
UNIT 2 THE WOMAN, THE MOMENT AND THE MILIEU-II

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

We will help you to analyze i. the history of Black women's fiction, ii. the chief characteristics of Black women's fiction iii. history of Black Women's Movement iv. literary influences on Alice Walker v. the meaning of Feminism, vi. Feminism and the Ideology of Individualism, vii. The Double Whammy of the Black Mammy Myth, viii. Black Feminism and the Civil Rights Movement, and ix. Black Feminism and Capitalism

2.1 A BRIEF HISTORY OF BLACK WOMEN'S FICTION

Black women writers in present times Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ntozake Shange, Gayl Jones, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Margaret Walker and Sonia Sanchez emerged from a black literary tradition beginning in the eighteenth century. Autobiographical writings and slave narratives were the starting points for Black women's fiction. Voices of African-American women such as Phillis Wheatley, Jarena Lee, Harriet Jacobs and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper were significant in shaping African-American Women's fiction. In her essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977), Barbara Smith argued that since the "feminist movement was an essential precondition to the growth of feminist literature, criticism, and women's studies," the lack of an autonomous black feminist movement contributed to the neglect of Black women writers. Individual White women helped Black Women publish books but the texts of Black women from ex-slave Harriet Jacobs to educator Anna Julia Cooper reveal the racist practices of the suffrage and temperance movements and the various ways in which white women were complicit with a racist patriarchal order against all black people. The first novels written by Blacks had a White audience in mind. This is because Black people, according to the laws of many states, were not allowed to read or write.

Despite obstacles to literacy several Black women wrote such as Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784), Maria Stewart (1803-1879) and Ann Plato (who wrote early nineteenth century). In fact as early as 1831 and 1832 black female literary societies appeared in Philadelphia and Boston. The text, *Our Nig: or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, edited and introduced by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is an early text. Referring to Frances E.W. Harper's publication of her short story, "The Two Offers," also in September 1859, Gates writes, "That two black women published in the same month the first novel and short story in the black woman's literary tradition attests to larger

shared cultural presuppositions at work within the black community than scholars have admitted before. . . . The transformation of the black-as-object in to the black-as-subject: this is what Mrs. Harriet E. Wilson manifests for the first time in the writings of Afro-American women."

However, throughout the period of slavery and reconstruction, novels written by Anglo-American writers dealt with negative images of Blacks but during this same period the Blacks were writing about the "tragic mulatta" (a hybrid. Children White and Black parentage). Frances Harper's *Iola LeRoy* (1892), the first published novel by a black woman made this character cast a lasting image. Several mulattas tried to pass for whites. We see this in Jean Toomer's *Cain* (1923) and in the novels of Nella Larsen *Passing* (1929).

Until the 1940s black women wrote confronting negative images of black women. Pauline Hopkin's heroine in *Contending Forces* (1900) wants to advance her race. Zora Neale Hurston tried to project positive images of women in her novels. But in reality these images had no impact because of the hostility surrounding the blacks. Characters in novels where they tried to be like the mainstream white culture such as Lutie Johnson, in Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), and, Cleo in West's, *The Living Is Easy* become frustrated and destructive and alienated from themselves. With Gwendolyn Brooks *Maud Martha* (1953) one sees a shift in African-American fiction. The focus here is more on the process of self-definition. Paule Marshall's *Browngirl, Brownstones* (1959) was influenced by Brook's *Maud Martha*. Marshall's work is a landmark in Black women's fiction. The novel deals with the life of a Black mother and daughter. Very few early writers of Black women's fiction wrote about Black motherhood because of the negative definitions surrounding it. The image of the Black woman became even more complex with the shift of Black women to the north. From cotton pickers, and cooks they now became prostitutes and garment-factory workers. In this transition the works of Ann Petry and Zora Neale Hurston were instrumental. Their works influenced writers like Brooks and Marshall both of who focus on Black community and culture which influenced many writers of the sixties and made them aware of the importance of community in developing one's identity. They made several writers aware that the animosity and patriarchal attitudes between Black women and men had larger links with capitalism and racism. With this new perspective on the Blacks the attitudes to their own community changed. The internalized notions of racial stereotypes that affected Blacks are seen in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. In these novels the communities are directly responsible for the tragedies. The madness of Pecola Breedlove, the suicide of Margaret Copeland and the murder of Mem Copeland by her husband all stem from it.

In the 1970s and 80s black community was seen as a threat to the survival of Black women. These novels protested against the sexist and racist attitudes in society. Not just Whites but the Blacks too had to change. The fiction of this period Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1978), *Tar Baby* (1980) Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Street*. (1980), Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980). Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Joyce Carol Thomas' *Marked By Fire*. Ntozake Shange's *Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo* (1982), Audre Lordes' *Zami* (1982) and Paule Marshall's *Praise Song for the Widow* (1983) all talk about how Black women's lives were affected by sexism and racism. Ntozake Shange, Gloria Naylor and Audre Lordes also indicate the diversity of language in contemporary African-American literature. Shange in *Sassafras* goes back to African culture in drawing upon dreams, letters and recipes. Naylor uses weaves in Afro-American folk dialect to her narrative which itself is very Afro-American.

In the 1990s a lot of fiction by Black women have appeared Marsha Hunt's *Joy* (1990), Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* (1990), Xam Cartier's *Muse-Echo Blues* (1991), Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (1991)

2.2 CHIEF CHARACTERISTICS OF BLACK WOMEN'S FICTION

- The theme of search for identity. This expresses itself in the form of a journey which is sometimes inward and sometimes outward. For example, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* the journey is from the plantation back to Edenton, from North Carolina to New York city and Boston and from Boston to England and back. In Walker's *The Color Purple* the journey for Celie is from silent object to speaking subject. The journeys are also expressions of the search for the African-American women's spirit that has not been destroyed by racism and sexism. In Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Janie Crawford journeys from her West Florida home to Eatonville, from Eatonville to the Florida Everglades, the Muck, and back to Eatonville. The form of journey is also linked to the concept of mobility. Most Black women writers talk about mobility because in the context of slavery this mobility was restricted.
- Renegotiating of identities is basic to Black women's writings. This has partly to do with their cross-cultural context and the history of slavery. Blacks had constantly to fight the identities imposed on them by the White mainstream culture. The stereotypes of Black women portrayed by Whites showed them as Mammies, aunt Jemimas etc. Also, Blacks were called by several names: Pan Africans, Black-American, African-American, Negroes etc.
- Images of powerlessness, entrapment, restricted mobility and helplessness are seen in most of the works by Black women writers.
- Low self esteem in women. Most of the Black women writers discuss issues arising from the intersections of race and gender and how women strive to gain respect and dignity amidst the flashpoints of this intersection. "Surviving whole" therefore becomes a corollary to this.
- The theme of lesbianism is another important characteristic of Black women's writings. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) Audre Lorde's *Zami* (1982) Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) and Ntozake Shange's *Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo* (1982) have lesbian relationships. Lesbianism in Black writings is seen as bulwarks against sexism and racism.

2.3 WHAT DOES FEMINISM MEAN?

In the US the contemporary feminist movement has popularly been identified with the movement defined by white, middle-class, college educated women. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is often cited as the first book of what is called the 'second wave' of feminism. It was a work around which many white women of this socio-economic class rallied as it expressed their frustrations at being excluded from the positions of privilege and power occupied by white males in American society. It also hit a nerve with women who are rankled by seniors within their families or personal lives. To vastly oversimplify, the goal of feminism became to eliminate sexist oppression imposed by the patriarchal society which, it was thought, would end discrimination against women on the job, in the home and in all areas of women's lives. **Equality of opportunity was the objective, and sexism was the enemy.** This often got translated into 'men are the enemy', which made many women uneasy and men defensive. In effect the women's movement seemed to **interpret equality of opportunity to mean the achievement of parity – or better – with white, middle – or – upper – class man.** For a number of reasons, black women did not see this as addressing their concerns.

One of the basic issues that divides feminists is whether they consider the goal to be reform of the present social system or its revolution. And it is on this point that black feminists and the mainstream of the white feminist movement have diverged.

Frances Beal (1970), in her essay **Double Jeopardy'. To be Black and Female**, is only one of the many black feminists who has criticized the women's movement for its limited focus. She says: "Any white group that does not have an imperialist and anti-racist-ideology has absolutely nothing in common with the Black Women's struggle's (Beal 1970:98), Black women and men, along with other minority groups, understand that equal opportunity with white male power elites is not only out of reach for the majority of the population but also is not going to alter an oppressive system in any significant way.

Brought to the American continent as slaves in the 17th century, African women were deprived of every basic human right in order to serve the plantation economy of the American South. Even their reproduction, sexual and material prerogatives were appropriated for the benefit of their white masters. This history inexorably impacts the thinking of every black woman's understanding of the connection between sexism, racism, and classism. And they know that the ending of slavery has not ended the systematic exploitation of their labor in American society and that the capitalistic system has created a tier of socio-economic issues which ranks them at the bottom.

Bell Hooks, one of the most eminent and articulate spokespersons of black feminist thought, has pointed at that black feminists are concerned about economic survival and ethnic and racial descrimination as well as sexism, and she faults the mainstream white women's movement for failing to speak to these issues. Speaking of the movement as it took shape in the sixties and as espoused by feminists such as Betty Friedan, Hooks (1984:4) says:

"White women who dominate feminist discourse, who for the most part make and articulate feminist theory, have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politic, of the psychological class, of their political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state."

Feminism is not, she says, about dressing for success or becoming a corporate executive or taking skiing vacations or the career marriages. Furthermore, as long as any group, whether it is black or white males or white females, defines liberation as "gaining social equality with ruling class white men, they have a vested interest in the continued exploitation and oppression of other (Ibid:15). "Because black women are on the margins of the whole system, Hooks argues, they have a special vantage point from which to criticize the dominant racist, classist and sexist hegemony as well as to imagine and create a system that does not rely on oppression of one segment of population for the benefit of another.

Throughout the history of women's movement in the US, there have been women, black and white, who have objected to the limited – however valid – focus on sexism and patriarchy as the cause of women's position in society. Moreover, working women of all races and ethnic backgrounds felt the effects of classicism. But, either because racial or class discrimination were not experienced by white, middle-class women or because they themselves were unwilling to give up the privileges accruing to them by virtue of their class women were either ignored or rejected as important targets for feminists. White feminists were eager for black women to join their movement and seemed perplexed that they were not eager to do so. Black women, however, were as a group unwilling to ally themselves with white women in opposition to black men who, inspite of their sexist behaviors, were closer in identity to them than white, middle-class women. Various studies have shown that class differences are greater than differences between the sexes within the same class.

2.4 FEMINISM AND THE IDEOLOGY OF INDIVIDUALISM

As all of us know, the 'cult of individualism' is especially pronounced in American society. Americans pride themselves on their individual initiative. While the ideology of individualism has no doubt been responsible for much American innovation and personal achievement, it like all ideologies, has its blind spots, and proponents of individualism ignore the unequal access that minorities and working class people have to economic, educational, and social opportunities, Bell Hooks (Ibid:84) has noted that 'The ideology of 'competition, atomistic liberal individualism' has permeated feminist thought to such an extent that it undermines the potential radicalism of feminist struggle.' One of the promises not questioned by early leaders of the white feminist movement was how American women accepted the same materialistic and individualist values as did American men. It simply did not occur to them that women may be just as reluctant as men to struggle for a new society based on new values of mutual respect, cooperation, and social responsibilities.

The ideology of individualism also was well - adopted to the feminist model of the 'new woman': assertive, capable, strong; the leap-tall buildings super woman image that the movement wished to project, an image that has, incidentally caused untold grief for women who found they could not live up to it. Another unfortunate consequence has been to re-enforce the myth of the amazonic black woman - strong, nurturing, uncomplaining, and all accepting - which has contributed to the acceptance by both white and black males of the theory of black matriarchy and that the myth that the black woman, next to the white male, is the most liberated member of society. The white women's movement, no doubt unwittingly, has contributed to this myth by highlighting the achievements of exceptional black women as if they were representative of what all black women could aspire to within a reformed system.

Phyllis Palmer (1983) in her article "White women/Black Women: The Dualism of Female identity and Experience in the United States," has an interesting discussion about the attraction of white feminists to such black heroic figures as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. Basically, she says that the strong black female figure corresponds neatly with the racist - inspired image of the 'black mammy'; disguising the fact that, as Barbara Smith and others have pointed out, black women have been the recipients of the lowest pay, the worst poverty, the least access to child care and the most frequent victims of all kinds of violence, including battering, rape and involuntary sterilization. Smith (1985:5) also says: "An ability to cope under the worse conditions is not liberation, although our spiritual capacities have often made it look like a life."

2.5 THE DOUBLE-WHAMMY OF THE BLACK MAMMY MYTH

From various sections, the myth of the strong black woman has been perpetrated, and in the 1960s Daniel Moynihan lent popular support to it in his report on the black family in which he described the black family as matriarchal, basing his theory on the statistics that 25% black families had female heads of household. **One of the many repercussions of this distortion was that it deflected the cause of the problems of the black family away from the economic and social system and onto the black woman who was portrayed as domineering, castrating and the cause of the black man's low self-esteem.**

Many black women, too, bought this analysis and blamed black women for their problems which exacerbated the conflict between black men and women. This was a

prime example of blaming the victim. You should, as a good student, note that Moynihan conveniently ignores such systemic causes of the problems of the black family as the high rate of unemployment, especially among black males, which contributes to the break up of families and the lack of opportunity for black men and women to marry and form family units in the first place.

Further, Barbara Smith (1985:5) has listed *five* myths that have been used by white men to 'divert Black woman from our own freedom'. These are:

- 1) The myth that black women are already liberated;
- 2) the myth that racism is the primary (or only) oppression black women have to confront;
- 3) the myth that feminism is nothing but man-hating;
- 4) the myth that women's issues are narrow, apolitical concerns and people of color need to deal with the 'larger struggle', and
- 5) the myth that "these feminists are nothing but lesbians."

Regarding the myth of the liberated black woman, as many writers have illustrated, the black woman in American society has the fewest choices and is the lowest paid, being the triple victim of racism, classism, and sexism. To the charge that racism should be her only concern, Babara Smith (Ibid:6) says: "A Black feminist perspective has no use for ranking oppression; but instead demonstrates the simultaneity of oppressions as they affect Third world women's lives". Waiting until racism is ended before tackling sexism which cuts across all racial, national, age, religious, ethnic and class groups would mean waiting a 'long, long time..'

To the accusation that feminism implies man-hunting, Smith and others have repeatedly denounced this claim, 'it is only sane,' she counters, 'for us to try to change that treatment by every means possible.' With all of the violence against women in society, the problem seems much more to be one of woman-hating. For example, one in three American women will be raped in her life time, if the current trend continues.

As far as women's issues being narrow and apolitical, Smith asks *how a movement committed to fighting* sexual, racial, economic, heterosexual oppression as well as imperialism, anti-feminism, militarism and all other kinds of oppression – against the young, the old, the physically handicapped, etc. can be called 'narrow?' And, to the charge that feminism implies lesbianism, the fear merely exposes the homophobia in society and the ignorance of both feminism and lesbianism. "Feminism is a political movement, and many lesbians are not feminists' while some are.

2.6 BLACK FEMINISM AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

In addition to the myths perpetrated about black women that have sought to undermine their participation in a woman's movement and the white feminist's rejection of issues of paramount concern to minority and working class women, the Civil Rights movement also highlighted sexist discrimination as it affected black women. Many black women have written about their banishment to the kitchen and the clerical corps by black male civil rights leaders who also discouraged them from using birth control because they decided that the black woman's role was to produce more black children for 'the cause'. **Adding insult to injury, many black civil rights leaders rejected black women and took white women as lovers, causing great enmity both between black women and men and women of both groups.** Historically, since the days of slavery, the white woman-sometimes even more than the white man – has been responsible for the mistreatment of black woman; thus, to find herself in competition with white women for the only men usually available to her as partners severely damaged any fragile chance for a relationship of trust and mutual understanding between black and white feminists.

2.7 BLACK FEMINISM AND CAPITALISM

As an avid reader, you must read the books and articles by Angela Davis in which Davis gives many examples of linkages between women's and men's oppression and the system of capitalism. **If you ruminate over the examples, there will be little wonder that black feminists have been unable to rally around a feminist platform that excludes class and race as co-equal women's issues.**

2.8 A CRITIQUE ON BLACK WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

In this section, we have reiterated some of the important issues discussed in sections 2.3 to 2.7. In distance education, repetition is meant for reinforcement.

The counter-cultural movements in the 1960s in America—anti-Vietnam war, Civil Rights movement etc.—were instrumental in the resurgence of feminism. Several women students worked for the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a campus based mass organization. It was a radicalized, unorganized movement. Its aim was to pull down the old order which made its participants feel alienated, pawns in the hands of “big military / industrial complexes.” Changing the old order meant ending the Vietnam war, putting an end to the draft, reforming the university and fighting racism. Most of the members of the SDS were radicalized students from middle-class backgrounds and included anarchists, socialists, Maoists, Trotskyites, and Castroites.

For all its openness and democratic idealism the SDS from its very inception operated in a style which favoured the domination of men in the movement. Very few women occupied high positions and women had little say in policy making. Women in the SDS also felt sexually exploited. The counter-cultural activities inside and outside the movement and the invention of oral contraceptives created new forms of sexual exploitation. More and more women were becoming aware of the contradiction between their hierarchical position in the movement and the democratic goals of the movement. From the SDS women had learnt the “Gautemala Guerilla Approach.” This was an approach acquired by the SDS which made individuals talk about the process of their own realization and commitment to the movement and was an important technique in consciousness raising. They were realizing their oppression in the movement. The increased draft call from the mid-sixties further alienated women from the SDS. It made these women see themselves as “auxiliaries” to the draft resisters.

Prior to and paralleling the activities of the SDS were several civil rights movements. These movements sprang up within the context of already existing racial tensions and those compounded by the problems posed by neocapitalism. It is necessary to delineate the nature of these problems.

Industrialization and technological developments not only displaced most Blacks from farms in the thirties, but the new economy offered them few alternatives since it sought highly trained, hi-tech workers. The undereducated Black was at a disadvantage. In other word, the industrial and technological revolution which had improved the quality of life for most middle-class Americans further marginalized blacks. Urban ghettos were a visible consequence of this. These ghettos were rife with poverty and crime and were the hotbeds of racial tension. It is not surprising, then, that when in 1964 a 15 year old Black youth was shot to death by an off-duty officer in Harlem, riots broke out. The Harlem riots were followed by riots in other Black ghettos all over the country. Blacks demanded the expulsion of white control from Black ghettos.

In fact, as early as 1957 Martin Luther King Jr. had already organized the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Influenced by Gandhian philosophy, the SCLC advocated non-violent ways to obtain civil rights. In Atlanta, in 1960 middle-class Black students were forming the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC was pivotal in organizing Freedom Rides against segregation on public buses. As a movement, SNCC worked closely with King's SCLC. Since these movements were more community based than the northern SDS, women were far more involved within them. In fact, local women—called “mammies” in the community—were instrumental in building up the network for civil resistance. Yet, by 1964 Black women in SNCC were agitating for sexual equality. These women were becoming increasingly aware of the dichotomy between their own hierarchical position within the movement and its democratic goals. For example, while women were always positioned where the action was viz. the communities, in the “freedom house” itself, they were treated as cooks, typists, etc. by their male counterparts.

By winter 1965 SNCC had over 50% whites in the movement. This created its own tensions. The feminist slogan, “Sisterhood is Powerful” had not yet evolved. Black and White women in SNCC did not trust each other. Moreover, as Evans observes, while for “black men, sexual access to white women challenged the culture's ultimate symbol of their denied manhood,” for Black women, it implied that they were still positioned as the other, the not beautiful. Interracial sex often seemed to duplicate the biases of the mainstream culture against which SNCC was claiming to fight. Anger and frustration was building up in Black women. They felt doubly oppressed and marginalized for being both Black and female. Not surprisingly, the first voices of protest for female equality came from these women.

Though the Women's movement got its impetus from the sexism within the New Left and the Civil Rights movements, it grew outside of these. By mid-sixties, a separate women's movement was in the offing. By 1973 Black women located in New York felt that they needed to go national therefore National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) was formed. The Black women did not want to repeat the mistakes of the early Civil Rights movements by including the opposition in their forces and allowing them to define their issues. The impulse behind the Black women's movement was not just to fight sexism but racism as well. Compounding this were the factors of poverty and the history of slavery. The intersection between these factors created flashpoints which made the experiences of Black women different from that of their white counterparts. However, this is not to say that Black women did not draw from the theories of the Radical Feminists but they gave them their own twist. For instance, the whole notion of self-definition which is so integral to the women's movement, is redefined by black women to include ethnic and cultural factors as well. For the Black American woman self-definition necessarily includes tracing their roots to African-American history and culture. Language also became an important tool in redefining one's self. Many Black writers use Black English because they believe that the best way one can express oneself is through one's own language which encompasses their experiences. Notion of motherhood also underwent a radical redefinition in the hands of Black women. This redefinition did not take place only within the context of patriarchy but also within the context of racism. For example, with the abolition of the international slave trade the white cotton-growing industry in collusion with the slave-holding class forced Black women to have as many children as possible to create more hands to do the field work. The Black woman was seen as a potential bearer of 12 to 14 children. They were treated as breeders rather than as mothers. The “mammy” figure who was sexually exploited and abused but which projected Black women as being “sexually promiscuous” was slowly eroded. Again, domestic work at home was not derided by Black slave women as much as by the white women. This is because most of them worked in the fields so working at home was seen as the only space for them to have control in. In short, the priorities of Black women were different from those of their White counterparts. Even in terms of literary history, Black women created their own literary history rather than be defined by the literary history of the White women

from which they felt alienated and excluded. (For details see Unit 2.1 for Black Women's Fiction).

The Woman, The Moment and The Milieu-II

Important Historical Names to Remember

- **Sourjourner Truth (1797-1833)**
Nationally known speaker of human rights for women and slaves.
- **Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897)**
Wrote the book, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.
- **Harriet Tubman (1821-1913)**
Led around 300 slaves to freedom as part of her Underground Railway Network.
- **Ida Wells Barnett (1862-1931)**
Anti-lynching leader, suffragist, journalist and speaker.
- **Mary Mcleod Bethune (1875-1955)**
Educationist, political advisor and civil rights leader.
- **Mary Burnett Talbert, Carrie W. Clifford and Gertrude Morgan** were all associated with the foundation and proliferation of the Niagara Movement (1905-1909).
- **Lucille Black, Odette Harper, Daisy Lampkin and Ella Baker** were associated with the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) started in 1910 and which is still continuing.

Black Women Theorists

- **Darlene Clarke Hine** developed the notion of Politics of Silence
- **Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Eileen Boris and Anne Meis Knuffer** have all written about the notion of Politics of Responsibility.
- **Beverly W. Jones** has written about Motherhood and Victorian womanhood.
- **Deborah Gray White** has developed the notion of Politics of Self-Denial
- **Bell Hooks** writes about the otherness and difference in the experience of African-American women, and wonders why postmodernism cannot be applied as a critical theory of enquiry to the Black experience.
- **Cornell West** writes about the decadency in the Black middle-class. Also highlights that Rap music is the Afro-Americanization of American Youth and the commodification of the Black rage.

2.9 LITERARY INFLUENCES ON ALICE WALKER

Walker associates writing with magic. This is not surprising because for several Blacks literary authority was associated with a Christian God or White people. Therefore, many delved into their African-American roots which included shamanism, animism and voodoo. In 1899, Charles Waddele Chestnutt in *The Conjure Woman* (1899) wrote out of the magic of Black folk life. Zora Neale Hurston went a step further and collected Black lies or folk tales and included them in *Mules and Men* (1935). Several Black women writers were influenced by these ideas. Walker says in *The Color Purple* "I thank everybody in this book for coming" (A.W., author and medium). With this ending note to the novel Walker creates a literary tradition in which several Black women who were unable to express themselves through writings because of the historical moment of slavery in which they lived, are

acknowledged. This is one way she brings together her ancestors who were denied the right to read and write. In *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* she writes, "Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories" (p. 240). By associating her writing with magic, Walker is also reaching out to her African-American roots which goes "deeper than any politics, race, or geographical locations." She therefore like women writers like the Bronte sisters, Kate Chopin, Simone De Beauvoir, and Dorris Lessing.

Walker states that she was influenced by Russian, Greek, African and Asian literatures. However, the Black woman writer, Zora Neale Hurston is whom she calls her "literary progenitor." Walker was struck by her sense of self. In "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and A Paritsan View," she refers to her as a "cultural revolutionary . . . who gave us [black people] racial health; a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings." It was after reading Hurston that Walker felt that Black people should be connected to each other as a community.

Hurston died in poverty and was not given importance as a writer. In her essay "Looking for Zora" Walker imagines herself to be Hurston's niece while searching for her grave and establishes an imaginary, biological link with her. She writes "By this time I am, of course, completely into being Zora's niece, and the lie comes with perfect naturalness to my lips. Besides, as far as I am concerned, she is my aunt—and that of all black people as well" (102). She acknowledges her indebtedness to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She says "there is no book more important to me than this one." Henry Louis Gates Jr. has shown several parallels between this book and *The Color Purple*. He adds that Shug Avery in Walker's novel could be modeled after Zora Neale Hurston.

Apart from Hurston, Walker acknowledges Rebecca Jackson, Phillis Wheatley and Ida B. Wells-Barnett as the first African-American feminists in the country who had an impact on her. She also lists other writers among the many who influenced her: Russians Greeks, Africans, Asians and such Americans, black and white, as Jean Toomer, Arna Bontemps, Emily Dickinson, Robert Graves, Williams Carlos Williams, e.e.cummings, and Flannery O'Connor.

2.10 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we discussed the following main points:

- Despite being denied the right to education under slavery, Black women have a history of literary works that go back to the eighteenth century.
- Black American women's movement is distinct from the mainstream White women's movement in America because of the different nature of their experiences
- The search for identity is a significant theme in most Black women writers in America
- Black women go to different sources for creative inspiration

2.11 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the significant milestones in the history of Black Women's fiction
2. How is the Black women's movement different from the mainstream women's movement in America.
3. What are some of the significant influences on Alice Walker?
4. Discuss the various aspects of Black Feminism.