Introduction

Violence against African American females, young and old, is an overwhelming concern in the novels of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor. The present study explores the possible whys and hows of this violence, which is, in fact, towards and by black females; it also goes into the ways in which black women survive their oppression. Tracing the roots of this violence to the days of slavery that justified the inhuman treatment of blacks by their white masters, black women are seen to be the worst sufferers as they have been doubly oppressed because of their race and gender. They also have to bear the brunt of their men’s emasculation by whites. Black female children face abuse in their own homes as well as from their own community. However, black women have devised their own strategies for coping with their oppression; these tactics have enabled many of them to survive their ordeals and come out of their marginalized state.

Violence is exertion of force so as to deal injury or abuse. It entails inflicting physical, material, emotional, sexual, and intellectual damage. It can be the exercise of force or constraint, perpetrated by individuals on their own behalf, or for a collective or state-sanctioned purpose. In its most obvious form violence is physical which includes battering, assault, murder, and rape. Though violence is largely physical, it occurs in a
psychological context and invariably produces mental and spiritual anguish. Isolation, deprivation, imprisonment, and badgering are also factors that cause great agony. Mental cruelty, the wish to hurt another person’s feelings, is at times more painful than physical hurt. Subtle and probably more enduring forms of violence like humiliation, ridicule, verbal abuse, and social and economic constraints tantamount to emotional imprisonment, are very effective means of control (Ackley xi). Language can be as violent as physical force. Obscenity is a form of psychic violence that can be used with the utmost effect.

“Violence and Black Females” naturally embodies two aspects, of race and gender. Violence is without doubt most central to African American experience. The history of blacks in America has invariably been one of victimization and oppression with the interracial violence manifested in whipping, lynching, branding and various other tortures, pogroms, race riots, and the brutality of white police. White racism appears in the lives of blacks as “the stepchild of slavery, of colonialism, and as a sentiment which emanated from European nationalism and capitalism” (Bonnett and Watson 4). Slavery, a culture held together by violence, had worked havoc with the black sensibility, not only alienating them from their native African culture but also rendering them chattel status.

In a classic statement W.E.B. Du Bois has given expression to the unenviable situation in which a black person finds himself in America:
The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil and
gifted with second-sight in this American world… a peculiar
sensation, this double-consciousness, the sense of always
looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring
one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused
contempt and pity. One ever feels this twoness—an
American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two
unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body,
whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn
asunder. (The Souls of Black Folk 3)

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. notes that because of the interrelatedness of
ethnocentrism and logocentrism in Western discourse, blackness itself is a
figure of absence, a negation ("Criticism in the Jungle" 7). Even in the
1960s, blackness was considered a debilitating badge of shame and a
reason for despair. Black arts and Black Power Movement of 1970s went a
long way in destroying the double-consciousness described by Du Bois.

Toni Morrison’s Playing in the Dark examines how race has shaped
the classics of mainstream American literature. She expresses her
displeasure that traditional, canonical American literature presumes itself
“free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence
of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States” (4-5).
While race has been a ground for contention in the treatment of violence, greater victimization has been taking place from time immemorial on the basis of gender. Traditional definitions of sex roles assigned to men and women have been profoundly influenced by Freud’s notion of biology as destiny. Another pervasive influence has been the neo-Freudian Erik Erikson’s assumption that the external and intrusive male sex organs account for men’s “outer space” perception of reality, while the internal organs of the female explain the “inner space” of women’s reality (Buncombe 421). In a phallocentric culture woman is defined by reference to the body and sexual reproduction. However, sexual relationships are often problematic for women and give rise to oppression and struggle as they are constrained under patriarchy. As such, they are denied all rights, including ownership of themselves, their bodies, and destinies.

So women easily become victims of violence that is always associated with the employment of power. Power, which is the source of every person’s self-esteem and the root of the conviction that the person is interpersonally significant, is the birthright of every human being. However, in practice, this is never the case. There is often an ecstasy when the perpetrator of violence is possessed by power that involves the lust for destruction, the atavistic urge to break things and to kill (May 243, 167, 176). As Kate Millet notes, the relations between men and women have always been a matter of politics or manipulation of power (23) and the
position of women is the result of such asymmetrical power relations. Of all the forms of violence, male violence against women in personal relationships is most overtly condoned and accepted because of the acceptance of this dominant-submissive relationship as normal.

Force is an integral part of all acts of violence, especially in the male asserting his masculinity. It is fundamental in all sadistic relationships. bell hooks observes that while male supremacy encourages the use of abusive force to maintain domination of women, the Western philosophical notion of hierarchical rule and coercive authority is the root cause of all violence, including those against women and children (118).

All the gender ideals open to the American man like the Masculine Achiever and Christian Gentleman have included self-assertion and aggression as key elements, and sometimes, sanctioned violence has been a common thread in American ideals of manhood (Horton 80). Conversely, assertiveness and aggressiveness that are the characteristics of male life would be considered unfeminine and monstrous in women (Gilbert and Gubar, Mad Woman 28). Naturally, women and children, especially girls, are seen to be the typical victims of violence, both overt and covert. This covers domestic violence, brutality in sexual encounters, and victimization of children. Whatever may be the form of violence, both the reality and the threat of violence act as a form of control over women.
Feminists have raised their voice against the subordinate position accorded to women under patriarchy. In order to contest the diminished status of women, feminist theory distinguishes between biological sex and socially constructed gender. However, neither feminism nor African American criticism has been able to do justice to the black women’s experience that has been expounded by black women authors. This fact was first pointed out by Barbara Smith in 1977: “When Black women’s books are dealt with at all, it is usually in the context of Black literature which largely ignores the implications of sexual politics. When white women look at Black women’s works they are of course ill-equipped to deal with the subtleties of racial politics” (27). Morrison too joins the protest of black feminists in “Women’s Lib,” indicating the exclusivity and ethnocentricity of women’s liberation movements.

In her pathbreaking work No Crystal Stair: Visions of Race and Sex in Black Women’s Fiction Gloria Wade-Gayles examines some novels by black women in order to analyse how race, sex, and class work against black women in America. According to her, there are three major circles of reality in American society, which reflect degrees of power and powerlessness. In a large circle white people, mostly men, experience influence and power. Far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow space, in which black people, regardless of sex, experience uncertainty, exploitation, and powerlessness. Hidden in this second circle is a third,
small, dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation, and vulnerability. She then goes on to explain the “double jeopardy” of being black and female in white America, and how they are denied the privileges accorded to women as well as the power and influence that men enjoy as heads of families and leaders of nations (3-4). A little further on, she adds the axis of class as well because from the time of slavery, “they were workers first, women second, and always black, and the three identities locked them into positions of vulnerability” (6). So their burden can be designated triple jeopardy. However, she feels that since class oppression cuts across race and sex, it is not unique to black women.

The flaring injustice inherent in the black women’s position had been challenged even as far back as 1853 by Sojourner Truth, an illiterate ex-slave, who laments that traditional gender roles assigned to women were not granted to black women. On the other hand, they were required to perform heavy field work or other duties just like men.

Black women’s literature continues to voice the peculiar predicament that black women face in America. Charles Johnson suggests that Du Bois’s statement should be expanded to include black women authors so that they can voice their “threeness; an American, a Negro, a woman: three souls, three thoughts, three warring ideals in one dark body” (117). These writers are joined together not only by their historical reality but also by the common themes that spring out of it. They constitute an identifiable
literary tradition as “thematically, stylistically, aesthetically, and conceptually Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social, and economic experience they have been obliged to share” (B. Smith 32).

Well into the second half of the twentieth century, however, neither white America nor even black men were ready to acknowledge the different voice of the black woman writer. Black aesthetic discourse, the literary programme of black cultural nationalism, consolidated around the sign of race, discouraged any literary exploration of gender and other differences that might complicate a unitary conception of the black experience (Dubey 1). The masculine perspective and the problems of black manhood had always occupied the centre stage in African American literature.

Nevertheless, there has been a distinct tradition of black women writers going back to Phyllis Wheatley in the eighteenth century. However, most of these black women writers were not included in the reading lists of American universities, the exceptions being Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker. Soon protest against this scholarly neglect became vociferous.

The 1970s is generally considered as a period of the Second Renaissance in black literature, the first being the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s acted as an impetus to this efflorescence. Interestingly, it is women like Toni Morrison, Alice
Walker, and Gloria Naylor who occupy the central position in this Second Renaissance, challenging the hegemony of a predominantly male perspective. The novel, a genre already approved as suitable for the female imagination, has been revived and valorised as a fitting medium for black women seeking to understand their predicament in American society. Both Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, let us recall, published their first novels in 1970 itself.³

The complexity of the black female situation yields a multiplicity of identities based on race, class, gender, education, and sexuality. There ought to be more than a single monolithic theory or approach to explicate this intricate predicament, as the casting weight of any one critical theory leaves room for lopsidedness and inadequacy. The study of black women, therefore, definitely calls for a determinedly feminist reading of the novels, here, of the three authors: Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor. I have used Andrea Dworkin’s feminist tenets regarding male-supremacist ideology for analysing the violence against the black females in the works selected. I have found Erich Fromm a most suitable ally for this thematic study of violence, especially, his treatment of aggression and its social-psychological forms in American society.

After examining two theorists, Alfred Adler and Konrad Lorenz, for their views on aggression, ⁴ Fromm posits two different types of aggression. The first is a phylogenetically programmed impulse to attack
when vital interests are threatened. He calls it defensive or benign
aggression that man shares with other animals and is in the service of the
individual and the species. It is biologically adaptive, and ceases with the
threat. The second is termed malignant aggression and is equated with
destructiveness and cruelty. It is specific to human beings and not
phylogenetically programmed or biologically adaptive. It has no purpose
and its satisfaction is lustful (4). This is the negative side of aggression that
injures another or gives pain and wrests power for self-interest. The present
study has drawn upon Fromm’s theories on the second type of aggression
leading to violence, the manifestations of which I trace in the novels. I have
further gone on to the first type in occasionally eliciting the response of the
victims to this type of violence.

Fromm comments on the various forms that malignant aggression
takes on. One is sadism, the passion for unrestricted power over another
sentient being. Another is necrophilia, the passion to destroy life and the
attraction to all that is dead, decaying, and purely mechanical. The
inhibitions against killing are operative only when there is a sense of
identity and empathy. The enemy from the other side during war,
especially if he is of a different skin colour, is treated as if he is not human.
The same destruction of humanness is observed in the treatment of black
slaves. Thus the “stranger” is never felt as a fellowman. Often conformist
aggression takes place on account of obedience and a sense of duty. Fromm also mentions accidental aggression and playful aggression.

Fromm goes no to observe that much of the behaviour pattern depends not merely on the individual but also on the situation. For example, the sadistic-masochist character is submissive to his boss and sadistically domineering to his wife and children. Sadism is more frequently to be found in frustrated individuals. A sadistic person behaves sadistically because he/she suffers from an impotence of the heart. While cruelty to a stranger may be unrestrained, there is some inhibition for such treatment to members of the same group. So the most severe treatment for misdeeds in primitive society has been ostracism, rather than death. Fromm’s theories also touch on the mother-child relationship. He treats the role of the mother not only as the goddess of creation, but also as the goddess of destruction. In his view, aggression and violence continue to be generated in a world where the majority of people are deprived of their freedom.

Dworkin analyses male power in its relation to the female. She establishes seven tenets of male-supremacist ideology. It is, first of all, a metaphysical assertion of self that women are considered lacking. Second, power is physical strength used over and against others less strong or without the sanction to use it as power. Generally, men are physically stronger than women and so seek to exercise dominion over them through force. Third, power is the capacity to terrorize, to use self and strength to
inculcate fear. Fourth, men have the power of naming that enables them to define experience, to articulate boundaries and values, that is fused into the language and upheld by force. Fifth, men have the power of owning, which leads many to assume that they have the licence to beat or rape their wives. Sixth, money or wealth of any kind, any degree, is an expression of male sexual power. Seventh, men have the power of sex, which is an act of possession and includes force and conquest. It is also expressed through the attitude or quality of virility. This accounts for the celebration of rape in story, song, and science (13-24).

Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor take the role of the black woman writer quite seriously. Morrison has stated in an interview: “I want to participate in developing a canon of Black work” (“Behind the Making of the Black Book,” quoted in Samuels and Hudson-Weems ix). She had also championed the work of black writers by editing them when she became the first black woman to hold the position of Senior Editor at Random House.

However, Morrison distinguishes her position from that of the early advocates of the Black Aesthetic, some of whom believed in a single politically correct way to write. The black authors that she had read, mostly men like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, seemed to be writing to a white audience, explaining black culture to them. Morrison explains the intention behind her writing thus: “I was interested in reading
a kind of book that I had never read before. I didn’t even know if such a book existed, but I had never read it in 1964 when I started writing *The Bluest Eye*” (with Parker 252).

In the Preface to her “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South,” Alice Walker declares her commitment to the ideology of “womanism,” which may be interpreted as an “attempt to integrate black nationalism into feminism, to articulate a distinctively black feminism that shares some of the objectives of black nationalist ideology” (Dubey 107). Walker has been very much concerned about grounding her work in a matrilineal tradition of black writing, paying particular homage to Zora Neale Hurston, for whom she felt an affinity, in “Search.” She also designed the first course on black women writers, which she taught at Wellesley College in 1977.

In a conversation with Morrison, Gloria Naylor reveals that she came to write because she had no choice, as the writers she had been taught to love were either male or white. She persuaded herself that “not only is your story worth telling but it can be told in words so painstakingly eloquent” (189) as she felt that her presence as a black woman and her perspective as a woman in general had been under represented in American literature. At Brooklyn College Naylor became conscious of her identity as a black woman and the need to overcome both patriarchal power and racial oppression.
All the three authors thus have special commitment to the cause of black women who face a sense of double or triple diminishment in American society. They also possess commendable academic credentials and have won acclaim for their work, culminating in the Nobel Prize for Morrison in 1993.5

What Marianne Hirsch says about the three maternal traditions among which Walker and Paule Marshall situate themselves is applicable to Morrison and Naylor as well. The first of these is the black oral invisible lineage in which their own mothers nurtured art as storytellers and gardeners. The second is the black written tradition of Wheatley, Linda Brent [Harriet Ann Jacobs], and Hurston. Thirdly, there is the white literate tradition of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, which must be revised to include the different story of the black writer (262).

Many of the novels of the three authors are revisionist in that they build on the work of Euro-American as well as black authors, both male and female. 6 They also revise and invert myths both European and African. Intertextuality of traditions and texts is often implied in these novels.

All the three authors explore the significance of growing up and being black and female in a culture that has denigrated these qualities. Naturally, their works abound in examples of violence against black women, which is multi-faceted. However, they portray characters that strive hard to overcome their oppressive conditions by finding their voices. Morrison apprises that the
black woman “had nothing to fall back upon: not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself” (“Women’s Lib” 15). Walker too expresses herself in a voice deeply immersed in her blackness, womanness, and Southernness. She has told O’Brien in an interview that she is committed to “exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women” (192).

There is a large body of critical works on these authors. It has been a Herculean task to identify the materials relevant to the present study. There are several book-length studies on them singly, and in combination with others. Henry Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah have edited a book each on Morrison, Walker, and Naylor, all under the title Critical Perspectives: Past and Present. Numerous journal articles have also come out on these authors. Kashinath Ranveer has published a book on the three novelists dealing with black feminist consciousness.

But there has been no single sustained work seeking to isolate and examine the different manifestations of violence, their reasons, and the response set forth in terms of fiction by these three authors. This makes the present study worth pursuing.

The aim of the present project, therefore, is to study violence towards and by black females in the African American context. The word “black” has been used here in the broadest sense without in any way being
disparaging. Morrison herself vouches for the word being clarifying rather than pejorative (with J. Wilson 136). In a conversation with Bill Moyers she remarks that there was a time when race was not a subject to be discussed and words like “white” and “black” could not be used in their real meaning and the inevitable result was the silence of the black person and the denial of the black presence (262-63). She has also asserted her insistence to be called a black woman novelist when she proudly declares: “As a black and a woman, I have had access to a range of emotions and perceptions that were unavailable to people who were neither” (with Caldwell 243). The word “female” has been used for clinical precision in order to include both women and girl children.

In this study, I have examined those novels of the three authors that deal most with this type of violence, and have only cursorily alluded to the others. As such, I have dealt with all the novels of Morrison, since they abound in such forms of violence. However, I have not attempted a detailed study of Tar Baby, as it does not contribute to the topic as much as the other novels do. I have studied in detail three novels of Walker—The Third Life of Grange Copeland, The Color Purple, and Meridian. I have omitted the other novels with their African setting and rites of genital mutilation, except for occasional glimpses, since they go outside the scope of this study, notwithstanding the transcultural oppression of black women they portray. Three novels of Naylor I have examined here are: The
Women of Brewster Place, Linden Hills, and Bailey’s Café. I have found Mama Day inexpedient for the present topic. The Men of Brewster Place appears an extreme revision of Women to be included in this study.

My findings are set forth in five chapters, rounded off with Conclusion, followed by Works Cited. In each chapter only those novels relevant to the theme are examined. I have also drawn attention to the diction and imagery that aid and abet the depiction of violence.

My study begins with “Shadows of Slavery,” that is, the violence that whites have inflicted on blacks, particularly black women and female children that includes sexual abuse. Separation of families has created great mental anguish and prevented cohesion of the black family. Even after the abolition of slavery, various forms of quasi-slavery like sharecropping and Jim Crow laws have continued to render life oppressive for blacks. Denial of voting rights, rampant racism and persistent poverty along with other open as well as subtle acts of discrimination have made life very hard for them. Assimilation of white values creates feelings of inferiority and lack of self-worth in many characters. Secondly, “The Displaced Fury” examines the violence in the marital relationships of black people. The black male, unable to confront the white oppressor, takes out his failure on his partner. Thus the black woman becomes a slave’s slave and the master-slave relationship is re-enacted in the domestic scene. The men are often irresponsible and sometimes they desert their family, leaving the women to
bear the burden of the children also. Further, “Aliens among Their Own”
studies the oppression of black women and girls outside the family by their
own people. This includes eve teasing, ostracism, breach of faith by lovers,
sexual harassment, rape, and assault. The black community at times makes
some member its scapegoat. Then I go on to “Betrayed Innocence” that is
devoted to an examination of violence towards female children within the
family. It deals with negligence, unwarranted cruelty, and even incestuous
assault by the father. Infanticide is an extreme form of violence and the
reasons for this are far from simple. The painful as well as ambivalent
experiences of motherhood also form part of this chapter. Finally, “The
Aftermath” enumerates the response to violence. While a few characters
break down under duress, there are many who have mastered the technique
of survival. Some respond to violence with counter violence but for most,
female bonding turns out to be a much better option. Those who fail to
meet the challenges lack the protection of the umbrella figures common in
black literature. The Conclusion aims at consolidating the findings of the
foregoing chapters, and at suggesting the scope for further study.
Notes

[1] The tradition of black women writers that began with Phyllis Wheatley (“On Being Brought from Africa to America”) in the eighteenth century has been carried on by Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy Or Shadows Uplifted* (1892), and Pauline Hopkins’ *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (1900). Jessie Fauset explores feminist concerns, though a bit ambivalently, in *There Is Confusion* (1924), *Plum Bun* (1927), *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931), and *Comedy, American Style* (1933). Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) present the hardships of black men and women. Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is a marked improvement in this tradition as she looks far ahead and becomes a model for later writers like Alice Walker. Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946), Dorothy West’s *The Living Is Easy* (1948), Hurston’s last novel *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), Gwendolyn Brooks’ (the first black American to receive the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1949) *Maud Martha* (1953), and Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) further explore the predicament of black women in America. Marshall published her second novel *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* a decade later in 1969. Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966) is based on the life of her great grandmother Elvira Dozier Ware.

The title of the anthology All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave (1982) points to the peculiar difficulties endured by black women. Claudia Tate’s Black Women Writers at Work was published in 1983. bell hooks’s Ain’t I a Woman (1981) and Angela


[4] Alfred Adler in *Understanding Human Nature* postulates aggression as a super oriented dynamic force that is a higher principle of motivation. Konrad Lorenz, on the other hand, tries to establish that man’s
aggressive behaviour manifested in destructive and sadistic acts is due to phylogenetically programmed innate instinct seeking expression (On Aggression).

[5] Morrison’s Song of Solomon became the first black novel to be chosen as a main selection for the Book-of-the-Month Club since Richard Wright’s Native Son. It also won the National Book Critics’ Circle Award and the National Book Award for the best novel. She secured the Modern Language of Commonwealth Award in Literature in 1989. In 1993 Toni Morrison created history by becoming the first black woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. Walker bagged both the American Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for her third novel, The Color Purple in 1983. Naylor’s first novel, The Women of Brewster Place won the American Book Award in 1983.

[6] For example, in The Bluest Eye Morrison revises the Trueblood episode in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man. Beloved may be considered a revision of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Walker is indebted to Hurston’s Their Eyes in the writing of Purple. She had planned to structure Meridian on the model of Jean Toomer’s Cane (1923). But it is Naylor that wrote Women as a revision of Cane as well as Petry’s The Street. Linden Hills plainly echoes Dante’s Inferno. It is also influenced by Morrison’s “Bottom” community of Sula as well as Eye

a) On Morrison

b) On Walker


c) On Naylor

d) Works Solely on the Three Authors or in Combination with Others