Chapter 2

The Displaced Fury: The Violent Male at Home

The black woman, vulnerable to exploitation through the confluence of race and gender, both in the work force and as an object of the white man’s lust, ought to find comfort and consolation from their life partners who are their fellow sufferers. However, the home proves to be no place of refuge for the black woman who is often ill treated by her man instead of being offered an empathetic understanding and emotional support. It is not merely the justification of Elaine Showalter’s contention that if the Angel in the House is dead, she is replaced by another spectre harder to kill, namely, the violent male at home. This chapter deals with the predicament of the black woman confronting the violent ways of her male counterpart at home.

Dworkin takes note of the presumption that the male’s right to own the female and her issue is natural, predating history, and postdating progress. The institution of marriage is the mainstay of women’s subjugation. Marriage gives the husband legal ownership of the wife’s person, property, and issue. bell hooks traces the connection between masculinity and domestic violence. The cycle of violence begins with psychological abuse of the male in the public world where he is unable to strike back. He suppresses this violence and releases it in a control
situation which is usually the home where he has no need to fear retaliation and the target for abuse is usually the female (121-22).

But the black woman’s plight is definitely far more complicated and problematic. The relationship between the black man and woman is often seen to be a repetition of the master-slave relationship outside. Fromm notes that patriarchal domination and exploitation of women result from an impotence of heart. Sadistic relationships pervert a life-serving impulse into a life-strangling one (194, 281). The black man, faced with the inability to confront the white oppressor, is seen to take out his failure on the black woman. Sexuality thus becomes a tool of domination for these black men trying to assert themselves.

Morrison, Walker, and Naylor are adept in tracing such seemingly unwarranted cruelty of the black man towards his mate to his bitter experiences at the hands of the whites. The role of the victimizer results from the character’s own victimization from a larger society. Slavery sought to reduce black people to dependent, passive, childlike characters. Black men are often punished in the presence of their wives and children, denying them the masculine role. A black man is usually called a boy till he is very old when the more respectable slaveholder calls him uncle. No black man has the right to defend his family from a white attacker. He finds this impotence worse than all the tortures that he may be subjected to.
Though black men are valued for their physical strength and skill, slavery demands that they forego the intellectual, emotional and temperamental traits of manhood. The male slave’s masculinity is, like his person, the property of his master (Horton 106, 82, 100). The invidious alliance between capitalism and racism causes the black man to respond violently at home. There is also the tendency to shift responsibility to the women and abandon the family.

The doubly difficult plight of the black woman is highlighted by the women visiting Aunt Jimmy in her fatal illness: “Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders” including white women, white children, white men and black men and the “only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other” (Eye 138). The novel also exemplifies the fractured relationship between Cholly and Pauline Breedlove. Cholly’s early life is marked by rejection and neglect. He has been salvaged by Aunt Jimmy from the junk heap where his mother abandoned him when he was four days old. According to Rollo May, the source of physical courage appears to lie originally in the relationship between the infant and the mother and physical cowardice results from an early rejection (176).

Aunt Jimmy’s death leaves Cholly an orphan at the age of thirteen. After the funeral he has his first experience of sex with a girl called Darlene. Unfortunately, their union is interrupted by two white hunters who insist that
he finish it for their benefit, thus turning an intimate moment into a public entertainment. These white men project onto the couple their obsessive fantasies about black sexuality and transform a natural rite of passage into a humiliating scene. Cholly feels helpless and impotent, as he is unable to protect his partner. Susan Willis remarks that the ray of white light cast into Cholly’s backside is a metonym for the white hunters who hold the flashlight and who, “as voyeurs, symbolize the plantation overseer” (“Black Women Writers” 230). She further argues that this incident suggests the foundation of black male misogyny the historical basis for which is the white male domination and the lynch mob. Cholly’s hatred is deflected onto Darlene, his partner in shame, and not toward his oppressors.

Later on Cholly confirms from myriad other humiliations, defeats, and emasculations his initial awareness that it is impossible to struggle against the white man and win. Thus the novel’s definition of sexuality is seen in terms of racial oppression. Here too the harm is done by the characters internalizing the “Look” of the majority culture that reduces Cholly and Darlene to mere objects in the flashlight of the hunters. The position of the black woman is that of the other in a double sense. “Because they are doubly defined as failures and outsiders, they are natural scapegoats for those seeking symbols of displaced emotions.” The “Look” takes on monstrous proportions as the humiliated black male aligns himself
with the Third or the observer by making the black woman the object of his displaced fury (C. Davis 32).

After the symbolic castration by whites, Cholly goes in search of his father Samson Fuller. He had deserted Cholly’s mother even before his birth and now rejects the son for a crap-game. Cholly tries in vain to stop his tears. He soils himself like a baby and then crouches under a pier in a foetal position. Grewal describes Cholly as “unfathered, unsocialized, and ‘castrated’ early in his youth” and “a social derelict” (32). The result is that Cholly becomes dangerously free. He is alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and after a brief spell of marital happiness, he finds his desire destroyed. “Nothing, nothing, interested him now” (160).

Pauline Williams, the ninth of eleven children in her family, develops a slight deformity by the punching of her foot by a rusty nail and is restricted to the cocoon of her family’s spinning. She falls in love with Cholly who treats her infirmity as something special. After marriage they leave for Lorain, Ohio, where Cholly finds work in the steel mills. By their move north, the Breedloves lose sight of the sharing and caring characteristic of a community.

In her loneliness, Pauline comes to depend more and more on Cholly for things to fill the vacant places. When it becomes clear that Cholly has other things to engage his time, Pauline takes to imitating the northern black women in her dress and make-up, and for the money she
starts taking jobs as a day worker till she gets pregnant. Still haunted by loneliness, she starts going to the movies and embraces unrealizable ideals.

“Along with the idea of romantic love she was introduced to another—physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought” (122). However, the loss of a front tooth while eating a bar of candy puts an end to her romantic dreams.

Meanwhile, unable to play the masculine role and the duties normally assigned to it, Cholly seeks refuge in alcohol and the company of other jobless black men, expressing his rage and frustration against the social conditions in violent acts to his family. So after the children Sammy and Pecola are born, Pauline takes over the role of the breadwinner of the family. Gerda Lerner observes that black women often find work even when black men cannot because the lowest paid jobs are reserved for them. That way, white society has economically pitted black women against black men (xxxiv). “Holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns and her children like a cross” (126-27).

Ironically, saving the initial period of happiness, the Breedloves do not generate any love: they destroy any semblance of it or pervert it. Their marriage becomes shredded with quarrels and they fight “each other with a darkly brutal formalism that was paralleled only by their lovemaking” (43) and an “unquarreled evening hung like the first note of a dirge in sullenly
expectant air” (41). Samuels and Hudson-Weems point out that theirs is the displaced aggression that results from their inauthentic lives (28).

In Song, Solomon, true to the tradition of the flying African, flies away, taking Jake, the youngest of his twenty-one children, with him. But Jake drops out of Solomon’s arms and is brought up by Heddy, an Indian woman as his mother Ryna goes insane when her husband deserts her. Jake, whose name gets changed to Macon Dead, starts a family with Heddy’s daughter, Singing Bird.

His son Macon Dead II moves north to Michigan following the murder of his father by whites and the estrangement from his only sister, Pilate. His rootless existence works havoc in Macon and he tries to make up for all that he has been denied. In a few years he becomes a big landlord with no mercy in his heart that extorts big rent from poor blacks and evicts those who fail to pay. Robbed of his birthright when he loses Lincoln’s Heaven, his father’s farm, Macon replaces his father’s ideals with a life of bitterness. The obsession with material wealth renders him “a difficult man to approach – a hard man, with a manner so cool it discouraged casual or spontaneous conversation.” So Mrs. Bains, Guitar’s grandmother, remarks: “A nigger in business is a terrible thing to see” (15).

Macon’s memory of his father’s calamitous end drives not only his greed for possessions but also his exploitative attitude in all relationships. For him “Money is freedom” (163) and he advises his son Milkman: “Own
things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own
yourself and other people too” (55). Macon’s urge to possess and control
causes a good deal of misery in the lives of those who come into contact
with him, especially his family.

In his choice of a wife also Macon is moved by the profit motive.
His marriage with Ruth Foster, the only child of the first coloured doctor of
the town, makes a good addition to his material assets. It also elevates him
to a higher position in the social ladder. However, Ruth, by her own
description, is a small woman pressed small to fit first her father’s concept
of an obedient daughter and later Macon’s idea of a compliant wife. Macon
treats her more like a doll and, true to this fetishistic attitude, makes a ritual
of undressing her, which gives him more pleasure than the actual
lovemaking. By displacing the sexual accent to the fetish, the sexual
partner becomes depreciated and a completely incidental detail receives
sexual rank and dignity (Ansbacher 427).

Though Ruth is encouraged to remain helpless and dependent on
Macon, these qualities make her repulsive to Macon. She illustrates the
cultural restraints imposed by patriarchy on women who are relegated to a
role of adoring, or docile dependent whose primary function is to bring
comfort to male domestic life. Though Ruth is free from the privations of
poverty that Pauline endures, her lot is in no way happier. Sexuality
becomes a tool of male domination by the phenomenon of sexual
objectification, a social mechanism that operates through the institution of masculine and feminine roles in the patriarchal nuclear family. The attendant ideology of sexual objectification is sado-masochism, that is, masculinity as sadistic control over women and femininity as submission to the male will (A. Ferguson 149).

Ruth’s blind adoration for Dr. Foster drives Macon jealous and he suspects an incestuous relationship. Macon throws away the medicines of the ailing Dr. Foster. Ruth holds him responsible for her father’s death, and never forgives him. In the violent quarrel that ensues, Macon threatens to kill her and she plans to inform the police about her father’s death. But neither of them acts, and Ruth infers that her father’s money is more important to Macon than the satisfaction of killing her. After this, Macon moves into another room, and stops sleeping with his wife. He considers Ruth’s devotion to her father as rejection of himself, and to assuage his wounded pride, convinces himself that he never cared for her at all. When self-deception fails, he resorts to violence to bolster his ego (White 71-72). Ruth, though a mother of two, is only twenty and out of desolation, starts visiting her father’s grave in Fairfield at night and Macon suspects her to be meeting some lover.

Realizing that Ruth is dying of lovelessness, Pilate supplies her with some magical potion that makes Macon come to Ruth for four days. However, he comes out of “his few days of sexual hypnosis in a rage”
and learning about her subsequent pregnancy, insists on an abortion. Ruth is subjected to various primitive methods like the pot of steam that puckers her skin and makes it difficult for her to pass urine. When they all fail, Macon punches her stomach. At this point, Ruth again seeks Pilate’s help. Pilate, by some conjuring trick, manages to keep Macon off Ruth.

The baby, Milkman is Ruth’s “single triumph” (133) against her husband.

Ruth’s feeling of inadequacy is fed by her husband’s remark that by herself she “ain’t nobody” (67). Macon’s emotion for her is always coated with disgust. Though Macon keeps each member of his family awkward with fear, his hatred of his wife glitters and sparks in every word he speaks to her and Milkman considers her “brutalized by a bear of a man” (75). He has no scruples in slapping his wife in front of the children till Milkman knocks him down. Ruth is victimized overtly and subtly. She becomes “a spread-eagled footstool resigned to her fate and holding fast to tiny irrelevant defiances” (132). Ruth is representative of those women who remain the emblem of a man’s wealth and class position and are denied any independent existence.

Denied the emotional, spiritual, and physical warmth of a whole relationship with her husband, Ruth makes her son, who has “always been a passion” (131) for her, the only solace in her life. She nurses him well beyond infancy that earns him the nickname “Milkman.” According to Luce Irigary, the mother’s appetite for touch and contact has free rein in
the child and finds compensations for and diversions from the frustrations that she too often encounters in sexual relations (This Sex 27). For Susan Willis, substituting the mouth at the breast for orgasm compensates the repressed sexual life (“Black Women Writers” 226-27). But Samuels and Hudson-Weems do not merely look at it as the fulfillment of Ruth’s sexual needs but suggest a compensation for the mother she has lost and, consequently, the nurturing process. Further, it meets her maternal need to nurse and nurture (56-57). Ruth, who has no independent self, maintains her balance mainly through her sense of duty as a mother.

Macon Dead is an example of victim-turned-victimizer. Guitar observes that Macon “behaves like a white man, thinks like a white man” (223). Clutching the keys to his buildings, that he fondles more than his children, and “letting their bunchy solidity calm him” (17), Macon tries to forget the stigmatized past. But his house is more prison than palace, his car is spoken of as a hearse and as the joke goes round, he is already dead. So Macon Dead exemplifies the necrophilic character not merely in name but also in his other attributes. The palatial house that she inherits from her father gives no happiness to Ruth either.

Milkman’s journey north in search of the gold lost by his father affords him a true knowledge of his ancestor’s flight away into freedom. However, as Grewal notes, the power and the wonder in the story is undercut by the question asked by Sweet, “Who’d he leave behind?” (332).
Looked at from the female perspective, flying means an escape from responsibility for the men but double burden for the women who are saddled with the additional responsibility of tending the children. The novel critiques the male paradigm of heroism by exposing the “stultifying reality of black women’s truncated lives” and has women’s subjection and their lack of dominion as its subtext (Grewal 73).

Milkman’s great grandmother Ryna loses her mind and dies when Solomon leaves her still a slave. Milkman listens to the sobbing emanating from Ryna’s Gulch, so named after the deserted wife. Susan Byrd, Milkman’s Southern cousin tells him that Ryna does not love anyone again as she is a one-man woman but the truth may be that she goes mad trying to take care of the twenty-one children by herself. Circe also tells him about Ryna’s “nervous love” (243). Her pathetic appeal to Jake forms a song sung by the children of Shalimar:

O Solomon don’t leave me here

Cotton balls to choke me (303).

On his return from the South, Milkman hears of Hagar’s death and he is now able to connect Ryna’s fate with that of Hagar, a woman he has used and discarded. He also understands the cruel neglect and repression endured by his mother and sisters. For the first time he thinks of his mother in a different way that the “best years of her life, from age twenty
to forty, had been celibate” and that “such sexual deprivation would affect her, hurt her” (300).

There are many other instances of black women left in the lurch by their husbands. In *Sula*, Eva Peace’s husband Boy-Boy leaves her when their youngest child Plum is only five months old. The hapless Eva leaves the children with a neighbour and comes back after eighteen months with only one leg and a lot of money. It is rumoured that Eva has become rich by claiming insurance money after placing her leg under a running train. Boy-Boy pays Eva a visit when Plum is three years old. Eva does not know whether to “cry, cut his throat, beg him to make love to her” (35). But they only make polite conversation, avoiding the question of Eva’s missing leg or any mention of the children.

Eva finds a woman waiting for him outside whose high-pitched laughter “hit her like a sledge hammer” and a “liquid trail of hate flooded her chest” (36). Even when they had been together, Boy-Boy “liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third” (32). This visit marks the beginning of Eva’s retreat to her bedroom and her life of manipulation. Boy-Boy is living proof of the damage of slavery and its aftermath on the black male. He is a wanderer who can never settle down long enough to accept the responsibilities expected of a man.

Nel’s family is also matrilineal and some of the men are mere accouterments. Her father Wiley Wright is scarcely ever home as he is a
seaman and he is peripheral psychologically as well. Nel’s husband Jude’s name suggests the archetypal “Intimate Betrayer” (Demetrakopoulos, New Dimensions 53). Initially, Nel is fascinated by Jude who gives her the new feeling of being needed by someone who sees her singly. But after marriage she gives up this claim to individuality and accepts the conventionally limitative feminine role of wife. The failure to find a job at the road-building site has prompted Jude to find someone who can validate his manhood. “Whatever his fortune, whatever the cut of his garment, there would always be the hem—the tuck and fold that hid his raveling edges” and “the two of them would make one Jude” (83). So in their marriage, Jude is the garment and Nel remains the hem, and this “asymmetrical contract represents the false complementarity in a conventional marriage” (Harding and Martin 69). Still, the marriage does not work, and when Jude leaves her, Nel is forced to work as a chambermaid in a hotel.

Stamp Paid in Beloved earns the right to enter any blacks’ house through his services to runaway slaves. But his tragic past includes the story of his wife, Vashti who was appropriated and later abandoned by the youthful master. Stamp Paid, whose original name is Joshua, has earned his freedom by acquiescing to the abduction of his wife. Nevertheless, he feels a violence welling up toward her and thinks of wringing her neck. However, he leaves her behind with all his debt and takes up the new name, which gives him a sense of freedom. But he disregards his wife’s
physical and emotional hurt and never bothers about the passive role he has
played in this game. Vashti becomes “a triple pawn in the dynamics of
black male/white male interaction during slavery” (T. Harris 331). She is
reduced to the status of a human chattel by the white master who sexually
exploits her and his wife who does nothing to prevent it. But Vashti gets no
understanding from her husband who manages to derive some benefit out
of this transaction. Knowing fully well her helplessness to escape the
humiliation, he hates and despises her.

In Jazz, Rose Dear, Violet’s mother, dispossessed of all her
belongings and tired of waiting for her husband, finally kills herself by
jumping into the well. Her husband arrives two weeks after the funeral and
leaves twenty-one days later, abdicating any responsibility for his wife or
children. If Violet’s husband has an affair with Dorcas, Alice’s runs off.
Marital infidelity is a threat to many of the women of the later novels.
Soane in Paradise knows of her husband Deacon Morgan’s affair with
Consolata at the Convent. Mavis’s husband brutalizes her and carries on
with other women. After the twin babies suffocate to death in the Cadillac,
she becomes scared of him and reaches her mother “looking like a bat out
of hell” (30). When Christine in Love finds her husband Ernie locked in the
arms of the staff sergeant’s wife, she is dumbfounded and leaves him.

Morrison has admitted her fascination for the adventurous male hero
and portrayed varieties of the type in Cholly, Ajax, Milkman, Son (Tar
Baby), Paul D and Rose Dear’s husband (Harding and Martin 65). But she is equally aware of the casualties and looks at this archetype from the point of view of women and children who are always the sufferers.

Alice Walker also believes that racism is not the last word in oppression and that it cannot be looked at to the exclusion of sexism. Her Third Life portrays failed marriages of both Grange and his son Brownfield consequent to the depletion of love. A victim of sharecropping, Grange at thirty-five appears to be grown old and worn before his time. After backbreaking work during the day, he does not feel himself free from the control of the white master even in his home. Unfortunately, the master’s control affects the relationships between black men and black women, and involves black children as well. The child Brownfield is puzzled when his father’s face freezes into an unnaturally bland mask as if he had turned into a stone or a robot on seeing the man who drives the truck. Grange’s face and eyes exhibit a dispassionate vacancy and sadness like a great fire being extinguished within him. He seems devoid of any emotion save that of bewilderment. Theodore O. Mason Jr. notes that Grange’s sole response to his deprivation is the fatal shrug that reveals Walker’s use of absence as a profound signifier (128).

Like Cholly, Grange is a victim of the cruel system and he in turn victimizes those who are under his control. He vents the anger and built-up violence resulting from the constant humiliation and frustration on the only
victims less than himself – his wife and child. In order to exert power over his wife and son he threatens to shoot the one and drown the other, finally doing neither but abandoning them. When he finds that all his hard work can never get his family out of debt, Grange takes to drinking and abusing his wife. Brownfield’s citified cousins tell him that his father has tried to make his wife “sell herself” to the man who drives the truck to get them out of debt. But Brownfield also knows that his father is jealous of his mother and resents her saying a word of greeting to other men. Margaret is forced to do hard work pulling baits in order to supplement the meagre income of Grange, leaving the baby Brownfield at home in a basket with a sugar tit. After two years of plantation life Margaret realizes her husband’s inability to protect her from Shipley, the white boss. So her cries fall on deaf ears, for Grange has “plugged his ears with whiskey,” blaming her and “all the Shipleys of the world” (178).

The life of the Copelands follows a cycle made of Grange’s weekend debauchery and hangovers spreading to the beginning of the week and leading to gloom that he hopes to dispel only by the coming holidays. “Depression always gave way to fighting, as if fighting preserved some part of the feeling of being alive. It was confusing to realize but not hard to know that they loved each other” (20). When Grange leaves for town on Saturday afternoons, Margaret dresses up for visitors who never come. When he comes back fully drunk late at night, threatening to kill his wife
and son, they take refuge in the woods. Brownfield thinks that his mother is “like the family dog in some ways. She didn’t have a thing to say that did not in some way show her submission to his father” (5).

Margaret knows about her husband’s long-standing affair with Josie. His rejection forces her along the same path of infidelity. Grange’s weekly cycles of fear and hatred broken on Saturday by drinking and fighting have their toll on Margaret. She sinks into alcoholism and finds relief in the arms of fellow bail-pullers and church members and even the man who drives the truck. She gives birth to a baby whose father might have been every one of its mother’s many lovers. The visible proof of her infidelity provides Grange a sufficient justification to leave a life he despises. Feeling responsible for Grange’s dereliction, barely four weeks later, Margaret poisons herself as well as the illegitimate child, leaving Brownfield alone. Left on his own, Brownfield seeks his fortune and becomes resident stud not only to Josie, his father’s mistress but also to her daughter, Lorene.

Brownfield falls in love with Mem, the school teacher-niece of Josie, who is far superior to him in every respect. Somehow he manages to coax her into marrying him and thoughtlessly enters into a contract with a farmer that ultimately gets him into trouble. After a few years of idyllic happiness depression creeps into Brownfield who realizes “how his own life was becoming a repetition of his father’s. He could not save his
children from slavery; they did not even belong to him” (54). Even Mem’s love that is both wifely and maternal, cannot sustain him any longer. “His rage and anger and his frustration ruled. His rage could and did blame everything, *everything* on her” (55).

Brownfield is yet another of those black men who make their women easy targets of victimization because of the impotence and helplessness they feel in the presence of the white boss. Though for a few years Mem’s body remains a shrine for him, their love life means “another mouth to feed, another body to enslave to pay his debts. He felt himself destined to become no more than overseer, on the white man’s plantation, of his own children.” Frustrated with his growing debts, he takes to drinking. Nevertheless, “when he took her in his drunkenness and in the midst of his own foul accusations she wilted and accepted him in total passivity and blankness, like a church” (54). Bettye J. Parker-Smith observes that guilt resulting from accepting responsibility for the emasculation of the black male breeds weakness in Walker’s women. So they take it as their duty to become a repository for the rage of their men who in turn use them as their punching bag because they are easier to knock out. Brownfield, the cancer of the black male-female relationship, takes this claim to the tenth power (481).

So Brownfield’s life is a replica of his father’s, from sharecropper to wife beater. Like his father before him, Saturday night finds Brownfield
liberally prepared for his weekly fight with Mem. But Brownfield’s cruelty to Mem far exceeds his father’s ill treatment of his mother and extends to various levels. First of all, he abuses her physically, beating “his once lovely wife now regularly, because it made him feel briefly good,” “trying to pin the blame for his failure on her by imprinting it on her face” (55). During one Christmas when they have nothing to give the children, Brownfield is further infuriated when Mem tells him that the children are frightened because he is drunk, and he beats her senseless. He knocks out one of her teeth and loosens one or two more. Later, feeling irritated that Mem is looking for a house that is worth living in, he grabs her wrist and twists it, bringing her to her knees beside his feet. “The harder and more unfeeling the elephant-skin hide skin on his hands became the more often he planted his fists against his wife’s head” (83). When Mem interrupts his offensive talk, he hits her squarely in the mouth, shaking her till blood dribbles from her lips. He gives her half a dozen slaps and kicks her till she passes out.

Finally, Brownfield cuts short Mem’s miserable life by murdering her in cold blood. One evening when she returns from work, he fires a shot from his gun and she lies “faceless among a scattering of gravel in a pool of blood” (122), literally obliterating her. As she lies dead, the children notice the large frayed holes in the bottom of her shoes and the right shoe stuffed with newspaper. In the Afterword to the novel Walker reveals that the last
moments of Mem’s life have been based on the memory of a dead woman who was incidentally a Mrs. Walker. What she remembers is “the worn, run-over shoe with a ragged hole, covered with newspaper, in its bottom” (343). Realizing that she could be symbolic of all women, Walker named the character Mem, after the French *la meme*, meaning “the same” (344).

Brownfield causes great mental torture to Mem throughout her life. He suspects “in his submissive wife a snare and a pitfall” (55) and blames her for all his failures whether it is his inability to produce crops at the end of the season or standing up to the white boss. Nevertheless, he leaves the struggle for domestic survival to her. As Dworkin observes, money is a distinctive male power even for poor people because while poor women use money for basic survival of themselves and their children, poor men use it to an astonishing degree for pleasure (20). This is seen in Cholly, Boy-Boy, and Grange as in Brownfield. He takes a devilish pleasure in moving the family from shack to shack, denying them a settled life, and thereby never allowing Mem a moment of peace. Finally, they reach “an impossible, unbelievable decline” and Mem becomes “a haggard automatous witch” (55). Mem tries hard to survive and the result is disastrous: “She slogged along, ploddingly, like a cow” and “her mildness became stupor; then her stupor became horror, desolation and, at last, hatred” (59).
Brownfield exploits Mem sexually. When his irresponsibility and cruelty reach an unbearable limit, Mem forces him on gunpoint to let her make decisions for the family. So for a while, the family moves to a good house with all amenities but even while enjoying it, he lies in wait for a chance to have his revenge. He makes her weak with pregnancy that does not reach fruition but they lose the house. Robbie Walker observes that the most tragic moment of Mem’s life is not her murder by Brownfield but the day when she is made aware of his devious schemes to remove the family back to a shack (411). Sexuality and pregnancy are not just biological facts; they are plot devices by which Mem is systematically brought down by Brownfield. Mem easily falls a prey to Brownfield’s “strategy of biological subversion” (Ensslen 201). The six pregnancies, two of which miscarry, deplete her physically and emotionally. Brownfield’s virtual murder of the last child, an albino, also devastates Mem. He often tries to dissuade her from going out to work, using his sexuality as a snare to entice and keep her his dependent, justifying Dworkin’s contention that sex is the power used by the male as an act of ownership, taking, force, and conquering (23).

Brownfield’s insensitive nature is particularly evident at the time of Ruth’s birth. He turns a deaf ear to Mem’s pleas for assistance from a midwife and the baby is born without anyone’s help. He does not even bother to provide any warmth for the shivering mother and child. Grange, who happens to come there with some food for the children, is shocked at
the pitiable state of the household. He lights the fire and makes a stew, while Brownfield idly looks on.

Brownfield knows that Mem is morally upright but when he gets into debt, he begins to accuse her of being unfaithful and even charges her with being used by white men, which is an egregious crime in the black community. He begins to “treat her like a nigger and a whore” (54). He knows very well that the albino baby is his. He brings up the question of her infidelity as a pretext for abusing her, though in his own words, she is “stupid enough to be faithful” to him. When he notices that the newborn baby is white, he beats the still weak Mem who falls out of the bed. Mem starts leaving the baby close to the fire and in the sun because Brownfield has declared: “if he ain’t black he ain’t mine!” (224). Finally, he becomes callous enough to leave the three-month-old baby on the doorsteps one cold January night, “like putting out the cat” and enjoys a good night’s sleep. Mem, who is unaware of what transpires in the night, finds the baby in the morning, turned into “no more than a block of ice” (225).

Even while unjustly accusing Mem of being unfaithful, Brownfield returns to Josie who makes up lies about Mem in order to get back Brownfield. Knowing fully well that these are just cooked up nasty stories, Brownfield pretends to believe them as they give him an excuse to go home and beat his wife.
Brownfield’s language matches his acts. He abuses Mem verbally, often calling her black, ugly, old, and a “snaggle-toothed old plow mule” (87-88). Ironically, Mem is hardly thirty at this time. Other epithets used by Brownfield to describe his wife are bitch, ugly pig, skeleton, and “goddam wrinkly faced black slut!” (91). When he manages to drag her out of the new house in town, he tells her triumphantly: “Miss high-n’-mighty, you come down off your high horse now” (107). Brownfield cannot tolerate the suggestion that his wife is superior to him. When his mates question him how he has managed to marry such a girl, his answer is indicative of his violent and obscene nature: “Give this old black snake to her and then I beat her ass. Only way to treat a nigger woman” (56).

Mem is also subjected to intellectual violence by Brownfield. When he first meets her, he is struck by her difference from the other women he has known. He considers her as someone to be loved and spoken to softly, never to frighten with his rough, coarse ways. Brownfield, who has admired Mem’s learning and even tried to master the rudiments of language from her, later resents her learning. In the beginning she tries to correct his language but as time passes, he gets irritated by her ways and throws the correction in her face. He now feels that her knowledge reflects badly on a husband who could scarcely read and write. Not being satisfied to put an end to her career as a teacher, he forces her into white homes as domestic in order to bring her down socially. Brownfield finds a cruel
satisfaction in humiliating his wife in the presence of his friends by mocking her proper English: “Hark, mah lady speaks, let us dumb niggers listen!” (56). This makes Mem turn ashen with shame and she keeps her mouth closed for the rest of the time. In his desire for domination, Brownfield coerces his accomplished wife to revert to the black dialect from literate articulateness.

Gradually, Mem relapses into an earlier stage, forgetting whatever she has learned. For Mem “who had so barely escaped the “culture of poverty,” a slip back into that culture was the easiest thing in the world.” When she reverts to her old dialect, the “starch of her speech simply went out of her and what came out of her mouth sagged.” Unlike her ancestors, her speech becomes “flat and ugly, like a tongue broken and trying to mend itself from desperation” (56-57). Since her education is of no value in her new roles as housewife and domestic, Mem eventually burns her books or uses them for fixing the rat holes of the various shacks they occupy.

The power of the male to transform the female is common in fiction. It is exemplified most specifically in the story of Pygmalion, where a statue is transformed into a beautiful woman. Bernard Shaw modifies the story of Pygmalion through the creation of Professor Higgins, who turns a flower girl into a lady. However, Mem is turned into a hag from a beautiful, healthy woman. After eight years of marriage she looks like “some old mangy aunt of hers” (72) and Brownfield is “her Pygmalion in reverse” (56).
Josie is also a victim of patriarchal ideology. Though she is a prostitute, her abiding love has been Grange whom she loved before his marriage to Margaret and even after. She accepts Brownfield as a lover just to spite Grange and throws him out when Grange returns from the North. Grange decides to do justice by Josie and marries her. But she does a great sacrifice in selling the Dew Drop Inn to buy a farm for Grange. Thus Josie loses all her savings and the only profession she is good at for the sake of Grange. However, when Grange adopts Ruth, Josie again feels left out and connives with Brownfield. She has a hard time supporting him by taking in washing.

All the female characters in Third Life are subjected to violence and exploitation by men. The only exception is Ruth. Two of the novel’s central characters, Margaret and Mem meet their early end because of their husbands. Barbara Christian cites Margaret and Mem as examples of Walker’s first group of women, the most abused of the abused who are destroyed when they begin to gather strength (“Everyday Use” 62).

Purple also exemplifies the cruel ways in which black women are treated by husbands with the support of patriarchal ideals that condone such behaviour. Celie’s incestuous rape by her stepfather Alfonso is partly due to her mother’s inability to satisfy him sexually too soon after the birth of a child. Insensitive to the condition of his ailing wife, he violates the innocence of her daughter and tries to molest the other daughter Nettie.
The lascivious Alfonso does not wait too long after Celie’s mother’s death to get married to May Ellen who is only Celie’s age. Celie observes the girl’s consternation: “He be on her all the time. She walk round like she don’t know what hit her” (5). Years later, when Celie visits her stepfather, she is introduced to his new wife, Daisy who is hardly fifteen.

Celie’s own marital life lacks even the semblance of love. Her stepfather marries her off to Albert, an older widower with four children whom Celie refers to as Mr.- and the marriage is more a business transaction between the two men. Though Albert uses Celie to satisfy his lust, he never treats her as a human being. “He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in” and “Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep” (81). Albert’s sexual assaults on Celie are akin to her stepfather’s rape and she feels violated and desecrated.

Celie cooks food, keeps house and tends the unruly children from Albert’s first marriage, and works in the field as well. Harpo, who is required to work with her, questions his father as to why he does not work any more and the answer is, “No reason for me to” (29). Celie never gets a good word. Instead, he victimizes her in every way, including bringing his mistress Shug Avery home to wait on. When Harpo asks his father why he beats Celie, the answer is typical: “Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for—” (23).
The use of violence against women to maintain control is simply an extension of the rights of ownership. As Dworkin sees it, such actions are based on the conviction that a man’s ownership of his wife licences whatever he wishes to do to her (19). Celie confides to Shug the abuses she has suffered in a loveless marriage and the beatings she has received for not being Shug. When finally, with Shug’s help Celie tries to assert herself, Albert tries not only to humiliate her but also to define her as worthless. As a replica of the whites’ attitude to blacks, in his eyes, Celie is the ultimate object, someone who exists to satisfy his despotic whims. Lovalerie King notes that the stunted relationship between Alfonso and Celie’s mother, as well as that between Celie and her husband mirrors the dysfunctional and tragic Copeland marriages from Walker’s first novel (237).

Albert’s first wife, upset by her husband’s infatuation for Shug, had taken a violent lover who later stabs her to death. When Harpo objects to Sofia’s assertive ways Albert advises him: “Wives is like children. You have to let ’em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating” (37). Sofia also resents the merely physical aspect of their love life. Sofia’s mother, according to her description, is “under my daddy thumb. Naw, she under my daddy foot” (43). Even Shug, though she has loved many men, says, “You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a’tall. Man corrupt everything” (204).
Such unequal relationships make Bernard W. Bell state that Walker’s men are “traditional black male chauvinists of both the lower and middle class who stereotypically vent their hatred of exploitation by whites on their families, especially the women” with some redemptive acts as Grange’s to turn to a new social order (268).

Naylor’s *Hills* is different from the novels treated so far in this chapter as the white world, as a point of contrast, is almost absent. If in the novels of Morrison and Walker the focus has been on blacks of middle class or poor blacks, *Hills* treats the patriarchal middle and upper class black society. However, through this novel Naylor seeks to establish that victimization of black women by husbands is not restricted to the homes of poor blacks. Winter’s parallels between slavery and patriarchy, seem apt here. First, in patriarchal cultures women are perpetually and violently dominated by men. Second, like slaves, women have been defined as socially dead as they have no independent existence. Third, women live in a condition of general dishonour in patriarchal cultures (10).

Set in Wayne County, U.S.A., *Hills* deals with the happenings during one Christmas season, from 19 to 24 December, as seen through the eyes of Willie and Lester, two impoverished black young men, whose search for jobs provides them with an opportunity to observe at close quarters the lives of well-to-do blacks of Linden Hills, a prestigious residential area inhabited by affluent blacks. The presiding
The original Luther Nedeed is a freedman who came to the North in the 1820s and bought the land. Instead of trying to farm it, he builds wooden shacks and rents them to the local blacks who are too poor to be farmers. He also starts an undertaker’s business in the back room of his cabin. He marries an octoroon woman and has a son who closely resembles his father. The son, who is also named Luther Nedeed, carries on his father’s mortuary business. So each generation has a Luther Nedeed who follows closely on the patriarch’s steps, acquiring an octoroon bride to produce his own replica and carrying on the mortician’s business. The present Luther Nedeed, however, is disappointed with his marital life, as his son happens to be light complexioned. Convincing himself that his wife has been unfaithful, he imprisons her and the five-year-old child in the basement of his house.

Even as Hills tells the material and professional success stories of upper class blacks, it would be an illusion to imagine that they are leading happier lives than their ancestors. In trying to realize their own version of the American dream, they have sold their African American identity and thus resemble the souls in Dante’s Inferno. The traditional idea of evil is refigured into a modern patriarchy and the Nedeed men repeat the oppressive treatment of whites towards blacks in their conduct towards
their women. However, the oppression here is more psychological and intellectual, though Willa Nedeed’s imprisonment is literal as well as she is confined in the basement that doubles as morgue. The abject entrapment to house as a patriarchal construct suggested in Ruth Dead absolutely fits the Nedeed women. The novel resembles the female Gothic, which together with the slave narrative represents imprisonment and slavery as the central condition of women’s condition in patriarchy (Winter 2).

For the powerful Nedeed men the V-shaped piece of land “suggests the female body even as Nedeed’s house situated at the entry suggests the male who wishes to take possession. The land is, for succeeding generations of Nedeed men, their love” (Christian, “Naylor’s Geography” 114). So it is not surprising that the women in their lives have only secondary importance. They marry mainly because they need an heir to continue their lineage. A wife becomes an accessory for the continuation of the male line.

While in the basement, Willa gains a true understanding of her predicament as well as that of the previous Nedeed wives all of whom have been oppressed by their husbands in several ways. After her child dies she begins the search in order to dress him for funeral before she too dies of starvation. It yields her a bridal veil wrapped around a Bible that contains the first of the untold tales of the Nedeed women. It belongs to Luwana Packerville, wife of the original Luther Nedeed. It is said that Luther
marries her after selling his octoroon wife and six children and uses the money from the sale for buying Linden Hills. So the land itself as well as the thriving business is the price of a woman and her children.

Originally a slave bought by her husband, Luwana believes that the sale is only a formality and her husband will have destroyed the sale deed. Their child is weaned at the age of two and Luther takes him to the solicitor to settle his will and other documents. However, she learns with horror that the special dinner she has prepared is meant to celebrate her son’s manumission, which means that Luther has freed their son only to make him his mother’s legal master.

As time passes, the son spends all his time with his father till finally he becomes a stranger to his mother. Adrienne Rich observes that though patriarchy depends on the mother to act as a conservative influence and imprint future adults with patriarchal values in early years, it has also assured through ritual and tradition that the mother shall cease to hold the child, in particular the son, at a certain point in her orbit (61), denying her any active role in his socialization. Luwana’s son who has been his father’s from his birth in flesh has now become his in spirit. It is “not just that he is Luther’s son, he is Luther. And I fear that I have been the innocent vessel for some sort of unspeakable evil” (123). Excluded from the world of her son as he grows into a man, she becomes a stranger to herself as well. She understands that there are to be no more children.
When Luther hears about some black woman poisoning her master, he engages a housekeeper and disallows Luwana cooking his food, the one service that has made life meaningful for her. She feels utterly forlorn, as she has no parents or sister to console her and no one to write to. She has no friends, white or black, being barred from the whites because her husband is black, and from the blacks because of his wealth. They have no contact with the church. She manages to save the garden from the gardener by falling at Luther’s feet. She is a thwarted artist who has lost all function in life. Reading becomes her sole pleasure and she records her sorrows in the Bible, writing on the paper separating one book of the Bible from the next. Becoming schizophrenic, she begins to write letters to herself and answer them in the Bible itself.

Luwana records how she has passed one full year without talking to her husband and son who communicate their needs to the housekeeper. She marks the number of times she opens her mouth just to answer their greetings on her chest with a steel hatpin. Having made 665 cuts on her body, the next entry that reads, “There can be no God” (125) completes the biblical sign of the Beast – 666. This cryptic statement sums up how her harrowing experiences make the pious woman lose her faith. Thus Luwana remains a bondswoman all through her life – first to the Packervilles, then to her husband, and finally to her own son.
Looking for more records left by Luwana, Willa comes across piles of cookbooks. These belong to Evelyn Creton, the wife of the second Luther Nedeed. Ironically, Evelyn has made so much use of the kitchen from which Luwana has been barred. From the accurate records of the huge quantities purchased and the ingredients of the recipes, Willa thinks: “The woman cooked as if she were possessed” (141). After repeated readings, the staggering details begin to make sense for Willa. At first she is surprised by the mention of additional ingredients like dove’s heart, amaranth seeds, snake-root, ivory-root, and shame-weed. Then Willa remembers her great aunt Miranda Day speaking about the potency of such things in making any man come round. She reads on how Evelyn uses lemon juice, olive oil, and even ragweed, nettle tea, and maidenhair fern.

As Willa proceeds, she finds rows of purchase dates for household medications. Things like castor oil, Epsom salts, calomel, magnesia, and mineral oil are purchased in large quantities every fortnight. As the dates run on and on, Willa notes “the relentless accuracy with which this woman measured her anguish” and infers that Evelyn becomes bulimic, consuming huge quantities of food as well as laxatives. Willa, the educated woman knows that by using her personal computer she will be able to match the dates in the recipe books against the dates for the laxatives and find “how long it took this woman to eat herself to death” (190). It seems that she
finally admits defeat, for the last purchase order is for prussic acid together with vanilla ice cream, obviously for suicide.

Evelyn sublimates her desires for intimacy, sexual and emotional, and for creative expression into cooking (Kubitschek 117). Sandiford attributes her divergent conduct to the “dichotomy between the social role she so efficiently performed and the private hunger she suffered from unsatisfied sexual and emotional needs” (131). Modern research has shown that bulimia and anorexia, two most important contemporary eating disorders, are largely associated with issues of identity in women. Paulina Palmer describes anorexia as an unconscious protest at being identified primarily with the flesh and all the implied attributes of second-class citizenship, rather than an effort to conform to the image of extreme slenderness (28).

In her anger Willa begins to savagely destroy the contents of the boxes in the basement. She comes across some photo albums belonging to Priscilla Mc Guire, the wife of the third Luther Nedeed. The album traces the gradual suppression of the high-spirited woman’s selfhood. The photographs taken after their marriage demonstrate Luther’s proprietary attitude towards her. After the child is born, there is a shift in emphasis. The annual photographs record not only the growth of the boy but the growing shadow cast by him on his mother. Now the labels only mention the age of the son. “This self-denial reflects increasing denial by the
context and finally results in a self-obliteration” (Kubitschek 118). When Luther Jr. is twenty-one, “the only thing growing in these pictures was her absence” (209). Finally, there reaches a stage when her face disappears altogether in the photos. “Priscilla Mc Guire ended at the neck.” On the last photograph, “scrawled across the empty hole in lilac-colored ink was the word me” (249).

Most of the documents that Willa discovers in the basement are a record of effacement and silence. Like the record of silence carved on her body by Luwana or the erasure of her own face by Priscilla, the presence of absence is represented in Willa’s story also. The contrast is between these female voices and the absolute voice of the patriarchy in which they are trapped. While Willa remains a prisoner in the basement, Luther attends a function and produces a store-bought cake, which he claims, is baked by his wife. But Willie suspects that the cake is too perfect to be homemade and thinks of Mrs. Nedeed that he has “almost missed tasting her absence” (147).

The present Luther Nedeed knows that the earlier Nedeed wives have been chosen “for the color of their spirits, not their faces” and “to fade against the whitewashed boards of the Nedeed home after conceiving and giving over a son to the stamp and the will of the father” (18). He has to pause a moment to remember his mother’s first name, because everyone, including his father, has called her Mrs. Nedeed and she too has called herself so, submerging her identity into that of her husband. It is the name
of the father that is privileged in order to determine ownership for the
family. Their lot is similar to that of slaves because they are socially dead,
not having any existence except in relation to fathers, husbands, or brothers
(Winter 10). Willa’s name is disclosed to the reader only towards the end
of the novel, indicative of her objectification.

Luther muses that ideally, he should have married a woman who
was of the same age as the other Nedeed wives, which is sixteen or
seventeen at the most but he knows that times have changed. Still, he dares
not marry any of the black women he comes across during his college days,
as they all seem filled with arrogance. He waits till his tenth college
reunion where he looks for any unmarried woman who has “lost that
hopeful, arrogant strut” and “more than willing to join the life and rhythms
of almost any man – and for a man like himself, she’d bend over
backward” (67-68). In short, he wants to continue the patriarchal project.
But in his marriage things do not go as smoothly as he imagines. Luther
finds in his son’s whiteness the destruction of five generations.

The Nedeed men prove the theory that “authoritarian personality
structures are produced by authoritarian families, and in particular
authoritarian fathers” (Craib 102). He remembers his father saying,
“breaking in a wife is like breaking in a good pair of slippers” (67). He
hopes that his wife will have learned her lesson in a few weeks. He also
plans that she will conceive again next spring, which will provide him with
the son he wants. Patriarchy is concerned with the wife’s sexual fidelity, and procreation that ensures the production of heirs (Beechey 76). If Brownfield exploits Mem’s sexuality and burdens her with unwanted pregnancies, the Neeed men do violence to their women by controlling their sexuality and reproduction.

Now Willa understands Luther’s absolute control over her, including food and water and light. “Whatever she had been allowed – upstairs or down – was hers not by right, but as a gift” (68-69). In other words, Luther assumes God-like attributes. In patriarchal cultures, the male head holds all real power and the wife is both the victim and the mediator of that power. The freedom of the patriarch depends on the denial of freedom to women (Winter 55, 6). However, with the death of her child Willa realizes that she does not need anything any more. Her laughter finally breaks in hard, dry heaves as her fingers dig into her scalp. She coughs up phlegm and blood and when her dry throat makes even swallowing difficult, she laughs inside. “Small, icy tears formed at the corners of her eyes as the silent laughter pierced through the basement” (150).

Willa recollects her husband’s indifference to their son from the beginning. The child who goes unnamed and avoided by his father is aware of this rejection. Willa names him Sinclair. The boy dies just as he is learning to write his name. Dworkin designates men’s power of naming as
magical, because when he gives the name, it endures and when she gives the name, it is lost (17).

In fact, their relationship has been very different from what Willa expects of marriage. She is surprised by his coldness and distance and it takes “a lot of patience with a little reasoning. Then a lot of reasoning with a lot of patience.” As she is surprised to find no toilet articles on the dresser and extra pillows on the canopied bed, he cites his guiding maxim, “The way it’s always been done here,” according to the hereditary male rationalist principle. Further, he needs his private space but at night he “would enter and leave her body with the quiet precision” and the “entrance and exit from her bedroom and her body became part of a natural flow of motion that was Luther” (148). Spontaneity and passion are totally lacking in their life. When she conceives, he stops coming to her bedroom at night. However, after the birth of the baby she is also caught up in the changing rhythm of her life.

In six years of marriage Willa puts on twenty-nine pounds of weight. Slowly, the fullness of her thighs becomes comforting as they touch each other and she begins to prefer anything sticky and sweet that takes a long time to chew, both of which act as compensation for her rejection by her husband.

Larry R. Andrews records the parallels between the previous Nedeed wives and Willa Nedeed. The 1837 Bible scribblings of Luwana
express her realization that marriage does not alter her chattel status which
Willa finds a “parallel to her own enslavement to a later, equally sexist,
Luther” (293). Reading Luwana’s desperate attempts for communication
by inventing a fictitious sister of the same name, Willa regrets that she too
has no one to confide in. Keeping the women isolated from their
community by quarrelling with the ministers and discouraging social
contacts is a common strategy of all the Nedeed men. The women are
never encouraged to establish contacts with their female peers. Willa too
had tried to lure her husband through cosmetics and bleaching creams, as
Evelyn had with sprinklings of herbs and conjuring tricks. Similar to the
erasure of Priscilla’s face in the photographs, the dense veil worn by Willa
at her wedding causes her face to disappear. Goddu notes that the red gold
wedding band matching the colour of her skin completes her
disappearance, as the platinum ring did to the lighter-skinned Luwana
(229). Theirs is a tale of progressive depersonalization, as each husband
became in turn more cruel and evil than his father (Ward 190) and each
Mrs. Nedeed—spirit, identity, and womb— is subordinated to the
patrilineal project (Homans 159).

Dworkin explains that wealth of any kind is considered an
expression of male sexual power. The sexual meaning of money is also
applied to the interior functioning of male sexual processes. Men are
supposed to hoard sperm as they hoard money. One meaning of the verb
‘to spend’ is ‘ejaculate.’ One meaning of the verb ‘to husband’ is ‘to conserve or save’; its archaic meaning is ‘to plow for the purpose of growing crops.’ In this sense, a husband is one who conserves or saves his sperm except for the purpose of impregnating (21).

Even as they plan the conservation of sperms, the Nedeeds aim at preserving their lineage through a single male issue by developing fixed rites of copulation with the aid of astrological charts and journals, releasing the seed at the vernal equinox. Irigary observes how “the womb has been played with, made metaphor and mockery of by men” (Speculum 263) to “keep up the reproduction – production of doubles, copies, fakes” (Speculum 265). Homans comments that the Nedeeds embody a crime “neither considered nor punished by Dante: the crime of making (or attempting to make) women into disposable machines for replicating men” (152). Since Willa’s child is not an exact duplicate but a new creation, she is punished until she will learn the art of perfect duplication. Women’s reproductive capacities render them vulnerable to male manipulation.

Willa’s identification with her predecessors is highlighted by isolating their stories typographically in a different typeface, “constituting a rupturing text that interpolates itself periodically into the body of the main text” (Bouvier 149).

One of the reasons for the Nedeed men’s disregard for their wives is necrophilia or love of the dead. Erich Fromm notes two types of this
perversion: sexual necrophilia, which is a man’s desire to have sexual intercourse or any other kind of sexual contact with a female corpse, and nonsexual necrophilia, which is the desire to handle, be near to, and gaze at corpses, and particularly the desire to dismember them (325). He cites manifestations of the necrophilic character. Such a person believes that the only way to solve a problem or a conflict is by force and violence. He is a wet blanket and a joy killer who makes people feel tired. The necrophile is marked by the incapacity to laugh, general immobility and lack of expression in his face. The smile is not spontaneous but planned and the skin often gives the impression of being lifeless and dry (337-40). Luther Nedeed fits the description very well. Macon Dead also exhibits many of these characteristics.

Willa barely manages to stifle the memory of Luther embalming one of his female corpses, though she knows that he is a technician and embalming is the family business. When he undresses the bodies, for him, those “weren’t breasts, thighs, hips; they were points of saturation” and he “wasn’t seeing ears, mouths, nostrils, and vaginas; they were openings that had to be cleared of foreign matter” (175). She runs more from guilt, than from the sight of him lifting a fish head out of a plastic bag and turning it gently in his hands before inserting it in the spread body before him. Intuitively, she recognizes his perverted potency: like his forbears, he exercises all his tenderness on making his dead women look alive, yet
deadening his living wife. The ironic parallel is that both processes concern vaginal insertion (Andrews 293-94). Likewise, Luther plans to transform Willa into the ideal wife.

Luther has learned his art at his father’s side, which makes his discourse patrimonial. Down to the insertion of the fish head into the vagina, the rites are executed without the slightest variance from the letter of the patriarchal canon. This production of the female body with its manifest associations of dominance-submission, perversion, and necrophilia, as a voiceless, plastic object is the supreme metaphoric figuration of female value that is true of all other bodies in Hills (Sandiford 125).

Laurel Dumont achieves the highest possible success for a black woman by graduating Phi Beta Kappa from Berkeley and becoming a senior executive at IBM. She marries Howard, a scion of Linden Hills and the first black D.A. in Wayne County who is predicted to be the next State’s Attorney. But her life is devoid of creativity and harmony. Finally, she discovers that the woman’s space in the competitive social order is small indeed. Women function as ornaments to their husbands and the wife’s success is valuable only so far as it validates her husband’s power.

The victimization of black women at the lower levels is represented through Willie’s mother who struggles to bring up six children with the insufficient income her husband earns. Moreover, she has to put up with the beatings he gives her on pay day because he “couldn’t bear the thought
of bringing home a paycheck only large enough for three people and making it stretch over eight people, so he drank up half of it.” But she stays on as “a bruised face and half a paycheck was better than welfare” (58).

In Women Eugene blames Lucielia Louise Turner or Ciel for everything including losing his job. He resents her fertility when Ciel becomes pregnant for the second time. “I’m fucking sick of never getting ahead. Babies and bills, that’s all you are good for” (94). As Brownfield finds in Mem a snare, Eugene views his wife’s fecundity as a trap and children as a burden and forces her to have an abortion. Ciel is a case of “extreme submissiveness,” “a special dependency of one adult upon another: the impossibility of living without the partner, the willingness to comply with all the partner’s wishes, thereby sacrificing all interests of one’s own, all independence and self-reliance” (Reich 198). He coerces her submission to his authority, though she desperately wants that child. Then her two-year-old daughter Serena, left unattended, gets electrocuted as she pleads with her husband not to leave her. Nevertheless, Eugene leaves her, insensitive to the enormity of her loss, the only thing she has ever loved without pain. Ciel’s story is an indictment of male irresponsibility and insensitivity. The argument for marriage as the family ideal is refuted in Ciel’s case also.

Café also abounds in instances of the cruel treatment of wives by their husbands. Sadie’s father has never wanted children and her mother
agrees to abort all the babies, though it renders her very weak. Sadie somehow manages to be born into this hostile atmosphere. However, her father walks out on her mother on an errand for a pint of milk when she is seven months pregnant like one of one of the men in Cora Lee’s life in Women who vanishes on a similar pretext. Sadie’s mother becomes addicted to absinthe, finishing a quart bottle every other day. It rots her brain and finally she loses her mind.

Jesse Bell grows up in a low class family where the men spend a lot of money, “too often on the wrong things, especially the wrong females” (120), validating Dworkin’s concept of money as a male power. So her mother has a hard time bringing up her children without a daddy—or daddies. The scar running right across her belly is a testimony to her resistance to male domination. Jesse marries up into the King family but she notices the women there also being treated the same way. These women are not slapped upside the head but she learns that there are worse ways of ill treating women. A man may call his wife stupid and lazy or insinuate as much in the presence of a roomful of people and she is forced to take it smiling. Or he may have the girlfriend and wife at the same dinner table and even get a thrill out of it. Fromm observes how mental sadism may be disguised in seemingly harmless ways where the right word or the right gesture can embarrass another in this sort of innocent way. It is all the more effective if the humiliation is inflicted in front of others (284).
The patriarchal project is seen in the statement: “Women up there look at other women as nothing unless they’re attached to some man’s name. And attached they remain, no matter what he does” (121). This is the situation seen in Hills and among the African tribes described by Nettie in Purple. Jesse further notices that some of these well-to-do women get beaten worse than the women in the docks. The difference is that they get “beaten by stone sober men behind stained-glass doors. And with all their money, they couldn’t afford to cry” (122).

When Jesse comes home from hospital with the newborn son, even the hostile Uncle Eli seems pleased with her. He snatches the child from her and remarks, “Look what Jesse Bell has given us” (127), establishing the patriarchal dictum that the wife’s main role is to produce an heir. Later, Jesse’s husband asserts his right to own his wife and child and tells her: “What goes on in our home, goes on in our home …I rule here” (123). Like the Nedeed women, Jesse too gradually comes to have no say in her son’s life, what friends should come to his birthday parties, what clothes he should take to camp, or what books he should read. When she is upset about it, her husband tries to convince her that there is nothing wrong and she is being “overly paranoid” (128). The greatest blow for Jesse is that her sixteen-year-old son refuses to attend her mother’s ninetieth anniversary party, being not inclined to associate himself with the Bells.
The Kings, feeling superior to other blacks, disapprove of their food habits. Jesse is surprised to find that her husband, a coloured man brought up in Harlem, has not heard of oxtail soup. He picks at the other food she prepares too. Later she understands that his Uncle Eli never allows the Kings to eat such stuff, calling it slave food. She is like Luwana who is denied the pleasure of cooking for her husband and son.

When the dyke club is raided and Jesse’s name hits the newspapers, her husband denies any knowledge of it. So she finds herself “on display like a painted dummy in a window” as her name comes to mean, “that no-good slut from the docks and the nineteen years I’d put into my marriage didn’t amount to dog shit” (131). And she ends up in the women’s house of detention.

The experience of the slave shows that physical strength alone does not warranty power. Similarly, for black women, though physically strong and capable of doing all the work carried on by men, physical strength becomes an abomination and anathema if used against men. Black women are seen to be powerless in their relationships with their husbands. They serve as sexual partners, bearers of children, cooks, housekeepers, and even punching bag for the wounded male ego. Males have the power to terrorize which they use against women to ensure their domination. In many cases, the master/slave dialectic is replicated and sado-masochist relationships are quite common.
Regardless of the social status, the lot of the black women in the novels of Morrison, Walker, and Naylor, is beset with violence. Forms of privation vary from one class to another but women in all strata share the humiliation of being owned and treated as commodities. Black women with their peculiar burdens that make them victims not only of the whites but also of their husbands, cannot hope for a reprieve from the men of their community. They find no solace within heir home; without, they are refugees among their own kind.