large and serious audience she deserves, she is going to have to address a riskier contemporary reality than this beautiful but nevertheless distanced novel. And if she does this, it seems to me that she might easily transcend that early and unintentionally limiting classification "black woman writer" and take her place among the most serious, important and talented American novelists now working. (6)

Using this quote, Smith makes this point that white women are not interested in black women's lives, their joys and sorrows. Similar disregard for black women's experience is seen in black male views about black women's writing. For example, the noted black writer Ismael Reed discusses black women's work in a sexist manner by terming it as the current fashion which marginalises black man's literature which is more literary and more important. In a recent interview the notoriously misogynist writer Ishmael Reed comments, which also Smith mentions in her same essay, in this way upon the low sales of his newest novel: "May be if I was one of those young female Afro-American writers that are so hot now, I'd sell more. You know, fill my books with ghetto women who can do no wrong.... But come on, I think I could have sold 8000 copies by myself" (8). These examples of white women and black man's prejudice to black female voice show how white racism's denigration of black women as objects and never subjects, and black man's suppression of black women is also present in literary culture; it is present in the literary economy of publication, distribution, criticism and canonisation. This justifies the view that black women need a strong black feminism and dedicated black women critics to help black women's literature emerge. Black women need foremothers and path bearers who can give them frameworks for theoretical and textual writing and analysis; these exemplars can also give them the frameworks to discuss important questions: who is a black woman? How does she connect with other women, black and white? What is her relationship to black men, white men, patriarchy and capitalism? In other words, what black women writers explore in their writings is the emergence, growth and flourishing of black women's agency in relation to race, gender, class, and sexuality.

Maria Stewart and Sojourn Truth are among black foremothers. In her popular speech as qouted by Collins, "Ain't I a woman" Truth said, "ain't I a woman? I could work as much and

eat as much a man- when I could get it and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have born thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?" (14). Truth encapsulates black women's objectification and brutal treatment during slavery. As a black feminist foremother, she demands her right to voice and asks the racist patriarchal white society to see black women like her as a person and a woman, no less than a white woman. The black women's experience of racism and sexism compel them to prove their womanhood and challenge the social context. Maria Stewart remain a motivating and encouraging figure for black women to fight for their rights and not to be ignorant of their rights. She says, "turn your attention to knowledge and improvement; for knowledge is power" (14). These two women experienced slavery, racism and sexism, but they created a tradition of protest and self-reliance for the next generation of black women. They started the fight which was later continued by 20th century black women activist, and they are still remembered as pioneers or foremothers of Black feminism.

Slavery has formed the politics, culture, economy of America. From 17th century, the practice of slavery was going on till the middle of 19th century. The slaves were used as unpaid labour in tobacco, rice, sugar, cotton plantations and white slave owners used to exploit them cruelly. Slavery creates a history which has given birth to several concerns in writings. One concern is the differential experience of slavery for black men and women. Blacks were made into slaves and irrespective of gender they bore lashes. Back women were made to work like the men. When white women were enjoying all kind of comforts in the plantation as wives of white men, the women slaves were whipped, raped and denied their motherhood in the same plantation. They were exploited cruelly and even had to give birth to the master's babies who were then often sold to other plantation owners.Venetria K. Patton writes, "motherhood, which is

described as the epitome of femininity, is not about women's desires, but the patriarchy's. Motherhood is not defined by women, but created by men's fictions" (125). Various slave narratives and neo-slave narratives have portrayed these pictures which ultimately are evidence of slave history.

Though the black women formally organized themselves in 20th century, during slavery they protested in their own way. The story of Margaret Garner, later made into Morrison's *Beloved* is one of them where she kills her baby girl to save her from slavery. Many slave women either killed themselves or killed their oppressors, which Dessa did in *Dessa Rose.* These examples from history reveal that black women's were never passive victims.

Though the black women encountered the white women as the mistress and hence an oppressor living with the white man. White women too at first ignored black women's oppression. White women's organisation like 'National Organization for Women' (1966) which consists of five hundred chapters and which aimed at equal status of man and woman did not write anything particularly on black women. Evelyn Reed's *The Myth of Women's Inferiority* (1954) also only talks about white woman. During second wave feminism, white women tried to change this perspective. Now white women tried to build alliance with black women against the white man who they saw as their subjugators. Aldridge writes in her essay "African American Women Since the Second World War: Perspectives on Gender and Race":

> When white women were into consciousness-raising sessions, trying to come to grips with who they were apart from their husbands and children, black women were seeking ways to address unemployment and underemployment among black people in general and black women in particular. When white women were trying

> to find time to write or do research, black women were searching for organizations and groups that would address the quality of education their children were receiving. (396)

White women started their fight to be equal with man and more particularly for the right to vote. Whereas black women started fighting to survive like human being. They could not think for the right to vote until they earn enough to have a peaceful life for themselves and for their children. White women were also dominated but the comfort and respect they enjoyed was never known to the black women. They ate well, lived well, wore well and never thought about the exploitation of black women. Their lives can never be similar with the black. It was necessary for the black women to organise themselves for their own rights. As Combahee River … suggests that white feminism cannot address the concerns of black women since, "white feminists often don't view Black men as men but as fellow victims" (10).

That it is difficult for white feminists to give primacy to black female voice is present in black women's writing such as *Zami*. Audre Lorde, a black lesbian feminist experienced herself such a behavior from white women, and she depicts it in her autobiography *Zami*. Lorde writes, "What could she have seen in my Black face that was worth holding onto such horror?" (5). White feminism could not become a sister movement to black feminism more so because it created a binary between man and woman. Black women, who were often abused by their men, had inherited a fractured society due to slavery. They did not have the luxury of hating their men as a form of protest. They instead wanted to build a community along with their men—a desire which is evident in Alice Walker's term, as discussed by Aldridge, 'womanism' where heterogeneity of black women is respected because black women come in all shades "lavender" and "purple" and in the community of black women, black men are also included. She defines

"womanist" in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*: a "womanist" is one who is "committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people" (401). **A**lice Walker coins the term 'womanism' in 1970 to present a historical idea of black feminism that includes all women of color and marginalised women of the society. She compares feminism to lavender and womanism to purple. She suggests that womanism is a form of feminism that foregrounds black women as the subject of the gender discourse.

By suggesting the need and feasibility of a black women's community made of like-minded women who do not seek patriarchal approval or compete amongst themselves for male attention, Walker brings out the idea of black sisterhood which becomes important in Black feminism. Other black women who also discuss the possibility of black sisterhood are Mary Anne Weathers, Pauli Murray, Michele Wallace and Audre Lorde. Weathers' essay "An Argument for Black Women's Liberation as a Revolutionary Force" written in 1969 is critical of black sexist demand that racial emancipation is more important that gender equality. She focuses on black mothers and she is critical of racism, sexism and economic discrimination meted out to black women. She asks black women to not give up their fight against black sexism in the name of racial solidarity and that they should cooperate with each other and generate an activism. Pauli Murray in "The Liberation of Black Women" published 1970 suggests that middle class black women and middle class white women share similar values and can come together to fight patriarchy. She argues that women as a group connect with each other naturally but they are separated from each other by artificial hierarchy imposed by race and class. Michelle Wallace is the radical voice who in the essay "Anger in Isolation" sees women divided from each other and distrustful of each other because of their need to please men. Audre Lorde following the black feminist precept that "personal is political" suggests in the essay, as mentioned in Cheryl R.

Hopson's essay, "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger" that her identity as black and lesbian makes her a "sister outsider" (264). Walker's womanism with its focus on woman centric relationship or black sisterhood becomes the most viable answer to this desire for a black female self oriented politics and community building.

These discussions on the need for black sisterhood proves that black women realise that simply racial equality will not give them gender equality. Before black women started writing about black women in slavery and after, black male writers never included black women's problems in their writing. So black women were silenced even in black man's literature. In white American writings, black women are either absent or when they are there, they are either characterized as a nanny or servant of the house. Combahee River Collective hence suggests that it is important to consider the experiences of black women through the framework of race, class and gender, a view that Barbara Smith agrees with when she says in the same essay, "A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity" (7).

Toni Morrison focuses on the politics of representation that is the product of this race, class and gender oppression. She indicates white American literature's absenting of black experience through the phrase "nineteenth century flight from blackness" in her essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature" discussed in Levine's "Reading Slavery"(384). She elaborates her discussion of this flight and the racist assumptions behind it in her literary criticsm, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination.* There she says that she is critical as a black woman writer and reader of the assumption that "the traditional canonical literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by

the four hundred year old presence of, first, Africans and then the African Americans in the United States" (5). She says that there seems to be "a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that because, American Literature has been the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those … are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States" (5). Barbara Smith shows the effects of this denial on black women's writing. She echoes Morrison and says in the same essay that "Black women's existence, experience, and culture and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these are in the "real world" of white and/or male consciousness beneath consideration, invisible, unknown" (3). The effect of this "invisibility" on black women writers like Smith is that "it is so difficult for [them] to know where to start. It seems overwhelming to break such a massive silence" (3).

Black women confront the history of slavery from whence their oppression started. This history provide black women with another important concern—the slave past. With the Civil War, slavery was gone, but race became a part of American life. Blacks were freed from physical torture but they experienced a new trauma. As Ron Eyerman says in *Cultural Trauma* "the 'trauma' in question is slavery, not as institution or even experience, but as collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people" (1). The issue of race that led to slavery never comes to an end for blacks in white dominated America. Black writing is preoccupied with race, which is formative to black identity, and to understand the operation of race as a social discourse and a power discourse, they looked to black experience in slavery.

Black women writing emerged as early as mid 19th century as a response to these concerns—-the need for black female articulation of their experiences, desire for literary identity, and use of literature to support the abolition of slavery. It adopted various issues related to both

black women of America. To these issues, contemporary black women writers added additional ones—relationship between white and black women, idea of being mixed race, exploring experiences of black working class women, lesbian black sexuality, black male-female relationship, black heterogeneity and building of an equitable community, as also the politics of writing race and gender in a nation hostile to these ideas. While 19th century writers like Harriet Jacob, Elizabeth Keckley, Sarah Jane Woodson articulate what they saw happening to black women in slavery, the 20th century writers like Alice Walker, Morrison and William's articulate the memory of slavery which is formative for black identity-male and female. The difference between the women of two centuries is that one is presenting contemporary situation and another is re-writing it as the past and connecting that past to present day subjugation of black women.

Black feminism came into being during the 60s and early 70s and was contemporary to the Civil Rights and Second Wave feminism. While Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Art movements were dominated by black men, the Second Wave feminism was dominated by white women, leaving black women little opportunity to voice their aspirations. Black feminists started organizing themselves with an object to free women from all kind of boundaries and black women authors searched for narrative forms through which they could express their search for identity. Black feminism with its demand for black women's voice remains integral to understanding black women's writing. As Barbara Smith says, "I feel that the politics of feminism have a direct relationship to the state of Black women's literature. A viable, autonomous Black feminist movement in this country would open up the space needed for the exploration of Black women's lives and the creation of consciously Black woman-identified art" (4). She provides a black feminist methodology for the discussion of black women's writing:

> … I will outline some of the principles that I think a Black feminist critic could use. Beginning with a primary commitment to exploring bow both sexual and racial politics and Black and female identity are inextricable elements in Black women's writings, she would also work from the assumption that Black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition. … thematically, stylistically, aesthetically, and conceptually Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social, and economic experience they have been obliged to share … The use of Black women's language and cultural experience in books by Black women about Black women results in a miraculously rich coalescing of form and content and also takes their writing far beyond the confines of white/male literary structures. The Black feminist critic would find innumerable commonalities in works by Black women. (10-11)

The chapters in this study looks as at three black women's novels ask if they give primacy to "creation of consciously Black woman-identified art". This means looking at black feminists issues of racism, sexism and sexual agency through specific narrative forms which have their roots in black slavery. The three writers, Shirley Anne Williams, Audre Lorde and Toni Morrison, have made use of three different forms respectively—neo-slave narrative in *Dessa Rose*, black autobiographical form in *Zami* and black postmodernism in *Song of Solomon*.

Black feminism is careful in its choice of literary forms, which it sees as also participating in politics of representation. The female slave narratives are important records of slavery and they later become a tradition that black feminist look up to. They present the sufferings of black men and women from a black female perspective. For example, black women

during slavery articulated their experience of physical and sexual exploitation, fragmentation of family and deprivation of all human rights through the slave narrative. The black feminists' search for literary frameworks led them to the conventions of slave narratives and generated the narrative form of the neo-slave narrative. In 20th century the black woman's neo-slave narrative suggests the need to look back to understand the slave past and seek answers to difficult questions of racial cooperation, black man-woman relationship, and black identity. Valerie Smith brings in how Bernard W. Bell first utilises the term neo-slave narratives and describes them as "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (168). Ashraf H.R Rushdy defines the neo-slave narrative thusly, "It is not completely a new genre but logical continuity of slave narrative" (5). The slave narrative gives account of the sorrowful condition of the slaves and makes the case for freedom from slavery but the neo-slave narrative asks us to remember the slave past full of oppression and demands the right of the blacks more explicitly from white America as the central character Dessa does in the neo-slave narrative *Dessa Rose.*

Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* was written in 1986. During that late 20th century many other black women writers were also recording the history and memory of slavery but Williams' novel was exceptionally different. *Dessa Rose* is an imaginary encounter of two strong women who were involved in two actual accidents. In 1829, in Kentucky a pregnant black woman was sentenced to death for helping to lead an uprising of a group of slaves headed to the market for sale. In 1830 North Carolina, a white woman living on an isolated farm was reported to have given haven to the runaway slaves.

Where others were busy in depicting the wretched plight of black women, Williams shows how a black and a white woman can fight together for racial and gender equality despite having different racial experiences. In addition to this she focuses on the politics of writing and

interrogates the biased representation of black experience such as slavery in white narratives, shedding light on the need for black women to narrate their communal history of slavery. She shows friendship between a black slave and a white female plantation owner. Mary Kemp Davis discusses *Dessa Rose* as a story from slavery to freedom which also analyses the limitations that the blacks face during slavery (547). On the other hand Venetria K. Patton asks us to consider Williams' portraying Dessa's motherhood since black woman's motherhood was exploited by their white masters (121). Thus the novel is found as radical one by these black feminist critics which makes it an important one for any black feminist study.

Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* looks back to an incident of 1829 from 1987 but frames it from a new perspective using neo-slave narrative form. This study suggests that while the slave narrative engaged with the necessity of friendship between black and white woman to fight against male oppression, *Dessa Rose* presents the comradeship between both groups of women, which did not come about fully either in slavery or during the Civil Rights and the Second Wave feminism. Williams engages with the thorny issue of representation brought to fore by black women writers like Barbara Smith and asks: Who should narrate the black past? What happens when the story of slavery is narrated by white men? In *Dessa Rose*, the character Nehemiah reveals the danger in relying on white man's perspective about blacks. The white man Nehemiah wants to write a book on Dessa's life but finds her descriptions of racial oppression difficult to believe. He tries to impose his perspective on the story, distorting her narrative. Williams shows the social relevance of contemporary black women writing about slavery through the neo-slave narrative form and explore how this writing promotes black female identity.

Signifcantly, if Williams wants black women to tell their own stories, Audre Lorde's *Zami* does exactly that. Through it Lorde narratives her identity as a black lesbian and encourages black women of America to fight against racial bias and heteronormativity. She presents that same sex desire is not only physical desire; it is desire for a company which is not dominating and exploitative; it is a desire for a secure place; it is desire for equality. The Radical Lesbians emphasise the politics of language and suggest that patriarchy uses language for oppression. They believe that using the term 'lesbian' in itself is a heteronormative strategy to identify and mark those women who dare to protest its tyranny. The sexist society can never accept women's bonding because they see it as neglecting the presence of men in their lives.

Lorde uses the black female autobiography which black women have used to profess their identity and to take ownership of their bodies. The black autobiography derives primarily from female slave narratives which talk about the ownership of the black female self. A case in point is the slave narrative—Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Lifeof a Slave Girl*. Harriet Jacobs, presenting herself as Linda Brent, claims her right on her body. Her white master Dr. Flint sexually abuses her and to protect herself, Linda chooses to be with another White man Mr. Sands, disregarding in the process the conventions of chastity imposed on her by white society that she has to obey if she wants to be considered a woman. Gabrielle Foreman in her work "Manifest in Signs: the Politics of Sex and Representation in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" observes that Jacobs "triumphed over Dr. Flint, not only in her material escape, but in her sexual one" (77). In that sense, Jacobs takes ownership of her body and does what Audre Lorde seeks to do herself—take possession of her black body and black lesbian sexuality from racist and patriarchal culture. As Lorde states, mentioned in Linda Garber's book, "If we don't name ourselves, we are nothing,…as a Black woman I have to deal with identity or I don't exist at all. I

can't depend on the world to name me kindly, because it never will. . . . So either I'm going to be defined by myself or not at all. In that sense it becomes a survival situation" (100).

The importance of Lorde's work as a feminist one is evident on the tribute paid by black women to her. The enormous impact her work has on other black women and lesbians make clear the relevance of Barabra Smith's say in the essay as mentioned earlier: "The Black feminist critic [and writer] would be constantly aware of the political implications of her work and would assert the connections between it and the political situation of all Black women" (9). Denise L. Fitzer in her essay "Audre Lorde's Expansive Influence on Black Lesbians: Jewelle Gomez, Cheryl Clarke, and Kate Rushin" worships Audre Lorde as the mother of black lesbians who are struggling for a respectful place in society. Carole Boyce Davies' *Black Women, Writing and Identity* discusses *Zami* as 'a rejection of the authoritarian family, the cultivation of female friendships and the assertion of independence' (86). In the book *Third Women and the Politics of Feminism* Barbara Smith praises Audre Lorde's use of autobiographical form. Lorde's choice of form that situates the black lesbian 'I'. It is a unique work which can inspire other creative writings about black lesbianism, more so because Lorde's depiction clarifies the relation among women who are known as 'lesbian'. She suggests that lesbianism can mean sisterhood also. The women who are connected to Lorde enjoy sisterhood with each other. This relationship is never confined within two people or within the same race. Their joy in each other becomes an inspiration for them to survive and live.

The chapter on Lorde reveals that the black autobiography presents itself as different than the white autobiography in its aims. The white autobiography, beginning with St. Augustine, sees life writing as redemption of soul through confession. But Audre Lorde's autobiography does not follow this concept; rather it challenges this need for confession and turns the discovery

of self through narration of self as a celebration of self. Her *Zami* is never a confession but self-assertion in a racist and sexist society; her lesbian autobiography emphasises not only same sex desire but sisterhood among women irrespective of color.

Audre Lorde in her *Zami* shows the logical continuation of slave narrative since she is also talking about racism, sexism and she is also in a way trying to negotiate with white man's discourse of black women's sexuality, here lesbianism. *Zami* engages in myth making of a black lesbian self. It can be said that every autobiography is a way of myth making because the autobiography is creating a self through writing. Audre Lorde is rewriting the concept of black lesbian sexuality as a 'dyke' or 'brownie' and creating a biomythography, presenting the black lesbian self as beautiful. In the words of Caren Kaplan, biomythography is an outlaw genre; it "requires a recognition of layers of meaning, layers of histories, layers of reading and rereading through webs of power charged codes" (212). Lorde has created the same layers of meaning by using the title *Zami* in her autobiography. The term 'zami' suggests despicable. Davies writes in *Encyclopedia of African Diaspora*, "the integration of ethnic and sexual identities is behind the author's positive appropriation of the Carribean creole word 'zami' for herself … this term is typically a derogatory naming of lesbians, derived from 'les amies' French for friends" (999). Lorde recognises same as Radical Lesbians how language can be oppressive and she uses language to celebrate the black lesbian identity. She has totally changed the meaning of 'zami' in her autobiography affirming her sexuality as positive and enabling; her self-writing makes her admirable not despicable. She becomes an example for other black lesbian who now pay tribute to her work and courage. Using the autobiographical form, the root of which is slave narrative, Lorde attempts to create a space not only for herself but for all the socially marginalised women.

In comparison to other two novels, *Dessa Rose* and *Zami*, which lend themselves to feminist reading readily on account of having female protagonist, Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is different. Here she has placed Milkman as the central figure of the novel and other important female characters, despite of their ability, are relegated to a background. The novel centralises Milkman's search for communal root with other vibrant issues like the subordination of Milkman's mother and his two sisters who are the victims of sexism and patriarchy. The novel presents the bonding among women, through the Milkman's paternal aunt Pilate's family, where male figures are absent. The novel touches upon the impact of racism on the black self through the device of the black man's search for the American Dream or material advancement equal to white and through portraying black organisations like 'Seven Days' that want to take revenge against the white. The novel touches upon the supremacy of man in a patriarchal culture. The female character Pilate has more knowledge about their family and community but Milkman, being a man, gets the opportunity to learn that they belong to a community which literally knows how to fly. At the end Pilate dies, making Milkman the sole figure to know about their community.

Through the story of the Flying Africans, oral narratives that tell about black slaves escaping from their masters as literally flying to their homelands, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* engages with the connection between present and the past on the thematic level, which is also of concern to neo-slave narratives. It is a postmodern novel that traces black male and female identity to the slave past and meditates on the connection between black people's past resistance and their present struggle to create an identity. Morrison feels the necessity of bringing back the old black folk and culture, and asks postmodern questions: Can we do without our communal pasts? How much of it do we need and in what form? This desire to have a past and a

deep scepticism towards its applicability in contemporary context gives a postmodern flavour to the novel because postmodernism is also a distrust towards all grand narratives as well as a recognition that we cannot do without them.

Morrison's use of postmodernism is important. Madhu Dubey writes in the introduction to her book *Sign and Cities*:

> Theories of postmodernism are generally developed without reference to the specificities of African-American life and history, even as they routinely invoke the idea of racial difference. To some critics, the very category of postmodernism has been so insidiously racialized –assuming a White western subject as its normative center-that it bears little relevance for African American and other "others" of the modern west. (7)

Madhu Dubey writes that Morrison claims that African Americans have been confronting postmodern dilemmas long before the term was coined (21). The idea of the split and liminal black self advocated by DuBois through 'double consciousness' can be construed as postmodernism which involves in the idea of 'signifying' proposed by Henry Louis Gates. In case of double consciousness, the black split self desires to be accepted as American and knows its African heritage makes it different; it never achieves the coherence of the universal (white) subject; he/she is the 'other' whose final meaning is consistently being 'deferred' following Derrida's 'deferrance'. Morrison shows that the black self continually seeks coherence by pursuing dominant (white) ideologies such as the American Dream, which Milkman and his father, Macon Dead does; at the same time, they also realise that finding coherence through this is actually loss of their black self because American Dream of material prosperity was the reason

why their ancestors were enslaved and why they are subjected to racism. In *Song of Solomon,* Black postmodernism works through double consciousness which operates prominently in Macon Dead. He believes that being a part of white culture he can earn respect and power that the white men enjoy. He says to his son, as Morrison writes in *Song of Solomon*, "you'll own it all. All of it. you'll be free. Money is freedom, Macon. The only real freedom there is" (163). He never recognises the irony behind his desire. In case of Macon's character, DuBois' concept of 'double consciousness' is applicable. DuBois defines double consciousness as

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twines,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (6)

Macon is a black but he wants to look at himself as someone who can become white by acting like white people of his time—rich, patriarchal and oppressive. The novel has the essential features of a postmodern novel, namely non linearity and an open ended conclusion.

The chapter on Morrison's *Song of Solomon* not only reads the novel as a postmodern one but also focuses on the female characters. The novel has predominantly been read as the male protagonist's quest for roots and coherent identity. There are very few writings concerned with the women characters of *Song of Solomon*. Most of the writings on this novel deal with Milkman's journey to know the history of his community. The novel even has been considered a bildungsroman for the male protagonist Milkman's growing up from an ignorant boy to an aware

person of his racial heritage. Cynthia A. Davis in the article “Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction” writes that Milkman completes his heroic mission as his life follows the pattern of the classic hero (333). Hogue’s “Race, Modernity, Post-modernity” also centers round Milkman’s development and heroism:

> Dead, who, at the age of thirty, is alienated and still lacks social identification. Approaching his thirtieth birthday, Milkman, a modern subject who needs a temporal unification between the past and the future in the present, realizes that he is fragmented, that he lacks wholeness, that he does not know who he is. Looking in the mirror, he becomes cognizant of the fact that his face lacks “coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self.” Until this moment in his life, Milkman has lived a careless, uniformed, and haphazard life. He is selfish, self centered, and spoiled. (31)

These critics ignore black women’s role in making the way for Milkman’s quest. It is Pilate his aunt’s magical potion that ensures Ruth Milkman’s conception. Moreover, he grows up in the care of Ruth and Pilate and also on the cost of sacrifices made by his sisters—Magdalene and Corinthians. Very interestingly the women characters have to suffer for Milkman’s quest but they are not given their reward.

The neo-slave narratives, black women’s autobiography and black postmodernism are different narrative forms interconnected with each other in their objective, which is to highlight the differential race, class, gender and sexual identities of black women. Though the narratives of three novels *Dessa Rose, Song of Solomon and Zami* are different from each other, in terms of subject and issues, these three novels can be placed side by side. The three novelists respectively

Sherley Anne Williams, Toni Morrison and Audre Lorde are three devoted black feminists who even in late 20th century are fighting for a society without racial and communal violence. The content of three novels may differ from each other but all the three novels have same demand—removal of racism and sexism, and equality for black women.

Race and Gender in *Dessa Rose*

This chapter presents Williams'*Dessa Rose* as a neo-slave narrative that not only concentrates on the exploitation faced by black women in slavery, but also portrays a white woman in the novel who is not the victim of slavery but of sexism. At the same period in twentieth century when other major writers present predominately the plight of black women in slavery, Williams has shown how a black and a white woman can fight together for racial and gender equality despite having different racial experiences. In addition to this she also interrogates the representation of black past in white narratives shedding light on the need for black women to narrate their communal history of slavery.

Dessa Rose is an imaginary story of two strong women who were involved in two actual accidents. In 1829, in Kentucky a pregnant black woman was sentenced to death for helping a group of slaves headed to the market for sale. In 1830, North Carolina a white woman living on an isolated farm was reported to have given haven to the runaway slaves. Sherley Anne Williams says in her author's note that she first read about the incident of black woman in Angela Davis's essay "Reflection on the Black Woman's role in the Community of Slaves" where she wrote that of the six leaders sentenced to death, one was a woman who was first permitted for reasons of economy, to give birth to her child. Afterwards, she was publicly hanged. While tracking Davis to her source in Herbert Aptheker's "American Negro Slave Revolt" Williams discovered the incident of the white woman. In the novel the author asks "what if these two women met?" and tries to bring these two women under the same umbrella.

The black woman Dessa has been portrayed as a lover, a daughter, a sister, a revolutionary, a mother and a business partner. In the novel she is awaiting her own death, by

hanging. She had been sold away because she violently attacked her master, who had viciously murdered Kaine, her lover. Her mistress assumed that Dessa attacked her master because there was some sexual liaison between Dessa and the master and ordered Dessa to be punished with a symbolic branding on her genitals and sold for profit. While on the slave trader's coffle, pregnant Dessa successfully initiates and leads a rebellion in which several white men are killed. Though she is sentenced to be hanged, her execution is delayed until the birth of her child. Dessa's fate changes when Dessa becomes friend with three black men Nathan, Cully and Harker who rescue her from Nehemia enabling her amazing second escape from slavery. These newly free slaves find haven in a white woman's farm whose gambler husband has abandoned her. Thus Williams succeeds in writing the novel weaving these two incidents together.

The theme of bondage and freedom are complicated in Williams's depiction of her enslaved protagonist Dessa Rose. Since the novel has been narrated from three different point of view so it develops in three parts. "The Darky" presents a white man Nehemiah, an author who wants to gain fame by writing about Dessa's crime. This section is told from the white writer Nehemia's point of view. Though he asks questions to Dessa but actually he is unwilling to accept her answers as truth. The next part "The wench" means a low, vicious young woman who carries a racist, gendered perspective and the experiences of her life is responsible for it. This section primarily treats the relationship between Dessa and Ruth. Here it is seen how Dessa hates a white woman Rufel just because she is white and Rufel though a white does not bear any dislike against Dessa. The last part "The Negress" reveals Dessa Rose as a first person narrative voice. This section suggests a more dignified gender and racial representation. In this chapter she fully succeeds in escaping from her master with the help of Rufel and Aunt Chole an old black

woman. At the end of the novel Dessa and Rufel come close and share understanding of race and gender oppression.

Sherley Anne Williams in 1986 wrote about slavery and experience of black before Civil War in America. She looks back to the historical past of her people to remind the world the struggle the black faced to survive. Even in 1980s , after more than one hundred years of Civil War, she felt the necessity to look back which is a predominant feature of neo-slave narrative. In 1960s neo-slave narrative emerged as a literary form and it affected the style of representing slavery. It is not completely a new genre but logical continuity of slave narrative. The neo-slave narrative of eighties is deeply connected and concerned with the neo-slave narrative of sixties. Rushdy in his *Neo-slave Narrative* comments that the writers of neo-slave narratives wished to return to the literary form in which African American subjects had first expressed their political subjectivity in order to mark the moment of a newly emergent black political subject. He also says, "each author of the neo-slave narratives being explored here (in *Neo-Slave Narrative*) began writing in the sixties when each first became enamored of and then disenchanted with the politics of Black Power"(5). The form of neo-slave narrative is similar to antebellum but authors add cultural, communal, racial trauma that the black go through even many years after the abolition of slavery. The neo-slave narrative is concerned with the cultural formation of America on the basis of race. The black are American but not a part of American culture. So the novels of 20th century attempt to prove the cultural aspects of the black by discussing both their past and present together. In these novels black people are represented through the point of view of black writers who can understand and depict their community better. Sherley Anne Williams in her neo-slave narrative *Dessa Rose* challenges a different issue of interracial bonding through the two characters Rufel who is a white and Dessa who is a black woman. Her novel has given a new

touch to neo-slave narrative form by adding the interracial relationship, both psychological and emotional, between a black slave woman and a white woman which is rare in neo-slave narrative writing.

Neo-slave narrative is used to speak back to the 'peculiar institution' which is still capturing the mind of the African Americans. Valerie Smith brings in what Bernard W. Bell described "neo-slave narratives" as "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (168). Slave narrative gives account of the sorrowful condition of the slaves but neo-slave narrative demands the right of the black as in *Dessa Rose* the central character Dessa is fighting for her right. The writers look back to the past because without past their present is incomplete. The black Americans cannot build a peaceful present ignoring the history of their community. So the neo-slave narrative reveals the consequences of slavery to show its distressing effect on Black psyche. Valerie Smith defines neo-slave narrative texts as "the challenges of representing trauma and traumatic memories…Relationship of the body to memory; the agency of the enslaved; the power of morality and of literacy; the ambiguous role of religion; the commodification of black bodies and experiences; and the elusive nature of freedom" (169). Writing about slavery in 1980s assert their demand for black humanity. They state that even before Emancipation Proclamation they were equal to the white in humanity but they were oppressed and never allowed to grow. In *Dessa Rose*, Williams brilliantly succeeds in performing that task by offering us a neo-slave narrative which claims the right of Dessa and her companions.

Along with neo-slave narrative during 1960 with the development of Women's Right Movement in America, the interest of the readers shifted from the rights of black to the rights of women. Publishers and readers became more receptive to the black women writers and writers

like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Sarah Wright, Gayl Jones, Sherley Anne Williams and many others published many popular novels even before 1983. In even 1980s these prominent women writers felt the need of looking back to slavery and its consequences to present the lives of black women in their fictions. They started raising their voice to record the lives of their women. Majority of these black women writers were concerned with the suffering of women who were either slaves or victim of racism. They portrayed black women's lives as it was during slavery and also showed how racism became trauma for them. In the midst of all these writings in 1986 Sherley Anne Williams produced something different. She in her novel *Dessa Rose* shows not only the dilemma of black women but also the universal condition of women irrespective of black and white in man dominated sexist society. *Dessa Rose* is a typical neo-slave narrative where the author in 20th century is nurturing the memory of slavery with bitterness and the central character of the novel leads a journey from bondage to freedom. The author and also Dessa the central character look back to past to frame the present. They cannot forget the history of their community or their forefathers so even at present though with great hostility but they think of their past. Dessa remembers the exploitation, inhumanity made upon her and how she fought against all these to save her life.

These 20th century novels by women writers mainly depict the resilience of black women while working as slave. Their plight is depicted with their strong will power to survive against it. They fought against both gender and racial discrimination and very often there was no one to support them in their fight. Inspired by the Black Power Movement, Williams' thinking mobilised by the new discourse on slavery produced by that movement, Williams makes the connection between her historical fiction and the women movement. Williams implicitly criticises those historians who had denied the extent of slave resistance and negated the role of

African American women in the slave community through her novel. In her novel, Williams explores the conditions and motives for slave rebelliousness, particularly the acts of resistance of several heroic slave women portraying the character of Dessa.

Williams wrote the novel with many purposes and one of them is to prove that white can never understand the plight of black and their narrative about black can never be completely trustworthy. When William Styron wrote about Nut Turner, a black revolt more than reality he used his own imagination and here writers like Williams found that problematic. She was angered by William Styron's fictional portrayal of Nat Turner and wrote in the author's note of her novel the reason of writing the novel as "being outraged at a certain, critically acclaimed novel of the early seventies that travestied the as-told-to memoir of slave revolt leader Nat Turner" (5) and wanted to see the problem of understanding and writing about others as she wrote about white being a black. Moreover this writing seems to the black scholars as comment of an outsider who does not know the reality. She also says about Styron and his *Confessions of Nat Turner* as mentioned in Rushdy's "Meditation on Story", "greeted with wild applause by white critics who know nothing of the history of experience which Styron sought to portray" (135). Williams then felt the necessity of bringing the truth and she has employed a white character who like Styron takes interview of a black woman Dessa to write about black lives. Nehemiah interviews Dessa while she is in jail just as Styron had Gray to interview Turner.

The first section of *Dessa Rose* is essentially concerned with showing us the battle between Nehemiah and Dessa, fundamentally the battle between Nehemiah's attempt to master Dessa's body and self and Dessa's attempt to resist Nehemia and finding a way for herself. By having Nehemiah write out Dessa's character and her role in the revolt on the coffle, Williams demonstrates in her introduction to *Dessa Rose* how African Americans have been "betrayed" by

and "remain at the mercy of literature and writing" (5). The struggle of Dessa to resist Nehemia's power is like Williams's struggle to resist Styron's power. Styron begins the novel with Turner's confession where he has signed and Williams begins with the love story between Dessa and Kaine. These two beginnings suggest two different motives of two writers. Styron wants to show the revengeful outlook of the black against white and Williams shows the normal life of a black woman who can also revolt against the oppression. Styron only depicts the behavior of slaves not their trouble and he totally ignores the position of black women during slavery. A large part of what motivates Williams in her revisionist fiction is a desire to recover the hidden or misperceived history and saying to Styron see what you missed. You went for the easy thing—the stereotyped thing. This is the real story that you missed. Apart from that when Nehemia questions Dessa in *Dessa Rose*, she answers him "in a random manner, a loquacious, roundabout fashion," (16). Like Nat Turner she does not respond submissively and this is because Williams has portrayed a heroic character in her protagonist.

In slavery women were physically tortured violently so that they become fearful about slavery system. They were lashed at about the hips, legs and near genitalia. Some women were branded inside the thigh. The scars of whipping in private part of the body remind the slaves their femininity. Dessa was also not exempted from the torment. Dessa's branded mark is near her pubic area and the mark was not something to be cherished, but a symbol of her enslavement. She was put in a sweatbox or she was let sweat in the sun by her white masters. When she comes out of the box she looks bloody and dirty and cramped because of lying in a small box. This kind of torture was common among slave women. Bertie another black woman tells about the torture to Rufel, "they lashed her about the hips and legs, branded her along the inside of her thighs…just from the waist down, you see, cause they didn't 'wanna impair her value'" (134).

These branded marks near the sexual part of the body suggest the slave owners' claim on their bodies. Whipping and branding Dessa near her genitalia suggests an attempt to connect the sign of slavery with the area that designates her as female. Perhaps it is more than coincidence that Dessa's brand is near her pubic area. These markings appear to link slavery and sex. Later when the former master sells Dessa to Hughes and she is interviewed by Nehemia there also she is always chained like animal so that she cannot escape. Nehemia writes in his diary, "in as much as the darky would remain chained as usual, there was no danger involved in such a venture…I shall make it my business to obtain another key to the cellar and to the chain with which she is bound to the tree…it is not my liking to be required to request permission each time I wish to talk with the gal" (51). This inhuman treatment was a way of suppressing the black. Their bodies were treated as objects to be used for any purpose.

On one hand the black women were not treated as human being on the other hand they were exploited for being women. Working restlessly under the white master is a curse for the blacks and black women suffered separately as collective object. Apart from their daily work they were physically and sexually exploited and that made their life more complicated. They were considered as subject to abuse. One decisive form of oppression was black women's treatment as slave breeding. They were again and again raped and had to give birth to so many children which were later sold to another plantation. In this regard Marable writes in "Grounding with My Sisters", "many masters counted the breeding capability of black women as an economic asset and encourage them to bear children as rapidly as possible" (64). The black women were used for the production of free slave and their love for their children was never considered. They were treated as the master's private property. Their wombs were the great source of income for the whites. Marable quotes Kenneth Stamp's view, "slaves were reared

with an eye to their marketability" (64). In *Dessa Rose* when Dessa and her companions are caught escaping, her companions the black men are sentenced to death but Dessa's death is delayed because she is pregnant. Her owner understands the value of the baby that Dessa is going to give birth to. He does not want to lose another free slave. Dessa understanding this even thinks "had it not been for that hope, her own sentence would have driven her mad. To be spared until she birthed the baby…But to let their Baby go now, now…She would swallow her tongue (63). The black women's body became business tool and the white masters fully made use of it.

From the beginning the novel makes clear the limitation imposed on black slaves. Dessa is already a slave when she first meets Kaine, her lover. She becomes pregnant and Kaine wants her to abort the baby. However Dessa proposes Kaine to run away to North which Kaine refuses as he is afraid of being caught. Dessa decides that her primary duty is now to save her child. She takes her pregnancy as an opportunity to run away from slavery. Her baby becomes a hope for her. She never thinks of killing the baby like many others but to give a secure life to it. She asserts her motherhood which is a primary right of every woman. She wants security of her child like the white children. The lives of black women is both painful and abusive. The slave women to flee from such lives and to save their child tried many ways and the extreme way of resisting were running of, murder, infanticide, self mutilation, suicide. These situations have become the core subject of many 19th and 20th century novels like Morrison's *Beloved* and Jacob's *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl* who also have discussed a black slave woman's struggle to free herself from every kind of oppression.

The novel centralises the theme of slavery and motherhood. The issue of motherhood is important while talking about black women's experience of slavery because motherhood was always denied to them. Hence, it is not an accident that slavery and motherhood are often linked

in the writing of black women. Williams has portrayed a number of mothers in her story and each of them experiences different dilemma as a mother. Where Dessa is worried about her baby when she is only pregnant, her mother has already lost her ten children only because of slavery. Morrison writes in Dessa's voice:

> Dessa heaved herself to her knees, flinging her words in the white woman's face. "Mammy gave birth to ten children that come in the world living." She counted them off on her fingers. "the first one Rose after herself; the second one died before the white folks named it…Little Rose died while mammy was carrying Amos(another child)- carried off by the diphtheria. (119)

White in slavery patriarchy enforcing present female slaves as mere breeders, and not mothers; this was just one manner of attempting to strip female slaves of their gender. Exploiting black women as breeders objectified them as less than human because only animals can be bred against their will. Thus the mother figure in *Dessa Rose* becomes the means of asserting and critiquing gender.

The women writers of 20th century have brought to light the relation between maternity and womanhood and Patton says in "Hunting Effects of Slavery", "black women are maternal and thus true women"(121). Motherhood is an aspect of femininity and also right to one's child. In *Dessa Rose,* Dessa's punishment is delayed to have the baby in slavery but the need of a mother for the baby is not valued. Thus motherhood in slavery was not women's desire but the need of patriarchy as Patton writes, "motherhood [in slavery] is not defined by women, but created by men's fictions… patriarchal definitions and fantasies of motherhood have been imposed on women in such a way that women cannot possibly meet the standards" (125). As

with many ideals, the ideal mother is in an untenable position, particularly for the already marginalised female slave. The slave owners did not want their slaves to become people by having family. If the mothers engaged themselves in bringing up their children, the masters had to experience loss of workers. The slave women's primary duty was to serve their masters and nothing else. Significantly, white women during slavery had the freedom to be mothers, but the black women were denied this important right.

Moreover, mother's love for the baby was not important for the masters. The children were separated from the mothers and sold to other masters. This idea of separation and the recognition that the babies will be enslaved too made many mothers not want children, which the novel also presents in Dessa's case. In *Dessa Rose,* Mammy gives birth to ten children but none of them are with her. Her children are sold and she rains her love on Rufel a white girl. When Dessa discovers her pregnancy, she seeks ways to run away from the farm. She knows that she and Kaine will never be able to give their child a good future in the plantation. Dessa says, "this our baby; ours, us's. we make it. How you can say, kill it? It mine and it yours."(46). But the master does not allow them to kill because the baby is as valuable to him as it is to Dessa. In Rufel's plantation when Dessa is asked the reason of running away she unexpectedly says, "cause, cause I didn't want my baby to be slaved" (139). The love for children made the slave mothers so desperate that they cared little about their own lives.

Feminists started working on motherhood from 1970s. With the form of neo-slave narrative the women writers also have brought the issue of motherhood which is a common theme in the novels by black women writers of 20th century. Morrison's *Beloved,* and Alice Walker's *Color Purple* notably portray the pain of motherhood during slavery. Where in other novels the mothers either kill their child or mourn them, Dessa deals in a different way as her

child becomes an opportunity for her to escape from slavery: “Kaine not want this baby. He want and don’t want it. Babies ain’t easy for niggars, but still, I know this Kaine and I wants it cause that” (46). Williams has linked motherhood and slavery but she has used it as a form of resistance. Her protagonist is a strong and bold character who even fights her master to save her child. When faced with pregnancy along with a life of servitude, she chooses to give her baby life of freedom. We see in the novel that her strong will helps her to succeed.

In the novel Dessa’s fight for identity reveals her personal, racial and sexual history. From the beginning, the novel presents Dessa to be brave and confident. She is not among those who bear all torture silently and submit herself to her master. Her decision not to abort the baby but to run away is based on her awareness that as a slave she cannot be the kind of mother that she wants to be because she would have no authority over her offspring: “this Kaine and it be like killing part of him, part of me. So I talk with him; beg him. I say, ‘This our baby; ours, us’s. How you can say, kill it? It mine and it yours.’…and finally I say ‘Run’ and he laugh”(46). Dessa is ready to have the baby; she will never give her baby to the white folk, nor will she end its life. She knows that her desire to become a successful mother entails running away which will get her killed, and still she is ready to bear all. She raises her voice against the oppression and inequality and after her escape from slavery she says, “this is what I hold against slavery. May come a time when I forgive . . . the beatings, the sellings, the killings, but I don't think I can ever forgive the ignorance they kept us in'" (207-08). Since the black were not counted as human being by the white so they were totally unaware of their rights as human and this unawareness became another reason of their suffering.

The black feminist started organising themselves with the motive to fight against the inequality the coloured women face but with time they start focusing on all kind of oppressions

that black women go through. They witness the privilege claimed by whites and they claim the same for themselves. Combahee River Collective states, "the most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (13). Williams' novel clearly depicts these issues centralising the experience of black women. *Dessa Rose* critiques the practice and effects of slavery which is the sole reason of the plights of the blacks. The white oppression degrades the lives of black men and women from every perspective as we see in the novel how Dessa's master kills Kaine and compels her to escape for her child.

In the novel master Vaugham, Wilson and Nehemia are the faces of white oppression and the author mainly has used the voice of Nehemia who tries to have power over Dessa's power of speech. He attempts to master Dessa's body and self by questioning her but Dessa who is a rebel never submits herself to him; she refuses to be manipulated by him. She even understands Nehemiah very well, "I never will forget Nemi trying to read me..." (236). The plot indicates that when her death is delayed because of her pregnancy, a white writer Adam Nehemia, who is writing a book on a foiled slave insurrection, interviews Dessa in hopes of receiving useful information. When Dessa asks him what he will use her comments for, Nehemiah responds, "I write what I do in the hope of helping others to be happy in the life that has been sent them to live"(39). Although Nehemiah describes his project in benevolent terms, it is clear that he has a particular opinion that he wishes to present as fact. For him black people are evil and stupid; they are not trustworthy. The whites want to frame the experience of the slaves in their own way and Nehemiah is not an exception. This white man tries to misrepresent Dessa's experience as he

cannot accept the cruelty imposed on black. The novel suggests that "Nehemia hesitated; the "facts" sounded like some kind of fantastical fiction" (41). He reads Dessa through the lens of racism and feels about the information, "she must be exaggerated, he thought, egged on, perhaps, by the young buck's example and her own nerve in attacking the master (42). He never sees slavery from a black woman's perspective and never tries to feel the pain in her description.

In slavery and even after escaping slavery, Dessa always claims right to her life and body. As a slave she is not seen as a mother or a woman, but by escaping Dessa could claim motherhood, womanhood, and freedom; when master kills Kaine she attacks master; when Nehemia wants her to tell her story as he wants, she protests and she is always rude to him since she understands by then that she has nothing to lose**.** In Rufel's plantation, Dessa seeks ownership over her pain and always tries to hide her scars which she feels tells her story. She feels seeing her scars means reading her soul. She cannot allow a white woman to know her and her pain. Even after Dessa's attempts to hide her scars, Rufel discovers it and she gets horrified:

> Rufel shivered; that couldn't be true, it was too, too awful, she thought; …she could almost feel the fire that must have lived in the wench's thighs… "what a horrid story," Rufel breathed after a moment, imagining the agony of those thighs, to walk with that burning…"what a horrid story," Rufel breathed after a moment, imagine the agony of those thighs, to walk with that burning- "that vicious trader." (134-135)

For Rufel these scars are something new. She is not familiar with such marks. Her unfamiliarity suggests the difference not only between these two women but also difference between their lives. Though Rufel understands Dessa's pain, she can never make out how these scars define

Dessa's life. The marks tell her history and the master's authority upon her and by not revealing all these to Rufel, Dessa is claiming right on her body.

Dessa is more akin to show her scars to Harker who helps her to run away from Nehemia's imprisonment and a member of Rufel's farm, because the latter also has gone through the same trauma in his life. Dessa feels that Harker can understand what the scars convey but the white woman can never feel so. In addition to this, the whites have created these marks on her body so how they can read it in an unbiased manner. So Dessa feels that showing her scars or her pain to a white woman is insulting her own body and soul. Dessa even hesitates first to share her scars with Harker. After their lovemaking, Dessa covers her scars, but Harker assures her that he knows about the scars and " 'It ain't impaired you none at all. . . . It only increase your value' " (208). Harker treasures Dessa's womanhood despite her master's attempt to deny her femininity. Anyone who sees her scars may read Dessa and recognise her as a slave or former slave. Dessa is careful to keep her scars hidden, where Morrison writes, "because she knows that to 'read' her is to 'own' her"(46). The only way for Dessa to possess her own story is to determine who will read it.

An important part of the novel is the relationship between black Dessa and white Rufel. Williams expresses her disappointment in the Author's Note saying, "how sad, I thought then, that these two women never met" (5). She herself in her novel gives the answer by portraying these two women together showing their hatred and developing friendship between a slave mistress and a slave woman. The story of these two women starts with tension but slowly they come close and trust each other. This bonding between them is not only unique but also strong because they find greater strength in each other. Williams uses them to increase understanding and to dismantle the stereotypical thinking that black and white women have to be enemies.

Following Nathan a member of Rufel's plantation who plans a scheme of selling the black men as slave to other plantations who then escape to be sold again to find their trip to west, all Harker, Rufel and Dessa start understanding each other and develope a positive relation among them through the journey. Though this group share many experiences, the friendship between two women does not built until Dessa and Rufel understand the need of each other. As Dessa says, "you cannot do something like this with someone and not develop some closeness, some trust" (225). They start knowing each other which helps them to understand the wretched condition of woman which is subject to sexist violence.

In their respective places both the women are lonesome, Dessa's lover Kaine is no more and she has no news about her brothers and sisters. On the other hand, Rufel's husband is not with her. But the difference of race that first creates enmity between them is much more stronger than anything. The color of skin in the beginning does not allow them to become companions, and for Dessa to have a white friend is nothing but an insult for their entire race. However, Rufel nurses Dessa's boy and this complicates the way Dessa sees race. Paradoxically this even upsets her because such unfamiliar behaviour is threatening Dessa's identity as a black woman. It is opposite to what she learnt about whites in the past: "it went against everything she had been taught to think about white women but to inspect the fact too closely was almost to deny her own existence" (123). Rufel's white skin reminds Dessa of her plight and hence this act of kindness Rufel does for Dessa puzzles her. The text indicates this clearly and states, "She watched the white woman sitting in the light from the long window. Her face was very white and seemed to radiate a milky glow…"(86). Dessa every moment is observing white Rufel and she finds it surprising that a white woman is not torturing the black but helping them. Rufel's whiteness and her attitude towards blacks seem mystifying to Dessa.

The relation between Dessa and Rufel begins with an accident and continues with self necessity. Rufel's husband is not with her so she is in need of good company to run the farm. On the other hand Dessa needs a safe place and care because of her complicated childbirth. In the beginning Dessa does not want to interact with Rufel but always sees her colour and actions with great astonishment. Their conversation starts with argument regarding Mammy. Rufel mentions about Mammy to Dessa and suggests that Mammy took care of her just like she would do for her own child. Though Dessa does not know her, she gets furious. Mammy is a black woman who used to take care of Rufel, when she was very young. During slavery the black women used to take care of their white master's daughter and most of them were dedicated to their job; these women were usually known as mammy. Rufel discusses about her as her own mother which is not acceptable for Dessa. She claims that Mammy can never be a white woman's mother and the white woman even does not know Mammy properly: "The words exploded inside Dessa. "Your 'mammy'!" . . . No white girl could ever had taken her place in mammy's bosom; no one. "You ain't got no 'mammy"… "You don't even not know 'mammy's name" (118). She feels blacks are only subject to exploitation for white and nothing else. Dessa can never trust Rufel's innocent love for Mammy.

In the novel Dessa's outlook implies that she believes that whites can only show sympathy to black and not love. Rufel and the other black women of the farm are surprised to see Dessa getting furious for mentioning Mammy. She mentions many injustices such as during slavery the time spent by the black women nursing white children meant time away from their own children. Dessa questions and makes Rufel understand that she and Mammy had the relationship of a slave and mistress. This realisation makes Rufel question whether Mammy loved her "freely" and leads her to feel "personally responsible for Mammy's pain, personally

connected to it, not as the soother of hurt as Mammy was always to her but as the source of that pain" (147). It is obvious that the white woman though treated her as her mother but it was a part of slavery. Rufel enjoyed her love but never cared for her; never wanted to know the distress of her life; never considered her equal to them. All the whites whether cruel or soft hearted took the slaves for granted. They were not interested in the personal affair of the slaves. Moreover, the mention of Mammy reminds Dessa of her family members who are not with her just because of the white folks.

Dessa's antagonism regarding Rufel is because of her view that slavery and racism are closely related to whiteness. The novel suggests that the binary between color is at the root of all racial oppressions. The blacks see the whiteness of the white people as power structure which is an invisible dominance. The white folk and their white body stand for power and the blacks feel that this privilege of color enable the whites to control them. The whites see themselves as the norm and hence the power hidden in their white skin is invisible to them. Frankenberg says, "dealing with racism is not merely an option for white people—that, rather, racism shapes white people's lives and identities in a way that is inseparable from other facets of daily life" (6). This power of one race on the other is the cycle of oppression. It is a continuous process which influences both the races. The color white creates such trauma for the black that the latter is even afraid of looking directly at eyes of the white. In the novel, Dessa sees Rufel but their eyes never meet. Unknowingly, as is the case with Rufel's treatment of Mammy, the whites used their color as a means of oppression which led the blacks to see whiteness as power structure. This is very evident in slavery where blacks were not allowed to look directly at whites and were punished when they did so. Black feminist scholarship has significantly discussed this politicisation of the gaze as furthering black subjugation. For example, bell hooks writes,

> Black slaves, and later manumitted servants, could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving, as only a subject can observe, or see. To be fully an object then was to lack the capacity to See or recognize reality. These looking relations were reinforced as whites cultivated the practice of denying the subjectivity of blacks (the better to dehumanize and oppress), of relegating them to the realm of the invisible. (168)

This limitation made the whites mysterious for the black. Though Dessa hates Rufel, she always observes her as if trying to discover the mystery of the color that creates all inequality. As bell hook says about white people, “they do not imagine that the way whiteness makes its presence felt in black life, most often as terrorising imposition, a power that wounds, hurts, tortures, is a reality that disrupts the fantasy of whiteness as representing goodness” (169). Williams shows what goes on in Dessa’s mind when she sees the white woman and how she cannot help hating Rufel:“She lowered her lids even more, looking at the white woman through the spikes of her own eyelashes; finally she could no longer see her. A white woman” (82). The more she looks at the white woman the more her hatred grows for Rufel. She sees the power hidden behind the color of Rufel.

The novel suggests that Dessa’s hate for Rufel originates because lives of black women were totally different from the whites; they were totally helpless and powerless. Dessa says in the novel, “Nigga can't do shit. Masa can step on a nigga hand, nigga heart, nigga life, and what can a nigga do? Nigga can't do shit” (38). With the character of Mammy, the novel reveals how the slaves cared for the white children even when their own children were separated from them. Rufel is keeping her child with her though Dessa has to run away to save her baby boy from the whites. Dessa's parents are dead and many of her brothers and sisters have either died or been

sold. She has no information about any member of her family since they all are separated. This difference exists even in post-slavery; black mothers have struggled to gain social welfare benefits long available to white women. We see in the text that Dessa is struggling to achieve and maintain her identity, retain her dignity and recover her personal, racial history; and control the meaning of her life which is the struggle of every black woman.

Even after abolition of slavery the gender and racial discrimination continue in America but Williams in 20th century made an attempt to bring close two women belonging to two opposite races. She makes them stand face to face and live in the same house where the black woman Dessa looks at the white Rufel with utter disgust. Williams's purpose is fulfilled when they realise how both of them are victims of the same patriarchal society in different ways and hence both of them are in need of each other. Being black, Williams understands the difficulty a woman like Dessa experiences in trusting a white woman who stands for power. So this union between the two does not take place in one day. Williams knits the construction of the relation in a way which starts with extreme dislike from Dessa and finally ends up with love. Even at the end though Rufel helps Dessa save herself from Nehemiah, the racial discrimination is still in their mind: "“Ruth,” “Dessa,” we said together;…we couldn'd hug each other, not on the streets, not in Acropolis, not even after dark; we both had sense enough to do that." (233). The novel ends with the indication that the racial inequality was a prejudice that lies in mind and it creates such trauma that is not easily removable. Patton views are important in this context. She writes,

> But in spite of this recognition, there is still a significant distance between them. Dessa notes that after their experience they could not help developing some closeness, but she also expresses her reluctance to discuss certain things with Rufel. She does not share very

> much that is personal…Yes they are both women, but Rufel is a free white woman, while Dessa is an escaped slave. (138)

Both the women understand the marked difference between them; they can be friends but cannot be equals.

Williams has used two characters to portray an exceptional situation. She has posited a white character so that she can explicate the scar of racial oppression, exposed white racial privilege and explored if white and black women together can fight against racism and sexism. Williams was upset by the conflict between black and white feminism and wanted to create a space where both black and white feminism can form companionship. Suzanne W. Jones writes in “Dismantling Stereotypes” that in an interview, Williams herself says that she hopes that *Dessa Rose* would “heal some wound” created by racism. She also added that fiction is understanding “the impossible and putting these women together, I could come to understand something not only about their experience of slavery but about them as women together, and imagine the basis for some kind of honest rapprochement between black and white women” (88). The novel has taken us to a different place where as readers we are not accustomed to go. She has attempted a historical issue but the core subject of her novel, finding common ground between black and white women, is rare. More than historical value, the novel has imaginative value because she makes an effort to create trust and respect by considering race and gender. She transforms the prejudice of colour and dismantles racial stereotypes not only through the relationship between Dessa and Rufel but also by positing a white mammy Rufel instead of a black mammy. During slavery it was a common thing for white children to be brought up by slave woman whom very often the white children call mammy as Rufel calls. Here we see how

Dessa's son who is a black being fed by a white woman. As Patton says, "[t]hus Williams replaces the image of the black mammy with that of the white mammy" (136).

Even though Rufel is not rude to Dessa, in her character we see the same doubt for Dessa that Nehemia had. Rufel's intrusion on Dessa's privacy indicates her power as a white woman even when she does not own the black people who live on that farm. Deborah White has observed about black women in "Jezebel and Mammy", "if she is rescued from the myth of the Negro, the myth of woman traps her. if she escapes the myth of woman, the myth of the Negro still ensnares her."(125). When she questions about Dessa's scars her thoughts and her actions are contradictory. Though she believes that Dessa has been whipped, she wonders what Dessa did to provoke such punishment. When Harker describes Dessa's torture in her former plantation, Rufel says, ""I know it's more than you telling," she flung at hi, as she turned to go. "And I'm going to get the bottom of it"" (137). She wants to confirm about the Darky's scar. When Dessa is sleeping in the white woman's bed the latter's hand reaches to draw the bed cover to see whether Dessa has been telling the truth. But she also realises how would she feel for such inspection and tries to cover up her intrusive gesture as a concern about Dessa's pain regarding the childbirth. Rufel is sympathised with Dessa but she does not want to trust her and this suggests the racial prejudice that Rufel also carries.

Rufel also has some typical notion about slave and it changes in the company of Dessa. When she accidently sees Dessa's heavily scarred buttock, she feels bad for her and realises her mistake. She also understands her own power and privilege as a white woman. Rufel starts seeing the world from Dessa's perspective. William implies that it is easier for Rufel to see Dessa's humanity than for Dessa to see Rufel's. Rufel is not mistreated by any black but Dessa is whipped, branded by the white; they sold her family and killed her lover so she cannot be as

liberal as Rufel. In case of her other mistress Dessa's feeling is a mixture of fear and hatred but for Rufel, Dessa has only hatred not any fear since Rufel is not torturing or dominating her and the hatred automatically arises. William succeeds in clearly depicting the feelings of both the women for each other which reveals the main motive of the author.

The wrath of Dessa against Rufel reveals in many events. Though Rufel tries to be good with her but she feels that ultimately the white woman is giving shelter to the blacks. Though she is not torturing them but her ownership of the farm suggests her power. She is unwilling to share with Rufel anything related to black and slavery. She sees in Rufel white power structure and her sympathy as mock. She herself does not want to be friendly with her and cannot bear any other black to be in a relationship with Rufel who is after all a white woman. When she discovers the relation between Nathan and Rufel, the information almost kills her. Seeing them sleeping together Dessa gets crazy. Though she has no physical relation with Nathan and they are not lovers but she cannot bear seeing him with a white woman. It seems to her submitting themselves to the white. The black women are always victims of white men's desire; they are raped by the whites again and again so seeing black man making love with a white woman is unacceptable for such victims. It seems to Dessa an insult of their race: "For the first time I wanted to cry. I couldn't go back in that House, not to get Mony (her son), not and see Nathan, see him and that white woman again. The remembrance of them in that bed kept stabbing at my eyes, my heart-black white red. I knowed that red was her hair, but it looked like blood to me" (164). Dessa even tries to discuss with Nathan reminding him the colour of the woman but she does not succeed.

The relationship between Nathan and Rufel also suggests a desire for power. Nathan desires Rufel for her beauty and he may also love her. However, most importantly, having Rufel

is a symbol of power. Nathan wants to posses the privilege of being close to a beautiful white woman. Here Williams reveals another layer inherent in the politics of the skin color that is race. The technique is most evident in the bedroom scene where skin is bare and where interracial intimacy occurs behind closed doors. Here both Nathan and Rufel have forgotten the larger discrimination that color creates between them. Dessa already hates her and this new event raises more hatred in her mind against Rufel. She says, "white woman was everything I feared and hated, and it hurt me that one of them would want to love with her" (169). Dessa's dislike is not for Rufel the woman but Rufel the 'white' woman.bell hooks says in "Representations of Whiteness", that whites do not comprehend that the black may judge them as they judge blacks because "racist thinking perpetuates the fantasy that the Other who is subjugated, who is subhuman, lacks the ability to comprehend, to understand, to see the working of the powerful" (168). Whites can never imagine what kind of hatred blacks keep for them. They feel they are invisible to the black because of the power they possess.

Through the incident of Nathan and Rufel, Williams brings to light another point where Dessa discovers what black men think about black women. When Dessa tries to explain tothe black men how the relationship between a black man and a white woman is a hazardous, one of them, Ned, claims that Dessa and other black women are jealous of the white woman. He insults black womanhood and says to Dessa, a black woman, that "don't nobody want no old mule like you (183). Listening to his comment Dessa cannot remain silent. She says:

> mules. Milly who had birthed seventeen children in eighteen years and seen them all taken from her as she weaned them…they had taken Flora's baby from her, put her out to nurse with someone else cause Flora could do much as any man in the fields. Jannet was mistreated cause she was barren; Ada's master had belly rubbed

> with her, then wanted to use her daughter. I had been spared death till I could birth a baby white folks could keep slave. Oh, we was mules all right. (183)

Dessa's voice clearly reveals how black women were exploited by the white and never valued by the black. They suffer both within and outside of their community. The white men tortured them as slave and exploited them as female bodies and the black men insulted them for not being typical beautiful, like the whites. Through this episode, the author shows the intense suffering of the black women in a sexist society.

Another aspect of gender discrimination shocks Dessa and changes her thinking over gender. When Rufel, Dessa and Harkar spend a night in a new plantation, the owner Mr. Oscar gets drunk and tries to rape Rufel. Both Dessa and Rufel work together to eject him out of the room. This event reveals the general way a patriarchal society has of looking at woman; woman becomes an object of use. Williams employs the attempted rape of Rufel by Oscar, a white man, to reveal the gender similarities across the color line. This scene discloses that condition of women is not solely based on race. Thus, notions of white supremacy becomes a patriarchal institution and is not based only on a notion of racial difference. White women also are victim of the same sexist society. The women are exploited irrespective of their race or class and their existence is valued very little. Williams is then on one hand asking us to gain a view of oppression as many headed thing and on other hand is asking us to see people as either simply white or black, a point June Jordan supports in an interview as discussed by Millsom Henry:

> I think there is something deficient in the thinking on the part of anybody who proposes either gender identity politics or race identity politics as sufficient, because every single one of us is more than whatever race we represent or

> embody and more than whatever gender category we fall into. We have other kinds of allegiances, other kinds of dreams that have nothing to do with whether we are white or not white.(44)

Patriarchy simplifies identity in terms of one thing or other. For example, Nehemiah refers to Dessa's in racial terms such as "Darky" (50); he employs gendered slurs such as slut, sly bitch, and devil woman; it is not merely Dessa's race that is being held in contempt, but her gender as well. When the drunken white planter Oscar tries to rape Rufel, Dessa feels that the condition of white and black women are similar in a sexist society:

> The white woman was subject to the same ravishment as me; this the thought that kept me awake. I hadn't knowd white men could use a white woman like that, just take her by force as they could with us…I never will forget the fear that come on me when Miz Lady called me on Mr. Oscar, that knowing that she was as helpless in this as I was, that our only protection was ourselves and each other. (201)

The condition of white woman is not much better than the black. White women were valued in sexist society for a premarital virginity that when "lost" in the context of heterosexual marriage, ensured that all children would be biologically "White." Regardless of social class, whites were encouraged to fear racial amalgamation, believing that it would debase them to the status of other races (culture, community). The white men treated the white women as "object" of sex and the black women as "animal". Through Rufel and Dessa, Williams succeeds in showing how the two women from different social worlds are vulnerable to the white man, and how they need to come together to protect each other.

If Dessa saves Rufel, the latter also saves Dessa at the end of the novelfrom Nehemiah who stands for slavery. Though Rufel has to bear being called a slut by the white man inherent in Nehemiah's speech, "you all in this together. All alike sluts" (232), because she sympathises with Dessa, she remains determined not to let Dessa go with him. She ignores what Nehemiah says and claims Dessa to be hers, "“this girl mines," Miz lady say. "Can't be no reward on her."- "just mistook my girl for someone else" (227). Dessa understands the new relation between them which is based on trust. Moreover, they finally recognize each other as individuals. Rufel says, "My name Ruth…I ain's your mistress," and Dessa says, "my name Dessa, Dessa Rose. Ain't no O to it" (232). By rejecting the O, Dessa signals her rejection of others scripting her body. This confident in Dessa signals that Dessa is no longer a defensive slave. As Dessa says, "I didn't hold nothing against her, 'not mistress', not Nathan, not skin" (233). Williams shows beautifully how gradually Dessa's hatred comes to an end when she discovers the strength of sisterhood crossing the racial barrier. In the article "Ripping Away the Veil of Slavery" K. Moody identifies Williams's novel as "optimistic" because "it teaches sophisticated lessons in pluralism and cooperation, accentuating the necessity of breaking down racial barriers, of establishing friendships across color, culture, and gender lines.(260)" (645). Moody views that Williams has succeeded in bringing these two different woman closer and has established interracial friendship between them is also supported by Angelyn Mitchell in *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction.* Mitchell discusses the author's positive outlook saying:

> Williams' protagonists undergo a transformation born of their interpersonal relationship, forming a bond of interracial sisterhood. Thus Williams presents to her readers her feminist engagement with race, so that we can imaginatively

> consider what might have been in terms of interracial feminist coalitions during slavery as well as what should be in terms of interracial feminist coalition now. (65)

Thus, the novel is important in its message that understanding between two races can help overcome the difficulty they are facing with regard to race and gender. Here, Rufel and Dessa come closer only after they understand each other's crisis and need.

The bond between Dessa and Rufel over their shared vulnerability to sexual assault helps Dessa learn that Ruth too is at risk in the patriarchal world. Williams's novel shows bond between Dessa and Rufel strengthening their coalition without changing the nature of the work to be done. Dessa unwillingly has to take the help of Rufel to save her baby. She initially dislikes the white woman but the novel demands an exceptional bonding between these two women which slowly forms. Dessa at first even resists acknowledging her lack of milk and does not want Rufel to nurse her son. However, she must face reality and submit her baby to Rufel as Ada informs her that Rufel is "the only nursing woman on the place" (122). Knowing about Dessa's hungry and crying baby, Rufel puts him to her breast since Dessa cannot feed him. Even knowing about Dessa's dislike for her, the white woman nurses Dessa's son when she is bedridden. Though Rufel replaces the black mammy but racial history suggest the distinction between black and white mammy. Very often Rufel also starts thinking over her act of mothering a black baby and feels shame. The plot tells us that very often Rufel also starts thinking over her deeds looking at the baby's "sleek black head, the nut brown face flattened against the pearly paleness against her breast … she become[s] conscious of what she was doing [and] a wave of embarrassment had swept over her" Rufel understands that what she is doing is taboo and"she …

looked guiltily around the parlor" (101). She willingly nurses Dessa's son but cannot forget the discrimination. Patron writes in "The Hunting Effects of Slavery":

> Rufel cannot be like Mammy because she has the power to refuse that Mammy did not have. Nor could Mammy love Rufel like her own child because she did not have the power to choose her community of loved ones. This is not to say that Mammy could not have loved Rufel, but the power dynamics at play taint her ability to love freely. (138)

Mammy was compelled to love Rufel because of institunalizes enslavement of blacks and also because she already had lost her own children. But Rufel is not pressurised by any situation. She can think and act freely. However, ingrained sense of difference between blacks and whites in Rufel's mind makes her hesitate which tells us how slavery as a system captures and trains the human mind to accept injustice.

The progress of Dessa and Ruth's friendship finally undermines historical circumstances. To clarify it Suzanne Jones puts forward Minrose Gwin's reading that the twentieth century novelist found that "color lines blinded white woman to the humanity of their black sisters and built in black woman massive layers of hatred for those fair ladies who would not, or could not, see their suffering" (86). Williams shows that by staying together, a color woman and a white woman can overcome this hatred; they can understand the common situation of women, which is the fate of being exploited by sexism. She also shows that interracial friendship among unequal is possible, only when the whites realise that very often the person on top in the hierarchy simplifies the reality of the person of lower status. Through Dessa and Rufel, Williams shows

that friendship is not assimilation but rather a respect of difference and an understanding of the oppression that difference creates historically. Nicole R. King writes:

> Both Dessa and Rufel come to realize that their new relationship is neither sinister nor temporary but rather the beginning of interdependence and trust, a friendship of mutuality and individuality. Though Williams strips these two protagonists and their world of the stereotypical constructions of mistress, slave and mammy, she refuses to strip them of difference as it is manifest in race and class. They are allowed to understand how even the most intimate relationships are complicated by experiences of power and by notions of identity. (366)

The bond between Dessa and Rufel is significant in history. Their relationship has overcome many tests and turmoil and has become unique and strong. Both have learn from their experiences how racial and gender issues are interlinked.

Signiciantly, if we look at the critical reception that the novel received, we see that the novel was seen as controversial. The novel raised hue and cry when it was published. Many critics pronounced its portrayal of nineteenth century race relation as very difficult to believe. Jones again brings a contrary view of Critic like Boyd Tonkin who dismissed the novel's portrayal of interracial friendship, saying that "since a piece of wishful thinking lies at its core, *Dessa Rose* finally shirks history in favour of romance" (88). However, Tomkin's view is overturned by the novel because though Williams' two protagonists become friend at the end, they have to work through their respective prejudices to become so.

Moreover, even belonging to the oppressed race, Williams chooses to be impartial when depicting two races. In this regard Sharon Monteith says about white author's depiction of white

woman as white women writers more usually privilege the moral growth of their white woman protagonist through her relationship with black friend (5) but Williams has not done it in case of Dessa. The text thus explores the history of cross racial relation between white and black women that tends to focus on the difficulties of the association. Williams looks back to slavery, the suffrage of black women where empowerment of one group of people suggests the disempowerment of the other. With the depiction of same issues the author of *Dessa Rose* ends the novel giving some positive idea. Where Feminism is divided on the basis of colour and fails to unite the white and black women under the same umbrella, *Dessa Rose* is a praiseworthy and outstanding work which imagines a world where the black and white women can not only coexist but also support each other—perhaps the first step in creating a racially integrated America, acknowledging and moving beyond the sins of slavery and racism.

"Ain't I a Woman?": Black Lesbianism and Selfhood in *Zami*

This chapter presents black female identity in Audre Lord's autobiography *Zami* which is also a biomythography exploring the life and struggle of a black lesbian in a sexist and racist society in the 20th century. *Zami* thus attempts to reveal the silenced and oppressed black lesbian identity. In the work, being black and lesbian, Audre Lorde deconstructs her identity and herself through the autobiography form. She envisions and invites her readers into a space where difference is neither feared nor ignored, but critically examined and embraced. *Zami* represents a specifically black, queer, female sexuality that certainly can connect with community. A female bildungsroman *Zami* traces Lorde's growth and development from a silent little girl to an articulate woman.

Zami tells us that from her childhood, Audre Lorde is different from other black girls in school. She understood the discrimination between the whites and herself as her class was divided between brownies, who were the blacks, and fairies, who were the whites. She never surrenders to this domination. When the school organised an election to select the president and the vice-president among the students, Lorde participated in the election though her mother tries to stop her. She lost but since she made an effort regardless of racism, she never feels bad for her loss. As a teenager Lorde's closest friends were girls, especially the dance student Gennie, the first person she was conscious of loving. She found her soul mate in Gennie with whom she experienced different desires of teenage life and met the first loss of her life when the latter commited suicide. After Gennie's suicide and an affair with a white boy that resulted in a homemade abortion, Lorde found that writing poetry about death, destruction and deep despair was the only activity that made her feel alive. In her high school she met some white and black women who were not racist and these friendships helped her to live open heartedly. She started

writing poetry and her thoughts for poetry came spontaneously. She wanted ‘voluntary aloneness’(83) at home but her mother’s strictness never let her do so. She complained about it to her teacher who was a white woman and who later talked about it with Lorde’s mother. When she saw her mother crying after the conversation with the white teacher, Lorde felt regret because she then understood what it meant to her mother to be insulted by a white woman for not understanding her daughter.

The plot also reveals what makes Lorde turn her interest from a man to a woman. After completing her graduation from a high school and leaving her home she meets Peter, a white guy and starts dating him. At that time she is working as a helper in a medical clinic. They experience sexual intercourse but Audre Lorde never enjoys this. Lord describes heterosexual sex as “grunting” and wonders “why it wasn't possible to just love each other and be warm and close and let the grunting go” (105). Though they finally leave each other, she gets pregnant. This is the most terrifying experience of her life. Peter never knows about his baby and Lorde learns a lesson for life on the dangers of heterosexual love. She has to go through severe pain to abort the baby. After this incident she never has a relationship with any man. After Peter, her partners were only women.

Zami presents Lorde as having many same-sex relationships. With each of them Lorde grows to understand herself more and searches more deeply for an understanding partner. Moreover, these relationships help us understand that a lesbian woman is a normal woman who searches for love and companionship similar to a woman with a heterosexual orientation.In Stamford Lorde gets a job to run X-ray machine where she meets Ginger. The latter is a lesbian and Lorde first has her same-sex relationship with Ginger. Though Lorde is first reluctant to sleep with Ginger but gradually she starts enjoying her company. In the mean time her father

dies of severe stroke and she goes home. At home she feels like a stranger and also feels good to be free from all family bonding. Returning from there she leaves Ginger; though the latter cherishes their relationship, she never considers it very important. After the end of her relationship with Ginger, Lorde moves to Mexico where she meets Bea whom she finds to be a better partner than Ginger. Lorde cannot continue for a long time with Bea and after the end of their relationship Lorde leaves New York for Mexico and starts living in Cuernavaca. There she is helped by Frieda and Eudora. Going to her place, Lorde comes to know that Eudora is also a gay. Interestingly, Lorde calls herself gay but for her Eudora is the first woman she meets who calls herself lesbian. She hates the word 'gay'. Lorde feels that Eudora is the only woman of her life who understands her and loves her. However, it is not revealed in the autobiography why they cannot continue as lovers; Eudora never meets Lorde again. From New York, she again returns to Mexico where she starts working in a village. There she meets Felicia. For Lorde she and Felicia share a separate racial world where they were different from their white sisters. The novel mentions Afrekete as last of Lorde's lovers who also leaves her. Audre then ends the book by meditating on all the women in her life and remembering her mother in the epilogue.

Zami is a continuation of the tradition of black women's life writing. Black women's life writing, such as slave-narratives, have explored the impact of slavery, race, and sexism in black women's life. The slave narratives gave the blacks the opportunity to reveal their consciousness as human being. When the women wrote slave narratives, their writings signify an account of the life and bondage of a black woman. The autobiography *Life and Narrative of Nancy Prince* in 1860s condemns slavery and cherishes black woman's motherhood. In 1861 Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was first devalued and is now accepted with greater of satisfaction. Black women's slave narratives liberate themselves from stereotypical views of

black womanhood and provide a new identity. Autobiography remains one of the most popular genres and enjoy a wide readership. Stover writes in *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography* how Popular autobiography also serves political purposes:

> The power and influence of the black woman's autobiography that emerged out of nineteenth-century America was sociopolitical as well as literary. And of all the literary genres, autobiography is the one that best lends itself to historical as well as literary approaches. As creative nonfiction, autobiography suggests the importance that place and time have on the development of the author; writers of autobiography re-interpret "self" for the reading of others.(4)

Thus, by writing autobiographies, the black women defy every attempt to enslave or diminish them or their self-expression. As individuals, each woman knows she must assert herself and express her point of view to survive. Desiring this freedom of expression can endanger her security, which becomes very prominent in the case of black lesbians who as 'other' to heteronormativity are most often social pariahs.

Lorde realises that black women writings themselves are important acts because no one else will do justice to their story, a view shared by Williams in *Dessa Rose*. Even in many black men's writings, the existence of women and their sufferings were neglected. Works by white like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *Huckleberry Finn*, and by black men like *The Black Boy, Up from Slavery* and *Souls of Black Folk* seldom mention the condition of women during slavery and their role in supporting the cause of black freedom. Lack of credible representations of black women in these early texts helped to establish the terms of engagement for black feminist criticism, highlighting the urgencies, issues, and concerns of African American women writers. Black

women were being silenced both by racism and sexism. Being aware of all these, Audre Lorde in *Zami* not just talks about her life as a lesbian but the life of a black woman from childhood. Her autobiography talks about various women, even white women and their position in society. A major theme for black autobiographers is focusing on the racial authentication of self, and Lorde does so by depicting the sisterhood between black and white women in the world of lesbians.

Writing an African American autobiography, Lorde signals that her narrative will deviate from the traditional path because she invents the genre of biomythography. Biomythography subverts the concept of life-writing as a genre using only facts. If autobiography is accurate, stable and chronological representation of the events, then for Lorde, biomythography refers to the self-conscious act of undermining such conventional dictates. Biomythography at once invokes, interrogates and celebrates the mythic possibilities present within act of myth, dream and history. Writing biomythographically suggests that the autobiography is a unification of "history, historiography, self-reflexivity and creativity" (60), writes Russel. In the words of Caren Kaplan in "Resisting Autobiography: Out- Law genres and Transitional Feminist Subjects", biomythography is an outlaw genre, and it "requires a recognition of layers of meaning, layers of histories, layers of reading and rereading through webs of power charged codes" (212). An important code that Lorde transverses is that of heteronormativity or social view that heterosexual is the only normal for people. Lorde does this with the use of moving beyond physical reality into a spiritual experience which is the realm of myth. In her prologue, she makes it clear that she desires a mythical life of unification with all of creation which is beyond binaries of gender. She wishes to go beyond limitations of gender and writes in *Zami*:"I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/into me to share valleys and mountains upon my body the way the

earth does in hills and peaks" (7). Lorde's *Zami* as biomythography represents the ways in which Lorde perceives the world. Her autobiography is a blend of her history, biography and myth. Lorde believes in presence of myth in her life. In her childhood she was a fat, partially blind, black girl who could not sit with white children in school. She overcomes these weaknesses and by valuing herself, succeeds in replacing them with power and identity. Lorde employs a different structure in her autobiography, interweaving a mythic narrative of self with a narrative of realistic life events.

Lorde's title *Zami* is a Carricaou name. Heather Russel in the book *Legba's Crossing* has mentioned Carole Boyce Davies' opinion that, in the Eastern Carribean,'zami' is conventionally a derogatory term meant to be demeaning (62). The term is an amalgam of the French phrase 'les amies' which means women friends and specifically refers to the community of women who when left by their husbands for long periods to go to sea create a network of friends and lovers among themselves. Davies writes in *Encyclopedia of African Diaspora,* "the integration of ethnic and sexual identities is behind the author's positive appropriation of the Carribean creole word 'zami' for her self-naming: this term is typically a derogatory naming of lesbians, derived from 'les amies' French for friends" (999). By making this phrase her title, Lorde centers zami, a curse used to demean black lesbians, and makes it into a celebration of sisterhood. In Lorde's hands, zami becomes "A Carricou name for women who work together as friends and lovers" (14) and she celebrates ideas of blackness and lesbian sisterhood. For Lorde, zami signifies a woman thoroughly suffused with eroticism. Lorde describes them as survivors—women who can live without men because they can love and depend on each other. Thus, zami, comes to mean an alternative way of life that helps women grow and survive.

Furthermore, Lorde mythologizes “Carriacou”. She imbues it with an magical aura. She posits “Carriacou” to be “a magic name” that contains spice and sweetness “like cinnamon, nutmeg, mace” and “the delectable little squares of guava jelly”(14). She conflates ‘zami’ and ‘carriacou’ and reverses the dominant signification of lesbianism as bad women in a heteronormative culture. Instead, lesbian women, like Lorde, who are zami and carriacou become unique beings with magic, spice and sweetness in their lives. Lorde’s rewriting of Carriacou from an ethnicity to a strong subject identity suggests that in using biomythography, Lorde is not presenting the self-story as a separate construct; instead she emphasises the relationship between the self and the world—the subjective, the social and the cultural.

Lorde has written her autobiography through myth-making in order to imply the idea that autobiography is not always a personal story of someone. This myth making process changes the confessional nature of self authorisation. She herself explains in an interview with Claudia Tate, “biomythography has the elements biography and history of myth. In other words, it’s fiction built from many sources. This is one way of expanding our vision” (99). Autobiography has the tendency to focus on one’s plight, but myth-making is concerned about more than the self; her biomythography suggests the collective representation of self in an oppressing world. For example, Lorde does not simply focus on the black lesbian but includes the general condition of black women in her biomythography. She knows from history how black women are facing oppression and feels the necessity of bringing in these issues.

Furthermore, race is crucial in understanding relation of power between white and black, evident in black women’s historical and autobiographical writings such as slave narratives, and its contemporary revisitation in neo-slave narratives as explored in *Dessa Rose* in the previous chapter. During slavery women bodies were exploited, tortured, commodified in every possible

way. Their bodies tell many untold stories. The slaves were chained, made to hold bit in their mouth, wear collar of shackles round their neck and were whipped for any kind of failure to satisfy their masters. The marks on their body carry the marks of their owners. Both these visible and invisible marks of the slave women are described in black women's literature. However, speaking of slavery get a relative social sanction after Civil Rights; speaking of the black female body experiencing a desire and closeness with another female body becomes socially unacceptable practice. This silencing of black women by heteronormativity again puts the black body—now the lesbian black body—at the centre of oppression. As the female slave narrative does with slave women, what is needed is another form of life writing which can emphasise the lesbian 'I' and help the lesbian voice speak its identity.

Zami carves out a unique place in African-American literature as the first full length autobiographical work by an established black lesbian writer. The text pictures the journey of a woman and a poet reading the pieces of self and racial identity. In this book relationship between women are at the center of the work. Lorde continuously explores the implication of being a black lesbian and she has an overt consciousness about her lesbianism. She does not define lesbians as a problem. Despite homophobia and her isolation from other black women because she is a gay, leading to loneliness, Lorde assumes that her lesbianism like her blackness is a given fact of life which she neither has to justify nor explain. Lorde explains her bonding with her friends whom she terms 'gay-girls' in the following manner:

> Being gay-girls without set roles was the one difference we allowed ourselves to see and to bind us to each other. We were not of that other world and we wanted to believe that, by definition, we were therefore free of that other world's problems of capitalism, greed, racism, classism, etc. This was not so. But we

> continued to visit each other and eat together and, in general, share our lives and resources, as if it were. (205)

Here, Lorde is revising the negative impression of the word ‘gay’ signifying homosexuality in popular parlance. In this extract from Lorde’s text, ‘gay’ becomes being away from ‘set-roles’ or freedom from stereotypical female sexuality. These ‘gay-girls’ want to be away from social evils and that show their strength of character. Hence difference becomes a form of positive identity. Because of her sexual difference and colour Lorde becomes the victim many times but she strongly and confidently faces everything. These ‘gay girls’ are part of Lorde’s past and the realistic episodes of ‘visiting, eating and sharing lives’ remain side by side in the narrative with Lorde’s desire for spiritual oneness with all creation, which is one form of myth-making. This illustrates that Lorde has fused her life story with myth using characters, including herself. She depicts how the life of a lesbian need not be an isolated one and can be connected with other similar lives.

Lorde uses her biomythography as a vision to unite and invite its readers into a different world of women. Her work serves to illustrate both the power of bias in society and also reveals that power not be an absolute one. Here we find similarity between Lorde and Michele Wallace. Wallace has defined black women’s life in her *Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* as an American myth. Wallace describes how American culture forces black women into the mandatory role of the ‘superwoman’ who can tolerate any kind of injustice and still serve:

> Through the intricate web of mythology which surrounds the black woman, a fundamental image emerges. It is of a woman of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work.

> This woman does not have the same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities as other women, but believes herself to be and is, in fact, stronger emotionally than most men. Less of a woman in that she is less "feminine" and helpless, she is really more of a woman in that she is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life giving, and nurturing reserves. In other words, she is a superwoman. (107)

Lorde finds ways to use the device of myth to break down this myth of the black woman and makes her a flesh and blood creature. *Zami* is the text that, despite Audre's reputation as a poet, defines her status in feminist criticism. It is one of her best writings where Lorde's self positioning as a black lesbian comes through. Her use of biomythography uplifts the subject of her autobiography and makes the readers aware of the lesbian women who face oppression, perhaps more than other black women.

Lorde's autobiography chooses activism with the help of biomythography. Lorde uses the autobiographical 'I' to describe herself, but at the same time, she never concentrates on only her own life story. She has gained the 'whole-self' view through experiences with others who represent different aspects of life. Lorde gathers strength from her solidarity with others who experience the same type of oppressions that were imposed on her. Using the "I" in her autobiography she speaks to the world beyond her personal values. Her subjective "I" breaks down midway as she includes different stories of her companions. Smith and Watson's "A History of Autobiography Criticism" discusses what French expatriate Luc Santé writes in *The Factory of Facts* about autobiographical 'I', ""I" as an effect of the constellation of objects in particular moments of everyday life" (131). Similarly, the 'I' in *Zami* does not refer narrowly to a particular and recent type of narrative account. The 'I' in her autobiography wishes to discuss

broadly everything the author experiences. While writing an autobiography the first person voice is a necessity and sometimes the author uses 'I' to express regret for personal limitations which is not the case in *Zami*. *Zami* not only generates a discursive self but also creates an entire world understood, spoken and legitimated by that self. Lorde uses the biomythography through the first person voice to display and create a discourse regarding the extraordinary idea of sisterhood, and to simultaneously find an alternative to the exploitative process of sexist society.

As a biomythography, Lorde's narrative breaks the linear form; it is deceptively linear and chronological, but she interrupts the narratological flow with italicised passage that appear to be narrated in dream time, employing a hybrid prose-poetic form. Through her use of italics and different narrative form, Lorde rejects specific codes and convention of so called authentic representation. She starts her autobiography using italic letters saying, "*To whom do I owe the power behind my voice, what strength I have become, yeasting up like sudden blood from under the bruised skin's blister?*" (3). Moreover, she many times writes her name in block letters like, "I used to love the evenness of AUDRE LORDE at four years of age" (24) and also "I bent my head down close to the desk that smelled like old spittle and rubber erasers, and on that ridiculous yellow paper with those laughably wide spaces I printed my best AUDRE" (25). The strategy of biomythography focuses on the process of gaining a different self which focuses on the mythical aspect of one's existence or life.

The practice of validating and celebrating the self through autobiography is usually traced back to St. Augustine and his *Confessions of Sin and Salvation; Zami* does not follow this trend. When Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote his own *Confessions* between 1764 and 1770, he followed the pattern established by Augustine and used the act of telling his life as an opportunity to unburden his soul. In *Zami* Lorde's confession suggest not the redemption of soul but making the

world aware of the struggles of a black woman. In this regard Natalie Perfetti Oates writes in "A Community of Difference: Confession and Queer Sexual Agency in Zami", "confession in an intimate and unapologetic presentation of the self. Her confessions in *Zami* reveals how she creates and is in turn created by the queer community of women around her**"** (210).

In her autobiography remembrance is a form of politics, as is telling of it. What is remembered and what is forgotten depends upon her major concerns and what she wants to express. So history, personal and collective memory is constantly being written, revised and rewritten to show what Leigh Gilmore says as mentioned in Echano's "Somewhere between Puerto Rico and New York", "there are struggles over who is authorised to remember and what they are authorised to remember, struggles over what is forgotten, both personally and collectively(125). Lorde remembers particularly those events of her life where her family is oppressed for being black. She writes how her mother could not continue her job for her colour. She writes, "When the owner saw him, he realised my mother was Black and fired her on the spot" (9). Lorde and her family once went for an outing and wanted to have ice-cream but the waitress denied them to serve in the hotel. Lorde writes, "The waitress moved along the line of us closer to my father and spoke again. "I said I kin give you to take out, but you can't eat here. Sorry." Then she dropped her eyes looking very embarrassed, and suddenly we heard what it was she was saying all at the same time, loud and clear" (70). She discusses purposefully her life a victim of racism. She is a black lesbian and *Zami* narrates her experience as someone homosexual but first and foremost she is a black woman who could not have a normal life for her colour. She had to go through such bitter experiences from her school life and she narrates some of them as:

> At St. Catherine's School, the Sisters of Charity were downright hostile. Their racism was unadorned, unexcused, and particularly painful because I was unprepared for it. I got no help at home. The children in my class made fun of my braids, so Sister Victoire, the principal, sent a note home to my mother asking her to comb my hair in a more "becoming" fashion, since I was too old, she said, to wear "pigtails. (59-60)

Lorde, her family and other people of colour every time had to be victims of racism which made each of their life a struggle. She never attains and achieves anything in life smoothly without any problem. *Zami* asks the question why is it so difficult for the people of colour to lead a 'normal' life.

In most of the cases autobiography can counter some of the damaging effects of such experiences. The autobiography becomes a place that can keep crucial memories safe. In such case, remembering becomes piecing together of the fragmented narrative of life. Individuals exists as subjective and communal identity and so writing a life story sometime reveals the neglected connections among self, community and identity. In *Zami,* one important aspect is showing these connections. Lorde asks the readers to go beyond racial hatred and find commonalities with other women, even white as she did with fellow lesbians:

> Always before, the few lesbians I had known were women whom I had met within other existing contexts of my life. We shared some part of a world common to us both-school or work or poetry or some other interest beyond our sexual identity. Our love for women was a fact that became known only after we were already acquainted and connected through some other reason .(196)

Lorde in this quote simply describes these women as lesbians instead of black or white. In the plot we come to know that these women come from different worlds; however, the commonality of their choices of loving women help them connect beyond other parameters of their self and identity. Lorde's bitter experiences of racism changes when she establishes bonds with white women and finds a different world of sisterhood that is beyond race.

In *Zami,* Lorde locates herself in a world which does not want to accept a woman like her. In an influential essay, Barbara Smith points to a relative dearth of positive discussions about being black and lesbian. She indicates the desires of lesbian women of colour for role models who could guide them; Barbara Smith calls for foremothers vociferously in "Toward a Black feminist Criticism" : "I finally want to express how much easier both my waking and my sleeping hours would be if there were one book in existence that would tell me something specific about my life. One book based in Black feminist and Black lesbian experience" (173). The lesbian women of America have to undergo triple oppression as they are women, black and homosexual.

Although these are issues that black feminists consider as important, Audre Lorde is a pioneer who breaks the silence surrounding them. She from her school life rebels against the hegemony of whites. She starts her autobiography with an experience where a white woman refuses to take her help; for this white woman, the blacks are invisible and bell hook also says the same thing in "Representation of Whiteness", "except as a pair of hands offering a drink on a silver tray" (168). *Zami* protest against this white gaze that makes blacks like Lorde invisible. The novel posits Lorde's lesbian sisterhood with Eudora whose loving gaze makes Lorde into a person. This makes Lorde "feel like she [Eudora] was the first person who had ever looked at me, ever seen who I was. And not only did she see me, she loved me, thought me beautiful"

(173). Eudora's love gives her a new life. This experience makes her cherish her existence and also her sexuality. With Eudora's love, Lorde no longer feels helpless for being a black.

Racism plays a large role in the time and place of the narrative. Furthermore, prejudice occurs not only in mainstream culture, but queer culture as well. Muriel, though a white tells Audre , "seemed to believe that as lesbians, we were all outsiders and all equal in our outsider hood. "We're all niggers," she used to say, and I hated to hear her say it" (203). Despite these issues, lesbians in *Zami* are seen crossing racial boundaries in a time when such behaviour was largely considered taboo. According to Lorde, 'lesbians were probably the only Black and white women in New York City in the fifties who were making any real attempt to communicate with each other' (179). These gay-girls not only engage in interracial sex, but hold intellectual discussions, offer emotional support, open their homes, and, in the case, of Audre and Muriel, make lives together across racial lines. In *Zami*, Lorde uses her queer sexual agency to give rise to communities that across borders of difference:

> It was not that I didn't have friends, and good ones. There was a loose group of young lesbians, white except for Flee and I, who hung out together, apart from whatever piece of the straight world we each had a separate place in. We not only believed in the reality of sisterhood, that word which was to be so abused two decades later, but we also tried to put it into practice, with varying results. (179)

She felt proud to live in a community where the women enjoy sisterhood without thinking about their colour. In their little world, which is separate from the mainstream world, these women enjoy more liberty and space so they can think and act freely.

Lorde's sexual agency is not predicated on acting out her queer sexuality, but rather on giving rise to a community that reaches across borders of difference. Indeed, this agency challenges boundaries not only in terms of race, but in terms of class and sexuality as well. Lorde experiences relations with different women of different status and colour. Indeed, throughout *Zami* the names of characters come and go, some reappearing at the end, some becoming central to the narrative, and some disappearing altogether. However, a discernible network of women does emerge:

> There was Dottie and Pauli, two skinny blonde artists from our neighborhood whom we met at Laurel's; Bea and Lynn, her new girl; Phyllis, who wanted to be an architect, but only talked about it when she was drunk; and, of course, there was Felicia, my adopted little sister, as I called her, and the only other Black woman in our group. Together, we formed a loosely knit, emotionally and socially interdependent set, sharing many different interests, some overlapping. (203)

In both her essays and poetry, Lorde focuses readily on the importance of community; she continually wrote about the different people that had come in and go out of her life. Lorde worked to bring together her different communities, and in that union, created a black lesbian community for countless women who were in need of coalition. Lorde changes her partners so many times which enables her to understand her actual desire. Her experiences with different women impacts her life and she learns different lesson of life from different women. She thus forms a community of lesbian which is more than having physical pleasure.

To be a black lesbian in America poses a particular set of challenge. Their sexual orientations or sexual practice differ from mainstream heterosexuals and so they often take great pains to hide their sexual identity. For black women, to reveal same-sex desire is a volatile act within the Black community. In *Theorizing Black feminism,* Busia writes about black lesbians as alienated figures in the community and even among black feminists. She says, “anger has been a critical trope for me, a black woman, ex slave, poet lesbian trafficking among enemies. During the early days of 1980s, I felt myself and other black lesbians many times being ‘cancelled out’ as feminists” (220). So in *Zami,* Lorde describes thinking she and her friend were the only black lesbians in New York Greenwich Village: “it seemed that loving women was something that the other black women just didn’t do. And if they did, it was in some fashion and in some place that was totally inaccessible to us, because we could never find them” (179). Wallace suggests that, regarding black lesbianism, “we have a situation in which black women’s sexuality is ideologically located in a nexus between race and gender, where the black female subject is not seen and has no voice” (308). Fitzer writes in “Audre Lorde's Expansive Influence on Black Lesbians” that Lorde realises when black lesbians choose to hide aspects of their identity out of the fear of not being accepted, the horrifying result is silence. Furthermore, when African-American lesbians silence themselves, they are rendered powerless (4). Lorde writes in *Sister Outsider*: “We have been socialised to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us"(44). Audre Lorde’s *Zami* protests that silence. Her biomythography highlights the silent black lesbian experience. Lorde by breaking the silence has inspired the individual black woman to create work that can connect to those black women who are unaware of their rights.

There are specific examples of black women like Barbara Smith, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Angelina Weld Grimke, Becky Birtha and others who did not conform to heterosexist expectations during 20th century. By the 1920s, Harlem, especially had become a focal point for black culture, politics and social life. Black gay men, lesbians, and bisexual played important roles in the intellectual and artistic movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. Some particular blue songs of that period made specific reference to 'mannish' woman who went with other woman. These songs indicate that lesbians and gay men were a visible part of the urban culture. Histories confirm that most black lesbians formed their own social networks in which house parties played a vital role. In *Zami* also we see Lorde and her friends arranging get together to have intellectual discussion and also to know each other more closely:

> One evening coming home from work I ran into Nicky and Joan on Houston Street and invited them home to dinner on the spot. There was only $1.50 in my pocket and no food in the house. We stopped off in the market on First Avenue and bought a pound of extra-thin spaghetti, some fresh parsley, half a pound of chicken hearts, and a packet of powdered milk. With the other seventy-five cents I bought a huge bunch of daffodils and we all had a fine dinner, although I forget what we were celebrating. Because we were always celebrating something, a new job, a new poem, a new love, a new dream. (205)

They share their experience whether good or bad, their dream, their feelings about anything with each other. They create their own lesbian world as they are considered outsider by other.

Audre Lorde reveals her anxiety for being a black and a gay. Her encounter with white women are infused with anxieties about her own blackness. In Mexico when she shares room

with a white woman Rhea she writes, “it was at times difficult and new-learning to live with Rhea, learning to share space with anyone, and a white woman, too, especially since I had no deep emotional bonds with her, only warm and casual pleasantries” (148). She is supposed to suppress all her desires in order to fit in a society in which her blackness is unaccepted. Finding the United States intolerable, Lorde sets out to explore an alternative world of brownness in Mexico that celebrates sensuality in eating and living. In Mexico she feels free to live her life. She succeeds in making relationship with different women whether white or black. Muriel becomes her soul sister and they both start living their life fully. There in the lesbian community Lorde seeks and encounters sisterhood and unity in relationship. Their lives indicate the limits imposed on black women, which take a psychological toll on them. Lorde says, “I had had tastes of what job-hunting was like for unskilled Black women … I wanted to be free enough to know and do what I wanted to do. I wanted not to shake when I got angry or cry when I got mad” (215). *Zami* is telling the story of a black lesbian who faces all kinds of social barriers from her childhood. In school, she never gets equal importance like the whites and in finding job again, she faces racism. When she goes to Mrs. Kelly for job the latter says to her, “You know, dear, there's not too much choice of jobs around here for Colored people” (125) . There were very few job opportunities for the black so Audre Lorde has to compromise in selection of her work.

Zami shows that forming lesbian groups, the women created a new practice of ‘lesbian bar culture’. According to lesbian history, the lesbian bar culture was an important public arena for creation of a lesbian community. In this regard Davis and Kennedy argue in “ Oral History and the Study of Sexuality” :

> The public bar community was a formative predecessor to the modern gay liberation movement. These bars not only was essential meeting places with

> distinctive cultures and mores but they were also the central arena for the lesbian confrontation with a hostile world. Participants in bar life were engaged in a constant, often violent, struggle for public space. Their dress code announced them as lesbian to the neighbors, to strangers, on the streets, and of course to all who entered the bars. (16)

Significantly, in the 1950s, lesbian bar culture was a white working class place and many bars did not include black lesbians. *Zami* overturns this discrimination and we find Lorde several times spending time with her friends in bars; she meets her girlfriend Muriel, a white woman, in a bar. As written in *Zami,* bar became a gathering place where the gays or lesbians could come together. For some, it became a perfect place to stay away from certain restraint present in home or society. Lorde says in the novel, "the bars on weekends were a ritual of togetherness that I only came to fully understand years later when I was tired of being alone. Every Friday night, it was the same" (206). The bar culture provided lesbians like Lorde with companions in their isolation.

Zami then focuses on the tribulations black lesbians face and suggests that a loving sisterhood of women is an important need for such women to survive. Since the growth of lesbian and gay liberation in the early 1970s, black lesbian lives have become much more visible and black lesbians have made significant contributions to the lesbian, gay, women and black feminist movement. Black lesbians were among the first African American women to critique the sexual oppression of black women. In her autobiography, Lorde records the difficulty of charting an individual path in an environment that imposes limitation on black women. She says, "Most Black lesbians were closeted … It was hard enough to be Black, to be Black and female,

to be Black, female, and gay" (224). She also mentions that the lesbians should not be 'othered'; they also want the same love and support from the society:

> Each one of us had been starved for love for so long that we wanted to believe that love, one found, was all powerful. We wanted to believe that it could give word to my inchoate pain and rages; that it could enable Muriel to face the world and get a job; that it could free our writings, cure racism, end homophobia and adolescent acne. (210)

Thus, Lorde suggests that black lesbian women seek lesbian sisterhood not simply because they desire physical love with another women; they need the sisterhood to share common feelings of desolation and loneliness. The society hostile to the lesbians very often compel them to choose this life.

That the larger society suppressing lesbian voices is very evident from the difficulties Lorde faced in publishing *Zami*. Black autobiographies recording black lives were seldom easily published. The narratives written by escaped slaves or later work penned by a black women in nineteenth-century America was rarely accepted at face value by the dominant white society; it had to be authenticated by white voices at the time of its publication through attached letters or introductory statements. Even so, many valuable autobiographical works that black women produced were undervalued and overlooked, lying dormant for years until they were rediscovered. Lorde's book, even in 20th century, was turned away by at least a dozen publishers, including one that specialises in gay titles. It could be inferred that the combination of black and lesbian was obviously too much for the publishers to handle. This supports Audre Lorde's

narrative that records the difficulty of being a black lesbian in an environment that imposes many obstacles.

Zami is a beautiful autobiography of her childhood and adulthood. From the vivid childhood memories in Harlem to her coming of age in the late 1950s, the nature of Lorde's work is cyclical. It covers many themes but mainly focuses on the close bonds she develops with women throughout her life. Her race, gender and sexuality were all rejected by society at large. Moreover, the women activists of this period completely ignore the black lesbians or are actively hostile to them. In society, the black lesbians were seen as pariah and this forced many black women to grow a persona that was not conducive to female bonding as Lorde writes:

> To be Black, female, gay, and out of the closet in a white environment, even to the extent of dancing in the Bagatelle, was considered by many Black lesbians to be simply suicidal. And if you were fool enough to do it, you'd better come on so tough that nobody messed with you. I often felt put down by their sophistication, their clothes, their manners, their cars, and their femmes. (224)

From this point of view, it is remarkable that Lorde who grew up in the 40s, 50s and 60s could penetrate the "tough" and form a community of interracial friends who were lesbians.

Audre Lorde also reveals her experience and feeling as a black lesbian in her poems. She talks about black female body and lesbian desire in her poetry. She believes that women poets can express in poetry their true knowledge and social activism. In her conversation with Marion Kraft, Lorde says that her poetry is the strongest expression of making, identifying and using her own power. Poetry is a way of living for her. She defines herself in as "a black lesbian feminist warrior poet mother" (146). Her various essays in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* also

articulate her aspirations regarding black women and lesbians. In the essay "Poetry is not Luxury", she says that there is a vast gap between the white male poet and black women poet because women writing poetry is often seen as a fashion or luxury, which is wrong:

> For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. (37)

Lorde here describes poetry and by extension, other forms of writings by black women as central to their identity formation. Black lesbians as marginalised women coin language to express their revolutionary thought and demand for freedom. Significantly, Lorde charts the path to activism as beginning in women's writing. Only when the revolutionary thought is pushed and shaped in language, can it become a practicable idea? Only a practicable idea, communicated to many, can become a movement? So she breaks down the boundaries between writing as thought given expression and activism as thought given action, and shows them as indelibly connected, being part of a process. Thus, she emphasises the importance of poetry in the lives of women. In her another essay "Transformation of Silence" Lorde discusses the potentiality of raising voice. She explains that silence cannot bring freedom for the marginalised women:"my silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you" (41). It is not only her autobiography *Zami* that talks about the crisis women experience, but her every writing reflects the black women issues.

Lorde's writings tell the marginalised females not to remain silent, she makes every attempt through her writings to make the women aware about their identity. She experienced the oppression but her writings never appear as grumbling over something but as protest against it. In "Sister Outsider" she again writes:

> Tell them about how you're never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there's always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don't speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside. (42)

Moving from silence to speech makes a new life and a new growth. Speaking is an act of resistance. Since black woman is silenced, black lesbian is doubly silenced. We see writers like Kimbly Wallace writing in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture* "the historical narrative that dominates discussion of Black female sexuality does not address even the possibility of black lesbian sexuality, or of a lesbian or queer subject" (311). Black women are always silenced as they are considered the 'other' regardless their sexual identities and practice. Lorde's *Zami* breaks this silence by depicting both the issue of racism and lesbianism. She considers it important to use her voice and also suggests the same to other black women.

Zami focuses on language as a means of oppression and so she rewrites the black lesbian identity as zami to mean a positive identity. For marginalised communities such as black lesbians, language is used in a derogatory manner and becomes a form of subjugation. Black women or black lesbians are called either niggers and dykes by the whites, so Lorde gives them a

new name which revises this humiliation. In Caribbean language 'zami' derogatorily suggests group of women who love each other, and Lorde has revived that concept in her biomythography and made it into a positive act. She boldly explains her experiences as a lesbian and using such an undignified term for herself, she challenges the mainstream society's view of the lesbians. Using such a title for her autobiography, she is highlighting Caribbean women who love the company of women; she is also challenging white America's humiliating terms for the blacks and lesbians.

That *Zami* is an important work is evident from the presence of countless women from the black community who have paid tribute to Lorde, both before and after her death, for helping them break their silences stemming from multiple oppression. Lorde has spoken to and encouraged many women from various backgrounds; however, her influence has extended most readily to the black lesbian community. Lorde's far-reaching impact is illustrated in the works of black lesbians Jewelle Gomez, Cheryl, Clarke, and Kate Rushin. Inspired by Lorde's life and work, these women challenge through their poetry and prose the conflicts associated with the triple oppression. Kate Rushin, an admirer of Audre Lorde, chooses to speak for all African-American lesbians as mentioned in Fitzer's "Audre Lorde's Expansive Influence on Black Lesbians" :

> Audre made a space, cleared a space for us that has never existed before ... especially, she made a space for Black lesbians, a space that has never existed in the history of the world ... We've been blessed to have her imprint on our lives. And best of all, because of her, we have each other. (15)

Zami, then, is a personal story of struggle and pain in a world driven by myths of white heteronormativity.

Moreover, *Zami* not only features a strong sense of community, it is also a text that itself constructs a community. The sexual agency of women of colour envisioned in this autobiography constitutes the creation of a community of difference. Audre Lorde's sexual agency in *Zami* is based on her interaction with others and the text highlights the rise of the gay-girl group in America. Lorde lives with multiple identities—black, female, lesbian, poet, activist and sister to all black women and lesbians, black and white. She embraces all these identities and suggest the others to do the same. Lorde becomes an inspiration for the black lesbians who learn to live life whole-heartedly; through her work, black lesbians have found that in suppressing the erotic, lesbians are suppressing a part of who they are.

Protesting Sexism: Gender Oppression in *Song of Solomon*

This chapter on *Song of Solomon* attempts to do a feminist study. It moves away from the predominant critical trend of considering the novel as an exposition on Milkman, the male protagonist; instead it presents how identity is often times connoted differently by black men and women, and how men and women have differential access to cultural narratives of identity. The protagonist Milkman, who initially chases the American Dream of material prosperity, later enjoys the privilege of searching for and understanding the history of his community because he is a man—a process of self-knowledge his society denies to the female members of his family. However, the novel posits other ways of knowing available to the women of his family, especially his aunt who is always connected to her family history through her songs and her dreams. The contesting fates of men and women in the novel become a tool to show the subordination of women and the need for bonding among black women in a sexist society.

To reinforce the complexity of black identity, the novel centers the black myth of Flying Africans that emerged during slavery and evaluates its relevance to the post-bellum life of black Americans. This use of myth and also a scepticism towards it can be read as a postmodern strategy to explore if the past can be adopted to serve the present. The novel also uses the postmodern strategy of black signifying to suggest the complexity of black identity, inherent in the idea of double consciousness, and presented in the novel through characters fascination for white power. Thus, Morrison projects the dilemma and double consciousness of the black in 20th century as they experience the complications of race, search for their own identity mediated by race and gender and yearn to adopt the security that comes with white men's cultural identity.

Morrison's *Song of Solomon* has predominantly been written as the male protagonist's quest for roots. Most of the writings on this novel deal with Milkman's journey to know the history of his community. Morrison's critic Mills has mentioned that Critic like A. Leslie Harris considers that Milkman can be compared to the classic mythic heroes. He sees in Milkman heroism like the mythic figures who are powerful and courageous (316). The novel even has been considered a bildungsroman for the male protagonist Milkman's growing up from an ignorant boy to an aware person of his racial heritage. Cynthia A. Davis in the article "Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction" praising Milkman writes that Milkman completes his heroic mission as his life follows the pattern of the classic hero. He has restored the name of their family and recovered their song (333). Milkman's search for roots is seen as important because this proves his masculinity. Critics who emphasise the deeds of Milkman ignore the role of women in his life. For example, Hogue's *Race, Modernity, Post-modernity* also centers round Milkman's development and heroism:

> At the center of *Song of Solomon* is the sojourn of a young protagonist, Milkman Dead, who, at the age of thirty, is alienated and still lacks social identification. Approaching his thirtieth birthday, Milkman, a modern subject who needs a temporal unification between the past and the future in the present, realizes that he is fragmented, that he lacks wholeness, that he does not know who he is. Looking in the mirror, he becomes cognizant of the fact that his face lacks "coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self." Until this moment in his life, Milkman has lived a careless, uniformed, and haphazard life. He is selfish, self centered, and spoiled. (31)

For some critics Milkman becomes the only important figure of the novel who brings back the narratives of the Flying Africans. His journey is deemed important without considering the role of other characters in his life. These readings ignore that Milkman's search for roots is not for the community but for his own upliftment and his heroism does not depend upon his goodness. He is never interested in the development of his people. The opportunity to know the root of his family or to learn the art of flying comes to him and he does not have to struggle for it.

Though Morrison considers Milkman the hero of the novel, her woman characters play vital role behind his success. It is Pilate's magical potion that ensures Ruth Milkman's conception as his father Macon Dead no more shows any interest in Ruth. Moreover he grows up cared by Ruth and Pilate and by the sacrifices made by his sisters Magdalene and Corinthians. He is loved by his cousin Hagar but never considers her seriously. While the women around Milkman shower love on him, his father uses him as a product to increase his earning. His achievement and heroism come about because of the women in his life. But when the critics celebrate Milkman's success they pay no attention to the role these women play in his life. So even though Milkman is considered the hero, he is totally indifferent towards his family and relatives. Harry Reed writes supporting this view in "Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* and Black Cultural Nationalism" saying:

> While Milkman is central to the resolution of the dense thematic thrust of *Song of Solomon*, his quest is buttressed by his female relationships. The fluid constellations of black women loving him, supporting him, guiding him and even rejecting him confirm the nurturing aspects of black life. Milkman is generally unconcerned about his effect on the females in his life. He neither knows about nor cares about the sacrifices they make to keep him whole and healthy. He

> accepts without question his mother's protection, but he cannot reciprocate when she needs support. (54)

Milkman appears to be very selfish and in this respect not heroic at all. He takes the women's love for him as a right and exploits his lover Hagar. Hence, though he is the protagonist of the novel, he represents the sexist society.

The plot of the novel tells us that *Song of Solomon* explores the black desire for cultural identity. The story is based on African American folktale about enslaved Africans who escaped slavery by flying back to Africa. In the novel it is the story of Milkman Dead, a young man who searches for his cultural and historical root and learns that he belongs to the flying community of Africa. He at first was an inactive person like his surname but with the help of his aunt Pilate and best friend Guiter Bains, Milkman embarks on a journey to search the root of his community and makes his life productive. Pilate is another important character of the novel who from the beginning has knowledge about her family; in her dream, she is always connected to her dead father who was killed by white men. Pilate is a very vibrant character who inspires the other female characters of the novel and refuses to be oppressed by any man. She and her family live without the presence of any male members and it is always Pilate who helps Milkman's mother stand for herself against her brutal husband. Other female characters, Milkman's mother Rufel and her two daughters, represent the victims of patriarchal society who in spite of having abilities, do not have the opportunity to prove themselves.

Milkman's father Macon Dead and her sister ran away after their father Jake was murdered by the whites for protecting his land. After some disagreement between them they both separated their way but finally both set up in Michigan though never talk to each other. Pilate has

become a poor but strong and independent woman. She lives with her daughter Reba and grand-daughter Hagar. On the other hand Macon Dead's family is consisted of his wife Ruth, two daughters Magdalene and Corinthians and the son Milkman. While women in the Dead family, Ruth and her daughters, are oppressed by both the male characters Macon and Milkman, Pilate and her companions live their lives independently without any oppression.

Milkman is cherished by the women characters in his life. He enjoys the love and importance from all. He begins a relationship with his cousin Hagar but cannot continue. His betrayal compels Hagar to commit suicide. On the other hand, he has a close knit friendship with Guiter. Guitar eventually confides that he is a member of Seven Days Society, a group of blacks who kill whites as an act of revenge, but Milkman is never interested in joining him in spite of being part of a family that has undergone white oppression. Milkman leaves for Virginia, located in American South, and discovers his family history that is passing on from generation to generation through a form of song. It is revealed that Milkman's great grandfather is the legendary Solomon, who flew back to Africa in order to escape slavery. As a result of his departure Solomon leaves behind his wife Ryna and their twenty one children. Solomon's son Jake comes to be raised by Heddy, an Indian woman who also has a daughter by the name of Singing Bird. Once grown Jake and Singing Bird flee north on a Wagon full of free slaves. So Milkman is a member of a family who has the ability to fly. The plot indicates that finally he also learns the special skill of his community.

American South holds an important place in black memory. During slavery the Southern part of America was the main destination of millions of African people transported from Africa. Southern slavery destroyed the black family. Among slaves—husbands and wives, children and parents—were to be separated and sold away according to the financial needs or at the whims of

their owners. By the 1830s, slavery was abolished in North and only in South it existed. Many authors have described how in Southern plantation slaves were tortured. Their backs were torn up by whipping and washed down with solutions of salt and red pepper to extend and intensify the pain. Many Southern states made it a crime for slaves to learn reading and learning. However, in spite of slavery, blacks survived and formed communities. Madhu Dubey "Even some fiction might be useful: African American women novelists" writes about slavery in South: "the South is represented as the site of cultural ancestry and memory. This emphasis on historical continuity must have seemed urgently necessary at a time when past traditions, and especially those associated with the racially oppressive history of the South, were being disavowed in the interests of political change"(160-161). The slaves considered South as their ancestral home and North as a the promised land of opportunity.

Milkman's ancestors were in South but his grandfather Jake drove to North a wagonload of slaves with Sing the woman he married later. The novel does not talk about Milkman's ancestors' experience of slavery in the South; it speaks about his grandfather's experience of racism in North, disabusing us of the myth that the North was the land of freedom for the blacks. Milkman's grandfather—the First Macon Dead—was killed by some white folk who wanted to occupy his property. He was a very good farmer; he grew peach tree, could slaughter hog and roast wild turkey; he could even sing like angel. He even owned the best farm in Montour Country which changed the lives of his family members. But this very land became the target of the whites. He was a confident and brave person who always had faith in himself and his community. He asked his people to move beyond victimhood and earn like him:

> Stop picking around the edges of the world. Take advantage, and if you can't take advantage, take disadvantage. We live here. On this planet, in this country

> right here. Nowhere else! We got a home in this rock, don't you see! Nobody starving in my home; nobody crying in my home, and if I got a home You got one too! Grab it. Grab this land! Take it, hold it my brother, make it, my brothers, shake it, squeeze it, turn it, twist it, break it, kick it, kiss it, whip it, stomp it, dig it, plow it, seed it, reap it, rent it, buy it, sell it, own it, build it, multiply it, and pass it on- can you hear me? Pass it on! (235)

Morrison peppers Macon Dead's language with strong verbs and shows his confidence as a person. However Macon Dead could not sustain his success as the whites were jealous of him. The whites shot him dead and took away his land. His children were deprived of their inheritance. Circe, the midwife, hid them in her house to protect them from the whites. But when the children Senior Macon Dead and Pilate started their journey alone they also took part in racism as revenge for their father's death. Macon killed a white man just for nothing suggesting that unless the discourse and system of racism can be changed, the cycle of hatred and oppression will continue. He was a powerless black, who gained a sense of power on finding a weak old white man alone, an incident that shows how Morrison blurs the line between power and powerlessness, refusing to portray the blacks as absolute victims. Rather in this episode, Senior Macon Dead just comes across as a troubled person who perpetuates racism by perpetuating the cycle of violence.

The novel shows a black man's search for belonging through American Dream. The idea of American Dream is connected to American Declaration of Independence which asserts that all men have the right to fulfill themselves. The phrase was coined by James Truslow Adams in 1931 and through it Adams argues, as discussed by Schneiderman in the introduction to Adam's book, that life should be "better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each

according to ability or achievement" (6) regardless of social class or circumstances of birth. In time, American Dream came to mean financial success and consumer culture which the whites had and the blacks were denied. Though the novel presents the failure of the American Dream due to racism in case of First Macon Dead, Senior Macon Dead achieves his version of the American Dream. With his hardwork and zeal, he finally becomes a rich black man in Michigan who owns even a car. He is passionate like his father in earning success but he follows the whites and also attempts to be like them. The novel through his character examines the reality of North a promised land for the Blacks. Morrison shows that North became a place where blacks sought power through financial success. In doing so, they forget their own culture and becomes trapped in ideas of inferiority. Macon Dead using his presence of mind does the same:

> He knew as a Negro he wasn't going to get a big slice of the pie. But there were properties nobody wanted yet, or little edges of property somebody didn't want Jews to have, or Catholics to have, or properties nobody knew were of any value yet. There was quite a bit of pie filling oozing around the edge of the crust in 1945. Filling that could be his. (63)

He is smart enough to establish himself as a successful businessman. He tries to maintain a so called standard life following the culture of whites. He learns the techniques to improve his business and make himself a remarkable man in a white society.

He creates his identity as a black through prosperity, which Morrison uses to show the dangers of the American Dream for the blacks. Macon is oppressive at home; as a man, he is selfish and jealous of the success of other women. Macon is not interested to keep any relation with his sister as he believes Pilate is leading a chaotic life with her daughter and granddaughter.

He succeeds in occupying a position among the whites who admire him for his position and money. However, he lacks familial feelings for his sister who he does not consider deserving enough to be equal to him. Having seen his father's powerlessness, he seeks power through money and considers himself superior to other blacks. He says to his son, "you'll own it all. All of it. you'll be free. Money is freedom, Macon. The only real freedom there is" (163). When Milkman is caught by police and has to spend two hours in the station, Milkman with a proud voice says, "wouldn't have been two minutes if you had called me soon's you got there. Sooner. Should have called me soon's they picked you up" (203).

Macon's behavior reveals that he associates blackness with subordination, poverty and powerlessness. He lacks concern for the black community and his sole desire is to attain respect from the white middle class. He calls Guiter a 'Souside nigger' though his family also belonged to South. He wants to forget his past and he hates those nigger who are not financially secured like him. He has removed himself from the African American community and he rejects their cultural values in order to assimilate with white culture. Macon Dead's ancestors were slaves of the white man and now he is the slave of materialistic life—the white man's American Dream.

Hagar has some similarity with Macon since she is another character who wants to look beautiful and hence belong to the mainstream community. She is not like her mother and grandmother who compromise regarding many things in their life; Hagar always wants the best thing for herself. Both Pilate and Reba pay their full attention to Hagar. The novel differentiates between Pilate and Reba, the earlier generation, as strong survivors, and Hagar, who is presented as needy and demanding, suffering from a sense of entitlement. Morrison writes:

> Neither Pilate nor Reba knew that Hagar was not like them. Not strong enough, like Pilate, nor simple enough, like Reba, to make up her life as they had. She

> needed what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girl friends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her-and the humor with which to live it. (307)

Hagar's need for others to reinforce her sense of self is evident in this quote from the text. It is also present in her desire to be fashionable and more particularly is her need to be loved by Milkman; to have all this, she wants to become the most beautiful. Morrison depicts her anguish when one morning she wakes up and sees the mirror and despises her blackness, "look at how I look. I look awful. No wonder he [Milkman] didn't want me. I look terrible" (308). She spends the whole day shopping and in a beauty parlour in order to possess her boyfriend, she tries to make herself a less-black woman. She is hankering after the dominant concept of feminine beauty, which is white. Michael Awkward writes in "Unruly and Let Loose: Myth, Ideology, and Gender in *Song of Solomon*", it is not Milkman who is responsible for Hagar's death but "her futile attempt to achieve the bourgeois society's notions of female beauty" (148). Like Senior Macon Dead, Hagar also wants to possess a place in leading culture.

If we consider slavery, then South is black man's hell and North is hope. But in *Song Of Solomon* the scenario is opposite. South is not described as being oppressive when Milkman visits his grandmother's family there. On the other hand, North—where Milkman's current family lives—is identified with black man's desire to be white. Blacks are not safe in the North as they are not trusted by the whites. Macon says, "they stop anybody they want to. They saw you was colored, that's all" (204). Though the North was seen as black man's hope, Morrison's text proves the opposite. Pelagia Goulimari, in her text *Toni Morrison,* writes,

> The second part follows, in slower motion, the hero's travel between North and South at the age of 32. By travelling South he reverses the historical direction of African American migration from South to the promised land of the North, though his movement is to-and froing, a dialectic between North and South rather than a migration South. (58)

Through his journey Milkman returns to the past which remains in South and the dominant discourse regarding South changes; South with its communal memories of slavery becomes a place of bondage as well as emancipation. Trudier Harris writes:

> … the South is not the land of riches, of physical, tangible goods waiting for those seeking their fortunes. It is the land of blood and death, of slavery, of countless generations of Africans tied to brutal and unrewarding labor, of intangible instead of tangible wealth. Milkman ultimately returns to the South for things that he can carry away only in his mind, in his conception of self, in his contentment with communal and familial history, and in his satisfaction with knowing and being who he is. (14)

Thus Morrison changes the notion of North and South. Her narrative suggest that we need to look deeper and redefine progress and freedom, which will give a new idea of the history of blacks in the South. Following the postmodern trend of scepticism towards grand narratives, she asks us to carefully evaluate the grand narrative of black migration to North which always depicts south as the destructive place for the blacks.

The central character of the novel, Milkman, suffers from identity crisis for more than a decade in his life. The novel centers round Milkman's quest for identity and the history of his

ancestors. He never has any self awareness. He grows up in a patriarchal family where his father takes all decisions of the family. He never goes to college and joins his father's business as the latter wants it. Morrison traces his progress from a young African male ignorant of the history of his family to an enlightened person bearing the same stories, namely of the Flying Africans. Going to the South, he learns about his family from his grand parent's relative. His paternal great grandfather flew back to Africa to save himself from slavery. Milkman's quest is different as it is not for individual identity but for community. Valerie Smith writes about Milkman in "The Quest for and Discovery of identity in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon" that "Milkman bursts the bonds of the western, individualistic concept of self, accepting in its place the richness and complexity of a collective sense of identity" (12). He becomes the subject of discussion of many critics by bringing out the lost history and identity of his family. Even Judith Fletcher writes about Milkman:

> His quest, however, will evolve into a such personal and cultural identity, an identity that individuates him from the father who bullies his wife and daughters, neglects and repudiates his only sister, and turns an old woman and her family out of her home. given his father's misogyny, Milkman's treatment of women is hardly surprising. He callously dumps his cousin Hagar, after a long term relationship, with a thank you note and a gift, he interferes in his sister's love affair, and robes his aunt. Milkman's quest for knowledge and identity, then, is a gradual movement toward a more decent relationship with women, and a value system more in line with that of Pilate rather than his father. (189)

Through his journey Milkman achieves the self knowledge which changes his outlook as well as the lost history of his family again discovered. The quest fulfills both the individual longing and communal need for their identity.

Though Milkman is considered the hero of the novel, he does not deserve to learn the secret wisdom of his community. Before starting his journey Milkman is a shadowy figure in the novel who always involves with his own needs. He is not an expected son, not even a helping brother. He never bothers about his sisters but uses his masculinity to rule Corinthians' life when she falls in love with Porter. He engages himself in his father's business just because the latter tells him to do so but he himself is never interested. He is never even serious about his own life. In the case of Guiter, he is indifferent to Guiter's revenge motif against whites. He is politically unaware and his lifestyle stops him from participating in any troublesome work. He is not disturbed by the ugliness of the society and he neither praises nor condemns Guiter's job as a member of 'Seven Days'. Moreover he uses Hagar, his cousin as long as he wants and then dumps her when she is madly in love. He comments on Hagar in sexist language, making her into an object:"she was the third beer. Not the first one, which the throat receives with almost tearful gratitude; nor the second, that confirms and extends the pleasure of the first. But the third, the one you drink because it's there, because it can't hurt, and because what difference does it make?" (91). His attitude towards women is like any other typical man in a sexist society. Yet, he gets the opportunity to make the journey to search for the identity of his community.

Milkman is the protagonist of the novel and also the hero for many critics but he achieves this at the cost of Pilate's sacrifice. Jan Furman states in "Male Conciousness: *Song of Solomon*", "Pilate, of course, is one of Morrison's ancestors, one of the timeless people who dispatch their wisdom to others, who consciously or unconsciously initiate others to the way of African

American culture that give life continuity and intent" (86). Pilate is connected to her father right from his death; in her dream, he asks her to sing. We see in the novel Pilate singing, "O Sugarman done fly away/ Sugarman done gone/ Sugarman cut across the sky/ Sugarman gone home…" (6). It is the song that talks about their family history which Milkman later discovers. Pilate already knows the song and has some knowledge about her family. Lubiano writes about Pilate's knowledge, "Pilate teaches Milkman to read history and thus represents not only embodied history but the praxis that comes with recognising history's effects**"** (113). With the help of Pilate, Milkman realises his quest but Pilate deserves more to be the part of this quest for identity.

The main reason behind Milkman's journey to his father's birthplace is to collect the gold that Senior Macon Dead and Pilate got murdering the white man. After this murder, Pilate becomes furious and tries to attack Macon. The latter runs away to save himself and when he returns, Pilate is not there and neither is the sack of gold. Macon believes that Pilate has the gold with her and he asks Milkman to get that back. Milkman's attempt to get the gold from Pilate's house reveals a different truth; Pilate never knows anything about the gold; rather, the thing Milkman steals considering it to be gold is bones belonging to someone. Milkman though is disgusted by all these but later he discovers and informs Pilate that the bones she is carrying are of her father's, "Pilate your father's body floated up out of the grave you all dug for him. one month later it floated up. The butlers, somebody, put his body in the cave and prop him on a rock. That was your father you found. You have been carrying your father's bones- all this time" (333). Pilate's father's bones symbolise gold. She never understands the message of her father when the latter says, "you just can't fly on off and leave a body" and become free (208). In other words, his message contains the crux of the myth of the Flying Africans, that when confront with

oppression, the slaves choose death instead of servitude, and indicated to future generations that there is always the possibility of freedom if one has a free mind. Like Macon, Pilate is never interested in the gold to prosper her life but unknowingly Pilate is carrying the gold—her father—and not Milkman.

After knowing about the gold from his father, Milkman makes his journey to the South. He searches for it where the white man was murdered but does not get. Most importantly, his journey does not go in vain as what he learns there is no less than gold. He meets his relative Susan Byrd who tells him about his great grandfather and his wife Solomon and Ryna and also about his grandfather and grandmother Jake and Sing. Milkman knew from this woman that his great grandfather Solomon literally flew to Africa to run away from slavery. Susan Byrd tells him, "oh, that's just some old folks' lie they tell around here. Some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa. The one around here who did was this same Solomon, or Shalimar- I never knew which was right" (322). Morrison has beautifully played with the term 'gold'. Macon Dead all his life has been thinking about the gold as physical wealth and curses Pilate for that but he achieves no such gold. He thinks Pilate has 'gold' with her and she really has the gold in the form of her dead father's bones. The bones signify the legacy of retaining her pride in blackness, which her father advocated, and which she maintains in her life. Guiter, Milkman's friend, also wants to have the share of gold and he also finally ends up gaining nothing. On the other hand, both the most important characters of the novel Milkman and Pilate finally receive their 'gold'. Gold is always associated with richness and wealth; here, metaphorically the 'gold' they achieve has made them wealthy. The 'gold' gives all the answers to Pilate; it totally changes Milkman and his outlook towards the people in his life. Gay Wilentz writes in "Civilization Underneath":

> Milkman envisions this trip back east as an escape from the drudgery of his life, but through the remembered instructions of Pilate, the search for gold becomes a greater search for family history and African heritage. Milkman's search takes him further than his grandfather's farm in Pennsylvania; he returns to the world the slaves made—the South. (70)

Milkman’s search for gold finally transfers into his acknowledgement of his family’s roots in slavery, a history his father prefers to forget. He follows Pilate, and though Macon has no knowledge of it, Milkman moves to Virginia, to his Grandmother’s family, and learns the complete story of his family. He achieves that ‘gold’ which enlightens him forever.

Though Pilate is the most enlightened character of the novel, she is unaware of her wisdom regarding her black community and family. It is her unawareness that becomes an obstacle for her. Her songs reveal her deep connection with her family and also with her father. Being oral knowledge, her songs also suggest her innate intuition blended with communal awareness. While her brother Macon Dead wants to run away from their culture, Pilate is everyday living them. Macon follows Christianity like the whites while Pilate sings African song and rejects Christian sermonising. Pilate possesses the self knowledge essential for the survival of a culture. Reed writes in the same essay, “most of the lessons of Pilate's pride, freedom, strength, humanity and native intelligence are lost on the young men. Pilate and Circe possess the self-knowledge and wisdom essential for cultural survival but few absorb their teaching” (63). She is making her culture alive within herself. Unknowingly Pilate is carrying the original culture of their family and also the bones of her father. She does not know any of these. It is because of Pilate’s unawareness that Milkman enjoys the opportunity to learn the flying history. Pilate has all the potentiality to be the heroine of the novel and she is even culturally more

enriched than Milkman. She takes all the initiative to save her culture and community but she lacks the meaning of her father's message. Davis writes in "Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction":

> In these ways, Pilate too is like the hero, and the importance of her role should not be underestimated. But the terms of her life keep her from really fitting the heroic mold. It is important to the mythic conception that the hero understand what he is, and Pilate does not quite reach that point. She does have the independence and compassion of the hero, but her sense of mission is oddly garbled. She misinterprets her dead father's messages, mistakes his bones for someone else's, cannot complete her 'quest'without Milkman's explanation. (339)

Here comes the traditional concept of man and woman, one is privileged and another is made dependant on the man. In a sexist society it is believed that women are supposed to learn from man and in *Song of Solomon* this kind of picture is drawn by Morrison where Milkman finally imparts Pilate the knowledge of their community. This discrimination is present even in the myth; it was Solomon who flew away. He did not take his wife with him but tried to take Jake, the youngest son. It is possible that women of Milkman's family have always been deprived of the skill of flying. This is another instance where the novel indicates how women are considered inferior to men.

Pilate has the capability to become the protagonist of the novel but she is subordinated because of her own unawareness. A good question is: why does the novel present Pilate as lacking true understanding? Moreover, apart from Pilate there are some other important women characters who also spent their life doing nothing productive. Other important characters—Ruth,

Reba, Hagar, Magdalene and Corinthians—are oppressed women. Morrison uses them and Pilate to indicate that women are undervalued in every situation. In this respect Harry Reed writes, "[b]lack women's lives are continually undervalued in American culture; any balanced representation of those lives in fiction had to await both the civil rights and the women's liberation movement" (51). Ruth is always neglected by her husband and she remains in the house maintaining all household works. Macon dislikes her closeness with her father and doubts that they had incestuous relationship. He tells all this to Milkman without allowing Ruth to defend herself. Consequently, Milkman hates his mother. The two daughters are also never considered important by their father. They spend their days making artificial roses and selling them to the local department store. They go to college to find husbands and not because they can learn and contribute to their family. Morrison writes in *Song of Solomon*:

> To Milkman's father, college was time spent in idleness, far away from the business of life, which was learning to own things. He was eager for his daughters to go to college-where they could have found suitable husbands- and one, Corinthians, did go. But it was pointless for Milkman, particularly since his presence was a real help to him in the office. (69)

Macon's thinking regarding his daughters and son reveal the difference that society creates between a man and a woman. Moreover, like Morrison does with discourses regarding north and south, here too she reverses the tropes; instead of becoming a place that can free the mind, college for Macon's daughters signify sexist domination and denial of opportunities available to their brother.

The readers experience in the novel how knowledge becomes weakness in case of women. Corinthians and Magdalene are educated and this becomes another big problem for them because they can neither fit in the black world nor in white. They are over-qualified to be the wife of a black man and in white family they can work only as a maid. Corinthians finally starts working as a maid secretly, living the stereotype of the black female as servant to the white. She cannot let her mistress know that she is educated. She enjoys her work and finds that house better than her own because now she can finally earn and take responsibility for herself as a person. The novel says, "the work Corinthians did was good for her. In that house she had what she never had in her own: responsibility" (190).

Despite not being the hero of the novel, one who can fly away, Pilate is a strong character. Her world is different from the Dead women. She is brave and so is her daughter Reba. In the novel Pilate is never seen feeling the absence of men in their life. She knows what it means to live with men who envy the liberty of women. Harry Reed also writes, "Pilate transcends that gender-related oppression and is therefore eccentric but free. She can not only support and live happily within a woman-centered environment but she can also accept the love of men without being devastated by its absence" (58).

On the other hand, Hagar is a very fragile woman whose death reveals the dangers inherent in women seeking identity by becoming dependent on any man. Hagar considers Milkman's love as the most important thing. She submits to Milkman because she considers him as her ideal lover but the latter leaves her. We see Hagar as a ferocious woman when she attempts to kill Milkman but in the end, she kills herself and not Milkman. Her love for Milkman never lets her kill him:

> She crawled into the room and walked over to the little iron bed. In her hand was a butcher knife, which she raised high over her head and brought down heavily toward the smooth neck flesh that showed above his shirt collar. The knife struck his collarbone and angled off to his shoulder. A small break in the skin began to bleed. Milkman jerked, but did not move his arm nor open his eyes. Hagar raised a knife again, this time with both hands, but found she could not get her arms down. (130)

Hagar, being unable to move Milkman from his decision of dumping her finally chooses death. She tries to find herself through Milkman who never considers her an important part of his life.

In both the families, the women live together in order to survive. Ruth's two daughters understand her pain of being neglected by her husband. They are sympathetic to their mother. Bakerman writes about this helplessness as, "Corinthians cannot turn to her mother for support or enlightenment because Ruth Foster Dead is herself helpless, abandoned, and immobilized by the death of her father and the scorn of her husband" (560). The three women support each other to survive in the house of Macon Dead. Corinthians and Magdalene, the two sisters understand each other's problem. Lena protested Milkman's interference in Corinthian's relationship with Henry Porter. She asks Milkman belligerently: "what do you know about somebody not being good enough for somebody else? And since when did you care whether Corinthians stood up or fell down? You've been laughing at us … Using us, ordering us, and judging us…" (215). She identifies Milkman as an exploitative and sexist black man who is following his father's footsteps in abusing women.

In Pilate's house, the root cause of their bonding is not the fear of being oppressed by any man but their love for each other, which is evident in their treatment of Hagar and in their support for Ruth. After Milkman leaves her, Hagar stops talking to everyone and this makes Pilate and Reba worried about her. Morrison writes that the women Pilate and Reba cared for her and "they cooked special things for her; searched for gifts that they hoped would break the spell … They brought her lipstick and chocolate milk, a pink nylon sweater and fuchsia bed jacket" (308). In both the families, the women are depending on each other's friendship. Apart from this, the bonding between Ruth and Pilate is one of the most interesting part of the novel. Macon Dead hates his sister but the latter helps Ruth in sleeping with her husband to get a child. Pilate gives Ruth a greenish powder, which Morrison writes, "to be stirred into rain water and put into food" of Macon (131). Pilate's magic works and Ruth becomes pregnant. Even later when Macon hits Ruth to kill the baby, it is Pilate who again saves her using her magical tricks. In a sexist society women's solidarity for each other is a necessary thing to survive and the novel proves so.

However, the novel refuses to make Milkman the absolute villain. Though he achieves a new identity and gets enlightened at the cost of Pilate's sacrifice, the novel suggests that Pilate cannot be the hero because she never knows her goal. Milkman, going to South, becomes curious to know more about his family whereas Pilate is satisfied within her narrow confinement. Though she is more enlightened than Milkman, she cannot be the protagonist for her passive role regarding the family identity. Pilate tries to follow her father; yet she fails to complete her journey. The main reason for Pilate losing the chance is her dependence on the dreams where her father comes to instruct her. She never works through those dreams and creates new dreams of her own which can perhaps have the solutions; she remains caught up in patriarchal order—her

father's; Bjork writes in his essay "*Song of Solomon*: Reality and Mythos Within the Community" what Beauvoir says about the female characters of *Song of Solomon*, "still dream through the dreams of men" (45). Macon and Pilate's father appears to only in Pilate's dream and never in Macon's but Pilate can never successfully use her father's messages.

Milkman in his life never experiences dreams like Pilate from his ancestors, but presents a desire to fly that Morrison does not give her women characters in the novel, suggests the view that the novel uses the structure of a western story. Milkman appears to be antithesis to Pilate. While Pilates' unique characteristic is her song, Milkman is always fascinated by flying objects, suggesting his desire to be a free spirit. In the novel when Milkman sees a peacock, Morrison mentions as "his unrestrained joy at anything that could fly" (178). His love for flying finally becomes his identity though he can fly because he learns the song from Pilate. Milkman is guided by Pilate to learn the history of his ancestors. Higgins describes this history in as "an oral tradition- a story passed on from generation to generation" (17). He also credits Pilate as the spiritual guide to Milkman and observes, "the song and Pilate serve as guide to Milkman- two powerful forces which drive him out of his selfish, stifling present into his selfless, freeing heritage. Milkman succeeds, is indeed saved, by Pilate and her song; without them, he never would have been able to fly" (17). Morrison has made her women characters strong and independent but not equal to man. Moreover Pilate cannot pass on the story to her grandchildren which Milkman can. Milkman finally succeeds to relate Pilate and her songs to their family. From this we can infer that the novel situates the male quest as important and follows the structure of mythic and western story where male protagonists dominate the story and women either become victims or passive figures.

Pilate in the novel is a unique character from many perspective. She is not only a strong and brave woman, she also has supernatural quality within her. Pilate does not have a naval which makes her lovers terrified about her. During her birth her mother died and she was born herself. Though the midwife expected her to be dead, she survived. She unconsciously preserves within herself Africanism. She knew the African traditional beliefs and applied them to solve her problems. It is her magical powder that helps Ruth to conceive and later her magical doll that she keeps in Macon's office which makes Macon soft towards Ruth. People consider her a witch and they don't like to get close to her. She is the bearer of her African beliefs.

Pilate's death substantiates this idea. Pilate has to die at the end of the novel and before dying, she learns the truth from Milkman about her father's bones. Her death makes Milkman the only survivor of his family who is connected to his ancestors; following patriarchal order where the males inherit, he inherits the legacy of storytelling and passing on the history that should have been Pilate's. Even her death is a form of victimisation because she dies instead of Milkman. Guiter shoots Milkman but unfortunately Pilate becomes the victim. She takes away his death and gives him more opportunity to 'fly'. Both Pilate and Milkman are strong characters of the novel; death of Pilate suggests the necessary death of one so that another can become more powerful. Before dying Pilate requests Milkman to sing for her. This confirms Milkman's survival with his new knowledge of ancestors.

Morrison explores double consciousness through the lives of male characters in the novel. The blacks live a dual life since they look at themselves from two perspectives; they look at themselves through their own eyes and also through the eyes of the whites who see them as inferior. DuBois examines that this has impact on the black psyche and writes in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twines,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.(6)

They follow their own culture at home and speak in that language but in public space they need to behave like whites. This dual life is seen in the character of Macon Dead as he always aspires to be like whites and prefers to forget the communal past. He teaches his son Milkman to be the same. His sister, Pilate, wants to know the communal history but cannot access it which suggests that with time, the past becomes slowly incomprehensible. Morrison couples double consciousness with the question—can our present exist without communal past? The novel explores the need of communal knowledge to help generations of blacks deal with the alienation of double consciousness. It attempts to prove how it is important to learn about one's origin to be enlightened.

The African myth of 'flying' is applied as a metaphor in the novel. She uses the African folk tale of "Flying Africans" who used to fly away to Africa to escape from slavery. The novel begins with the leap of Mr. Smith and ends with Milkman's leap though one fails and the other succeeds. Mr. Smith an insurance agent of Michigan attempts to fly and dies on the very day

when Milkman was born. He wants to run away like the slaves of Africa. Here his flying attempt proves fatal for him. He does not belong to that flying community so uses wings to fly away. On the other hand Milkman when achieves the power to fly, it never seems difficult for him to fly. His quest for knowledge completes and the new knowledge changes his outlook towards the women of his life. He starts feeling himself weightless and here what Guiter says proves absolutely correct, "he admires the peacock's strut, but asks why it can't fly any better than a chicken. Too much tail, Guitar replies. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down" (179). Milkman was loaded with the burden of hatred for his own family and with the removal of all hatred he becomes a flying African of new generation. Milkman's fly is not escape but liberation. He knows Guiter's purpose of killing him when at the end of the novel Guiter comes to him but he does not fly away from him but flies towards him. He is no more afraid of being killed.

Milkman is first loaded with the burden of hatred for his own family and with the removal of all hatred Milkman becomes a flying African of the new generation. This proves that Morrison suggests flight to be a spiritual act of unburdening all negativity and accepting one cultural identity, even when it means becoming part of a community that is marginalised as blacks in America. Milkman's flight is not an escape; it is liberation. Harry Reed comments in this regard as, "Morrison's novel has come full circle: it opens and closes with a flying motif. Mr. Smith's attempt to fly is doomed to failure: without the ancient knowledge he is simply going to die. Milkman actually flies, and the moment of resolution is hopeful" (63). Morrison has turned Mr. Smith's 'escapism' into Milkman's 'enlightenment'. The novel starts with the flight of Mr. Smith and ends with Milkman's flight.

Using flying as a symbol, Morrison connects the post-bellum blacks with their communal past. In an interview Morrison says about African flying which is quoted in Sanchez's *Challenging Realities*:

> I also wanted to use black folklore. The magical and superstitious part of it. Black people believe in magic. Once a woman asked me, "Do you believe in ghosts?" I said, "Yes. Do you believe in germs?" it's a part of our heritage. That's why flying is the central metaphor in song—the literal taking off and flying into the air, which is everybody's dream. (41)

Morrison's language here reminds us of Dubois' 'second sight' which blacks inherit as marginalised community. This second sight can be interpreted as the ability to understand the true characteristics of white America, which Morrison's 'song' or her art presents as materialism. It can also be the wisdom in black folklore—one encapsulated in the metaphor of flight which Morrison speaks of as 'magical', 'superstitious', black 'heritage'—that freedom is in the mind and the black can achieve it when he or she decides to be black and American rather black or American.

Morrison's *Song of Solomon* popularly adopts the postmodernism though not in the way white authors often use it. Barbara Christian criticises the white author's use of language in postmodern texts saying, as quoted by McLaren, "it mystifies rather than clarifies our condition, making it possible for a few people who know that particular language to control the critical scene- the language surfaced interestingly enough just when the literatures of the people of colour of Black women of Latin Americans began to move to the center" (395). Postmodernism famously defined by Lyotard, which Nancy Fraser adds in her essay, as "postmodernism

designates a general condition of contemporary Western civilization. The postmodern condition is one which 'grand narratives of legitimation' are no longer credible"(417). It breaks down myths and grand narratives of identity and proves all identity as a construction. So postmodernism suggests that there is no coherent innate identity and all discussions of identity connected to history, ethics and justice are man-made. This becomes a problem for minority writers who want to consolidate their communal identity; they are exposed to the question that if there is no fixed identity, what is the need to seek a communal identity? This makes activism difficult, supporting capitalist exploitation, which Frederick Jameson identifies in his critique of postmodernism. As Jameson says, "postmodernism is not the cultural dominant of a wholly new social order..., but only the reflex and the concomitant of yet another systemic modification of capitalism itself" (xii). This point is important in context of Morrison because through Macon Dead, who pursues financial success with an unabashed zeal and can be oppressive because of it, Morrison is critical of black America's desire to follow capitalism as an answer to their marginality. Jameson's suggested remedy is historical awareness which Morrison also believes.

Morrison situates the need of historical consciousness in her use of postmodernism. While she presents history of oppression as a history that is manmade and hence a concept that creates the realities of slavery and racism and identities such as the slave and the racially oppressed, she never negates or ignores this history as unimportant. So she follows the need to 'always historicize'. Her use of African storytelling, a low cultural form as per white America, is incorporated in her novel as a signifier of communal history and hence, is an important part of the novel, which is high art. Morrison uses this blend—oral and written, literal, mythical and metaphorical—which is typical of postmodernism and connects the individual with history and community. Valerie Smith identifies Morrison as resisting the "simplifying tendency of epic

mythmaking" and she writes about it in "New Essays"—a grand narrative exemplifying individual accomplishment through a hero who has no negative characteristics (102). For her, identity is still a construction of grand narratives as per postmodernism, but she suggests that these grand narratives cannot be done away; we need to understand them in order to understand ourselves.

Another use of postmodern is play with time as part of the narrative form. Time in the novel is not linear, neither is the narration. It begins with Milkman's birth, starts progressing in linear method and then incorporates flashbacks. Milkman learns about his parents' relationship and also the story of Macon and Pilate. The thematic idea that the various past of these characters forms the present is given shape through the non-linear narrative. It is always Milkman who from his mother, father and later from Circe and Susan learns the past and connects them to his present, he remains at the centre where others giving pieces of their narratives to Milkman. So the novel is not a straight storytelling but one where there are many stories, each intersecting other and creating a web of narratives. At the end, Milkman's going to the South for his quest for gold and finally in quest for identity is an example of the novel reversing the historical time and suggesting the circularity of time.

In conclusion, the novel uses the postmodern form to situate the idea of blackness as a journey that the characters have to perform; they can only understand themselves when they can connect past and the present, history and identity. The theme of women's liberation is a theme that exists as another layer of writing beneath the theme of blackness and at times even conflicts with it especially in the case of Milkman and Pilate. While Milkman's wastrel character and his eventual redemption becomes a case in point advocating blackness as a quest and a process, the very fact that he gets to take this quest and not Pilate suggests the marginalisation of women. We

cannot even say that Pilate does not need to know the song, signifying communal lore, because at the end she does come to know the song and gains peace courtesy of Milkman. Milkman achieves his goal of getting the gold—the history of his people—but the women characters pave the way for him and make sacrifices to see him successful. *Song of Solomon* clearly familiarises the readers with African American's desire to learn their origins and their need to connect personal with the communal; it also suggests that in this the black man is favoured and that his identity is often gained at the expense of black women.

Conclusion

During slavery and after, black women have been protesting the limitations visited on them. Though they narrated different stories and used different forms, they write with similar purpose that is freedom of black women from all kind of oppression, which is also the aim of black feminism. In fact, as indicated by Barbara Smith, which the Introduction to this study cites, black women's writing contributes to black feminism and black feminism can serve as the critical framework through which black women's writing should be studied. Barbara Smith also talks about black women's writing, criticism and feminism charting and following a black woman's tradition; she sees common ideas of demand for dignity, liberty and voice for black women in black women's writing. The three novels discussed in the study remain true to the principles that Barabra Smith chalks out for black women's writing. They present strong black women as protagonists and characters; they choose narrative forms—neo-slave narrative, black autobiography and black postmodernism—all of which derive from slave narratives; they thus search for 'tools' to dismantle' the master's house within their history and tradition.

However, the narratives that this study has investigated in the three core chapters are exceptional even as black feminist writings because they add new dimension to the story of black women's lives that black feminism seeks to tell. Williams' *Dessa Rose* portrays a friendship between a white plantation owner and a black runaway slave woman even though in reality black white sisterhood could not be sustained during the Civil Rights leading to the flowering of black feminism from 60s to 80s and beyond. Audre Lorde's *Zami* brings the issue of lesbianism which is judged by mainstream white society and remains an important work in an era when alternative sexuality is still persecuted. Morrison's *Song of Solomon* tells the age old story of how a woman is oppressed by her male counterpart and how she is deprived of the opportunities to enlighten

herself. These women are concerned with race, class, gender and sexuality. The three core chapters have portrayed how race, class, gender and sexuality have become the major reasons behind the oppression of black women. Dessa, Audre Lorde and Pilate—the three central woman figures have experienced slavery, racism and homophobia and sexism respectively; they have suffered because they are women who refuse to settle for whatever life the patriarchal society decide for women like them. Where Shirley Anne Williams' Dessa wants to be free from slavery for the baby she is carrying in her womb, Audre Lorde wants a society free from any kind of racism and sexism and Morrison's Pilate lives a life of her own where she encourages and inspires other women to be brave and independent. So what unites them and their narratives under the umbrella of black feminism is not that they are victims; neither is it because they are black women; they are important examples of black feminism because they do not want the label of victim for themselves, which has been historically the attitude of black women since slavery.

The three texts of this dissertation are 20th century texts by three black women writers who have beautifully discussed both the major and minor issues the black women have been facing in America since slavery. They live through the subordinate lives given to black women in white America and in black patriarchy, and each have struggled to live a respectable life. Dessa is dominated by her white master and she is treated like an animal, always chained and kept in a cage. She is considered as a violent creature as she has tried to escape previously and has murdered her former master for killing her lover. She can be read as a rabid creature but we should understand that she has become violent in order to save herself and her world that being destroyed by the whites. Audre Lorde, not a slave, but a post-bellum free black woman, is dominated by the society because she cannot fit in its neat boxes; she is neither white, nor rich, nor heterosexual. Though she is educated, she has very few job opportunities so much so that she

has to spend several penniless days as an unemployed person. Moreover, her sexual identity makes her a pariah and she mentions that lesbians are very often considered 'prostitutes'. Pilate also does not fit in like Dessa and Lorde. Located in a sexist society, she does not want to follow its norms; she raises her own family; she lives without men; and she feels a comradeship for other women. She has more knowledge about the root of her family than others but it is her nephew who gets the opportunity to journey and search the origin of their family. Only he enjoys the secret wisdom of their community that is to know the art of flying(literally).

Black feminists beginning with Sojourn Truth, Maria Stewart, Zora Neale Hurtson, bell hook, Barbara Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, Alice Walker, Anita Hill and many others have always indicated the need for the empowerment of black women. This demand is an ongoing one because racist and sexist oppression have changed shapes and have taken new ones. Black women continue to be deprived. If in past eras black women were the slaves, the mammys who raised white children, the jezebels and sapphires who tempted white men, today they are similarly typecast as drug addicts, convicts and less educated women who are rarely white collar workers and office women. NAACP (founded 1909) which is one of the oldest Civil Rights organisation cites in its web page that the incarceration rate of black women in present day is approximately twice that of white women ("Criminal Justice Fact Sheet"). While people of colour like African American and Hispanics make up thirty two percent of American population, they comprise of approximately fifty six percent of jailed people ("Criminal Justice Fact Sheet"). Hence, black women's demand to live as human beings and equal citizens which these black writers are presenting is socially relevant even today, as is their writing.

Williams through Dessa presents how whites takes their social dominance for granted, seldom thinking about it as a position of power; Lorde shows how language affects black

lesbians and decides to bring in a revolution by contesting this bias in language; she takes on the challenge of making ‘Zami’ the ‘outcast’ as Zami the loved and cherished one. Her narrative presents us with an interracial community of lesbians—sisters who love and understand each other. She also creates a community for lesbians through her autobiography in the real society which is evident from the tribute other black lesbians give her as their inspiration. Morrison suggests that only by doing away with sexism can black community defeat racism, a idea that remains important because black feminist have been often asked to choose between being black or being a feminist. Hence, the writings of these three women are not a bunch of words; they are an amalgamation of emotion, rage and determination.

Williams’ *Dessa Rose* is a neo-slave narrative and the writer located in 1986 looks back towards 1829 in order to do justice to those women who paved the way for their generation to raise voices against oppression. She re-presents a real incident of Kentucky where a black slave woman escaped and at the same time a white woman was providing haven to some runaway slaves. In her novel she has made them meet with each other. It is this narrative arc that makes the novel unique and interesting. Slowly the two women understand each other and develop a good relationship. Being a black women, Williams can still be considerate towards the white women who did not allow her black sisters full participated in second wave feminism. She conveys in the novel that white women are not beyond all oppression. Rufel is left by her husband and she has no idea of his return. As a black female writer, she shows solidarity for her white sisters and points out how colour is not the only factor which oppresses women. Rufel being a sensible woman understands that she and Dessa are powerless in a patriarchy and vulnerable to sexual victimisation because they are both women. However, this tentative sisterhood between both is not an easy thing. Dessa’s initial hostility to Rufel’s whiteness shows

that this memories of racial oppression is not easy to overcome and hence for black people, whites are oppressors, weather they behave so or not. The novel ends with a sense of comradeship if not sisterhood between both women which is a positive revisitation of race relationships.

Dessa Rose is an important example of black feminist writing because of another reason—its discussion of the politics of representation. Both white male and female writers and black male writers seldom do justice to the bitter experiences of the black women. They see them from their white and/ male gaze and judge them according to their biased knowledge. Williams shows this through white writer Nehemia. As cited in the Introduction to this study, white writers and black men denigrated black women's writing and experiences. By portraying a biased writer who can record who has the power to construct black women wrongly though language, Williams is suggesting that it is the responsibility for the black women to make readers aware of the trials and strengths of black women, a view Audre Lorde supports when she asks black women to speak up, which this study cites in the Introduction and in the core chapter on Lorde. Thus, all three writers believe in the black feminist precept that 'personal is political' and narrate black women's stories in their writings.

Zami, a lesbian autobiography by Audre Lorde, published in 1982, makes the readers aware of the plight of women who are black, poor and lesbian. She presents same sex relationship which is considered as something bad even today. From childhood, in school, society and market, her family is insulted and neglected for the colour of their skin. From this experience, Lorde learns to fight for her own rights. She presents lesbianism as an antidote to racism and sexism. She is focusing not only on the pleasure found in the same sex relationship but she rethinks the concept to suggest sisterhood among women irrespective of race and colour.

Morrison's *Song of Solomon,* published in 1977, is a postmodern exploration of black people. The narrative reminds the readers that one cannot forget the origin or root of one's community no matter how many years have passed. The knowledge about the family root is knowledge that roots us firmly in our self and community evident in Milkman the protagonist of the novel who gets enlightened after he learns about his community. However, the novel combines this idea with a sense of loss because it presents the black female characters as consistently being deprived of this knowledge; hence they lack roots, which here means strength and self-assurance; they can easily be dominated by their male counterparts. The novel plays with idea of roots in postmodern manner depriving us of the certainty that all narratives about roots are good or positive. Here the story of Milkman's family connected to the black myth of the Flying Africans, people who have been able to resist any form of captivity. However, this story which advocates the importance of spiritual freedom and the black spirits refusal to be enslaved told as one of dereliction of responsibilities. Milkman's male ancestor flies away but leaves his family behind to survive anyhow. However, since Milkman reforms on learning this history and becomes less sexist, we are led to understand that Milkman has put his own interpretation on this old myth, which suggests the open-ended and gendered nature of all narratives, even those of oral history.

The black female characters of the novel are victims of a sexist society and they have paved the way for Milkman's journey. It is the result of their sacrifice, particularly Pilate and Ruth's, that he has learnt to fly. Thus, Milkman's enlightenment would not have been possible without the support of the female characters in his life. The novel narrates their stories through a nonlinear timeline. Going back into the past is never a straight forward act of remembering. The novel plays with time and presents two opposite plot movements: Milkman's father aspires for

more money to act powerful like whites and Milkman hears stories about the past to learn more about his black community in the present. This is an important characteristic of postmodernism where both past and present are existing at the same moment since without past the present is not possible.

Since the novel gives importance to a male protagonist, and it centers the themes of relationship between the past and present and relevance of oral myth and legends for black identity construction, the novel is concerned with black community, more than black women. However, Morrison shows the position of the black women in the community as suffering from sexism. To deny Morrison's novel as a feminist work just because its protagonist is not a black woman (as it is in other two novel of the study) would be simplistic because black women writers are concerned about the identity question of black men and women and they did not want to separate black men and women in society; they did not want a divided community; they wanted a wholesome identity for blacks where one gender did not oppress other. Morrison's critiquing sexism and reforming Milkman serves that need.

In conclusion, the three novels though written by three different writers and in three different time periods are beautiful examples of black feminism; they have been written with the purpose of advocating anti-racism and anti-sexism. They can be differentiated in terms of their narrative technique, plot and story but not in the overall objective. Williams using neo-slave narrative, Lorde writes a lesbian autobiography and Morrison uses post modern technique to depict injustices against black women. Yet these novel do not end with black women as absolute victims; they present the generosity and dignity of black women and they show the resilience of black women. The three authors have made a narrative space where justice can be done to black women's sufferings and her victories.

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