Conclusion

My aim in this study has been to examine the lot of black females in America as abject victims of violence in all walks of life as portrayed in the novels of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor. Through a detailed exploration of fourteen novels by the three authors I have sought to isolate the factors that lead to extreme forms of violence, the consequences, and the responses to such forms of violence. Though the complexity of the black female condition makes any monolithic analysis of the theme incomplete, I recognized a feminist reading to be indispensable. For this, I found Andrea Dworkin’s critical tenets regarding male supremacy quite suitable. I combined these with Erich Fromm’s theories of aggression as critical tools to explore the situation. Such an approach has been beneficial for a study of the multiple forms of violence manifest in the novels of the three authors.

Black females are seen to be the worst victims of violence from whites starting with the days of slavery, when they have been exploited as labourers without human dignity, and sexual mates without the power of consent. Although considered valuable as breeders, they have been denied any right to their children. In their marital relationships they are the repositories of the rage of their men who are emasculated by whites. Black
men fail them as lovers, friends, fellow black activists, or fellow members of the community. The weak and the nonconformists become easy scapegoats. The black female child is also the victim of violence at home. The most heinous offence on a female child is rape connected with incest. However, the resilience of the black females enables many to come out of their hopeless situation. This is achieved largely through female bonding and the community of women that is more supportive than the nuclear family.

The beginning of the history of blacks in America is rooted in violence. Though slavery arose as a result of the economic necessity of whites, it projected blacks as less than human and justified the inhuman treatment meted out to them. Even as the prolixity of slaves added to the property of the white master, fantasies of the black man’s promiscuity created pretexts for lynching, whipping, and other cruel practices. Black women were stereotyped in southern white literature, and the most prominent is the mammy figure, Aunt Jemima, who is black, fat, nurturing, religious, strong, enduring and in direct contrast to the ideal white woman pictured as frail, alabaster white, incapable of doing hard work but with the beauty of fragile crystal. Other images in which black females were cast are the concubine and the conjure woman. Early black literature, on the other hand, projected the tragic mulatto. Needless to say, black women have been at a disadvantage because of the negative images in which they were cast.
Morrison, Walker, and Naylor go beyond such stereotypes and present the real story of their ancestors. They have been able to transcend such limitations imposed by their oppressive past by drawing strength from their rich heritage and making use of the potential of writing as an instrument of empowerment. Among the novels included in this study, *Beloved* is the only one dealing directly with the era of slavery. The trauma of the Middle Passage is conveyed through the stories of Sethe’s mother, her friend Nan, Baby Suggs, and descriptions given by Beloved. In addition to physical violence like cruel beatings and the bit in the mouth that silences the slave voice, female slaves are sexually abused and denied their motherhood through separation of families. They are also subjected to violence that is intellectual and linguistic, embodied in schoolteacher. Morrison invents the word “rememory” to describe the deliberate remembering of things long repressed.

There are oblique references to the days of slavery in the stories starting with Meridian’s great-great-great-grandmother and the slave Louvinie whose tongue was viciously clipped out by the white master. Hard-working men like Macon Dead and Celie’s father are murdered by jealous whites. *Jazz* has for its background the racial riot of St. Louis when children like Dorcas lost their parents. Joe and Violet are also victims of the atrocities of whites. The Dick-and-Jane primer in *Eye* attests to the negative influence of white values on the black psyche. Discrimination
subjects blacks to severe hardships, and prison life is hell for victims like Sofia in Purple. Even in the 1960s black activists of the Civil Rights Movement receive harsh treatment from the white police and prison authorities, as represented in Meridian.

The detrimental effects of whites’ oppression get reflected in the marital life of blacks. The black man compensates for the emasculation and humiliation that he suffers from whites by victimizing his wife, thus replicating at home the master-slave relationship outside. Cholly, Grange, and Brownfield are examples for men who transfer their rage to their women. Macon Dead is prompted by the memory of his father’s murder by whites to lead a life of acquisition, and considers his wife also as a possession. Cholly, Jake, Boy-Boy, Ajax, Son, Rose Dear’s husband, Grange, Brownfield, and Eugene are all wanderers who abdicate any responsibility for their wives or children. Albert and the Nedeeds, however, victimize their wives not because of oppression by whites but because of their having imbibed the patriarchal ideology.

Black women and girls sometimes find themselves outsiders even within the black community. One important reason for this is the contempt blacks feel for themselves, which is projected on to a victim who acts as a scapegoat to purge their feelings of lack. Pecola becomes a scapegoat because everyone, including herself, thinks her ugly. Sula is also treated as one as they consider her evil and to be avoided. Sethe becomes a pariah in
the black community not only because of the infanticide but also on account of her pride and haughtiness. Even Baby Suggs is avoided by her people when they resent her plenitude. But the greatest cruelty is perpetrated on Lorraine. Being a lesbian, she is considered deviant and a challenge to the masculinity of the local thugs who take upon themselves the right to punish her by gang raping her. A similar incident occurs in *Love* also.

Lovers too often prove to be unfaithful. Milkman discards Hagar without any scruples. K.D. causes great anguish to Arnette by abandoning her when she gets pregnant and consenting to marry her only after four years. Truman exploits Meridian, Butch Fuller seduces Mattie, and Mem is born of an exploitative relationship her mother forms with a preacher. Seneca is abused by a foster brother, and singled out by men as a target of attack. Etta Mae is duped by Reverend Woods with whom she hopes to form a permanent alliance. Josie is sexually abused by her father’s friends. Peaches is sexually exploited by many and the temptations begin with her father’s friends. Cora Lee becomes the unwed mother of seven through various men.

Under such circumstances, the family ought to be a place of refuge for the female child. Unfortunately, it is rarely so for a black girl. The most gruesome offence to a girl child is rape combined with incest. Cholly violates his daughter Pecola who gives birth to her father’s child that is stillborn. She becomes mad. Celie is repeatedly raped by her stepfather
whom she takes to be her biological father. The two children born of this union are given away. Brownfield oppresses his daughters who are scared of him. He kills the albino child by exposing it to the winter weather. Mem’s mother, Josie, and Mattie have been thrown out by their fathers when they get pregnant. Lorraine’s father rejects her when she becomes a lesbian. Eve is sent out of the home, purged and naked by her godfather. Sweet Esther is sold by her brother to his master with whom she endures a sado-masochist bond for twelve years.

When black mothers commit infanticide, the reasons are far from simple. Sethe murders Beloved with a handsaw as she considers death preferable to slavery and manages to scare away the slave catchers. Approaching the status of sacrificial murder, Sethe’s infanticide becomes an act of piety. Earlier, slaves like Sethe’s mother used it as a mark of resistance by killing children born of whites. Sometimes children are seen as extensions of adult needs as in Nel and Helene. However, motherhood is fraught with contrary impulses in many cases because all women do not enjoy it. Meridian’s mother can never understand her and Meridian in her turn rejects her son. Pauline gives no understanding to Pecola, and Celie’s mother dies cursing her. Sadie’s mother who has been disinclined to motherhood forces her to become a prostitute.

The responses to violence are varied, and they determine the character’s success or failure. The winners transcend their limitations, as
they are possessed with an inner sense of self. Some gain ascendancy with the help of others who act as umbrella figures. Aunt Jimmy, her friend M’Dear, and Mrs. MacTeer are such figures in *Eye*. Self-mutilation gives power to Eva and Sula. Sethe’s act of dismembering her child’s body frustrates schoolteacher’s plan to recapture her and the children. Pilate and Circe gather wisdom from their folk roots and ancestors and they help others overcome their vicissitudes. Baby Suggs becomes an unchurched preacher and exhorts her people to realize their strength. However, the rejection by the community makes Baby Suggs isolated and dispirited.

Lady Jones, recognizing the power of the written word, runs a school for the poorest children of her race. She takes the first step to reinstate Denver and Sethe in the community. Violet finds the strength to save not only herself but others like Alice and Felice.

Miss Winter helps Meridian come out of her guilt-ridden past and emerge as a leader of the people. Shug Avery and Sofia are role models for the women in *Purple*. Mattie, Roberta, Mama Day, and Eve are Naylor’s matriarchal figures who heal those who are psychically scarred. Ruth is a survivor of the third generation of Copelands. Willa Nedeed gathers comfort from the records left by her predecessors who have expressed their frustration through masochist acts—Luwana’s 665 marks, Evelyn’s purging, and Priscilla’s self-erasure. They assert themselves through
polyphonic and multi-layered texts as in *Beloved*. Seneca develops the masochist habit of slicing her skin.

Pecola, however, fails because her indoctrination of white values is devastating and she gets no support from her mother. Hagar also loses sight of the values of black culture when she embraces the consumerist culture. Margaret commits suicide when Grange leaves her; another suicide is that of Laurel Dumont. The gentle Mem fails, as she is cut off from all sustaining relationships. Josie’s mother is unable to help her, and Josie turns to prostitution as revenge. Thus we find that those who submit to the oppression by conforming to the system that victimizes them are unable to come out of their limited existence. On the other hand, those who confront and resist oppression by their own efforts or with the help of others, become survivors. Persistence and resilience are qualities developed by survivors.

Female bonding thus becomes an effective strategy to ward off violence. This is often the maternal bond that even transcends the grave as in *Beloved*, or non-biological bonds between Baby Suggs and Sethe, Mary Magna and Consolata, Miss Winter and Meridian, Miss Eva and Mattie, and Mattie and Ciel. Sibling relationships of Claudia and Frieda, Lena and Corinthians, Denver and Beloved, Soane and Dovey, and Celie and Nettie are remarkable. But there are intense emotional bonds like those between Sula and Nel, Christine and Heed, and lesbian ties of Celie and Shug, and
Lorraine and Theresa. The survivors, in order to find wholeness, also find a connection with the community, a wider family network without its oppressive features. They accept their heritage and blackness as something to be proud of.

In these novels many characters make an attempt to confront the painful past. They gain the strength to face a problematical present by coming to terms with the ineluctable past. These writers draw on the oral story-telling tradition with its features like Specifying, or name-calling, and antiphony, or call and response. Folk culture represented in traditional black female activities like quilting, rootworking, herbal medicine, conjuring, and midwifery are incorporated into their stories. In their own world the women find expression and refuge in wordplay, irony, rage, fun, lies, song, and backtalk.

Gloria Naylor adopts the feminist stance in her writings. She does not dwell so much on the effects of racism on black women but concentrates more on intraracial violence to black females. Alice Walker prefers to call herself a “womanist,” a term that she feels would incorporate the black woman’s experience. Though Toni Morrison vouches writing for black women, she does not label herself as a feminist. Nevertheless, she is of opinion that black women are more suited to aggressiveness in the mode that feminists recommend, being both mother and labourer.
Some characters embrace counter violence as a solution. Guitar joins the Days, an organization for avenging racial injustice. Anne Marion and others force Meridian to kill for the revolution. The murder of Brownfield seems the only option before Grange. However, Walker offers the idea of nonviolent resistance in Meridian.

In relationships between the sexes also there is the need for reconciliation. Walker takes particular care to present the idea in all the novels. In *Purple* the chain of personal violence is broken only when Shug persuades Celie not to kill Albert. Those male characters that undergo a change learn to fuse both male and female characteristics, displacing their aggressivity with female values of caring and nurturing. Grange, Milkman and to a much lesser degree Albert recognize the toll paid by women. Naylor’s work traces a certain evolution of the men from the rapists in *Women* to a positive model in *Café*, who ironically bears a woman’s name, Miss Maple. Characters like Milkman too reach such an understanding.

These writers, being tempered by their female sensibility, evolve clearly matrifocal patterns. The female-centred and female-oriented narrative explores the nuances of the black female situation in America that is rooted in multiple marginalities. Like many of their protagonists, they act as griots of the race and vindicate the endurance and dignity of the black female.