Chapter 5

The Aftermath: Fragmentation and Wholeness

In all the novels Morrison, Walker, and Naylor examined in this study, black females are presented as victims of all sorts of violence. This final chapter enumerates the ways in which the oppressed black females react to situations of violence. These authors have also pointed out the black female’s potential by celebrating the survival/victory of the female protagonists. The winners are those who gain awareness of their marginalized situation and try to overcome it. Very often, as they are cut off from support systems in mainstream culture, the community of women helps each other tide over problems. Female bonding becomes a necessity for the survival of black women. Strong women who have gained a superior female sensibility through their experiences, usually painful in nature, act as umbrella figures in nurturing and protecting those who are weak.

The concept of black sisterhood is often established in these novels. It is the community of women rather than nuclear family that offers possibilities of growth and well being to the beleaguered individual. Female friendships are seen to take precedence over relationships of men and women. Lesbianism is often seen as a continuation of the mother-daughter bond. There are also cases of meeting violence with violence,
sometimes against the oppressor, and at other times against themselves, resorting to masochism.

Fromm cites aggressive behaviour as a response to any kind of threat to the survival or vital interests of the animal as an individual or as a member of the species (121) that can be seen as defensive aggression. The aim of defensive aggression is not lust for destruction but the preservation of life (195). It is also seen in suppressed groups that thirst for revenge (131). But Fromm also notes that the eagerness for the reparation of damage will be less in those who have confidence in life and enjoy it than the anxious, hoarding, or extremely narcissistic characters (274). If necrophilia is the death instinct, biophilia is the passionate love of life and all that is alive (365). Many black women who have been the helpless victims of the seven-fold violence pointed out by Dworkin are able to break free of their constraints in these novels.

Survival is a prominent theme in novels by black women. Morrison has stated that her aim is to show “how to survive whole in a world where we are all of us, in some measure, victims of something” (with Bakerman 40). Resistance, as Kathleen Mark notes, is not just a modern response to a painful past; it is an integral activity belonging to memory, and as such has an archetype. The early expression of resistance can be found in the notion of the apotropaic or the warding off or frightening the horrible precisely by the use of the horrible itself (6-7).
Wade-Gayles observes that black women have always resisted their oppression through racism and sexism in various ways. During slavery, their resistance has been subtle. While pretending to be genial, many use strategies like putting glass in the master’s food, poisoning animals, breaking tools, and feigning illness and ignorance to avoid work. They also play clever games of trickery and submission, hiding their true selves for their own advantage (146). The folk worldview through which characters retain a sense of self insists not on overcoming the enemy so much as outwitting and outliving him. Some advocated escape with the help of others, using secret codes, even using hymns and spirituals as modes of subversion, what Claude Brown terms a “semi-clandestine vernacular” (4). They also make use of defence mechanisms to reduce anxiety and produce some kind of security and safety. These include manifestations of repression such as isolation, denial, inhibition of memory and knowledge, and alienation of affect as well as subgroups of these like fantasy and avoidance (Randle 282).

Recognising the centrality of black women in their communities in contrast to the American norm of woman’s subordinate position in the nuclear family and denigration in society, black women novelists present women who are strong and believe in their primacy. On the other hand, they also present black women who internalize the dominant society’s definition of women and court self-destruction. Morrison’s *Eye* contains
both winners and losers. Cholly’s great aunt Jimmy has been able to accept her limitations and transform them for the benefit of the community. She and her friends maintain strong woman ties. Her friend M’Dear is a healer who presides over life and death. According to Nickie Charles, practising feminist witchcraft enables women to discover their true selves and to regain the unity between humankind and nature that patriarchy and patriarchal constructions have destroyed (17).

Mrs. MacTeer, Claudia and Frieda’s mother, has her own obsession with white values as seen in her procuring Shirley Temple dolls for her daughters during Christmas. But she also possesses a strong sense of family ties. When Claudia is sick, her mother’s strong, rough hands impart a homeopathic dose of violence that strengthens Claudia against the life-threatening disregard of society in general. Claudia and Frieda learn of their blackness and femaleness from their mother and understand better to cope, unlike Pecola who develops a negative self-image. The commitment to the idea of the black community as an extended family makes Mrs. MacTeer take in the homeless Pecola. She is another archetype of the caretaker in the traditional African-American community that conserves the wisdom of her foremothers who have sought survival communally. She and her friends, “the primary tale-tellers and the transmitters of history as well as the singing teachers” (Rigney, Voices 10), employ casual gossip as a means to escape their limitations.
There is a black style of aesthetic value seen in *Eye* in the form of the blues, which functions as an alternative to white America’s value system. Claudia always waits for her mother’s singing that comes at the end of her harangue, about “hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times” (25). But Claudia longs for those hard times as her mother’s singing voice is so sweet and her eyes are melty. “Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother’s voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet” (26). Claudia, whose rite of passage is a major concern of the novel, understands the constructive and healing potency of blues that transform the pain, sorrow, and suffering into a source of lyric energy for living (Mori, *Womanist Discourse* 96). On a visit to the three whores, Pecola is fascinated to hear Poland sing of blues.

As a child, Claudia feels an antipathy for the white blue-eyed dolls and dismembers them to find out the secret behind them. She escapes the damage to her self by destroying the doll, which she herself names “disinterested violence” (23). It helps her direct her rage not toward herself, but to the society that attempts to alienate her. She also asserts herself by showing her resentment to Rosemary Villanucci, the proud daughter of a European immigrant. Claudia indulges in fantasies of violence to whites like her, yearning to beat her up and make red marks on her skin. She admits that dismembering the dolls was not the true horror but the
“transference of the same impulse to white little girls” (22). However, Claudia is a survivor because she appropriately directs her anger from white dolls to her white adversary. What she has wanted is never any possession but some feeling like the security and warmth of Big Mama’s kitchen. All the sections of Claudia’s narrative are free of the Dick-and-Jane epigraphs that head the other narratives. McKay notes how the young black girl driven insane in her quest for the white western ideal of female beauty is balanced by a second black girl who understands and rejects the self-destructiveness inherent in such identification (“Reflections” 161).

Pauline, who is quite unlike Mrs. MacTeer, compensates for the failure of her marriage in diverse ways. The first is make-up and movies. Heinze terms it schopophilia, or sexual pleasure in looking which is activated by the very situation of cinema (28). Pauline accepts the Christian promise of deferred gratification and survives through repression, amnesia, and culturally sanctioned values for the more authentic experience of sexual love. She also becomes the perfect servant of a white family. However, she does not leave her husband as suggested by another white mistress.

Pecola lives in a world of unreality as she accepts white ideals of beauty, thereby depending on others for her identity and losing any sense of self. She learns to practise disappearing as a strategy for survival. But even in this fantasy her eyes refuse to disappear. Awkward notes that
Pecola suffers from “a tragic schizophrenia, a psychotic double
voicedness” (“Evil” 205). Her father’s rape drives the girl to madness and
she continues on the fringes of society, picking through garbage.

The three-women household is a favourite device Morrison employs
to establish the self-sufficiency of all-female households. In Eye this
establishment is depicted through the three merry prostitutes, China,
Poland, and Miss Marie, who “hated men, all men, without shame,
apology, or discrimination” (56). This spirit of noncompliance is achieved
through their economic and sexual autonomy. Each of them practises a
different folk skill: China is adept at signifying, Marie tells stories, and
Poland sings the blues. These middle-aged women understand the social
parameters of their position and, in their refusal to accept sentimental or
normative representations of themselves, are incorruptible in their
“corruption.” The uneducated whores shunned by the town’s respectable
folk are presented more favourably than the educated Geraldine and
Soaphead Church.

But this concept is given a greater dimension in the Peace household
in Sula where Eva reigns as the supreme monarch with Hannah and Sula.
Harding and Martin trace Eva’s lineage of mutilation to Captain Ahab, the
one-legged protagonist of Herman Melville’s Moby Dick, where physical
deformity serves as a visible sign of personal deficiency and alienation.
However, they find the portrayal of Eva different from that of Ahab in
three ways: first of all, Eva is not isolated from the other members of her society through her deformity; rather, she attracts friends and neighbours to her. Secondly, the narrative does not focus on the amputated leg, but on the unmutilated limb that is placed in a position of singular prominence. Thirdly, Eva’s physical deformity is shrouded in mystery, as all accounts of it are based on hearsay (2-3). Thus the mutilated leg, instead of being a lack, becomes a source of power, giving Eva God-like authority to interfere in the lives of others. Holloway observes that the incredible potential invested in creative power can lead to the extreme of creativity, which is destruction. Eva is as much a part of her children’s death as she has been of their living (24). She sets on fire her drug-addicted, spiritually dead son, Plum. But she makes a futile attempt to save her daughter Hannah from fire by leaping from the third storey.

Bodily marks in Morrison’s fiction, though drawn on the conventional scapegoating/hagiolizing pattern of Western tradition, constitute the most original development. Mutilation, as a demonstration of violence can be a symbol of invalidity but it can also stand for liberation. In Sula, self-mutilation is not an expression defeat, but something that elevates the character to a heroic stance. Another incident of this sort takes place when the teenaged Sula, confronted by a gang of white boys who have already harassed Nel, immediately slashes off the top of her finger and tells the shocked boys: “If I can do that to myself, what you suppose
I’ll do to you?” (54-55). Sula “aggresses the aggressor” and in this purposive self-destruction is embedded an element of self-preservation as the boys’ threat is diminished and their power vacated (Marks 1,2). The act of marking is appropriated by the oppressed individual in order to retaliate against the oppressor. Like her grandmother, Sula equates survival with mutilation. According to Susan Willis, Sula’s self-mutilation symbolizes castration and directly contests the white male sexual domination (“Eruptions” 322).

The atmosphere of violence in which she grows up creates in Sula the spirit of independence. When Eva asks her when she is planning to get married and have babies, her answer is typical: “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (92), thus rejecting the legacy of motherhood. Sula’s type of survival comes from carrying individuation to an extreme by being alone, inner-dependent and autonomous, which she maintains till her last days when she tells the visiting Nel: “But my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed over to you” (143). Rejecting the status quo and denouncing the traditional roles for women, Sula vehemently denounces her grandmother and her neighbours who might snatch away her independence. She shouts: “And I’ll split this town in two and everything in it before I’ll let you put it out!” (93). Thus she heals herself but wounds a community. Sula fails to
become part of the matrix of umbrella women that Morrison identifies as the central stabilizing force in the black community.

After their trip South Nel understands herself in another light. Learning the vulnerability of her proud mother, she realizes that she can define herself apart from her parents. “I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me. Each time she said the word *me* there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear” (28). This “new found me-ness” (29) enables her to cultivate a friendship with Sula. They find in female bonding the wholeness society inhibits, and a temporary escape from the tensions of patriarchal structure.

A cardinal incident that seals the bond of friendship of Sula and Nel is the death of Chicken Little, a small boy whom Sula holds by the hands and whirls so fast that he falls into the river and drowns. It is an example of what Erich Fromm calls accidental aggression, which is a form of pseudoaggression. It is unintentional but psychoanalysis introduces the concept of unconscious motivation into such acts (188). However, Nel is unable to pursue her independence. As the child of a woman who drives her daughter’s imagination underground, she plays perfect counterpoint to Sula’s intense insistence on freedom and accepts the traditional roles expected of a woman, namely, wife and mother. She falls out with Sula who finds nothing wrong in sharing Nel’s desire for her husband.
Nel knows the value of her friendship with Sula after Sula’s death when she realizes that more than her husband Jude whom Sula appropriated, she has been missing Sula herself. Nel has been to Sula “the closest thing to both an other and a self” (119). Later, when Nel evades responsibility in the accidental drowning of Chicken Little, Eva shrewdly asks: “You. Sula. What’s the difference?” (168). Based on this incident, Demetrakopoulos notes that Sula is Nel’s image of individual freely imagined feminine selfhood. She calls it the best and only portrait in all of literature of the true significance for women of feminine bonding (New Dimensions 62). Morrison has said, “I suppose the two of them together could have made a wonderful human being. But, you see, they are like a Janus’ head” (with Parker 62). Though Morrison categorically denies any homosexual involvement between the two, Duvall is of opinion that “there very definitely is a representation of female homosociality” (54).

Helene displays the same negative attitude towards her race as Geraldine in Eye in assimilating white standards, and negating African American identities. She uses the clothespin to shape her daughter’s nose and refuses to recognize her Creole-speaking prostitute mother. Citing the exchange of her name Helene Sabat “with its exotic associations with the witch’s Sabbath, for the prosaic Helene Wright, with its implications of both ‘rightness’ and ‘whiteness’,” Rigney states that choosing one’s own name can also represent a rejection of race and culture (“Hagar’s Mirror” 60).
The most magnificent figure in *Song* is Pilate. Born without a navel, and without any one’s assistance, Pilate is a woman of archetypal dimensions. She carries her identity by keeping her randomly chosen name in an earring fashioned out of her mother’s snuffbox. However, she transcends the Christian implication of violence associated with her name (as the person responsible for the crucifixion of Christ) and reclaims the original meaning intended by her illiterate father by becoming a pilot. Early on in life she fixes her priorities and lives accordingly a simple and natural life in response to the questions she puts to herself: “When am I happy and when am I sad and what is the difference? What do I need to know to stay alive?” (149). Pilate, Reba, and Hagar live in a woman-centered alternative community operating without regard for middle-class conventions or the expectations of men that serves as another three-women household in Morrison. Although Ruth and her two daughters constitute a three sum, they fail to make up such a cohesive unit as they are under the thumb of Macon.

Being fearless by nature, Pilate is able to look after herself as well as protect those who need help. She never loses her contact with the spiritual resources of the folk traditions and acts as an African griot or historian of the race. She holds the key to the mysteries of the family history of the Deads. Endowed with formidable strength even in her marginality and isolation, she aids Milkman in discovering his heritage and
coming out of his shell of solipsism. Milkman owes his very existence to Pilate’s voodoo magic. But she walks out of her brother’s life the moment her mission is complete because she respects other people’s privacy, “unlike her predecessor—the meddling, managerial and matriarchal Eva Peace” (Brenner 21).

Pilate is also instrumental in releasing Milkman and Guitar from the police when they are caught for stealing a sack of bones, which they mistake for gold, from her home. This time she resorts to an old technique of game playing. She looks shorter, weaker, and even whines to the policeman, practising duplicity by playing into white stereotypes of black behaviour to manipulate and control whites. But she expresses no rancor for the whites that killed her father and she dies with a bullet Guitar aims at Milkman. Hers is a love that “mothers the world” and “negates the atrocities of history” (Rigney, *Voices* 69) manifested through her dying words: “I wish I’d a knowed more people. I would of loved ’em all. If I’d a knowed more, I would a loved more” (336). Duvall is of opinion that her claim serves as an intratextual critique pointing out the inauthenticity of Guitar’s claim that is echoed by Porter and Robert Smith that the Seven Days’ killing is for love (96).

Though Ruth lacks the self-assurance of Pilate, they share the common quality of drawing strength from their fathers long after they are dead. Pilate carries her father’s bones with her and Ruth makes nocturnal visits to her
father’s grave. Though “little more than a weak replica of her biblical namesake, exemplar of dutiful, self-abnegating obedience” (Brenner 19), Ruth manages to find some meaning in life through such small-scale concerns. Her nursing of Milkman over an unnaturally prolonged period as a compensatory mechanism has been discussed in Chapter 2.

The younger generation is represented by Lena, First Corinthians, and Hagar. Lena and Corinthians have been encouraged to lead a vegetative existence, spending their time in making artificial flowers, till the beginning of middle age when they attempt to break out of their confines. Corinthians becomes maid to Miss Graham, the poetess, giving out to be her amanuensis, and though the job is demeaning considering her Bryn Mawr education, it enables her to emerge from the infantile existence. She meets Henry Porter, a tenant of her father, on her way to work. Knowing him to be far inferior to her in every respect, she nonetheless accepts his love and leaves with him. Milkman’s remonstrations have no effect on her.

Lena, the elder sister, also comes out of her limited existence by expressing her fury at Milkman about their subordinate position. The immediate occasion for the diatribe is the withering of a tree she has planted when Milkman urinates on it. But she chastises him for his interference in the life of Corinthians and Porter as well. She questions him, “Where do you get the right to decide our lives?” and answers it
herself: “I’ll tell you where. From that little hog’s gut that hangs between your legs” (215). She strikes out against the patriarchal authority handed down from father to son. This is the beginning of Milkman’s education when he learns to understand and respect women.

Reba and Hagar have not inherited the strength of Pilate, as they have no direct experience of African-American values but are attracted by false urban values. Hagar is not strong enough, like Pilate, nor simple enough, like Reba, to make up her life as they had. Her love for Milkman turns her violent and she loses her mind. In her conformity to consumerist culture, she is like Pecola and Pauline.

Sing, Hagar’s great-great-grandmother is also a rejected woman who becomes mad on the loss of her man and the charge of twenty-one children. Madness is her way of escape when she is unable to cope with her burdens. Her sorrow is echoed in the songs of Shalimar representing the community of survivors.

Conjuring is also used as a device by black people to get even with their white oppressors. Circe, the community’s midwife who took care of the orphaned Macon and Pilate, is a conjuror like her mythical namesake. However, a black woman’s conjuring is rarely performed directly. Circe’s long life is devoted to a vendetta against the Butlers for their cruelty to the Deads and it approximates a form of madness. In letting the Butler mansion disintegrate, she is aided by thirty Weimaraner dogs. She asserts
complacently: “Not a speck of dust, not a grain of dirt will I move. Everything in this world they lived for will crumble and rot” (247). With Pilate, Circe also helps Milkman come out of his self-centred existence.

Jadine in *Tar Baby* seems unaware of the violence perpetrated against her race. She becomes a proponent of the consumerist culture since she works as a model. She is a cultural orphan oscillating between the black and white worlds without knowledge of her parents, her roots and the past. She has to learn the solidarity of her female ancestors who have provided each other with caring and nurturing. Like Sula, she chooses quest instead of marriage, and in order to create herself, rejects the maternal role. She has rejected all mothers, even the mother within. As Thérèse says to Son, “There is nothing in her parts for you. She has forgotten her ancient properties” (305). Her resistance to all things black is repeatedly examined in the novel.

The responses to violence are varied in *Beloved*. Baby Suggs belongs to that group of umbrella figures that Morrison is fond of projecting in her work. She provides for Sethe the first real experience of a home and mother when she escapes from slavery. She kisses Sethe and hands over the newborn to a woman. Baby Suggs starts bathing her in sections, beginning with her face. She ties her stomach and vagina with sheets, soaks her feet in salt water and juniper, and washes away the crust from her nipples. Finally, when she discovers that “Roses of blood
blossomed in the blanket covering Sethe’s shoulders” (93), the shocked Baby Suggs greases her back and dresses it.

Before tragedy overtakes 124, it remains a cheerful, buzzing house where “Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed” (87) her people. Having rejected the name on her bill of sale, Jenny Whitlow, she renames herself “Baby Suggs” in memory of her husband. As Showalter says, the acts of unnaming and self-naming are fundamental to cultural identity and self-assertion and for African Americans it is the rejection of patronymics and the languages of slavery (Sister’s Choice 7). It is an appropriation of male power which could never be a black female’s. Assuming the role of the African griot and rejecting the gospel of the official church, she becomes an unchurched preacher. She preaches to her people in the Clearing every Saturday, trying to inculcate in them the value of dignity and self-love. She tells them to be wary of whites that do not love their flesh, eyes, skin, or hands but “only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty” (88). But the community rejects her soothing mission when they suspect pride born of over abundance. Sethe’s violent act further seals Baby Suggs’s fate and she dies of a broken heart.

Blacks survive mainly through defence mechanisms and suppress their impulses. So Baby Suggs says, “Everything depends on knowing how much. Good is knowing when to stop” (87) that Paul D echoes: “The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so
when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you’d have a little love left over for the next one” (45). There is also the therapeutic power of violent self-assertion allied to fantasy that allows the slaves release of dangerous emotions. “They killed a boss so often and so completely they had to bring him back to life to pulp him one more time” (109) as Claudia does to the white girl.

Like Eva and Sula, Sethe also appropriates the act of marking to retaliate against the oppressor. However, these marks are not inflicted on Sethe’s own body but on some one dearer to her than her own life. So it is akin to self-mutilation. These are the marks on Beloved made by the handsaw and also the scratches on her forehead by her mother’s fingernails. Sethe is in fact trying to subvert the authority of the white master by claiming ownership of her children, first by bringing them to freedom, and later trying kill them when they are about to be recaptured. Thus she moves from the position of the object to that of the subject. She resists the boundaries between self and other and rends the master/slave hierarchy (Hefferman 564).

A certain transformation and growth evolves out of Sethe’s act. Aggression and violence assist in the development of self-assertion as well as psychological change and growth. Violence becomes “a way of achieving a sense of dignity and power in the face of ages of humiliating oppression” and becomes creative (Bryant 224). Sethe’s frustrated attack
on the benevolent Mr. Bodwin whom she mistakes for a slave catcher, is also an attempt to assert her autonomy.

The task of rescuing Sethe from the hold of solipsism brought about by the advent of Beloved falls to her youngest daughter, Denver. She does this by getting rid of her own solipsist tendencies. In her first foray into the world outside, Denver approaches her old teacher Lady Jones who with her privileged light skin feels obliged to nurture the most underprivileged children of her race. After some coaxing on the part of Lady Jones, Denver blurts out that she needs food for her family. “‘Oh, baby,’” said Mrs. Jones. ‘Oh, baby’ ” (248). Denver knows later that it was the word ‘baby,’ said softly and with such kindness that inaugurated her life in the world as a woman. First Lady Jones, and then the other women of the community begin to provide them with food and it creates a bond. Denver also finds a job for herself. She has a new experience of having a self to look out for and preserve. Thus she also moves into the subject position. Denver is a survivor according to Sethe’s description as the arrival of Amy Denver has been nothing short of a miracle. She is a transitional figure not only because she is born in a river separating the free from the non-free but also because she operates in both an oral and literate culture (Hefferman 570).

Finally, the community that has stood Sethe off so far comes to her help in confronting Beloved. Thirty women arrive at 124 and without stepping foot into the yard, kneel down and start praying. But when Ella,
who is against past errors taking possession of the present, starts screaming, they all join, stopping their prayers and taking a step back to the beginning. “In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what the sound sounded like” (259). These women evidently challenge the logocentric order of the Bible, “In the beginning was the word” (John 1:1). They substitute language with human voice that has existed from prehistory. According to Kubitschek, the “beginning” “revoices not only God’s creation of the world in Genesis but the women’s creation of other life, the sounds accompanying birth.” It is also tied to Nan and Sethe’s Ma’m’s lost language and the chain gang songs (174). Sethe once again experiences the Clearing “where the voices of the women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words… a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees” (261).

Sethe now confronts the horror of the past that her rational memory has succeeded in repressing, as a defence. When she relives the crucial scene at the end by mistaking Mr. Bodwin for a slave catcher, it is through the fragmented sensory and emotional perception of her non-rational memory. “She hears wings. Little hummingbirds stick needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thinks anything, it is no. No no. Nonono” (262). This visceral reenactment enables Sethe to see past the “facts,” and place the blame for her daughter’s
murder where it belongs, exorcising at least part of the guilt (Lock 112-13). The women who come to intervene in the cathartic re-enactment of Sethe’s original violence are the very women who have contributed in some measure to the act of violence that took place eighteen years ago. They break the cycle of violence and drive Beloved from 124. Their action echoes the rites of exorcism of primitive communities by shouting, clanging weapons or cooking vessels, and beating the air with a stick that Girard describes. Exorcism represents the last chain in a series of reprisals (123, 124). One of the central assumptions of the novel is that the family cannot survive in isolation but needs the strength and protection of the wider community. The women take the necessary step in “breaking the tyranny of the violent past” and condemning violence as “an adversary of community” (Melissa Walker 40).

The philosophy Morrison develops here is that the price of human existence cannot be depreciated through escapism as demonstrated by Sethe killing her child, or Baby Suggs willing herself to death. No horror of slavery can outweigh the gift of life. Morrison’s assertion that killing Beloved was the right thing to do, but that Sethe did not have the right to do it seems to support this idea. Survival is not by shutting out the past but by “rememory,” or wilful remembering of the past in order to go forward. Morrison says: “The past, until you confront it, until you live through it, keeps coming back in other forms” (with Caldwell 241). The characters
have to face both the individual and collective past in order to heal themselves.

Now that Sethe is freed from her pathological and painfully protracted mothering, Paul D once again enters her life. This time he does not plan to count her feet but only to rub them. He tries to console Sethe who still mourns Beloved as her “best thing” (272). But making another human being one’s own “best thing” is ultimately to move into a condition worse than slavery. So Paul D tells her: “You your best thing, Sethe. You are.” He also wants to put his story next to hers and says: “me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (273). Now he knows the value of a woman who is “a friend of your mind,” which is Sixo’s feeling for Patsy, the Thirty-Mile woman: “The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order” (272-73). Nelson Lord tells Denver to take care of herself. If the last time he spoke to her his words blocked up her ears, now they open her mind. Morrison has said, “Nobody in the novel, no Black person, survives by self-regard, narcissism, selfishness. They took the sense of community for granted” (with E.B. Washington 235). Finally, the word beloved that had been a terrible sepulchral epigraph becomes a final command toward love and hope, and not toward death (Marks 4).

In Jazz also Morrison stresses on the need for the solidarity of black women as check against male oppression. However, Dorcas who has never
known such a community seems filled with masochist tendencies when she looks forward to Joe’s hurting her. After she is fatally wounded, she does not divulge Joe’s name, though everybody urges her to name the offender. According to Freudian theory, the masochist response is the expression of the death instinct (primary masochism) and has as its aim the gratification of an unconscious need for self-punishment, arising from guilt about forbidden impulses (Menaker 221). Dorcas embodies the traumatized survivor’s secret impulse to die, as she does not struggle to live when she is shot. The postulation of a drive to death implies recognition of the destructive force that the violence of history imposes on the human psyche. So history becomes the endless repetition of previous violence. The narrator is sure that the “past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack” (220).

Violet, who mutilates the dead body Dorcas, earns for herself the name “Violent.” She later feels attracted to the dead girl and goes in search of her history. After a period of suffering, Violet discovers a new imperative for living, as a sympathetic understanding brings her the realization that the girl could have been the daughter she never had, or miscarried. This understanding is arrived at through her association with Alice Manfred, Dorcas’s aunt, who has been unwilling at first to admit Violet to her place.
Through their association, Violet not only helps Alice but also Felice, Dorcas’s friend. All three of them share a feeling of deprivation of mother love. Violet’s mother has committed suicide, Dorcas’s been killed in the riot and Felice is rarely able to see hers. So each of them reviews her life and nurtures the others, even mothering them. The results are very positive. Violet, instead of her silence that caused her to act crazy, learns to communicate with Joe. Alice, who gets rid of her fear of men, moves back to Springfield and realizes the importance of the community in the survival of African Americans. Felice grows into a strong woman not to be used or abused, “nobody’s alibi or hammer or toy” (222). Unlike Dorcas, she will not be a victim or a victimizer. Violet takes the initiative to bring hope and love into their lives.

At the end of the novel, Violet’s attempt to mutilate the corpse of Dorcas is explained as an effort to exorcise the destructive other who inhabits her consciousness. She explains to Felice: “Killed her. Then killed the me that killed her” (209). Similarly, the violent acts she performs at the start of the novel can be seen as forms of self-destruction and self-reclamation. Rather than seeking compensation for the lack she perceives in herself, she affirms the possibility of inventing herself anew and says: “Now I want to be the woman my mother didn’t stay around long enough to see” (208).
Grewal aptly compares the ending of *Jazz* with that of *Beloved*. Both the couples Paul D and Sethe, and Joe and Violet share a hard-won love that has endured the buffeting of repressed memory. Both the novels deal with a collective trauma and transform it into an encounter whereby the narrative becomes a medium of historical transmission and also of healing (134). The ruinous love triangle turns into a family triangle at the end. Violet offers to trim Felice’s hair, Felice promises to bring records and Joe agrees to buy a victrola. The novel ends with the words: “Look where your hands are. Now.” It is this laying on of hands, hands bearing witness and healing, that the past demands and *Jazz* invites. The narrative voice says: “make me, remake me” (229). Joe and Violet manage to exclude from their relationship the disorders of passion, and the violence and loss that attend it because they have many things in common, the most important of which being the loss of the mother.

As the title of the novel suggests, music plays an important role in the healing process. Like the blues, jazz is an integral part of black life. Mori observes how Morrison shows the restorative potency of jazz that encourages interaction between listeners and performers. Improvised jazz represents the repressed voices of African Americans without the authoritative rules of classical written composition. *Jazz* functions as a communal repository, preserving and conveying identity-shaping truths. To start with, Alice believes jazz to be the cause of the riot because the
dominant society suppresses her anger and manipulatively replaces it with her hatred for the music and the drums. These accompanied the silent participants of the riots and voiced their resentment, despair and frustration. Her negative perception of race music as “nasty” and “lowdown” makes her insensitive not only to the restorative potency of music nurtured by the community but also to the community itself (Mori, *Womanist Discourse* 113). Now with the intuitive recognition of it as her own culture’s sustaining musical expression, Alice feels its healing power. Now she feels that the drums gather and connect them “like a rope cast for rescue” (58). Violet and Joe too gradually recuperate from loneliness and oppression through music.

“Music fills the empty, silent spaces between them, functioning as an activator and facilitating their communication” (Mori “Embracing Jazz” 328). Finally, for Violet and Joe, nothing is left to love or need but music.

Music also aids in retrieving lost contacts with the community.

Though unnamed, jazz is the essential narrator in the novel. As in jazz, Morrison’s narrator initiates a series of calls and responses, “a technique of musical, cultural, and language derivation” to discuss the armed black women of the City and for improvising an idea from an earlier part of the novel. Blank pages are inserted between chapters that function as a pause or break as in music (Eckard 17-18).

In *Paradise* the women who have been abused and mutilated by the world outside spend their time in the Convent, listening to one another’s
stories, singing, and offering a healing touch to the lacerated. Imperfect though it may be as a haven, it nevertheless enables the women to come to terms with their past as they remain free from the hold of male power. Consolata has been the ideal parent, friend, and companion in whose company the other women feel safe. Finally, in a way reminiscent of Baby Suggs with her emphasis on the flesh, Consolata attempts a spiritual healing of the troubled souls under her charge by combining maternal and sexual instincts. She speaks of the inalienable connection between body and spirit: “Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary’s mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve” (263). In a cleansing rain each feels free of the trauma and terror of the past.

In Love, Christine and Heed, the greatest friends-turned-worst enemies forego all violence when they realize their true feelings for each other. With the help of Junior, Heed reaches Cosey’s hotel to forge the will of her late husband. Christine follows them and watches Heed fall down. She gathers Heed in her arms and finds that her bones, “fragile from decades of stupor, have splintered like glass” (183). Left alone in the hotel till help arrives, the two reminisce their childhood. “Language, when finally it comes, has the vigor of a felon pardoned after twenty-one years on hold” (184). Realizing how Bill Cosey dominated their lives and sundered them, Christine says: “We could have been living our lives hand in hand instead of looking for Big Daddy everywhere” (189). When Romen rushes to the hotel, he finds the
two women lying huddled together but closer examination reveals one has wrapped the right arm of the dead one around her neck and is snoring into the other’s shoulder. L- the narrator remarks how some children “fall for one another. On the spot, without introduction” (199). For such children who have found each other even before they know their own sex, the parents’ place is secondary to their first chosen love. Such is the love of Christine and Heed as that of Sula and Nel.

Alice Walker has portrayed both victors and losers in Third Life, and losers outnumber victors. Generally, Walker’s women get no protection or support from their men. So their few victories are achieved by themselves or attained with the help of other women. Margaret is a victim at several levels. As a beautiful black woman, she becomes the object of the white man Shipley’s lust. While condoning it, Grange resents it as a husband and resorts to indifference and weekend debauchery that she too emulates. But when a child is born to her out of wedlock, Grange abandons her. Margaret’s infanticide and her suicide are an admission of defeat.

Mem endures greater trials than her mother-in-law. By nature generous and cheerful, she is transformed into a hag by Brownfield. Her strength, endurance, and forgiveness are conditioned by her identity as a mother. Violence becomes her last resort for survival. Her liberation may be considered sexual in nature, as she aims the loaded gun barrel at Brownfield’s genitals but her victory is short-lived. Not content to exploit
her love and make her weak with pregnancy and then drag her to live in a shack, Brownfield puts an end to her life. Margaret’s lot is not as bad as Mem’s because she and Grange love each other and fighting is their way of being alive. But the educated Mem suffers violent oppression from her husband and not from the outside world. Wade-Gayles rightly attributes Mem’s misery to her loneliness because she is a woman “without a past, without fond memories, without life-giving myths, without self-reinforcing stories related by a grandmother, with ties to a warmly hysterical black church” and “without neighbors who give advice and lend support” (110).

Josie is a black woman who has come out of the bondage of gender oppression. When she is literally crushed under her father’s foot, she decides to lead an independent life. She becomes the town prostitute and the richest and most powerful person there. She does her job with a gusto, which is her revenge against her father, and his many friends who have exploited her sexually. But economic power, which is so rare for women in the small community, does not liberate Josie. She is still confined to a role named by men and unable to redeem herself from their image of her as a ruined and worthless woman. So she can be called a winner who loses (Wade-Gayles 131).

Josie is also a loser in her relationship with Grange, the one man she has loved all her life. She feels cut up about Grange marrying Margaret and has her revenge by wrecking their marriage. When Brownfield comes to
the Dew Drop Inn, she tries to get even with his father by having Brownfield as the resident stud. However, when Grange returns from the north, she does not hesitate to dismiss Brownfield from her life. She becomes the happiest person when Grange makes her his wife. She sells the Dew Drop Inn to buy a farm for him. But she becomes annoyed with him when he adopts Ruth and devotes his life to her. Again she plans revenge by rallying Brownfield’s help. Deprived of her means of sustenance, she takes in washing to support herself and Brownfield.

Ruth, who is the hope of Grange in his third life, is trained by him to live with joy, laughter, and contentment in being a woman. “Survival was not everything. He had survived. But to survive whole was what he wanted for Ruth” (214), and her possession of a whole self compensates for the absent, deformed identities of her mother, father, and grandmother (Dubey 111). He seeks to make her independent by passing on the folk wisdom he has accumulated, giving special emphasis to the trickster tales that he hopes will instill in her a profound distrust of whites. But she learns an early lesson, which her father never acquired that “words and intelligence, not raw violence, have the power to transform experience by creating understanding and control over life” (Butler 199). So Grange fails to instill hate into her.

Grange is also aware of the folly of blaming whites alone. He tells Brownfield how whites can corrupt blacks: when they “got you thinking
that they’re to blame for *everything* they have you thinking they’s some kind of gods!” (207). The key to survival that Walker suggests through Grange is to keep some corner of one’s soul sacred from the corrupting abuses of any external, destructive forces. However, Ruth’s salvation depends on a final act of violence by Grange. On the court giving Ruth’s custody to Brownfield, Grange shoots him and brings about his own death at the hands of the police.

Raised in the 1960s, Ruth comes into contact with some Civil Rights activists and she is the natural inheritor of the changes marking the transition of the Grange women from death to life. Grange envisions a better life for Ruth through his transformation and sacrifice and she stands poised for a change at the end of the novel.

In Meridian, Alice Walker projects a heroine who rises from her state of oppression to become a leader of her people. She is the first among Walker’s women characters to survive by her own efforts. If Ruth is ready for a change based on an understanding of her familial and racial history, Meridian gathers wisdom from her personal history as well. A high school drop out and teenaged mother, she musters enough courage to break the “reproduction of mothering” and challenge the stereotype of maternal self-sacrifice (Palmer 101).

Miss Winter plays a crucial role in the healing of Meridian. Kubitschek observes that Miss Winter, a childless woman is able to
understand Meridian better than her own mother in her delirious state as well as when she stumbles for words in the midst of a speech, realizing the falsity of its political content. Though she conforms to Saxon standards outwardly, Miss Winter deliberately rises against its tradition by teaching jazz, spirituals, and blues in her music class and fighting with the president and the college dean. She is a griot through whom Meridian recognizes her own role to preserve the tribe’s song (162).

Callahan notes that in undergoing an abortion and having her tubes tied, Meridian, like the girls who cut down the Sojourner, turns her anger against her own life-giving potential (232). But her violence in hitting Truman in a refrain of wordless protest when he asks her to have his babies assumes therapeutic value. Meridian’s extrinsic act of womanly assertion leads to interior rejuvenation and reconciliation.

When Meridian is asked if she would kill for the revolution, she is unable to make the required response and chooses instead the more difficult alternative to go back to the people and live among them. She goes to the small southern towns, and in caring for the community, she assumes the role of the mother that she had rejected in personal life. She gives up her role as a biological mother in order to be a social mother. Meridian takes upon herself not only the trauma of her past life as a victimized black female but also the collective trauma of her people. Even at Saxon she had suffered from a sickness characterized by dizziness, temporary blindness, swooning, loss of
hair, and paralysis. Now she stages public acts of atonement, bordering on masochism, taking responsibility for the sufferings of her people. She confronts the authorities to allow black children to visit the freak show any day. But the suffering also functions as a healing process and Meridian returns after each act, cleansed of sickness, Lazarus-like, able to integrate a community she now recognizes as her own.

Meridian further draws from her heritage by discovering the strength of the black musical tradition and the black church. She undergoes an epiphany in the black church when she realizes that the music is more martial and the picture in the glass window resembles a blues singer rather than the traditional Christ figure. Thus Meridian in the course of her crusade for the downtrodden of her race is able to achieve psychic wholeness for herself as well. Upon perceiving her essential oneness with the black community, she reassesses her commitment to the racial struggle. There she promises to kill for freedom if necessary, a stance that she had refused to take earlier.

The ritual in the church teaches her the difference between suffering and victimization. Suffering is not a natural and necessary state of existence, and accepting it as such is an act of cooperation with those who inflict it. The guilt she has felt for her son, her mother, and her own efforts is cleansed in her refusal to be a victim any longer. By choosing life—personal, sexual, racial—she cures her diseased soul. In the black church
Meridian realizes: “For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experience of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul” (201). So she will keep the voice of the people alive and soothe the warriors with her song. Meridian becomes a modern-day griot.

Walker tries to drive home the necessity for black people to engage in the rituals that have given them their spiritual legacy, which has been the sustaining substance of their survival. Morrison also speaks of the artist’s tribal and racial sensibility, a small remnant of which can be seen in Black churches where people shout. “It is a very personal grief and a personal statement done among people you trust” (“Rootedness” 339). As the novel ends, rid of her sickness, with the soft wool of her newly grown hair that frames her thin, resolute face, Meridian is ready to go out into the world. De Weever is of opinion that Walker, in attempting to “strike a balance between private needs and public demands, grants privilege to neither. Meridian takes a low road, seeking the holy in the lowly, suffering with the poor” (122).

No black woman has ever been without language, not even the tongueless Louvinie who plants her tongue to speak louder than and longer than words. However, the question of language is not meaningful except in relation to the community. In contrast, Wild Child represents a negation of the individual’s need for community. In Meridian Walker explores the
relationship between voicelessness and the extremes of violence often visited on women and children.

*Purple* portrays not merely the negative machinations of female oppression; it also dramatizes the positive process of growth and liberation. Celie, the central character of the novel undergoes a transformation from a poor, dumb, near-illiterate, victimized woman to an independent one who has attained selfhood. Early in her life, Celie’s coping mechanisms are to alternately ignore and annihilate her body. The latter is her strategy for defence against her husband’s assaults (Ross 69). Sexually abused women often distance themselves as a conscious strategy for coping with the abuse. “I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree” (23). Celie believes Nettie to be dead and realizes the futility of fighting, advocated by her sister-in-law Kate. She also tries to find solace in religion, looking forward to an afterlife like Pauline in *Eye*. “This life soon be over, I say. Heaven lasts all ways” (44).

Another strategy that Celie employs is writing. She starts writing to God, the only sympathetic audience that she can imagine. However, after Nettie leaves for Africa, Celie writes to her. The sisters instinctively sense the power of the word to free them from their oppression and act as the bond that will fortify them against the dominance and abuse of a male world. Though she does not receive any of Nettie’s letters, Celie goes on writing to her, as she can define herself through her writing. Though still a
victim, Celie can find a voice in contrast to the silenced women like Margaret and Mem.

Celie’s growth is chartable through her letters as she is liberated from a belief in a God outside herself to acquaint herself with the God inside herself. Celie’s letters to God record passive resignation, silence, and blind faith, and none of them are signed. “In their anonymity, their namelessness, the letters further underscore Celie’s lack of individuality.” But when Celie directs her letters away from God, a public and alien audience outside herself, she directs them towards her sister, a private, familial, familiar, and receptive audience (McDowell, “Changing Same” 44, 45). The tradition of letter writing, along with diaries, has been the dominant mode of expression for women in the West. Instead of diaries of suffering, the letters become records of the growing internal strength and final victory of Celie.

The person who contributes most to Celie’s emergence as a person is Shug Avery, the queen honey bee who embodies the classic blues aesthetic which transforms the pain of black women. According to Mareyamma Graham, Walker achieves a previously unrealized depiction of the womanist approach in the character of Shug who chooses an alternative to mothering by pursuing a career as a blues singer and expresses a free, open, fluid sexuality. Walker further develops the womanist aesthetic of Shug and Sofia in Lissie of The Temple of My Familiar, Lisette of
Possessing the Secret of Joy, and Magdalena of By the Light of My Father’s Smile (236-37).

Strangely enough, Celie has no anger or jealousy towards Shug and when Albert brings home a fatally ill Shug, she is only too happy to nurse her back to health. Gradually, Shug responds to Celie’s altruistic devotion and in turn nurtures Celie into a self-reliant individual. Understanding Celie’s rejection by Albert, Shug works to create in her a sense of worth by teaching her to love herself. The liberation that Shug initiates in Celie is basically sexual in nature. Walker employs a topic that has been a taboo as a redemptive force in Celie’s life. Celie’s libido which has been deadened by her stepfather’s rape remains dormant even after marriage with Albert. Sex for Celie is something to be endured and never a pleasurable experience. Shug considers her still a virgin, as Celie has no idea about her sexual organs or their functions. Giving her a mirror, Shug forces Celie to examine herself and learn to derive some pleasure out of her own body. After the initial embarrassment, Celie thinks of her body as her own, for the first time. “It mine, I say” (82). In discovering and accepting with pride her own body, Celie initiates a desire for selfhood.

The lesbian relationship between Shug and Celie is presented as a continuation of the mother-child relationship in neither of which roles Celie has had any satisfying experience. She and Shug become in turn a daughter and mother for each other. “I feels something real soft and wet on
my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth. Way after while, I act like a little lost baby too” (118). Butler-Evans notes lesbianism as an essential aspect of “womanist” theory and praxis, encoded in the novel through the bonding between Shug and Celie (169). Rich too celebrates lesbian love as based on power of mother love. Walker extols the redemptive power of love offered unconditionally that enables Celie transcend her isolation and lack of self-esteem. Shug dedicates one of her songs to Celie, saying it was something that Celie helped scratch out of her head while she was doing Shug’s hair. Lesbian love counters the violence and macho pride inherent in heterosexual relationships.

If self-examination in the mirror is equivalent to the mirror stage described by Lacan, the end of the mirror stage for Celie also marks the two developments described by Lacan: the coherent use of language and the development of aggressivity (Ross 79). When she tells her story to Shug, she breaks the father’s law and his prohibition of silence. Aggressivity poses sinister possibilities as Celie seeks revenge against Albert when she and Shug discover Nettie’s letters he has kept hidden over a period of many years. When Albert orders her to shave him, she is reminded her of her stepfather and contemplates murder with the razor. Shug holds her back from this act of violence.

However, with Shug’s help, Celie learns to take control over her aggressive desires by two means of sublimation: assertive speech and
substitution of the razor with the needle. She is exhilarated by the sense of power that possesses her for the first time in her confrontation with Albert. “Look like when I open my mouth the air rush in and shape words” (213). Language keeps Celie from the destructiveness that would be the natural response to her oppressor. She curses Albert that unless he does right by her, all that he embarks on will fail. Though Albert talks slightingly of Celie: “You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman” and “you nothing at all” (213), she becomes bold enough to assert: “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook…But I’m here”(214). It is a positive and creative move towards self-recognition and establishment of self-worth. Celie asserts the supremacy of speech over the physical, material despotism characteristic of patriarchy. The revision of her point of view frees Celie from her imprisonment in stoic passivity.

The awakening of her sexuality leads Celie to creativity and she takes up sewing as a pastime. Celie and Sofia together make a quilt out of some torn curtains and a yellow dress. Celie has always enjoyed making quilts and has been particularly fond of a design called “Sister’s Choice.” According to Elaine Showalter, this name reflects both the kinship tradition in American woman’s quilting, and the central image of Walker’s writing that brings together elements from American and African-American history (Sister’s Choice 20). Quilting also forges a bond among women against the violence of men. Christian observes that for Walker, quilt making is a
model for her own craft, creating out of seemingly disparate materials patterns of great beauty and imagination. She expounds this idea in “Search” and the short story “Everyday Use.” Female creativity is projected as a means of overcoming oppression and bringing about transcendence. It is also a survival strategy.

In Memphis Celie sets up a business of her own, which is termed Folkpants, Unlimited, stitching pants that serve both men and women. When Celie finds a way of bringing her workplace and living space together, she defines an alternative economic basis for community. Female activities of quilting and stitching entail integrative, holistic, and reparative dimensions. If the violence inherent in male power destroys, splits, rends, breaks, and splinters delicate objects, the creativity of the female hand cures and cares.

Robbie Walker marks the inefficiency of support groups without self-determination by looking at Celie’s faltering efforts to survive. Celie first depends on Nettie for survival and later Shug replaces Nettie. But when Shug declares her own sexual freedom to be with Grady, Celie is broken hearted. However, gradually, her locus of control begins to shift from others to herself and she begins to manifest her self-determination (416-17). This means that even as supportive women can help a lot, the real support has to come from within. Celie attains a healthy personality.
development that moves from infantile dependence, through quasi-independence, to mature dependence.

The displacement of Standard English with the supposedly inferior black vernacular is effectively achieved in Celie. When measured against the repressed and rigid linguistic codes to which Nettie has conformed, Celie’s language with its flexibility and natural flow challenges its dreary correctness. When Darlene, an assistant tries to correct Celie’s language, she nonchalantly asserts her position. If the beauty of the black dialect is lost by Mem, Celie attests to its lasting beauty.

The knowledge about her parentage further empowers Celie. Notwithstanding her sorrow about her father’s lynching, she is relieved that Alfonso is only a stepfather. The burden of incest is lightened and she says, “My children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa” (183). Moreover, the family is reunited; Celie gets back not only the long-lost sister but also her children who she thought were dead. Her parental property bestows economic independence to her.

When the imaginary community has become real for Celie, gradually, the real community replaces the abstract idea of God that has been initially necessary for her. She discovers a world saturated by a sensual beauty that signifies God’s work. Finally, her vision of God becomes all encompassing. So she writes: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (292), a vision
that begins and ends with God. It is different from the God of traditional Christian theology who is identified as a male, “big and old and tall and greybearded and white” (201). With Shug’s help she unlearns the vision and modifies it to one who loves all feelings. Thus Walker adds a new dimension to the spiritualism of women. She considers animism to be one thing that African-Americans have retained of their African heritage, “a belief that makes it possible to view all creation as living, as being inhabited by spirit” (with O’Brien 193).

Kenneth Millard observes an alternative spiritualism suggested by the novel’s title that stands in opposition to the discourse of Christianity which in its very whiteness is inimical to black people. The colour purple is a pantheistic rather than Christian spirituality. It embodies the central themes of the novel. It is associated with pain, as in the colour of bruises; it is linked to the African race whose blackness shines like purple; it is a regal colour suggesting authority; and finally, it is the colour of sex (76-77).

Celie is also aided in her growth by Sofia who resists domination by anyone, white or black, male or female. Sofia refuses to be intimidated by the patriarchal outbursts of Mr.- or the weak imitation by Harpo. When Celie tries to find consolation in heaven, Sofia retorts: “You ought to bash Mr.- head open… Think of heaven later” (44). But Sofia has to pay dearly for her boldness when she clashes with the mayor and his wife. Years of prison life rob Sofia of much of her spirit and good looks and she survives
by emulating Celie: “Every time they ast me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I’m you. I jump right up and do just what they say” (93). Though she appears defeated, Sofia represents the strong woman who always puts up a fight against injustice. Her strength derives partly from her sisters with whom she has a supportive and nurturing relationship. At their mother’s funeral they act as pallbearers along with their brothers.

Sofia is given a reprieve when she is sent to the mayor’s house to work. This is achieved through a strategy devised by the women that exemplifies black female solidarity. Harpo’s girl friend, Mary Agnes, nicknamed Squeak, is deputed to meet the warden of the jail and manipulate things in Sofia’s favour. Though Squeak achieves her mission, she gets raped by the warden. But this sacrifice renders her a certain dignity. First of all, she demands that she be called by her rightful name, Mary Agnes, and not Squeak. Secondly, she decides to be a singer, which gives her a new identity and power. She leaves for Memphis with Shug and Celie. The rape by the warden “serve[s] as the diacritical mark that organizes Squeak’s insertion into the ‘womanist’ order. Having herself to sexual, racial, and political abuse in the name of communal solidarity” (Berlant 220), she assumes these privileges. Both Celie and Mary Agnes endure oppression with dignity and gain moral power over the oppressor. Their creative act is also the finding of their voice.
As bell hooks observes, the values expressed in woman bonding like mutuality, respect, shared power, and unconditional love become the guiding principles that shape the new community in *Purple* (294). Celie learns to tolerate Albert and even regards him as a friend. She tells him the African version of the story of Adam and Eve where the whites are the serpent. But she adds, “the only way to stop making somebody the serpent is for everybody to accept everybody else as a child of God, or one mother’s children, no matter what they look like or how they act” (282). The change in Albert makes him care for the sick Henrietta, Sofia’s sixth child whose father is not Harpo, and escape the confines of the patriarchal role.

Christine Froula notes the positive change in adults brought about by children. Just as love partners change, children circulate among many parents. Samuel, Corrine, and Nettie raise Celie’s; Celie raises Mr.-’s and Annie Julia’s; Sofia, Odessa, and Mary Agnes exchange theirs; and the whole community, including the white Eleanor Jane, becomes involved with Henrietta. If in Levi-Strauss’s analysis the exchange of women forges bonds between men, in Walker, children bond all her characters (642). The men are also redeemed from their meanness, selfishness, and propensity for violence. Violent and aggressive sex-role stereotypes give way to ethical values. The quest for personal and communal wholeness is realized to a great extent.
Most of Walker’s novels trace the development of black women from abject helplessness to a control over their lives. However, as Melissa Walker observes, progress in *Purple* is entirely in the private domain, as characters change but still live in a hostile and essentially unchanged society (50). Harpo explains to Henrietta that the reason they have a family reunion on July 4 is that while whites celebrate their independence from England, blacks can celebrate each other. That means, public history is something that happens to whites and black people must create their own private history (Melissa Walker 71).

In Naylor’s *Women* the community of women forms abiding bonds with each other. Far removed from the white, patriarchal world, they serve as the bearers of culture and tradition. The vulnerabilities of black womanhood create a vital oneness among them. “Like an ebony phoenix, each in her own time and with her own season had a story” (5). Dorothy Wickenden notes that this is a novel about “mothering, a concept embraced by Naylor’s women, each of whom is a surrogate child or mother to the next” (5).

The principal healer of Brewster Place is Mattie Michael, who is first received by Etta Mae and later taken care of by Miss Eva as a daughter. However, Mattie loses the house Miss Eva bequeathes to her because of her son’s irresponsibility prompted by her toxic love. Having lost her son, she channels her maternal instincts into the service of others.
She is the first in a long line of central mother figures in Naylor’s canon who plays a key role with her strength and timeless wisdom. She offers sound advice to Etta on the ways of men, but when Etta returns dispirited after her tryst with Reverend Woods, she boosts her up. She refuses to join in the community’s condemnation of Lorraine and Theresa as she realizes that the deep bond she has felt with some women transcends any relationship she ever had with a man.

Mattie’s almost magical healing touch is offered most profusely to Ciel who loses her only child soon after she is forced to abort the second. Mattie revives the nearly dead Ciel. Intuitively gauging the depth of her hurt, Mattie shouts a word of prayer, a “blasphemous fireball that shot forth and went smashing against the gates of heaven, raging and kicking, demanding to be heard. ‘No! No! No!’ She enfolds the tissue-thin body in her huge ebony arms and rocks her “out of that bed, out of that room, into a blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time… back into the womb to the nadir of her hurt” (103). Mattie also carries her over the grief of mothers bereft of their children due to acts of institutionalized violence. Ciel retches exorcising the evil of pain and this exorcism “represents one aspect of a rite of purification; its completion involves Mattie’s bathing of the young woman who has regressed into a state of physical helplessness akin to that of an infant” (Awkward, “Authorial Dreams” 55). Mattie’s
bathing of Ciel, reminiscent of Baby Suggs’s bathing of Sethe, is symbolic of baptism by water.

Kiswana Browne’s mother penetrates the artificial identity her militant daughter assumes by drawing upon the resources of age, wisdom, and experience (Montgomery, Apocalypse 92). She is a strong woman who had sworn to use everything she had to see that her children were prepared to “meet this world on its own terms, so that no one could sell them short and make them ashamed of what they were or how they looked” (86).

Only Lorraine and Theresa fail to find refuge in Brewster Place. Moreover, when Lorraine tries to free herself from her submissive role to Theresa and assert herself, the result is a gang rape and madness. The deadly eruption of her deferred self-assertion results in Ben’s death. It is ironic that Ben the father who has betrayed and lost his daughter should be killed by Lorraine, another daughter banished by her father.

Montgomery calls Mattie’s dream-nightmare a communal dream of freedom and classifies it as what Northrop Frye calls demonic, with its dystopic imagery suggestive of impending doom and destruction: there is a torrential rain storm, blood on the wall, and blaring police sirens (Apocalypse 99). Following the death of Lorraine, the women participating in the block party note the spot of blood on the wall. Instinctively, they decide to tear the wall apart. They pull with all their might and dislodge the bricks, which they pass from hand to hand. They refute their walled-in
existence and throw the resistance to oppression out into the dominant society, breaking the flow of traffic past Brewster Place with the flying bricks. Larry R. Andrews considers the women’s act as a “protest against the power of men over women (the gang-rape of Lorraine) and, more broadly, against the barriers of racist and class oppression (the bloodstained wall) that distort relations between the sexes” (286).

According to Awkward, if Pecola serves as a scapegoat in a community’s rites of purgation, then Lorraine’s ultimate status includes both purgative scapegoat and brutalized martyr whose demise apparently serves to unify a female community (“Authorial Dreams” 56).

In the course of the demolition Theresa arrives there and is asked to join. When Cora says, “Please. Please,” Theresa violently asks her, “Don’t ever say that!” (187) as it is a repetition of the only sound made by Lorraine during the gang rape. In throwing the bricks, Theresa throws away the word “please” and “discards the script of submission” (Fraser 103). Awkward draws attention to the fact that the wall’s destruction concludes with a “baptizing rain which, much like the symbolically reborn Ciel’s tears, serves to demonstrate a sense of harmony between nature and woman, between outside and inside” (“Authorial Dreams” 61). Although the idea of miraculous transformation associated with the phoenix is undercut by the starkness of slum and the perpetuation of poverty, the
notion of regeneration also associated with the phoenix is supported by the quiet persistence of women who continue to dream on.

_Hills_ also contains healing but it is self-healing effected with the wisdom gathered from the dead ancestors. This is because unlike _Women_, there is no community in _Hills_, let alone any sisterhood. The women entrapped in the Nedeed patriarchy are cut off from nurturing female support systems. According to Sandiford, Naylor “adopts certain polyphonic strategies to accommodate a diversity of textual voices, providing thereby a ground for engagement between her novel’s over-voice and the legitimized, canonical voices of the novel’s intertexts, opening up new “discursive spaces” for “other” (unlegitimized, uncanonized) voices to represent themselves in texts that are often radical and extra-literary” (120). Thus the voices of the four Nedeed wives speaking through the intertexts produce texts. They assert social presence by striving to rupture and dissolve the formidable coalescences of patriarchal texts. Each female author creates a structure that helps her to achieve self-expression. They also employ techniques of subterfuge and subversion.

The first Mrs. Nedeed, Luwana Packerville’s life is buried in three intertextual remains: her Bible which is the gift of a slave mistress, the notes and letters scribbled in between the books of the Bible, and her wedding veil. Like Celie, she also resorts to letter wring as a mode of healing. This clandestine journal- and letter-writing awaken her
consciousness to the reality of a neglected self and an alter ego which is a sister who advises her, “Pray, take hold of yourself” (123). She exhibits masochist tendencies when she punishes herself by making 665 marks on her body with a steel pin.

The second Mrs. Nedeed, Evelyn Creton tries to find solace in cooking, first resorting to occult practices to lure her husband. When that fails, she prepares huge quantities of food and also purgatives to match. She too suffers from masochist tendencies as she is driven to physiological self-abuse by binging and purging repeatedly, hastening her death by the final purchase of vanilla and prussic acid. The third Mrs. Nedeed, Priscilla McGuire’s photo album truthfully depicts her attempts to construct an identity, her growing insignificance, and final erasure. In Sandiford’s opinion, they represent an equally radical textualization of her voice in its confrontation with the Nedeed patriarchal voice (133).

Letters, recipes, shopping lists, and photographs are all a means of piecing together these women’s histories from the buried past. Their story is left out of Braithwaite, the historian’s writings. Naylor makes use of women-authored texts that express women’s creativity in ways that may not be acceptable to patriarchal scholarship, “the history of women’s quiet creativity in preserving and restoring what official history has torn apart” (Erikson 288). These texts may be termed what Gilbert and Gubar call “regal autographs drawn from a feminized nature” (The War 239). Against
this positive signifying heritage, which gives voice to silence and a presence to absence, Willa recovers a history of self-mutilation.

The female author forges out of her self-division and entrapment a text that is read by another woman in extremity. By reviewing the tragic histories of her predecessors resonant with their self-destructive syndromes, Willa is inspired to rewrite her own. She examines her face with her hands and the water in the pot acts as a mirror for her, the key to identity and self-knowledge. Naylor herself comments on this scene: “I created a way for her to see her own reflection in a pan of water because she had no self until that moment. And when she realized that she had a face…she could take her destiny in her own hands” (with Morrison 210). Her utter loneliness prompts Willa to a realistic assessment of her situation that finally leads her to make her own decisions. She takes stock of her life of thirty-seven years and acknowledges responsibility for herself. Six years ago she chose to walk into the Nedeed home as a bride and again she has consented to walk down the twelve steps into the cold and damp cellar.

Having found the identity she thought she had lost, Willa, unlike the previous Nedeed women, takes a positive decision to walk up the stairs. However, Luther intercepts her progress as she emerges from the cellar with the dead body of her son and she becomes bold enough to resist him for the first time. She clasps him in a death grip and the three of them burn as one to death in the fire that catches the veil draping the child’s body
from the lighted Christmas tree. Nevertheless, when Willa destroys Luther Nedeed, her victory becomes her predecessors’ as well (Puhr 522). Just as the female authors of Gothic novels and slave narratives try to dissect and disrupt the functioning of the patriarchal family and state (Winter 55), Naylor too subverts the patriarchal order.

Laurel’s grandmother Roberta’s efforts at healing and saving her granddaughter fail because Laurel deludes herself with her success as a career woman till the very last. Like Eva in Sula who sacrifices her leg for insurance money to nurture her children, Roberta funds Laurel’s education in Berkeley by cashing in on her insurance money. Again, as Eva is unable to save Hannah from death by fire, Roberta too fails to prevent Laurel’s death. Laurel is unable to derive support from female bonding. She tries calling Willa without success. Next, she contacts Ruth Anderson who sends her a Christmas gift. Finally, being unable to find any meaning in her existence, she kills herself by diving headlong into the empty swimming pool. Music and swimming, her two passions, fail to sustain her.

Ruth, unlike Laurel who is trapped by her adherence to class values, is content to live with her sick husband Norman Anderson outside Linden Hills, bordering on poverty. She is the only young woman in the novel who has a satisfying relationship with a man, even though he suffers from periodic bouts of insanity. Transcending the violence inherent in such a life, she escapes the spiritual aridity of the modern inferno. Grandma
Tilson, Willie’s grandmother, is the stern guardian of traditional values in Linden Hills. She had fought Luther as the maverick of his upward-striving black community. She warns against selling the silver mirror God propped up in one’s soul that is a warning against self-betrayal and loss of identity.

Mama Day, the title character of Naylor’s novel is an embodiment of female wisdom and power. Burdened early with the care of her family when her mother commits suicide, she eventually becomes the nurturer of the community of Willow Springs. Peter Erickson traces the development from Mattie to Mama Day through the figure of Roberta Johnson in Hills. He finds Laurel’s attempt to reconnect with a Southern rural landscape prefiguring Cocoa’s return home from New York City. However, Nedeed’s “obsessive concern with the empty ceremony of a traditional family Christmas is replaced in Mama Day by the non-Christian observance of the winter solstice that signifies cultural independence” (243).

In Café also healing plays a large role in the well being of the community. Here Naylor indicates that healing places are no less important than healers. As Montgomery notes, the primary relationships are among partially dispossessed women across time and space who are unified by the desire for a place where each is just allowed to be (Apocalypse 100). The narrative voice says: “Even though this planet is round, there are just too many spots where you can find yourself hanging on to the edge…and unless there’s some space, some place, to take a breather for a while, the
edge of the world—frightening as it is—could be the end of the world” (28). Karen Joy Fowler calls Bailey’s Café “a halfway house—halfway between the finite and the infinite, halfway between the belief that the universe cares for us as individuals and the evidence that it does not” (26). Bailey’s Café offers for the afflicted of both genders a refuge but Eve’s Garden is a haven for battered women who have lost all hope in life.

Montgomery calls Eve also belongs to the long line of larger-than-life central mother figures in Naylor. As the first customer to arrive at Bailey’s, she calls herself archetypal Mother Earth. The trial of her perilous journey to New Orleans batters and remakes her and no later challenge holds any threat to her. She proudly declares: “If I could get through all I’d gotten through, then I was overqualified to be the mayor of New Orleans. And much too overqualified to be the governor of Louisiana” (91). The absence of clean-cut parental ties shows her to be both natural and supernatural and invites comparison with Pilate. She is akin to Pilate also in her ability convey a sense of unreality by manipulation of reality and her connection to the trickster figure.

Sweet Esther, who has been forced into a sadistic relationship with a man who is not her lawful husband, contemplates killing him before she leaves in order to spare the same fate for other girls who will take her place. However, she gives up the idea as useless as there would be too many in the same predicament. Like the Nedeed women she is lonely and
feels the absence of a companion. She serves the man for twelve years in order to oblige her brother and then leaves the place to reach Eve’s.

Peaches arrives at Eve’s after she has ripped open her cheek with a tin opener. When her father comes in search of her, Eve assures him that she will return his daughter whole. Jesse Bell, the lesbian drug addict is rescued from the Woman’s Detention Center by Eve and restored to health and normalcy in less than a month.

The last story is that of Mariam, a pregnant fourteen-year-old Ethiopian Jew brought to the Café by Gabe, the neighbourhood pawnbroker. She repeatedly avows: “No man has ever touched me” (143, 144, 145, 146). Clearly, she is a mythical figure, reminiscent of Virgin Mary, and the birth of her baby, a Christ figure, is a cause for celebration to all and “wonder of wonders, Esther smiled” (225). Peaches starts singing and everybody joins. Stanley, a black man with a Ph. D who has changed over to female clothes and taken the name Miss Maple, also joins the celebration.

The “finale of all these stories is not madness and darkness but light and birth” (Wakefield 31). Naylor has brought “an assortment of persecuted refugees” and together, “the privileged proprietors and these waifs transcend their narrow confinements” and “celebrate a broader community based on openness, tolerance, psychic interconnections, and telling and hearing their stories” through which “they all learn to survive”
The novel tries to “establish unity between the widely disparate voices of women, not just within but outside the text.” The ebony phoenix symbolizes the woman as narrator: each storyteller emerges out of the ashes of personal catastrophe (Montgomery, *Apocalypse* 101). In all her novels Naylor pays attention to the special bond that can exist between women, including women of different generations. Naylor’s novels reinforce the theme that one can overcome with the guidance of others, usually a female other.

Barbara Christian explains how female bonding became a necessity for the survival of black women partly because of the matricentric orientation of African peoples from which they were descended and partly because of the nature of American slavery where survival would have been impossible without the female values of communality, sharing and nurturing (“Naylor’s Geography” 118). The person who passively submits to attacks upon her psyche actually reinforces and condones the behavioural tendencies from which the attack results. On the other hand, one whose individuality enables her to resist attempts at ego-obliteration may be persecuted, but can never be humiliated by behaviour stemming from the psychological deficiencies of another.

Many of the women characters portrayed by these novelists emerge from their initially fragmented experience to one of wholeness and fulfilment. They have gained an awareness of their marginalized situation.
They realize both their weaknesses and strengths through this awareness. Consequently, it leads to a search for means of overcoming the restrictive roles allotted to them. But it is not an easy task and involves struggle and sufferings. However, their sufferings lead to ways to endure and prosper, though the prosperity is more spiritual or psychological rather than material. The winners rarely attain their victories single-handed. They receive help from female bonding or the strong support from the black female community. The resilience and determination of black females act as strong forces for them to emerge from the clutches of violence inherent in their existence.