

REPRESENTATION OF MOTHERHOOD IN AFRICAN AMERICAN
LITERATURE: A SOCIO-CULTURAL AND GENDER ANALYSIS

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RAJENDRA PRASAD BHATT

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Ph. D. Reg. No: 47/2017 (2073 Magh)

Tribhuvan University

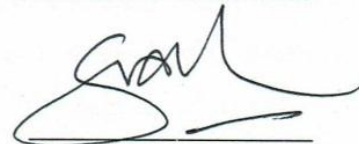
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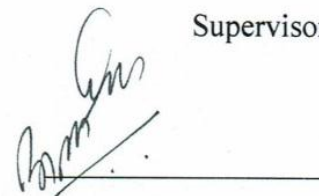
We certify that this dissertation entitled "Representation of Motherhood in African American Literature: A Socio-cultural and Gender Analysis" was prepared by Rajendra Prasad Bhatt under our guidance. We hereby recommend this dissertation for final examination by the Research Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tribhuvan University, in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.

Dissertation Committee



Prof. Dr. Amma Raj Joshi

Supervisor



Prof. Dr. Anirudra Thapa

Co-supervisor

Date: 13. Jan. 2022



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FACULTY OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES

Office of the Dean
Kirtipur, Kathmandu

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APPROVAL LETTER

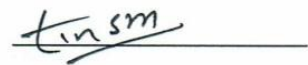
This dissertation entitled **Representation of Motherhood in African American Literature: A Socio-Cultural and Gender Analysis** was submitted by **Rajendra Prasad Bhatt** for final examination to the Research Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tribhuvan University, in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy in English**. I, hereby, certify that the Research Committee of the Faculty has found this dissertation satisfactory in scope and quality and has therefore accepted for the degree.

Prof. Kushum Shakya, PhD
Dean and Chairperson
Research Committee

Date: 14 Jan 2022

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation entitled "Representation of Motherhood in African American Literature: A Socio-cultural and Gender Analysis" is my own work and that it contains no material previously published. I have not used any material for the award of any kind of other degree. The sources of information taken from other authors have been acknowledged.



Rajendra Prasad Bhatt

Date: 13...Jan...2022

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ABSTRACT

The research entitled "Representation of Motherhood in African American Literature: A Socio-cultural and Gender Analysis" examines the socio-cultural construction of motherhood and its representation in African American literature. It explores how dominant ideologies, the beliefs and ideas shared by the majority of people such as white supremacist ideology, male supremacist ideology, etc., define the role and responsibilities of black women/mothers. Focusing on the socio-cultural stereotypes that construct the concept of motherhood, this study attempts to inspect the changing values and notions of motherhood over the course of history in literary works. The exploration of the notion and perception of motherhood in African American society and the social construction of black woman's identity as reflected in African American literature, unveil larger contextual issues regarding the interrelationships between race and gender and their implications for understanding the situation of black mothers in contemporary society. This research, therefore, aims at evaluating black mother's representation in African American literature from slave narratives to postmodern literary writings, through race and gender dimensions. It explores the meaning and representation of motherhood through the explication, analysis, and assessment of African American literary writings of different historical phases ranging from Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's "The Slave Mother" (1854) to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), where motherhood is a recurrent theme and lifelong commitment. The selected texts deal with social, cultural, race and gender issues that assist in exploring and understanding the construction of motherhood.

Using a qualitative methodology while analyzing the narrative events, it utilizes narrative inquiry approach for analyzing and interpreting the selected primary sources. The research employs socio-cultural, race, and feminist insights, especially

drawn from black feminist theories, which help explain the intricacies of black mothers. Each theory presents a distinct idea to explore the social and cultural representation of black women/mothers in literary works. In addition, it applies black feminism for sharing the experiences of black women, black mothers in particular.

The representation of black motherhood along the historical lines has affected the way black people idealize black mothers in American society. The examination of the works of African American literature reveals motherhood as a social construct and the notion of motherhood changes with changing socio-cultural values. Reflecting on the close association between black motherhood and black family life, this research unfolds changing ideologies from domesticated motherhood to liberated motherhood during different phases of literary and historical development. The study attempts to reveal the evolution of black motherhood from a subjugated and voiceless subject to a vocal source of inspiration for empowerment, and force of resistance for black women to encourage them to struggle against structural racism and sexism.

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Chapter One

Motherhood in African American Imagination: An Introduction

Motherhood relates to the unique relationship between a mother and a child that resonates reciprocal feelings of love and affection. The mother achieves this attachment through ceaseless attention and the child responds to the love showing his/her attachment to the mother. It helps a baby to learn to be sociable. Motherhood is an experience shaped by social context and culture. Societal norms define motherhood as a sacred and powerful spiritual path for women and a key aspect of their lives. Every society holds its own unique mythology surrounding motherhood and the notion of motherhood has been transforming throughout the course of history. Motherhood, as a persistent theme in literary works, has been viewed in different lights and presented in diverse ways. Regarding the cultural construction and multiple connotations of motherhood, Andrea O'Reilly, in *From Motherhood to Mothering*, asserts:

. . . motherhood is not a natural or biological function; rather it is specifically and fundamentally a cultural practice that is continuously redesigned in response to changing economic and societal factors. As a cultural construction, its meaning varies with time and place; there is no essential or universal experience of motherhood. (4-5)

O'Reilly believes that motherhood is a social and cultural practice and the notion of motherhood changes with changing economic status and social patterns. As a cultural construction, there is no universal notion of motherhood because it varies in terms of expectations and values of individual cultures.

Motherhood is also seen as a moral transformation. At this stage the women undergo physical, mental, and emotional changes in themselves. In this line of

argument Adrienne Rich describes that motherhood is earned through pregnancy, childbirth, and nurturing progeny. Reflecting on the mother's role and responsibilities, Rich, in *Of Woman Born*, notes, "Motherhood is earned, first through an intense physical and psychic rite of passage— pregnancy and childbirth— then through learning to nurture, which does not come by instinct" (12). Revealing the weight of responsibility that women bear with children, Rich opines that motherhood is the heaviest of social burdens because it brings physical, mental, as well as emotional transformations in them.

This research focuses on the notion of motherhood and its representation in African American literary works produced from mid-nineteenth century through the end of twentieth century, ranging from 1850s to 1980s. It adopts a genealogical study approach and, therefore, it traces the evolving notions of human behavior in a chronological order by reviewing and analyzing the works of African American writers from Slavery to Postmodern phase. The texts selected for this study, such as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's "The Slave Mother" (1854), Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Lonesome" (1896), James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Claude McKay's "My Mother" (1920), Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter* (1930), Gwendolyn Brooks' "The Mother" (1945), Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), Nikki Giovanni's "Mothers" (1968), Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), Maya Angelou's "Momma Welfare Roll" (1978), and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), are taken from different phases of historical and literary development, where motherhood is a recurrent theme and lifelong commitment.

The literary works demonstrate the multiple roles, the roles of black men, black woman, and white women, that black mothers perform and multiple terms such

as Mama, Mammy, Ma, and Big Mama, are used to address them. These terms of endearment reveal the signs of blackness and subordination. Explaining the symbolic meaning of the term 'mammy' in the US, Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought*, notes, "The first controlling image applied to US Black women is that of the mummy— the faithful, obedient domestic servant" (72). Collins reveals that mammy is a derogatory term, used to indicate a black woman, who works in a white household and performs as a faithful and obedient servant. The mammy figure is rooted in the history of American slavery. Ann DuCille calls such terms as "the quintessential site of difference" (593), the signs of endearment that make African American women different in all aspects of life, such as social, cultural, and racial, from other women. African American writers in their literary works highlight the lives of black women, especially the lives of black mothers and the events that lead them to self-discovery, overcome their disillusionment, and recognize their own worth. Black writers have developed multiple perspectives to evaluate, interrogate and shape the location of black mothers' identities. Therefore, this study revolves around marginalized voices such as black intellectuals, writers and artists, who have, through their expressive modes, presented black maternal figures in their works.

The focus of this research is on the changing notions of motherhood as represented in literary works. In addition, it examines the role of race and gender factors in the extreme victimization of black women/mothers. I have used the terms black woman/mother and African American woman/mother interchangeably throughout the work.

1.1. Statement of Problem

African American literature mirrors social and cultural aspects of black people's lives, and foregrounds the obstacles and sufferings that the blacks, black

women in particular, encounter by being confined within the constrictive ideals of womanhood and motherhood. The issue that confounds me is whether black women face difficulties merely because of being women or that race and culture too, along with gender, are causes of such hindrances. Understanding women predicaments from feminist perspective alone, as has been done in earlier research work, is not enough to internalize black women/mothers' dehumanization and dual oppression. The race and gender factors, which are intertwined with each other, impel me to inquire whether racist and sexist exploitation form the basis for double victimization of black women. Focusing on the issues of race and gender along with the concept of motherhood, this research attempts to unveil the silenced or repressed history of black women/mothers. Among the African American writers' works, which belong to different periods of African American literary development, I have reviewed and analyzed seminal writers' selected works from Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's "The Slave Mother" (1854) to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), from slave narratives to postmodern literary writings. The works of literature picked for this study are significant because they narrate the dual oppression of black women along the history of racism in the United States.

Harper's "The Slave Mother" and Jacobs' *Incidents* depict the pain and suffering of enslaved mothers who are forced to face the reality of their limited relationship with their children. The mothers love their children, but they are excluded from their maternal rights due to chattel slavery. The threat, of their children being ripped from their arms and sold to another plantation owner, hunts them constantly. Similarly, Dunbar's "Lonesome" and Johnson's *The Autobiography* reflect the difficulties that the blacks face in American society and the efforts they make to achieve equality. They reveal the subjugation of black women/mothers in a racist and

sexist social order. The black woman's limited boundary and the mother's separation from her children create inconveniences for them. Black women/mothers are literally trapped within slavery or trapped by the pressure of society because their roles and responsibilities are determined by contemporary social and cultural context.

This research investigates the representation of motherhood in African American fictional and non-fictional narratives. The main issues it intends to explore are: (a) the concept of motherhood perceived in African American society as reflected in African American literature, (b) the changes in the notions of motherhood in different phases of African American literary movements, (c) the role of socio-cultural, racial, and gender factors affecting the attitude and behavior of African American mothers and the impacts these factors make on their self-esteem and self-concept, and (d) the way the literary depiction of black motherhood represents the unique history and experience of African American women.

To explore the intricacies of prejudices and gender biases, this study examines the role of society and culture in black women/mothers' lives. It demonstrates how black women perform their roles as mothers and how the notion of motherhood changes at the intersections of race and gender over the course of history. This research refers to the autobiographical, cultural, racial, and other historical materials that have contributed to the writers' perspectives on this theme. To record the trajectory for constructions of motherhood within African American society as it is reflected in literary efforts, the selected works are significant because they expose the socio-cultural and aesthetic representation of motherhood and deal with crucial issues of race and gender in concrete form and structure.

1.2. Significance of Research

The study of motherhood through the examination of African American literary writings is particularly important because it focuses on an aspect of black people's life that is often devalued, misunderstood and negatively portrayed. The scholarly works on black motherhood, which reflect women's position in African American society, make this area of research relevant to women's studies.

Investigation of a particular group of people i.e. black women, who have been marginalized, oppressed, neglected and deprived from their civil rights, deepens our understanding about the experiences of African American women as mothers. This research reflects a border that does not only divide blacks from whites, but males from females as well. In addition, it fills a gap in literature concerning black motherhood and its representation in different phases of literary developments. This study makes a significant contribution to existing research because it de-centers dominant ideologies of maternal work. Given the multitude of critical studies on mothers, a shift in focus seems reasonable.

This study is significant, firstly, because the research on black motherhood is critical to understanding the unique experiences and diversity that exist within this group. By reflecting the marginality and outsider status of black women, it sets them forth as a group whose experiences would be inclusive of all women. Regarding black women's situation in America, Patricia Bell-Scott, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, and Jacqueline Jones Royster, in "The Promise and Challenge of Black Women's Studies", inscribe that the study of black women exposes "persons in whom the forces of race, class, and sex oppression converge is obviously among the broadest and most complex inquiries of the human experience" (284). They argue that black women face

race, class, and gender oppression; therefore, to make any research on them is a complex inquiry.

Secondly, this work utilizes black feminist thought to examine black motherhood by challenging long-standing notions about black women. When the women's, especially the African American mothers' experiences are included in a study, their lives and situation are revealed in ways that have otherwise been silenced. Furthermore, this study will prove beneficial for social workers, cultural explorers, educators, and future researchers, who want to gain expertise in this area and bring changes in the lives of black women, especially in the lives of black mothers.

1.3. Purpose of Study

This research analyzes and interprets the literary representation of black mothers and the construction of motherhood in African American society. The purpose of this study is to explore the conception of motherhood and the impact of society, culture, race, and gender on black women's personal identities. It takes the position that the experiences of black mothers as reflected in literature are crucial to understand socio-cultural aspects of black people's lives in America.

Black women have both the social and cultural experiences of being female and of being black. They have been confronted with both racism and sexism. While most of the research works on motherhood have focused primarily on mothers in general and the way they perform their motherly tasks, very little attention has been given to the unavoidable circumstances African American mothers have to pass through while performing their motherly responsibilities. The present research fills the gap in the literature by explicitly focusing on how black women/mothers understand, manage and negotiate motherhood under the forces of racism and sexism. This study, moreover, inquires about the role of social, cultural, racial, and gender

factors that affect the lives of black mothers and change the notion of motherhood at different time frames. Therefore, the specific areas of concern are the notion of motherhood and its representation in African American literature written between slavery era to present time.

1.4. Research Questions

This dissertation focuses on motherhood and its representation in African American literature. It explores the role of socio-cultural values in the construction of the notion of motherhood. With an emphasis on the representation of black motherhood, the researcher is especially interested in examining how, society, culture, race, and gender factors affect the lives of black women/ mothers.

The specific research questions that have guided this study are:

1. What perception of motherhood can we notice in African American society as reflected in African American literature and how does this notion of motherhood change over the course of history?
2. How do socio-cultural, racial and gender factors affect African American women's lives especially those of the black mothers' and what impact do they have on their self-esteem and self-concept?
3. How does the literary portrayal of motherhood embody the unique history and experiences of African American women?

1.5. Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to explore the meanings of motherhood and the impact of society, culture, race, and gender on black women's personal identities as reflected in selected works. It aims to inquire about (a) the notion of motherhood and its projection in African American imaginations; (b) the changing notions of motherhood in successive phases, and (c) the impact of socio-cultural, racial, and

gender factors on black women's self-esteem and self-identity. Furthermore, it investigates how the literary portrayal of motherhood represents a unique history and experiences of black women.

1.6. Research Methodology

My research adopts qualitative methodology by utilizing narrative inquiry approach for analyzing and interpreting the selected primary sources. Immy Holloway describes qualitative methodology as "a form of social inquiry" (2). As per the goal of narrative inquiry, which is to uncover the common themes or plots in the data, this research argues that the works of African American writers tend to highlight episodes and events that take place in the lives of black people, black women/mothers in particular. And in doing so, it examines socio-cultural stereotypes and their role in the construction of dominant ideology. This study applies proportionate sampling strategy, which is a process of sampling in which the researcher divides the literary works into subcategories and then employs random sampling techniques to each subcategory, for selecting the texts. Analysis is carried out using interpretative methods, which involve reasonable explanations for noting underlying patterns of motherhood in African American society as reflected in literature and its changing notions over the course of history.

Concentrating on holistic content analysis of the data, which explores narrative materials to generate the major themes of the texts, this research looks at the issues of racism and sexism. It examines the complexity of human nature and multiplicity of perspectives to provide insights into human condition. The construction and reconstruction of motherhood highlights the social and cultural aspects of the black life in the United States. To explore the role of society and culture in the construction of motherhood in African American society as reflected in literary

works, I have critically examined the selected works of African American writers within the framework of the socio-cultural, race, and feminist theories. The examination of the literature of different periods reveals the changing notions of motherhood over the course of history. I have strengthened my findings with a significant number of sociological, cultural, feminist, and critical writings on these works which deal with the themes of motherhood, racism, and gender oppression.

I have taken insights from Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Andrea O'Reilly's *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices Empowered Mothering*, and Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* to conceptualize the social and cultural aspects of motherhood. Similarly, to explore the cultural and racial issues in literary works and its impacts on black people's lives, I have concentrated on Cornel West's *Race Matters*, which explicates how race related issues affect black community in the United States. And to comprehend women's issues, the issues of black women in particular, I have used feminist theories, such as bell hooks' concept of feminism explained in *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, and *Ain't I a Woman*, Simone de Beauvoir's views on patriarchal traditions as described in *The Second Sex*, Anna Julia Cooper's concept on black feminism explicated in *A Voice from the South*, Hortense Spillers' views described in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe", and Patricia Hill Collins' notions described in *Black Feminist Thought*, which reveal about the racial and gender subjugation of African-American women. However, suggestions and ideas from scholars, teachers, seniors and colleagues have also been included.

To conduct this research, I have applied a qualitative research design, which is a systematic process for obtaining information from the sources. John W. Creswell in *Research Design* states, "Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and

understanding the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (30). Qualitative method of inquiry is useful for this study because it helps to detect more about the culture, historical experiences, identity, and race and gender related issues. This study employs the process of collecting data, analyzing and interpreting the data, and then drawing conclusions from them. The data collection tools are the written documents and texts. To pursue an in-depth understanding of socio-cultural, race, and gender issues, I have collected data from primary and secondary sources. The primary data are taken from the selected texts of African American writers produced between the phase of Slavery to Postmodern phase and the secondary data includes the references and materials, such as textbooks, internet resources, articles, papers, dissertations, author’s biographies, journals, and other significant works, relevant to this study.

This research inquires about the role of society and culture in the construction of motherhood by producing data in narrative form. Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research in which the stories themselves become the raw data. Leonard Webster and Patricie Mertova, in *Using Narrative Inquiry as a Research Method*, assert, "Narrative inquiry is human centered in that it captures and analyzes life stories" (13). I have used theoretical lens such as socio-cultural, race, and feminist theories to investigate socio-cultural stereotypes and their role in the construction of dominant ideology. Socio-cultural theories help to understand the cultural and historical aspects of the lives of black people, especially, black women. Likewise, race theory examines society and culture as they relate to categorization of race, law, and power and feminist theories focus on gender inequality while black feminist theories focus on black women's issues. They provide the guideline to study the impact of patriarchy such as discrimination, objectification, oppression, neglect,

sexual and domestic abuse and violence, and their effects on personality development and relationship.

Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data. I have analyzed the data using the method of narrative analysis. This study adopts narrative thematic analysis in which content within the text is the primary focus. It consists of the process of obtaining a general sense of the information from the data, categorizing it into themes, and interpreting the data. Applying the procedure of narrative thematic analysis of the texts, I have categorized my data into major themes. The technique of the data analysis in this study is interpretative technique procedure in which the researcher interprets major themes of the texts by analyzing the content. Focusing on the primary texts and the critical responses over the narratives and issues presented in them, I have analyzed the fictional and non-fictional works of African American writers to look into how society, culture, race, and gender affect and construct the notion of motherhood in African American society.

1.7. Organization of the Study

The dissertation entitled "Representation of Motherhood in African American Literature: A Socio-cultural and Gender Analysis" explores the social construction of motherhood and its representation in literary creations. This study traces the condition of black women/mothers and factors contributing to their oppression and disillusionment through the examination of literary discourses. To analyze the primary texts, it abundantly uses ideas from different writers and theorists such as Rich, O'Reilly, Ruddick, West, hooks, Beauvoir, Cooper, Spillers, and Collins. By shedding light on the circumstances that black women/mothers have to pass through, it concentrates on changing values along the historical lines. The primary focus of the study is to explore the notion of motherhood as reflected in African American literary

efforts written during different phases of historical and literary development. This dissertation is divided into four chapters and the attempt is made to clarify the concept of motherhood and how this notion changes over the course of history.

Tentative Chapter Plan

Chapter One: Motherhood in African American Imaginations: An Introduction

This chapter provides the researcher's direction of the study. It introduces the topic and gives relevant background information along with the statement of the problem that helps to explore the purpose and significance of the study. In addition, it focuses on specific research questions and reveals the methodology for analyzing and interpreting the selected primary and secondary sources. Furthermore, the organizational framework with the tentative chapter plan is also the key components.

Chapter Two: Literature Review: Conceptual Frame and the Critical Reception of African American Writings

This chapter provides a background for understanding the notion of motherhood and the impact of socio-cultural, racial, and gender factors on black mothers' lives. Beginning with the literature written on motherhood, this chapter examines socio-culture, race and feminist theories relevant to this study. It presents a thorough description of the conceptual framework by focusing on the representation of motherhood. To elucidate the black women's position in American society and black mother's position in particular, it makes a comprehensive survey of the scholarly literature on African American womanhood and motherhood. By examining various aspects of African American social and cultural life, the review of literature helps to lay the foundation to understand black motherhood, changing notions of motherhood as reflected in different phases of literary efforts and the impact of socio-cultural, racial and gender factors on black mothers' self-esteem. By exploring

women's roles in the family and larger society as well, light is shed on the form and functioning of black American family structure as it developed in the context of slavery and in the succeeding periods.

Chapter Three: Representation of Black Motherhood in African American Literature

This chapter focuses on the brief survey of African American literature. It demonstrates in what way dominant discourses construct motherhood and how this notion of motherhood gets organized around the literary works produced during different phases of African American literary movements.

Section One: Slavery and Post Slavery Phase: Dehumanization and Devaluation of Black Motherhood and its Representation in African American Literary Writings

Section Two: Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement Phase: Turbulent Social Reformations Empowering Black Women to be Assertive

Section Three: Black Arts Movement and Postmodern Phase: Black Mother's Journey from Voiceless to Voiced State

Chapter Four: Conclusion: African American Mother's Travail from Suffering to Liberty

This chapter summarizes the research by highlighting the discussion and conclusion of the study. It reveals the changing notions of motherhood during the course of history and its reflection in literature. Additionally, it also clarifies in what way the literary representations of black motherhood embody the unique history and experience of African American women. Furthermore, the researcher focuses on the importance of this research work for future researchers and his personal reflections.

Chapter Two

Literature Review: Conceptual Framework and the Critical Reception of African American Writings

This chapter reviews the works relevant to the study of the conception of motherhood. The purpose of this literature review is to explore the social and cultural aspects of black women's identity as a woman and as a mother through theoretical, literary, and critical reviews of the texts. It identifies the central issues, which explore how social norms define motherhood, through an overview of African American literary imaginations across different genres, poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. Concentrating on black women/mothers' struggle under the forces of racism and sexism, this research provides a background for understanding the conception of motherhood by utilizing a narrative inquiry approach as the foundation. This review of literature begins with the theoretical insights and then seeks to illuminate the role of society, culture, race, and gender factors in the formation of black motherhood as reflected in literary creations. By examining African American family structure as it developed in the context of slavery and then in later periods, it concentrates on changing values along the historical lines. Therefore, this review, after defining major terms, sheds light on theoretical works used for conceptual clarity, and then, it focuses on creative writings with critical responses on them relating to the issue of motherhood.

2.1. Introduction

This research examines the representation of motherhood in African American literature. It explores black women's situation as portrayed in literary writing, especially the situation of black mothers through socio-cultural, racial, and gender lenses. Motherhood as perceived in African American society and represented in

African American literature is a source of subjugation as well as empowerment for black women. On the face of racist and sexist oppression African American women have been transferring their experiences to the new generation. This study chronicles the struggle of black women, the struggle of black mothers in particular and explores how they have been represented in literature produced during different phases of history of the United States. It focuses on socio-cultural, racial, and gender dynamics which affect the construction of motherhood along the historical lines. The central question, how social norms define motherhood, points to larger contextual issues regarding the interrelationships between race and gender and the implications they have for understanding the literary portrayal of black mothers in contemporary American society.

In this study I intend to contextualize and interpret the discourses of motherhood reflecting upon social and cultural contexts through African American literary creations written between the phase of Slavery to Postmodern phase. To develop an understanding of representation of black mothers in literary works in its changing paradigms, I have reviewed the primary and secondary sources with simultaneous critical responses on them. The major concepts used to frame the present research are socio-cultural, race, and feminist theories, especially black feminist theories, which help explain the position of black women in racist and sexist social order. These theories provide a unified framework and each theory presents a distinct idea to explore the social and cultural representation of black women in literary writings. To address the essential aspect of this research, black feminism is applied for sharing the experiences of black women, black mothers in particular.

2.2. Theoretical Frame

This theoretical frame is primarily based on socio-cultural, race, and feminist theories which explain how dominant discourses affect the lives of black women/mothers in racist and sexist societies. Like a lens, it offers a perspective to the reader how dominant ideologies are socially constructed. From the point of view of mother's role and responsibilities, this research examines Adrienne Rich's perception in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Andrea O'Reilly's views in *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering*, and Sara Ruddick's concept in *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, who believe maternal work as a primary and key function of a woman's life. To conceptualize and explore the cultural and racial issues, this study examines Cornel West's ideas on racism in *Race Matters* (1993), who claims that the main obstacle to harmonious race relations in the United States is 'nihilism', the sense of worthlessness that exists among most blacks. And to explore and analyze feminine role, this research examines Simone de Beauvoir's views on patriarchal traditions as described in *The Second Sex*, who suggests that the psychic structure is operated by political and social ideology of identity. In addition, this research examines the works of black feminists' such as bell hooks' *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, and *Ain't I a Woman*, Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South*, Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe", and Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought*, who describe about the racial and gender oppression of black women. Black feminists argue that African American women have developed a rich intellectual tradition in spite of the burden of racial and gender subjugation.

Rich's influential and landmark work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) is a thoughtful examination of motherhood. She

narrates her personal experience, history, research, and literature to bring changes in society's treatment of women/mothers. Emphasizing the mother's crucial role as a creator of life, she marks, "All human life in the planet is born of women" (11). She explicates the fact that women are the originator of human civilization in this earth. Besides, Rich outlines two key ways of thinking about motherhood; motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution. Describing the two meanings of motherhood, Rich elaborates:

. . . two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her power of reproduction, and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control. This institution has been a keystone of the most diverse social and political systems. (13)

Rich reveals that motherhood as experience relates to the mother's power of reproduction whereas the institution of motherhood is a patriarchal notion through which women are kept under male control. She clarifies that the institution of motherhood dominates women by creating a boundary for them. The institution of motherhood, which this study emphasizes, is the key element that plays a dynamic role in the social construction of motherhood.

Rich narrates the history of women's work to define the power structures that turn against women. Narrating her personal experiences as a woman, a feminist, and a mother, she exposes the experiences of all women, who live in a patriarchal society. Reflecting on women's position in society, she states, "We know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood" (11). Rich argues that it is difficult to know about the nature and meaning of motherhood because the notion of motherhood varies across cultures and it changes

over the course of time. Rich's work is particularly influential for understanding the differences between motherhood as experience, that is, the experiences of an individual woman and motherhood as institution, that is, motherhood as determined by dominant discourses. Using personal narratives and history, she creates a document of universal importance, which highlights women's status. Rich's ideas are useful for this research because she provides a narrative, which includes her personal experiences, history, research, and literature to internalize the connection between the complex webs of forces deeply rooted within the institution of motherhood. She argues that social and cultural institutions use the ideology of motherhood to define or limit women's role in society. Her ideas also help to understand how motherhood as institution affects the normal life of women.

O'Reilly, in *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering* (2004), distinguishes between mothering and motherhood, and argues motherhood as a patriarchal institution that is oppressive to women. Tracing the history of normative mothering practices in North America, O'Reilly points out that motherhood is a cultural practice rather than a biological function.

The book consists of five sections that cover the topics of Feminist Mothering, Lesbian Mothering, African-American Mothering, Mothers and Daughters, and Mothers and Sons. It examines how mothers imagine and implement theories and practices of mothering that are empowering to women. The author believes that mothers and children benefit when the mother lives her life, and practices mothering, from a position of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy. She explains, empowered mothering "recognizes that both mothers and children benefit when the mother lives her life and practices mothering from a position of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy" (12). O'Reilly contends that mothers should separate

themselves from the ideal of the good mother and become bad mothers or mother outlaws, if they want to make mothering as an empowering experience. Mother outlaws refer to women who raise their children in opposition to the normative motherhood ideal of the caring and self-sacrificing mother. O'Reilly's views are fruitful for this research because she focuses on African American mothering. The essays on African-American mothering reflect on mothering ideal that differs completely from the white middle-class ideal of intensive biological mothering. They explain how traditional African-American women-centered mothering benefit women, children, and communities alike.

Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1989) examines the domain of mothering. According to her, mothering is a practice and a type of caretaking activity, which consists of three acts, that is protection, nurturance, and training. Describing maternal practice, she asserts that "mothers are people who see children demanding protection, nurturance, and training; they attempt to respond to children's demand with care and respect rather than indifference or assault" (xi). Ruddick opines that to preserve the life, to promote the growth, and to train the children for social acceptability, are responsible maternal behaviors. Such behaviors are the socially defined roles for women/mothers. The mothers must address the demands of the children with love and care. She sees a difference between birth-giving and mothering activities. To clarify the distinction between mothering and birth-giving activities, she explains, "A birth-giver may transfer to others the maternal responsibility of caring for the infant she has created" (xii). It shows that mothering is a caring activity and mother is a primary caretaker of a child.

Ruddick's primary focus is on maternal work, which consists of three activities, such as to protect, to nurture, and to train. Regarding the responsibilities of

the mother, she marks, "To be a "mother" is to take upon oneself the responsibility of child care, making its work a regular and substantial part of one's working life . . . They are "mothers" just because and to the degree they are committed to meeting demands that define mother works" (17). Ruddick contends that mothers take responsibility of child care by fulfilling the demands of mother works. Ruddick's concept is useful to comprehend and analyze maternal responsibilities for this study because she believes that preserving the life, promoting the growth, and providing training for survival of the child are a mother's primary duty. Social and cultural norms enforce women to take such responsibilities.

To examine race related issues in the literary texts, this study looks at West's views on racism described in *Race Matters* (1993). *Race Matters*, a collection of essays, raises race, class, and gender related issues in the context of American society. Through his work, West criticizes the effects of race, class, and gender hierarchy in America and calls for equality and justice. He expresses his philosophy by using clear and profound ideas and appeals blacks and whites to understand the seriousness of race relation which empowers the whites by oppressing the blacks. West believes that the race relation has a strong historical connection; therefore, it has been a matter of concern for Americans. He argues that without understanding the seriousness of the issue, it is difficult to eradicate discriminatory attitudes from the society. West's work is a valuable treatment of racism, because he not only looks at spiritual and political aspects of racial oppression, he also criticizes liberal and conservative responses to it. The liberal notion focuses on economic dimension and conservative response highlights immoral actions. Reflecting the liberal and conservative responses of racial oppression, West marks:

The liberal notion that more government program can solve racial problems is simplistic—precisely because it focuses solely on economic dimension. And the conservative idea that what is needed a change in the moral behavior of poor urban dwellers (especially poor black men, who they say, should stay married, support their children, and stop committing so much crime) highlights immoral actions while ignoring public responsibility for the immoral. (2)

West explains that both the liberal and conservative views are the sign of oppression of the blacks because the former reflects black people's poverty and later reflects their immorality. His insight helps the readers to understand that there are aspects of truth in both responses.

According to West 'nihilism' is the main problem, which creates disharmony between the blacks and the whites in the United States. Nihilism refers to the sense of worthlessness and absence of hope that exist among most black Americans.

Regarding the problem of the blacks, he explains, "The major enemy of black survival in America has been and is neither oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic threat—that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning" (15). West argues that the main obstacle of the blacks' survival in America is neither oppression nor exploitation; it is the sense of loss of hope among black Americans. Black Americans have the feeling of worthlessness for themselves, which is the root cause behind social disharmony.

West provides three solutions of this problem. Firstly, the black Americans must look to themselves and their common history as a source of power and hope. Secondly, they must focus attention on the public arena, which is the center of activity. And thirdly, black Americans must generate new leadership, which promotes black people's causes. Furthermore, West reveals that the politics of conversion is a cure to the nihilistic threat. As he remarks, "Nihilism is not overcome by arguments or

analyses; it is tamed by love and care . . . A love ethic must be at the center of a politics of conversion" (19). West opines that love and care are the key factors, which respond to the rage and hopelessness of black Americans. They help to overcome the nihilistic attitude of black community. West's ideas are significant for this study because he provides a narrative for the complex web of forces and race relation that are deeply rooted within American social life, especially in the lives of the blacks as reflected in literary efforts. It helps to examine social and cultural institutions, which use the ideology of race to define or limit the role of black women in a racist society, the roles of black mothers in particular.

This research applies the assumptions of feminist theory in general and black feminist theory in particular to examine the literary discourses that reflect the struggle of black women in performing their roles as a woman and a mother. There are several major assumptions at the core of feminism, such as feminist theory investigates and documents the unique voices and experiences of all women, exposes the social construction of gender roles as the bases for the unequal distribution of power between men and women in the family as well as in larger society, and raises voice for women's empowerment, which is the ability to organize against all forms of oppression. The feminist theory, in the present research, helps to unfold the experiences of women and black feminist theories explicate the unique experiences of black women through the examination and analysis of literary works to pursue questions about the meaning of motherhood from feminist perspective and how it is a socially constructed identity.

Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) deals with human history from the feminist perspective. By examining the problems of women in Western society, Beauvoir argues that women are subjugated, oppressed, and made to be inferior to males

because of the fact that they are women. As she asserts, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (273). Beauvoir clarifies that society's expectations and norms impose the idea of womanhood on a woman. By reflecting the core feminist belief, she reveals that gender is a social construct. She argues that men oppress women by characterizing them, on every level, as the 'Other'. Reflecting the secondary position of women, she illustrates, "Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (15). Beauvoir explains that men define their own world, and women are merely meant to live in it. She sees women dependent, imprisoned, and mutilated and entirely unaware of their own oppression. According to her, sex is biological but gender is a social construct.

Beauvoir discusses many forms of oppression, such as that of the working class by the bourgeoisie, blacks by whites, poor by rich, but she thinks that women's oppression by men is different from all other forms of oppression because there is neither any historical starting-point for it nor there is any solidarity of economic interest. Her main concern is to explore why women are oppressed and why they are 'the second sex'. Beauvoir's views are fruitful for this research because she analyzes the male-female relation through the examination of history, myths, and society, which reflect women's subordinate roles keeping the males in center. She, moreover, explains the fact that it is the social norms that keep women in confinement.

Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics (2000) provides an introduction to the work of hooks, a prolific writer, critic and theorist. hooks narrates an account of the struggle of feminist movement, which includes its successes, failures, disappointments and readjustments. She argues that sexism, racism, classism, and capitalism in America promote oppression by idealizing oppressive values. hooks begins her work with the fundamental question, what feminism is, and answers in a

strong voice that "feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (1). hooks asserts that the main objective of feminist movement is to end sexism and sexist oppression. She argues that there are some misconceptions related to feminism. She marks, "Masses of people think that feminism is always and only about women seeking to be equal to men. And huge majority of these folks think feminism is anti-male" (1). hooks clarifies that there are many people, who know little about feminism and many of them falsely assume that feminism is anti-male sentiment. They believe that sexism is no longer a problem and feminist movement is no longer needed. She urges the male readers to play a positive role in the feminist movement because its struggles focus on the betterment of all women and men. By creating a society in which women and men are truly equal, the potential for honest and committed relationships for everyone can be established and a true liberation can be achieved. hooks applies her critical analysis to the most controversial and challenging issues, such as reproductive rights, violence, race, class, and work.

hooks' *Ain't I a Woman* (1981) gets the title from Sojourner Truth's antislavery speech "Ain't I a Woman?", which she delivered in Ohio in 1851. Through her speech Truth encourages black women to raise voice for their rights. Reflecting Truth's contribution in black women's movement for equality, hooks states, "Sojourner Truth was not the only black woman to advocate social equality for women. Her eagerness to speak publicly in favor of women's rights despite public disapproval and resistance paved the way for other politically-minded black women to express their views" (160). hooks reveals that Truth encouraged black women to speak for their rights. In *Ain't I a Woman*, cultural critic hooks explores the complexities of living in the United States as a black woman. Exploring the effect of racism and sexism, she examines the lives of black women in America. She explains that during slavery, due

to being both black and woman, black female slaves faced bitter experiences. They were justified as sexually corrupt, immoral, and loose. Describing the black women's status in slavery, she articulates, "The designation of all black women as sexually depraved, immoral, and loose had its roots in the slave system" (52). hooks explains that the combination of sexism and racism devalued black women by characterizing them as immoral and loose.

Connecting her analysis with her personal accounts, hooks challenges the notion that race and gender are two separate phenomena. Insisting the fact that racism and sexism are closely connected with each other, she expresses, "I voiced my conviction that the struggle to end racism and the struggle to end sexism were naturally intertwined" (13). hooks narrates her personal experience and clarifies that sexism and racism are naturally interconnected. She argues that black social movement is largely a patriarchal because it serves the interests of black males, seeking to overcome racial divisions by strengthening sexist ones. And women's movement is a largely white middle and upper class affair because it does not articulate the needs of poor and non-white women. Reflecting on the interests of black movement and women's movement, hooks marks, "a black movement [that] primarily served the interests of black male patriarchs and a women's movement [which] primarily served the interests of racist white women" (9). hooks reveals the fact that both the movements neglect black women's causes because they promote sexist and racist ideology.

In both of her above mentioned works hooks provides a narrative to examine the effects of racism and sexism on black women especially, black mothers. *Feminism is for Everybody* explains about the oppression of the Blacks, which is promoted in America by sexism and racism, and *Ain't I a Woman* narrates the complexities of

living in the United States as black women because they are oppressed by white men, black men, and white women as well. hooks' concepts described in *Feminism is for Everybody* and *Ain't I a Woman* are useful in the study of black motherhood for analyzing and interpreting literary discourses that reflect the black women/mothers' issues and the role of social stereotypes that construct their identity. hooks argues that the stereotypes, set during slavery, still affect the lives of black women; especially the lives of black mothers. She believes that black women must try to find their own voices and they must analyze their place in society if they want to protect themselves from oppression.

Cooper, a distinguished African American educator and scholar, raises voice against the inequalities and injustices African Americans and women face. Cooper's *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* (1892), a collection of essays and speeches, is her only published work. The essays touch on a variety of topics such as racism and the socio-economic realities of black families. Her central focus is on black women's education. She raises voice in the favor of the educational, moral, and spiritual progress of black women because these things help to improve the situation of the entire African-American race. She condemns the black people's attitude because they restrict women from educational opportunities. Regarding Cooper's view about black men's attitude to black women's education, Mary Helen Washington, in the Introduction of *A Voice from the South*, describes, "She criticizes black men for securing higher education for themselves through the avenue of the ministry and for erecting roadblocks to deny women access to those same opportunities" (xxix). Cooper views that education is a must for the advancement of black women. She argues more sophistication to education can be brought by promoting more female intellectuals. The educated and successful black women must support their

underprivileged peers in achieving their goals. Cooper expresses her concern for the weak and the powerless, who face the brutality of the power of dominant majority.

Focusing on Cooper's concern for blacks, Washington discloses, "Everywhere in *A Voice from the South*, Cooper is concerned about the unrestrained power of a dominant majority to crush the lives of the weak and the powerless" (xliv).

Washington exposes that Collins' *A Voice from the South* explores the predicaments of marginalized community.

Through her work, Cooper emphasizes the significance of a woman's voice and highlights the racialization of gender (racial identity within sex) and the sexualization of race (sexual identity within race). She argues that the black women are simultaneously affected by racism and sexism and suggests the ways for eliminating the systems of oppression. Cooper's views are significant for this research because she provides a framework for conceptualizing the situation of black women; especially the situation of black mothers and their dual oppression. Moreover, her ideas are helpful because she advances the vision of African-American women's self-determination through education and social support.

Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987) reflects her contribution in African-American literature because it articulates a theory that describes African-American female's gender construction. Spillers' primary concern is of the alleged problem of matriarchal family structure in black community. She explains that " the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so far out of line with the rest of American society" (65). Spillers points out that black people's family structure is different from the structure of families in American society. She rejects the wisdom of the Moynihan Report 1965, which focuses on the deep roots of black poverty which is caused not by a lack of

jobs, but by the deterioration of the black family. She states that in "Daniel Patrick Moynihan's celebrated "Report" of the late sixties, the "Negro Family" has no Father to speak off- his Name, his Law, his Symbolic function mark the impressive missing agencies in the essential life of the black community" (66). Spillers says the Moynihan's report focuses on absent father figures in Negro family, which is the missing agency in black community.

Spillers expresses her concern by narrating the history of slave ship. Reflecting on the structure of black family during slavery, she marks, "When the field of captives is divided among the spoilers, no heed is paid to relations, as fathers are separated from sons, husbands from wives, brothers from sisters and brothers, mothers from children - male and female" (70). Spillers describes that during slavery the Whites fixed the boundary for the Blacks without paying any attention to their family ties. When they divided their property among brothers, they divided slaves along with other goods. She further explains that the absent father in African-American history is the white slave master, since legally the child follows the condition of the mother. The enslaved mother performs the role of a father, as the one from whom children get their names and social status. Spillers provides a framework to explore the pathetic condition of black mothers who are burdened with overall responsibilities of their children due to the absence of a father figure. Black men and women are both positioned as weak creatures because they are deprived from their rights. She attempts to demonstrate a connection between the structures of the black family that were created during slavery, and the ways in which they have manifested into contemporary familial phenomena. Spillers' views are useful for this research on motherhood because she provides a framework to explore the overall responsibilities of black mothers and their dual oppression in American society. She argues that black

mothers are burdened with responsibilities due to the absence of a father figure in black families.

Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) focuses on black women's lives, experiences, and thought that demand rigorous attention. Sharing the voices of African American women, Collins explains her unique standpoint that black women must have equality and justice. By exploring the themes of oppression, family, work, and activism, she examines cultural and sexual politics which limits the boundary of black women. Through her work, Collins challenges white feminist dominance of feminist theory. She asserts that black women can neither fully be a member of feminist thought nor black social thought because the former gives priority to whiteness and later gives priority to maleness. Collins reveals that in spite of a lot of difficulties and the burden of racial and gender discrimination, African American women have developed a rich intellectual tradition.

According to Collins there are three interdependent features of black women's oppression in the US. Firstly, black women's free labor, which has been essential for the capitalist economy since the time of slavery, is the cause of black women's oppression. The enslaved black women had to pay a very high cost for their survival at the time of slavery. Although in the Post-slavery era the situation changed a bit and black women were released from the bondage of slavery, the economic exploitation of African American women's labor remained unchanged. Secondly, the political aspect, which has deprived African American women from their rights, is the cause of their oppression. The political subordination of black women has influenced all organizations that privileges white people. Reflecting the political dimension of black women, Collins argues, "Forbidding Black women to vote, excluding African-Americans and women from public office, and with-holding equitable treatment in the

criminal justice system all substantiate the political subordination of Black women"

(4). Collins points out that black women suffer when they get deprived from suffrage and other citizenship rights. The political dimension of oppression evidently can be seen in the educational system of the US where the white authority has hindered the literacy expansion and growth among black women. Thirdly, the ideological aspect has contributed in black women's oppression in the US by presenting them with some negative attributes, such as mammies, matriarchs, breeder women of slavery, and ever-present welfare mothers for black women. Explaining the effect of negative attributes to black women, Collins marks, "Negative stereotypes applied to African American women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression" (5). Collins believes that the negative stereotypes used for black women have contributed to their oppression. She asserts that these negative stereotypes illustrate black women as unworthy of being studied at all. Collins' ideas are fruitful for the study of black motherhood because she clarifies that the racist, sexist, and classist ideologies have constructed sufficient controlling images for black women, especially for black mothers by preventing them from forming an independent and self-reliant identity.

2.3. Review of Literature

This research aims at the exploration of black motherhood. It reflects how different discourses of American culture construct the notion of motherhood and how motherhood is represented in African American literature over the course of history. In order to explore the social construction of black motherhood, I have selected the works of poetry such as Harper's "The Slave Mother", Dunbar's "Lonesome", McKay's "My Mother", Brooks' "The Mother", Giovanni's "Mothers", and Angelou's "Momma's Welfare Roll"; fictions such as Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Hughes' *Not Without Laughter*, Wright's *Black Boy*, Morrison's *Sula*,

and Walker's *The Color Purple*; and non-fiction such as Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* from African American literature in a temporal order from Slavery to Postmodern phase and I have reviewed and analyzed them in a thematic order. This review concentrates on the construction of motherhood through social and cultural discourses reflected in African American literary works of different time frames. Through the exploration of various aspects of African American family structure, particularly women's roles, the primary focus is on the functioning of black motherhood and its depiction in literature in the context of slavery and later periods. This section, therefore, begins with the review of Harper's poem "The Slave Mother" and then, moves on to other selected works in a temporal order and addresses the conceptualizations of motherhood in literary writings.

Harper's "The Slave Mother" exemplifies the pain and suffering of an enslaved mother who is forced to face the reality of her limited relationship with her child. Published in Harper's collection of poetry entitled *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854), "The Slave Mother" deals with the themes of motherhood, racial discrimination, gender oppression, and horrors of slavery. As an example of protest poetry for which Harper is famous, it narrates the perspectives of a mother who has lost her child due to slave trade. The line "He is not hers" (17) reveals that under the bounds of slavery, the slave mother's son does not belong to her.

The poem illustrates the cruelest aspects of chattel slavery which separates children from their parents for slave trade and deteriorates the familial bonds. Regarding slavery, Hortense J. Spillers, a black feminist theorist, and literary and cultural critic, reveals that a woman and her children stay in a distant relation in slavery. In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" she explains, "Under conditions of captivity, the offspring of the female does not 'belong' to the mother" (74). Through

her work *Spillers* exposes the condition of black mothers under slavery. She reflects the anguish black mothers have to face when they are deprived from their motherly rights. In the poem, the slave mother is being presented as a helpless creature with emotions such as pain and despair. Due to deep relationship between the mother and her son, the son seeks protection in her presence. The lines, "Her boy clings to her side / And in her kirtle vainly tries" (14-15), show the child's worthless effort for his safety by hiding himself in his mother's kirtle. The child's action provides an internal sensation of helplessness. The poem shows how the institution of slavery destroys the black family and restricts black women/mothers from their maternal rights. The poet uses figurative language and imagery to illustrate the slave mother who gets forced to face reality over the limitations of her relationship with her child. The mother feels sympathetic to her own situation and to the situation of her son, whom she is unable to protect from dehumanization. The helplessness of a slave mother and her suffering in a racist and sexist social order is demonstrated through this poem.

By narrating the slave mother's unpleasant details in her poem, Harper asks his readers to accept the slave mother's testimony as truth. She believes that the separation of mother and child is not universally understood without comprehending the institution of slavery and its horrors. She views that only a slave can truly understand the separation and loss that is described in this poem. Describing the uniqueness of Harper's work, William Lloyd Garrison, in the Preface of Harper's anthology *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, opines, "The critic will remember that they (the poems) are written by one young in years, and identified in complexion and destiny with a depressed and outcast race, and who has had to contend with a thousand disadvantages from earliest life" (4). Garrison believes that Harper, as a revealer of unjust slavery, expresses the nuisances of slave system through her poetry.

Black mothers belong to the depressed and outcast race; therefore, their problems are not different from the problems of other black people. Although the poem does not directly call for an end to slavery, it demonstrates one of the worst parts of the business and the horror it creates to inspire abolitionist sentiment.

In the poem the poet connects the readers to the mother by revealing her horrid truth, which is the mother's separation from her children, one of the cruelest aspects of slavery. Concerning Harper's poetry, Patricia Liggins Hill describes that the poem "The Slave Mother" is very similar to the poem "The Slave Auction" because both the works expose the horror of slavery. In "A Study of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's Poetry" she marks, "'The Slave Mother' which is very similar to 'The Slave Auction' tells of a mother's parting from her son who is to be sold to a slave trader" (98-99). Hill's words are relevant for the study of black motherhood because she reveals that the theme of Harper's most poetry is the horrors of slavery, which shows a mother's forceful separation from her children for slave trade. Harper does not merely express sympathy for the slaves, but also exposes the real picture of the system of slavery through her work.

The theme of motherhood is personal to Harper. Although she was born to free parents and never lived as a slave, she lived in a slave state and was fully aware of slavery's devastating effects on black families. Harper lost her own mother at a young age and got firsthand experience to be a child permanently separated from her mother. As a mother, Harper also realized the depth of the bond between mother and child. These connections enabled her to write with authority on her subject. Harper's popularity associates with her protest poetry that describes the evils of slavery. Likewise, Alice Rutkowski expresses that Harper's popularity is associated with her protest poetry. In "Leaving the Good Mother: Frances E. W. Harper, Lydia Maria

Child, and the Literary Politics of Reconstruction" published in the journal *Legacy* she describes, "African American activist and poet Frances E. W. Harper gained attention in 1850s with her passionate antislavery poetry" (83). Rutkowski reveals that Harper blazes the trail for both women and African Americans by using her writing to protest, and promote social changes. She raises the issue of dehumanized slavery through her literary creation because she aims to bring changes in the lives of black Americans, black women in particular.

Feminist critic Barbara Christian argues that Harper's main concern in her work is to reveal the plight of black men and women. In *Black Women Novelist*, she expresses that "orators such as Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown and Frances Harper as early as 1830s to the beginning of the Civil War were concerned with countering southern images of not only of black men but of black women as well" (19). Christian's words reflect Harper's deep concern to the situation of black people. Harper, as an orator, narrates the tale of southern black women, who are the victims of racist and sexist social order. Being aware with the situation of black mothers, Harper makes efforts to narrate the bitter reality through her literary creation because she wants to rescue them from dehumanized effects of slave system.

"The Slave Mother" reflects a real picture of the system of slavery in the US. It is relevant for the study of motherhood because it focuses on the social and cultural aspects of slavery. The poet highlights one of the cruelest aspects of chattel slavery which separates children from their mothers for slave trade. She humanizes the pain that the mother feels at the loss of her son because the child is the mother's most precious jewel in this world. Linda, the slave mother in *Incidents*, encounters the same fate. Due to unfavorable social and cultural norms for black slaves, poverty, and other

factors, both the mothers pass through a lot of trials and tribulations while performing their responsibilities.

Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) details a slave's struggles in a racist society. Through the pseudonym Linda Brent, Jacobs' autobiographical work *Incidents* follows Jacobs's life from her birth in slavery in 1813 to her freedom in 1851. The narrative focuses on Linda's escape to freedom, as well as her struggle with the social and gender issues of slavery. Linda credits her early happiness to her mother and father and to the experience of living with her first mistress. As she reveals, "Those were happy days - too happy to last" (9). At twelve she goes to Dr. Flint's family where she knows about the cruel world of slavery. Dr. Flint relentlessly pursues her sexually by littering her mind with obscene images. For a little joy and revenge, Linda begins a romantic relationship with Mr. Sands and becomes the mother of two children. Later, she flees from Dr. Flint's plantation and hides in the attic of her grandmother's house. After nearly seven years, with the help of a network of family and friends, Linda travels to New York, where she meets the Bruces and accepts various jobs to secure her children's education. In 1852, Linda's employer, an anti-slavery sympathizer, arranges for Linda's purchase and frees her. Jacobs's autobiography highlights a slave's struggles with abuse, sexual harassment, and her role as a woman and a mother.

Incidents, is the most popular female slave narrative. It exposes Jacobs' real life experiences before she is freed. Narrating the authenticity of the description, Jacobs discloses in the Preface:

Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my

descriptions fall far short of the facts. I have concealed the names of places and given persons fictitious names. I had no motive for secrecy on my own account, but I deemed it kind and considerate towards others to pursue this course. (3)

She addresses her reader on a personal level within the first lines of her narrative, in the Preface, and asks him/her to believe her and not to disregard her story as being a mere product of her imagination. In this way Jacobs presents a realistic picture of African American society during the time of slavery. The narrative clearly reflects the lives and conditions of the slave mothers who are the victims of dehumanization of slavery.

Although many male writers have written slave narratives about the victimization of enslaved African American women by white men, nobody has addressed the issue as directly as Jacobs. Concerning Jacobs' narrative, Carolyn Sorisio describes that Jacobs' text is a powerful tool of the articulation of her voice. In "'There is Might in Each: Conceptions of Self in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" published in the journal *Legacy*, she points out that, "Within the scarcity of the slave woman's word, we find Jacobs's text—powerfully written, wonderfully articulated, and enormously complex" (1). Sorisio contends that Jacobs not only documents the sexual abuse she suffers, but also explains how she devised a way to use her sexuality as a means of avoiding exploitation of her master. She exposes the socio-cultural contexts of slavery and the position of women/mothers in a racist society through her work.

Risking her reputation, Jacobs appeals to Northern female readers and informs them about the situation of slave mothers in the South. She believes that the women in the North might sympathize with the plight of a Southern mother in bondage and

make efforts to bring changes in her life. She describes that her goal is to "arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse" (3-4). It takes a long time for researchers to establish the amount of truth in Jacobs' writing and the connection between her and her imaginary character, "Linda Brent", and to authenticate the narrative. Stephanie A. Smith gives the credit of Jacobs' work's authenticity to Jean Fagan Yellin, a literary scholar. Reflecting the contribution of Jean Fagan Yellin, Smith, in "Harriet Jacobs: A Case History of Authentication", notes:

. . . unlike other historians and scholars . . . she (Jean Fagan Yellin) believed the author, "Linda Brent" (Harriet Jacobs), and the original editor, Lydia Maria Child, when they said that the narrative was true. Searching through various archives, Yellin was able to find solid documentary evidence, in the form of letters, newspapers, and official state papers, as to the truth: that the incidents recounted in *Incidents* had actually occurred. (189)

Smith argues that Yellin establishes the literary and actual worth of Jacobs' narrative through her study of various records and finally she reveals it to the public. Smith's words are relevant to understand the real experiences of black women as slave mothers and the authenticity of the work. Yellin accepts the fact in the Introduction of *Harriet Jacobs: A Life*, when she declares, "These letters convinced me not only that Harriet Jacobs had written a book, but that she had written the book that Child had edited" (xvii). *Incidents* receives little critical attention until Yellin's research reveals the authenticity of the narrative. Yellin's research establishes Jacobs as the sole author of *Incidents* and clarifies Child's limited role as an editor.

Jacobs focuses on the importance of family and motherhood in the narrative. She details the account of being separated from her grandmother and two children during her seven years of hiding in an inconvenient place. Caitlin O'Neill reveals that as a loving and caring mother, she faces constant torture to save her children from dehumanized effects of slavery. In "The Shape of Mystery" she illustrates, "Jacobs' most significant theoretical contribution is her discussion of the garret - a nine feet long, seven feet wide, and three feet high hideaway where she would subsist for seven years before fleeing north" (57). Through the description of the cell where the mother Linda spends about seven years, O'Neill shows the mother's deep love and attachment to her children.

Linda suffers her whole life for the better future of her children. She does not only take on the role of a mother, but also of the self-sacrificing parent, who does everything in her power to protect her loved ones. When she realizes that the father of her children has bought them, but does not intend to free them, she escapes the North to liberate them. She knows that her fair skinned children will not be accepted by society. They will be considered as disgraceful mulattoes, a product of two races, which by law should not actually be in existence. Eventually, Jacobs manages to free her offspring. She educates them at home, thus merging further into her new role as a free woman and an altruistic mother.

Exploring the themes of the bond of motherhood, the quest for freedom, and community support, *Incidents* exposes the lives of slaves and deals with the torturous treatment that slave men and women have to encounter. The sexual exploitation of slave women, which is the bane of the system of slavery, is the primary concern of the writer. Regarding slavery, Harriet Becher Stowe reveals that it is a curse because it breaks family bonds. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she describes, "The most dreadful part of

slavery, to my mind, is its outrages on the feelings and affections, -the separating of families, for example" (124). Stowe's words signify the dreadful aspect of the system of slavery, which separates mothers from their children. She explains that under slavery, Linda like black mothers have to pass through a lot of trials and tribulations while performing their motherly responsibilities.

Incidents elaborates on the misfortunes of slave women through the real experiences of Jacobs. She uses pseudonyms to hide her true identity and to refute the belief of that time that women were incapable of writing about controversial issues. Expressing this reality in words, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, assert:

The literary woman has always faced equally degrading opinions when she has to define her public presence in the world. If she did not suppress her work entirely or publish it pseudonymously or anonymously, she could modestly confess her female 'limitations' and concentrate on the lesser subjects reserved for ladies as becoming to their inferior power. (64)

Gilbert and Gubar explain that though Jacobs does adhere at times to characteristics of women's writing in the nineteenth century such as apologizing and stating her limitation as a woman, her subject matter is more serious and more important than the subject matter that women usually wrote about. Gilbert and Gubar's views are noteworthy to figure out the unworthy situation of black women during the phase of slavery. Jacobs protects herself from those who may doubt the truthfulness of her story. Therefore, she writes under a pseudonym, Linda.

Linda faces various humiliations but she struggles for survival. As she narrates, "For years, my master had done his utmost to pollute my mind with foul images and to destroy the pure principles inculcated by my grandmother, and the good

mistress of my childhood. The influences of slavery had had the same effect on me that they had on other young girls" (60). At fifteen, Linda begins to face sexual harassment because the slaves at this age are considered mature enough to be abused sexually. Relating to slave women's oppression, Patricia Felisa Barbeito, in "Making Generations in Jacobs, Larsen, and Hurston: A Genealogy of Black Women's Writing" published in the journal *American Literature*, argues that, "Harriet Jacobs's ground-breaking slave narrative, which was enlisted in the abolitionist effort, focuses on the sexual exploitation of women during slavery and directly associates the woman slave's struggle for freedom with the freedom to control her own sexual activity" (365). Barbeito admits that Jacobs' *Incidents* focuses on the sexual exploitation of black women during slavery. Her views are relevant for the study of black motherhood because she talks about black women's struggle and sexual exploitation. Through simple language and clear sequence of events, Jacobs makes the readers understand more clearly about the socio-cultural circumstances of the time which lead slave women to despair.

The narrative shows Jacobs' concern about the effects of slavery on females, both black and white. To awaken her readers, she continually addresses them while telling her experiences. By doing this, she goes against the social norms, which were formed at that time for women and known as the attributes of 'true womanhood'. Regarding the effects of true womanhood on women, Sterling Lecater Bland Jr., in *Voices of the Fugitives*, explicitly explicates:

Being relegated to that sphere meant that the participation of black women in the public arena created tensions between black women and their audiences (black and white) and between women and those blacks (male and female) who did not share their thoughts on the public and political engagement of

African-American women. They were strongly encouraged to adopt the attributes of piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness that characterized the nineteenth-century ideal of 'true womanhood'. (120)

Bland points out that due to the attributes of true womanhood, women's participation in public arena creates tension. It becomes difficult for them to raise voice against oppression if they adopt the attributes of true womanhood. Jacobs fails to adopt the attributes of true womanhood. Her intention to fight against injustice, both as a slave and as a woman/mother, increases the difficulty of her struggle. To be able to successfully compose her narrative and to unwrap her knowledge about slavery, Jacobs raises a voice and claims an identity for herself, first as a slave, then as a fugitive woman/mother, and finally as an author.

In spite of her embarrassment, Jacobs narrates her story honestly. She is determined to make white Americans aware of the sexual victimization of slave women by dramatizing the fact that they often have no option except to surrender their virtue. Regarding the sexual victimization of black women, Sarah Way Sherman, in "Moral Experience in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" published in *NWSA Journal*, states that, "'Slavery is terrible for men', Harriet Jacobs wrote in 1861, 'but it is far more terrible for women'. Citing this passage from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jean Fagan Yellin argues that Jacobs' book was the first book to address the sexual exploitation of women under slavery"(167). Commenting on Yellin's statement based on Jacobs' line, Sherman argues that Jacobs' *Incidents* narrates the painful experiences of slave women. Sherman's words are useful for the study of black motherhood because under slavery black women and black mothers face the same fate. Jacobs breaks the taboos and writes a woman-

centered slave narrative to present her sexual history in slavery. Sherman also notes that Jacobs in *Incidents* challenges the nineteenth-century's conception of domesticity.

When Jacobs acquires her freedom and restores her family, she decides to use her knowledge about slavery to open other people's eyes. She turns into an author and uses her voice and experiences to help her peers to gain liberty. Richard Gray reveals that Jacobs takes a risk when she publishes her story for the liberation of other slave women. Observing Jacobs' efforts for the liberation of slave women, Gray, in *A History of American Literature*, marks:

The slave mother willing to risk losing her character by publishing her story for the greater good emerges as the prototype for the post-bellum 'race woman' (a phrase connoting the respectability of activist women) whose domestic labor, usually invisible, becomes visible and is transformed into a collective and raced form of activist labor. (243)

Gray describes the concern of a slave woman, who fights for the liberation of the other women of her race. By addressing her black and white readers throughout the narrative, she forces them to consider about the impacts of slavery on black and white communities.

Jacobs' narrative takes on a female perspective of the horrors of slavery by highlighting the threat of sexual exploitation. She reveals the real emotions of slaves and appeals directly to the Northern women. Reflecting Jacobs' strategy to narrate the accounts of slaves, Henry Louis Gates Jr., in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, notes, "Imagined readers shape the ways in which an autobiographer constructs the narrative of her life" (189). The prospective readers might determine the mode of the narrative themselves. The reason why Jacobs appeals to a particular type of audience has been sufficiently evoked, but it might be

important to highlight the fact that ". . . Jacobs (did not identify) with those likely readers (white abolitionists and white middle-class women) . . . but sought to interest them" (185). Gates declares that Jacobs intends to make people aware about the dehumanization of slaves in the South so she appeals to the Northern women.

Jacobs wants to receive the attention of the Northern people so she addresses them frequently throughout the text. Supporting this idea Johnnie M. Stover argues that Jacobs' intention behind making her stories public is to bring changes in the lives of her black brothers and sisters. In her work "Nineteenth-Century African American Women's Autobiography as Social Discourse: The Example of Harriet Ann Jacobs" published in the journal *College English*, she explains, "Because of the nature of enslavement and because of the scars left by particularly vicious acts of oppression, antebellum African American women autobiographers, like Jacobs, chose to make their stories public in an effort to effect changes for themselves and for their black brothers and sisters" (150). Stover's stance is clear because she reveals the pains of enslaved women, who unveil their stories in an effort to bring changes in the lives of the Blacks. In this sense *Incidents* has a crucial importance. Jacobs' main concern is to draw her readers towards the harsh, brutal, and demeaning conditions of slaves, and especially those of women slaves, who face inhuman treatment at every step and suffer all their lives.

Jacobs' autobiography seems relevant for this study because it helps to delineate the female experience of slavery primarily through images of motherhood. Exposing the unfavorable social and cultural circumstances for slaves, this work of non-fiction represents the female slave, Linda's struggle for freedom and preservation of family. Narrating Linda's struggle for freedom, hooks, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, asserts, "Linda Brent's slave narrative records resistance struggles,

where black women confront and overcome incredible barriers in the quest to be self-defining" (47). hooks opines that Linda's constant struggle helps her to overcome the incredible barriers of her life. The circumstances in which Linda becomes a mother emphasize that for the female slave the journey to motherhood is complex right from the conception. The disregard and violation she encounters leave the black mother in desperate state of mind and compel her to suffer.

Dunbar's "Lonesome", too, expresses the black mother's struggle and suffering for the welfare of her children. Taken from his collection of poetry *Lyrics of a Lowly Life* (1896), this poem reflects the construction of motherhood in American society and the efforts they make to get liberation. Dunbar's deep emotions to his mother are evident in the poem. He expresses racial and gender issues explicitly through his poetry. The speaker contemplates his sadness over his mother leaving town for a visit. He feels lonely and compares the house with a nest without a bird, which shows the speaker's deep attachment to his mother.

"Lonesome" parallels Dunbar's own relationship with his mother. The poet often expresses the same melancholy when he travels outside of Dayton, Ohio to promote his poetry. The poem conveys the extent of Dunbar's sadness when he stays away from his mother. Even the food doesn't bring any taste for him as he articulates, "The food ain't got the pleasant taste it used to have to me" (10). In reality, it was his mother who stayed at home and Dunbar who left for months at a time. The mother felt uneasy and suffered a lot in the absence of her child. It is Dunbar's way of expressing mother's feelings towards him and suppressing the sadness and guilt he feels over leaving. His work explores the frustrations and ambitions of black Americans of his day. More important, his life exemplifies the blacks' potential for contributions to American culture and barriers to their achievement.

The speaker's separation from his mother is heartbreaking. It shows mutual bond and deep sense of attachment between the mother and the child. The absence makes them feel uneasy. Even the delicious food becomes tasteless for them. The mother's confinement inside the boundary of her house reflects her pain and suffering in a racist and sexist social order. Through his work Dunbar exposes the confinement and struggle of black women/mothers. Although his emotions were often spoiled and his childhood was sometimes hard, he suggests that talking about these things gives the audience the best impression of who he is, and who he wants to be. Dunbar succeeds in searching for and discovering some of his African-American roots. Regarding Dunbar's expression of black life, William Dean Howells, in the Introduction of *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, states, "Paul Dunbar was the only man of pure African blood and of African civilization to feel the Negro life aesthetically and express it lyrically" (xvi). Howells' words show that Dunbar understands the feelings of black people and demonstrates the uniqueness of the black race through an accurate depiction of African American life. His words are relevant because he feels that blackness is inherent in the music of Dunbar's poetry, be it by instrument or by voice.

Dunbar demonstrates a familiarity with the craft and the themes that distinguish him as a notable writer. The images and elements that he presents in his works, such as memories of slavery, discriminatory attitude towards the blacks and women, cracks in the wall of developing Jim Crow segregation, organizing for resistance, black intellectual networks, and building audiences for African-American voices, have made him a popular figure of his time. He looks for and narrates his own roots in his dialect poetry. Similar to Howells, Gene Jarrett opines that Dunbar's dialect poetry is an authentic recreation of black life. In "Entirely Black Verse from Him Would Succeed" published in the journal *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Jarrett

asserts, "Greater proof of Dunbar's phenomenal status appears in reviews of his book of poems, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*. Printed between January 1897 and April 1898 in major U.S. and British periodicals, the (ten) reviews praised Dunbar's orthography of dialect as an accurate and authentic re-creation of African American vernacular"

(521). Dunbar uses African American vernaculars to express the thoughts and feelings of black people. Jarrett's view is significant to derive the complexity of Dunbar's work which he acquires from his victimization by racism and his talent. The dialect poems, which reflect his Negro culture, are the excellent examples of his talent. Jarrett further explains that "the dialect poems were "on the whole, excellent"; examples of a Negro being "thoroughly spontaneous and natural"; "pure Negro songs"; "not overloaded . . . with ornaments of culture . . . He is a full blood Negro" (521-22). Dunbar's poetry, which is spontaneous and natural, contains the cultural elements. He gets supported by his family so he always feels dependence on his mother. The mother helps him to find completion in his emotions and childhood memory. Dunbar considers these to be the things that define him best.

Dunbar examines the role of traditions that have influenced the generations of African-Americans, and depicts it through his works. Though he uses Negro dialect, most of his works are in formal English. Dialect poetry emerged as a significant part of African-American writing in the mid-1890s with the success of its first well-known black practitioner, Dunbar. Dunbar's dialect poetry uncovers the roots of the black society. Appreciating Dunbar's achievement as a poet, especially his dialect poetry, which expresses the lives of lowly people, Howells in the Introduction observes:

The contents of this book are wholly of his own choosing, and I do not know how much or little he may have preferred the poems in literary English. Some of these I thought very good, and even more than very good, but not

distinctively his contribution to the body of American poetry. What I mean is that several people might have written them; but I do not know anyone else at present who could quite have written the dialect pieces. These are divinations and reports of what passes in the hearts and minds of a lowly people whose poetry had hitherto been inarticulately expressed in music, but now finds, for the first time in our tongue, literary interpretation of a very artistic completeness. (xix)

Howells explicates that Dunbar's dialect poetry contains excellent ideas and narrates the lives of lowly people, whose poetry has been inarticulately expressed in music. Dunbar's poetry contains traditional forms and themes. Being proud of his African roots, he praises his culture. Howells's idea is useful because it demonstrates that African-Americans are making significant progress as people and they have racial pride.

Dunbar's dialect poetry was criticized by many critics saying that it degraded the lives of black people. Relating to Dunbar's dialect poetry, Donald A. Petesch, in *A Spy in the Enemy's Country: The Emergence of Modern Black Literature*, reports, "Jean Wagner writes that "Dunbar's dialect is at best a second hand instrument irredeemably blemished by the degrading themes imposed upon it by the enemies of black people"" (109). Reflecting Wagner's view on Dunbar's dialect poetry, Petesch reveals that many critics mark Dunbar's dialect poetry as a second hand instrument that reflect hopeless situation and humiliation of black people. Petesch's view is significant because he reflects the harsh reality of black life that Dunbar expresses through his dialect poetry.

As a great African American literary figure, Dunbar uses Negro dialect within the formal structure of his poems and best known for his poetry. Regarding Dunbar's

expertise in the formation of poetic creation, Kwando M. Kinshasa, in *African American Chronology*, asserts, "It is for his poetry, however, he is best remembered" (84). Kinshasa further writes, "Dunbar's poems *Oak and Ivy* (1893), *Major and Minors* (1896), and *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896) cause many critics to refer to him as the poet laureate of the Negro race" (84). Kinshasa's words reflect Dunbar's placement in African American literature which make him the poet laureate of the Negro race. Dunbar's works reflect the difficulties that the blacks face in American society and the efforts they make to achieve contentment.

Dunbar's "Lonesome" conveys the extent of his sadness when he stays away from his mother. By depicting the poet's intimate association with his mother, the poem demonstrates the socio-cultural reality of the time. Though there is little indication of the feelings of the speaker's mother, she feels lonely and suffers a lot to get the company of her loved one, who is her son. The poem also reflects the difficulties that the blacks face in American society and the efforts they make to achieve equality and freedom.

Likewise, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1913) emphasizes Johnson's frank and realistic look at black society, race relations, and black people's struggle. The novel narrates the struggle of a mixed-race protagonist who is unable to fit into either racial culture. The unnamed narrator is light-skinned enough to pass for white but identifies himself emotionally with his beloved mother's black race. He spends his childhood happily with his mother and after her demise he moves to other places. Initially he intends to become a great black American musical composer, but he fearfully gives up that ambition when he sees a mob of whites set fire to a black man in the rural South. As he narrates, "There he stood, a man only in form of stature . . . Fuel was brought from everywhere . . . He squirmed, he writhed, strained at his

chains then gave out cries and groans that I shall always hear" (106). When the narrator witnesses white people's attack on an innocent black man, he feels shame and humiliation for himself for being a black man. The narrator, then, decides to follow an easier path of 'passing' as a middle-class white businessman. Defining the term passing, Brooke Kroeger, in *Passing: When People Can't Be Who They Are*, marks that 'passing' as an act when "people effectively present themselves as other than who they understand themselves to be" (7). Kroeger's definition is significant to understand the role of the mulatto narrator in a racist society. The narrator finds success in the role of a middle-class white businessman but meets failure in his own terms. His true identity is ripped in just ambivalent.

The novel demonstrates Johnson's frank and realistic look at black society. The narrator's great secret is that he is a mulatto, although his skin is light enough for him to pass as white. He knows the reality at school when his teacher calls on the white students in the class to stand for the principal and asks him to sit down. The boy initially experiences confusion and shock. He accepts the biased and racist ideological paradigms of his teacher and principal. When he arrives home, he asks his mother if he is white. She tells him they are not. She consoles him revealing that he is the son of a white man. As she answers, "No I am not white, but you - your father is one of the greatest men in the country - the best blood of the South in you" (12). Having never known his father or the life of his father, the narrator has no means of reconciling the difference between being a nigger and being one who carries the best blood.

The narrative reflects a deep attachment between the mother and the son. In spite of the social and cultural barriers, the mother sacrifices her whole life for the better future of her son. She has no other children and has never married because she loves a white man. Due to the black color of her skin, white man does not accept her

as his wife. Regarding the black mother's circumstances, Cooper, in *A Voice from the South*, articulates, "She (The colored woman) is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both" (134). Cooper's words signify the situation of black women, who are the victims of racist and sexist oppression and unprivileged to marry white men. The circumstances that she passes through make her suffer at every stage, even then she cares for her son's physical and emotional wellbeing. To maintain his emotional fitness, she tells him that his father belongs to white race when he asks her about his racial identity.

From the very beginning, the narrator establishes his innate curiosity about the race relation. He details his efforts to claim his position in the middle because he is a mixed race person. Concerning the title character, Kathleen Pfeiffer argues that the title character in Johnson's novel represents the paradox of race and color. In "Individualism, Success, and American Identity in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*" published in *African American Review*, she points out, "The title character in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* embodies the paradox of race and color because he is both legally black and visibly white" (403). Pfeiffer describes the situation of mulatto narrator, who embodies the inconsistency of race and color because he is both legally black and visibly white.

The narrator's dedication to music proves his talent at best. He gets inspired by the powerful spirituals and orations, which he hears at rural church meetings. Later, he diverts his path when he witnesses a horrific scene in the town. A black man is being burned alive by an angry white mob. This experience motivates the narrator to live as a white man. It changes his mental state. He is overcome with shame when he sees a black man being killed by a mob for no fault. He describes, "Shame at being identified with people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals"(108).

In contrast with the narrator's celebration throughout the novel of the achievements of African Americans and their contributions to American culture, lynching scene creates confusion for him. He begins to think about his black racial identity. His musical ambition that integrates black and white races artistically does not stay in him. The narrator decides to hide his black identity and pass as a white. Regarding the narrator's decision to hide his black identity, Heather Russell Andrade argues that due to the problem of race relation, Johnson's mixed race protagonist hides his black identity and passes for a white man. In "Revising Critical Judgments of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*" published in *African American Review*, she explicates, "Johnson represents a fictional anti-hero, a black man who chooses to 'pass' for a white man who need not negotiate the hardships of race relations in America" (257). Andrade's declares Johnson's narrator as an anti-hero, who escapes himself from the hardships of race relations in America. Instead of fighting back, he passes for a white man. This all reflects insensitive race relation between the blacks and the whites. The protagonist chooses an easy path due to racial violence.

In his travels through the South, his observations are often consistent with those of a typical white racist, such as when he notices the lower-class blacks that he meets. He narrates, "The unkempt appearance, the shambling, slouching gait, and loud talk and laughter of these people aroused in me a feeling of almost repulsion" (32). This ambivalence not only marks his condition of an outsider with respect to the black group. It also reinforces the narrator as an observer. For him it is a matter of race and class distinctions, since he seems to feel superior to the working class black people he encounters in the South. It is also the hint about the character's possibility of passing. Donald C. Goellnicht in this regard, reasons that when the fair skinned mulatto becomes unable to face the difficulties of color-line, he chooses to pass for white. In

"Passing as Autobiography: James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*" published in *African American Review*, he explains that Johnson's 1912 novel *The Autobiography* is a fictitious autobiographical "narrative of a fair skinned mulatto man who after many difficulties on both sides of the color line and much agonizing over 'the Negro problem' in America chooses to pass for white" (17). Goellnicht's view reflects deep racial gap between the blacks and the whites in American society. Wedged between the two categories, the narrator chooses to 'pass' to the white society by taking advantage of his fair skin.

The narrator desires to get freedom from categories and challenge and defy conceptualizations of race so he eventually chooses a mid-way. As he narrates, "I finally made up my mind that I would neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race"(108). Relating to the narrator's choice, Anna C. Hostert describes that passing, which the narrator chooses, is refusal and renewal both. In *Passing: A Strategy to Dissolve Identities and Remap Differences*, he asserts, "Passing is a refusal to be confined within historically limiting structures of existence. But just as passing is a refusal of the given, it is also an opportunity for renewal and growing" (15). Therefore, Hostert believes that the passing of the narrator should not only be viewed through the perspective of selfishness and betrayal to the race. Passing can also be viewed as a possibility of freedom- from categories that condemn an individual to live in a permanent condition for the rest of his life, without providing possibilities of change and mobility.

The narrator feels that the disclosure of his social identity creates problems for him. He stands completely at odds. In spite of his efforts, he cannot hide his blackness but enters into the in-betweenness of mulattoes. He says, "So once again I found myself gazing at the towers of New York and wondering what future that city held in

store for me" (108). Such realm is signaled in the text by other clues such as his feeling of loneliness and of isolation. The notion of self-estrangement creates for him another kind of conflict which usually accompanies the mulatto's discovery of his blackness and self-hatred. According to Robert Fleming, in "Contemporary Themes in Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*", published in *Negro American Literature Forum*, "Black self-hatred is another important theme employed by Johnson. Constantly told that he is a member of an inferior race, the black man may come to believe or fear that he really is inferior" (122). Fleming explains that due to the belief of being inferior, the narrator feels a strong dislike towards the mere idea of being categorized with the other black people and of losing the rights that his white skin bestows upon him. Fleming's words are relevant because this is the case of many tragic mulattoes who attempt to fight against the socially imposed definition of their identities as black, holding onto their whiteness, and thus refusing to acknowledge their in-between selves. Michael Cooke uses the word escapist for the ex-colored man because of his disloyal attitude to his race. In the Conclusion of *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century*, he remarks, "The Ex-Colored Man becomes essentially an escapist" (48). The protagonist's passing for white, however, is mostly received critically as an expression of racial disloyalty and thus as morally blameworthy.

Johnson's *The Autobiography* is relevant for the study of black motherhood because it reflects the struggle of an unnamed black mother, who devotes her whole life for the better future of her son. Despite of social and cultural barriers, she proceeds to perform her role as a mother. Though being a black woman and single caretaker, she makes a lot of struggle in a community for survival where blackness and single mother status are social burdens. She fulfills the demands of her son by

maintaining a good relationship with the community where she lives. As a loving and caring mother figure, she supports her son till the end of her life. Bearing a lot of pain and suffering, she performs her motherly responsibilities perfectly.

Harper's "The Slave Mother", Jacobs' *Incidents*, Dunbar's "Lonesome", and Johnson's *The Autobiography* clearly reflect the domestication of black motherhood by depicting black women as mute victims of slavery, racism and sexism. Written during the phase of Slavery and Post-slavery, these works fall in various generic categories such as poetry, fiction, and non-fiction and represent the socio-cultural stereotypes that construct motherhood ideals. Moreover, the depiction of black mothers' confinement inside the boundary of the house and their love and attachment to their children is out of imagination. The mother in "The Slave Mother", Linda in *Incidents*, the speaker's mother in "Lonesome", and the protagonist's mother in *The Autobiography* are some representative mother figures, who struggle a lot while performing motherly responsibilities and pass through different trials and tribulations. The review of the selected texts shows that motherhood for black women was connected and rooted in a social system of bondage during Slavery and Post-slavery phases.

During the phase of Slavery, for example, there were strict boundaries for slaves. The black slaves were separated from their close relatives and families. Harper and Jacobs reflect such events clearly through their works. The slave codes regulated the system of slavery by promoting absolute control by the master and complete submission by the slave. Under such system the slave was a chattel. As a piece of property, they could be bought and sold. Slaves were not allowed to have a stable family life and prohibited by law from learning to read or write. And in the Post-slavery phase due to some constitutional amendments African-Americans got some

liberty by abolishing slavery and getting some citizenship rights. Hardly any change came in the situation of black women, black mothers in particular. Post-bellum society also constructed the notion of motherhood by confining black women inside the strict boundary. Because of a complex web of race and gender, black mothers experienced various forms of oppression simultaneously. The multiple roles assigned for them, such as mothers, field workers, breeders, servants, wives and concubines, reflected the complexity of their lives. As a commodity, black women's motherhood was not separated from their status. Black mothers' lifelong struggle and painful experiences were inexpressible and different from the experiences of ordinary women. The mother figures in the above mentioned texts face painful circumstances at every step which puts them in the category of confined and suffering mothers. In this way, this dissertation attempts to highlight the complex nature of black motherhood in American society.

Black motherhood is also distinctly visible in African American literature written during the successive phases of historical and literary development while the notion of motherhood is different due to changing socio-cultural circumstances. McKay's "My Mother" is about the mother's selfless attachment to her son. Taken from McKay's collection of poems *Harlem Shadows* (1922), the poem reflects the sense of loss and feeling of pain. The poem begins with a request from the poet's friend Reg, who wishes him to go to the field but the poet stops. The speaker articulates, "Reg wished me to go with him to the field, / I paused because I did not want to go;" (1-2). The speaker stays home to take care of his sick mother. Due to his mother's deteriorating health condition, he feels hesitant. He decides to stay at home in the company of his mother, who is a great source of inspiration for him. In spite of her serious health condition, the mother lets the speaker go and do his job. She

understands her motherly responsibility and lets him perform his earthly duties. She teaches him to strive against the difficulties of life. Later in the poem, the speaker describes the normal activities of life. Soon the mother dies. He realizes that nothing changes over the earth. This deep attachment to his mother recurs in the poem and reminds him of his mother's possible demise, which distresses and upsets him.

The poem narrates the mother's selfless attachment to her son. It reflects the cultural construction of motherhood during Harlem Renaissance and how it is an important aspect of black life. The speaker shows his mother as a strong individual much unlike the ideas of women crafted by society at the time. The line "Her eyes said: I shall last another day." (8), illustrates the African American woman: a woman of determination and strong-will. The speaker details and concludes with the death of his mother. As he says, "Beneath its breast my mother lies asleep" (28). This poem is a simple description of a black woman/mother's place, not only in the poet's life, in the larger society as well. The description of presence and absence of the mother establishes a positive light for African American women.

McKay concerns about the physical sufferings and moral degradation of the blacks. In his work he focuses his attention on the pressures mounting on the blacks for whom struggle is life. Observing McKay's poetry, John H. Jordan, in *Black Americans 17th Century to 21st Century*, asserts, "By the end of first world war the fictions of James Weldon Johnson and the poetry of Claude McKay were describing the reality of contemporary Black American life in America" (253). Jordan's words are worthy to grasp McKay's concern because most of his works reflect the reality of black American life of his time. The race problem never acts as a hindrance to his artistic creation.

McKay seeks to draw greater attention to African American identity, racial prejudice, and inequality in *Harlem Shadows*. Walter Francis White, Executive Secretary of the NAACP from 1931- 1955, acknowledges McKay as the most talented Negro poet. In Tyrone Tillery's *Claude McKay: A Black Poet's Struggle for Identity* he views as, "without doubt the most talented and versatile of the new school of imaginative, emotional Negro poets" (54). McKay depicts the plight of black race through his creations. His self-expression in *Harlem Shadows* on behalf of African Americans is strong. Robert Smith notes that McKay's self-expression dares to strike back against racial injustice. In "Claude McKay: An Essay in Criticism" published in the journal *Phylon*, he argues, "This is not the poetry of submission or acquiescence . . . It is one of scorching flame, a voice conscious of persecution, that dares to strike back with vehemence" (272). Smith's views are relevant to internalize the essence of McKay's works that oppose racial disparity and oppression. As a leading spokesman of an oppressed race, McKay facilitates the establishment of a national African American voice, a voice that seeks to emphasize the injustices of racial prejudice of African Americans. Moreover, it emphasizes the courage, strength, and resiliency of black race. It is this voice amongst others that makes McKay a prominent, praise-worthy, and admirable leader of the Harlem Renaissance.

McKay's works greatly influence the phase of Harlem Renaissance, the golden age of black people's creativity. The poems denounce the white world's discriminatory practices. Wayne Cooper, McKay's biographer, in McKay's *The Passion of Claude McKay*, explains that McKay can be understood only within the full context of his life and career and promptly locates him in the "continuous chain of African American literary tradition from Booker T. Washington to Black Power Movement of 1960s" (2-3). Cooper believes that McKay's contribution for the black race can only be

understood if we look at the chain of African American literary tradition. His creations carry a thrill into the depth of our hearts.

As a leading poet, McKay highlights the situation of American blacks. Max Eastman contends that McKay's voice expresses the hopes and sorrows of his race. In the Introduction of *Harlem Shadows*, he acknowledges, "McKay knew that his voice belonged not only to his own moods and the general experience of humanity, but to the hopes and sorrows of his race" (xii). Eastman's main intention is to make readers aware of the spirit of McKay's poetry. *Harlem Shadows* makes McKay a renowned poet because through this work he expresses the pains and sorrows of rural blacks. Like Eastman, David Levering Lewis also reveals that McKay gets popularity through his collection of poems *Harlem Shadows*, which narrates the lives of rural blacks. In "Reading the Harlem Renaissance", he notes, "Claude McKay, whose volume of poetry *Harlem Shadows* (1922) made him a Village celebrity (he lived in Gay Street, then entirely inhabited by nonwhites), found his niche among the *Liberator* group, where he soon became co-editor of the magazine with Michael Gold" (129). Lewis's praises McKay's contribution and believes that as an anti-racist campaigner, McKay's literary creations help him to establish himself as a co-editor of the magazine *Liberator*.

McKay through his works expresses the bitter truth of racism. James Weldon Johnson calls him a poet of beauty and power. In "A Real Poet" published in the magazine *The New York Age: The National Negro Weekly* (May 20, 1922), he outlines, "Mr. McKay is a real poet and a great poet . . . a poet of beauty and a poet of power. No Negro poet has sung more beautifully of his own race than McKay and no Negro poet has equaled the power with which he expresses the bitterness that so often rises in the heart of the race." Johnson clarifies that *Harlem Shadows* exposes the

reality of black life in America. Through the poem "My Mother" he reflects the cultural construction of motherhood during Harlem Renaissance by presenting the image of a black mother who teaches her son to be dutiful.

McKay's poetry reflects the real picture of African American social life. The poet depicts the socio-cultural norms that define the role and responsibility of a black mother. In spite of women's marginal status and limited boundaries, McKay identifies his mother as being a powerful force in his life. Though she is serious, the mother shows courage by permitting him to go to complete his task. Presenting the image of a black mother, who struggles against conditions of life boldly, McKay conveys the message that African American mother figures are assertive. Like McKay, Hughes conveys the similar message through *Not Without Laughter* (1930) by presenting the image of a black mother named Aunt Hager.

The narrative reveals a black mother's devotion to her children. By reflecting socio-cultural circumstances of the period, the novel exposes African American life through the eyes of a youth during the early twentieth century. The plot moves around Sandy Rogers, an African American youth during the 1930s and early 1940s and provides an overview of the rural black experience. Sandy, born and raised in Stanton, Kansas, experiences the African American struggle of inequality through instances of poverty and racial segregation. His grandmother, Aunt Hager, is the guide and guardian for him. She washes clothes for the whites and courageously guides her family. Hughes' exposes African American culture through the eyes of a youth. African American cultural aspects such as family, motherhood, race, work, education and gender discrimination are the major themes in the novel. Observing Hughes' literary creations, H. Nigel Thomas declares that this novel is Hughes' one of the best works of literature. In "Patronage and the Writing of Langston Hughes", he opines,

"*Not Without Laughter*, compared with Hughes's other novels and short stories, emerges as the superior work"(108). Thomas declares the novel superior because it reflects the real picture of black American life and provides a direction to the black community for the liberation of black race.

The novel narrates the account of black American life in the mid-west within two generations following slavery. It crystallizes some of the themes introduced in Hughes's first two poetry collections and examines the experiences of working-class and poor blacks. Regarding Hughes' literary talent, Arnold Rampersad, in *The Life of Langston Hughes*, admits that Hughes', "creative identity, in spite of his plays, fiction, and essays, remained that of a poet" (193). Rampersad argues that Hughes's depicts the lives of poor black Americans like a poet. The novel primarily deals with the notion of motherhood and how socio-cultural factors define and limit the role of black women as mothers.

Aunt Hager, the crucial mother figure, is a strong and courageous woman. Like the traditional black mother figure, Aunt Hager is the authority in her house. She earns by washing white people's clothes so her home at times resembles a laundry. The laundry service, she provides, represents an example of her devotion towards Washington's approach on schooling, since she simply needs practical skills in order to gain a salary. Regarding Hager's devotion to her work, Matthew Mosley describes that Hager's profession combines two notions, cleanliness and industry of Booker T. Washington's ideology. In his dissertation *The Feminine Representation of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois in Langston Hughes' Not Without Laughter*, he explains, "Hager's occupation fills a need in the local community and establishes her economic value. Her occupation also intertwines two notions of Washington's ideology, cleanliness and industry" (12). Mosley's words are significant to

comprehend Aunt Hager's role as a responsible mother and guardian in the life of her children. She establishes good relationships with her neighbors and gains the respect of the other race. This attitude, based on thrift and the mutual respect between the whites and the blacks, is exactly what Washington proposes in his writings. Hager is the one who fulfills the family needs, makes the decisions, and disciplines her children. Being a sole bread winner and decision maker for her children, she plays her role as a catalyst to Sandy's growth via education.

Aunt Hager is a moral compass who concerns for her children's prosperity and bright future. She works hard and wants her children to be laborious and directs them to the right path at every step. Concerning Sandy's learning, Steven C. Tracy argues that Sandy learns most practical lessons from his grandmother. In "Langston Hughes and Aunt Hager's Children's Blues Performance", he reveals, "From Hager Sandy gets his sense that the best way to respond hatred in the world is with love. In addition to his sensitivity, he also inherits from his ethic of hard work, his love of spirituals, his pride in his African American heritage, and his commitment to becoming a great man . . ." (28-29). Tracy explains that Aunt Hager performs the role of a perfect mother by teaching her children the best way to live in a world where racist ideology governs. Tracy's view is noteworthy to comprehend the responsibilities of black women/mothers. Hager asks frequently to her daughter Harriet over her lack of moral. The stereotype of mammy feels overwhelmed with Harriet's activities. Standing in the middle of the kitchen floor with her arms raised to heaven, Hager prays to God for Harriet's goodwill. As she speaks, "Have mercy on this chile! Help her an' save her from hell-fire! Change her heart, Jesus! . . . God have mercy on ma daughter" (44). Aunt Hager plays a prominent role upon her children's lives though women had

limited roles during the time. As an assertive mother figure, she performs her responsibilities perfectly.

The novel creates a warm human picture of Negro life in Black America. Focusing on the relations between the blacks and the whites, it depicts the tensions between different philosophies of living with oppression and the subtle and not-so-subtle racist social norms of white society. Regarding the tension between the blacks and the whites, Dolan Hubbard, in the Introduction of *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, describes, "He (Hughes) depicts the lives of common, working class people who, because of the color of their skin, have been largely excluded from full participation in the American Dream" (3). Hubbard's analysis is relevant to show racial inequality because he reveals that Hughes' works depict the situation of poor black people who are excluded from the mainstream of society. The community of Stanton is visibly divided into two groups of inhabitants that are the blacks and the whites. While the poor African-Americans live in wooden shacks, the prosperous whites, such as Mrs. Rice, reside in luxurious buildings. As the narrative reveals, Mrs. Rice lives in "the long residential street, with its large houses sitting in green shady lawns far back from the sidewalk" (57). Accordingly, there exists racial inequality among the population, which furthermore creates difficulty in the social relationships.

At school Sandy faces discriminatory response from his teachers. Reflecting Sandy's reaction to discriminatory attitude, Elizabeth Schultz reveals that Sandy opposes the racial cruelties in the school as he opposes discriminatory attitude in other places. In "Natural and Unnatural Circumstances in *Not Without Laughter*" published in *Montage of a Dream*, she marks, "In September Sandy enters a new school and both he and the readers are introduced to Kansas's institutionalized racism when the young boy confronts the racial cruelties of his new classroom teacher and the shame

of his family's poverty" (44). Schultz explains that Sandy faces problems at the new school due to the black color of his skin and poverty stricken situation the family faces. Schultz's expression reflects the scene of institutionalized racism in American society. Sandy's mother Anjee, works as a maid in the household of Mrs. Rice. Due to her belonging to the black race, she faces various difficult problems in the white household. As she describes, "white folks sure is a case . . . So spoiled with colored folks waiting on 'em all their days! Don't know what they'll do in heaven, 'cause I'm gonna sit down up there myself" (58). Her statement indicates that the whites perceive the blacks as their inferior servants. Through his creation Hughes reflects the importance of family and the forces that surround the family life such as the racial discrimination, the violence of society, the unfairness of educational opportunities, and the right to share in the American dream of opportunity and freedom. Schultz further reveals, "Hughes imagery evokes the oppression and humiliation of an omnipresent racism and poverty" (44). Due to racial disparity, African Americans have limited opportunities. Employment options are not lucrative as they are limited to unskilled labor.

The absence of the strong father figure is counterbalanced by maternal figures. Sandy matures without a stable father figure. He gets constant support from his grandmother and later from his mother and aunts. Reflecting the absence of the strong father figure in Sandy's life, Daniela Fargione, in "From Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter* to Langston Hughes' *Piccola America Negra: Where's the Music Gone?*", describes:

The absence of a strong paternal figure in Sandy's life is widely counterbalanced by the hefty presence of the three women he lives with: Aunt Hager, his maternal grandmother and a loving churchwoman; Anjee, his

devoted mother and hard worker; and Harriett, Sandy's favorite aunt and model, the independent and rebellious folk soul, who eventually becomes the 'Princess of the Blues'. (679)

Fargione explains that the absence of a strong paternal figure in Sandy's life is counterbalanced by the presence of Aunt Hager, Annjee, and Harriett. Sandy gets a strong support from his grandmother, mother, and auntie. He never feels the absence of father in the family. The bold mother figures fulfill the fatherly responsibilities for him. Through her work Fargione depicts the picture of African American society where mothers have to bear the sole responsibility of their families due to the absence of the strong father figure. Fargione's words expose crucial aspect of black family dynamics, which is unimaginable outside black communities.

The narrative shows the struggle of obtaining work for the blacks through the representation of Sandy's vagabond father, Jimboy. Hughes introduces blues as cultural resources for black community, which helps them to deal with their frustrations. Supporting the usefulness of blues for the blacks, John P. Shields in "Never Cross the Divide": Reconstructing Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* published in *African American Review*, argues, "In the blues, there is also a degree of physical release for participants" (610). Like Hughes, Shields also appreciates blues as a medium for the blacks to deal with their frustrations. Shields finds evidence of Hughes' feelings that the blues along with religion are working in opposition to the struggle against racial inequality. He further explicates, "Hughes has allied religion with the blues to represent two of the more subtle forces working in opposition to the struggle against racial inequality. Hughes realizes that the blues and religion work in different ways, both leading to complacency rather than to action" (610). Shields

believes that religion is a source of catharsis whereas blues music creates cathexis.

The blues differs from religion in that it forces the individual to face his/her misery.

Like Shields, Sterling Brown, a black professor, folklorist, poet, and literary critic expresses the similar view. In *A Son's Return* Brown calls blues music as "the finest medium for interpreting to the whites some of the best qualities of the Negroes"(189). Brown argues that blues reflect black culture. Blues and jazz tend to be linked to poverty, a side of black life from which many progressive blacks wish to dissociate. Hughes' reflection of the cultural setting in *Not Without Laughter* polarizes a black community, along lines of social class.

Discriminatory attitude towards women is another issue in the novel. Being poor and submissive, most women in the novel are bound to domestic work under white dominance. Sandy's Aunt Tempy is the only exception because she belongs to a wealthy family. Due to her conversion to white American culture, she is regarded as uncultured. Tempy hates blues and spirituals. As the narrative reveals, "Blues and spirituals Tempy and her husband hated because they were too Negro" (168). Tempy feels that colored people need to promote their talent so that the white race would realize Negroes are not all mere guitar players and house maids. As she narrates, "Colored people certainly need to come up in the world, Tempy thought, up to the level of white people - dress like white people, talk like white people, think like white people - and then they would no longer be called "niggers"" (167). Tempy's husband also keeps the same opinion. He thinks that blacks need to "Stop being lazy, stop singing all the time, stop attending revivals, and learn to get the dollar—because money buys everything, even the respect of white people"(168). This brings about the division in thought concerning African Americans and wealth.

Hughes stresses the importance of education among African Americans, as it is their gateway to a better life. Both Aunt Hager and Aunt Tempy highly prioritize education for Sandy, however both differ in their ideologies. Aunt Hager prioritizes Booker T. Washington's formula, that stresses vocational education whereas Aunt Tempy gives preference to W.E.B. Du Bois' formula, which stresses the importance of classical education. Sandy adopts both the ideologies and applies both teachings in his life.

In 1930, Hughes' novel, *Not Without Laughter*, won the Harmon Gold Medal for literature. Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason supports Hughes for two years prior to publishing this novel. Hubbard states, "Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason, his patron, served as advisory, editor" (3). Due to Mason's support Hughes gets opportunity to visit various places and share his experiences through his literary art. Regarding the popularity of Hughes as a writer, Steven Otfinoski, in "Langston Hughes: Dean of Black Writers" published in *American Profiles: Great Black Writers*, asserts, "Langston Hughes reputation as a writer is secure today. No other black poet is as widely read and appreciated" (41). He contends that Hughes is the most popular writer of the time.

To explore the issue of black motherhood during the phase of Harlem Renaissance, Hughes exposes the role of society and culture in the life of a black mother named Hager. Aunt Hager, the sole breadwinner of her family, is a courageous woman. In spite of unfavorable social and cultural circumstances for black women/mothers, she supports and guides her family. She works hard and never makes her children feel scarcity of anything. She maintains harmonious relation with the community of Kansas and encourages her children to study because she knows the

value of education. As a strong and courageous mother figure, she bears her motherly responsibilities boldly.

Likewise, Brooks' "The Mother" exposes an emotional overflow of the sense of guilt by a mother, who has performed one or more abortion to save her children from the dehumanized effects of poverty. Taken from Brooks' first collection of poems *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), the poem poignantly reflects the reality of oppression in the lives of urban blacks. Harold Bloom argues that Brooks portrays the anguish and remorse of the mother through her literary creation. In *A Comprehensive Research and Study Guide: Gwendolyn Brooks*, Bloom states, "'The Mother' (1945) originally published in Brooks's first collection of poetry *A Street in Bronzeville*, she addresses the controversial issue of abortion . . . she demonstrates the anguish and remorse the mother has for her unborn child, yet Brooks does not portray the mother expressing regret" (15). By addressing the controversial issue, Brooks depicts the socio-cultural values of the period. During 1940s abortion was a controversial issue and African-American women/mothers faced considerable obstacles in their everyday lives due to Jim Crow Laws and unwritten, racially biased social codes. These codes and behaviors created strictly segregated barriers for black mothers.

The poem "The Mother" is well-known for its emotional complexity and sensitivity because it captures a really difficult topic, abortion. Brooks reveals the emotions of a mother who has performed one or more abortions. She feels guilty of her deeds. The speaker first speaks to the mothers who have done abortions like herself and tells them that they will never forget their killed children. She articulates, "You remember the children you got that you did not get" (2). Presenting the graphic description of the fetus (child in the womb), the speaker exposes the helplessness of the mothers. She then, turns to her own cases of abortion and tells them that she has

heard the voices of her killed children in the air and seen them in her dreams. She feels herself guilty for aborting them. She reveals the fact that she has sinned against them by taking their lives but she did all that unintentionally. She admits, "Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate" (21). She ends up by only saying that she loves them all. It shows the mother's deep love and confession to her children.

The poem narrates an expression of female experience. The mother aborts her children and then expresses the personal feelings of guilt. Motherhood as the central aspect of the poem, Brooks describes about abortion and impacts it makes in the lives of black mothers. Regarding Brooks' work, Kate Falvey, in "The Taboo in Gwendolyn Brooks' 'The Mother'", reports, "The poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by a Bronzeville woman who has had multiple abortions" (123). Falvey's view is relevant because Brooks' speaker is a woman who has done multiple abortions. The subject, expression and theme of the poem show that only a woman can understand the feelings of a mother. Like a typical female, the speaker is very sensitive and kindhearted. The first stanza of the poem is in second-person voice, but the second stanza shifts to first person voice. Concerning the shift of the voice in the poem, Barbara Jean Bolden, in *Urban Rage in Bronzeville*, explains that the first stanza's "inchoate second-person voice" signifies its speaker's unwillingness to "take ownership of her own deed and pain" (27). The shift to first person voice demonstrates the speaker's confession of her deeds. As an experienced mother who knows about the process of bearing and bringing up a child, she understands the typical experiences and pleasures of motherhood.

The poem begins with a simple statement, "Abortions will not let you forget" (1), a confessional and poetic kind of expression, which contains a shocking reality. The mother talks about an issue, which is considered by many to be publicly

unspeakable, then. In 1945, the subject of abortion was taboo and certainly not likely matters for poetic treatment. Declaring abortion as a controversial topic for poetic treatment, D.H. Melhem, in *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice*, remarks, "'The Mother' is a dramatic monologue on abortion, a controversial topic then, as now" (23). Through his words, Melhem reminds the readers about the controversy of the issue abortion. Brooks brings vivid and poignant images to the aborted children when she expresses, "The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair" (3). She reminds them that the babies would have become singers or workers in the future. When she imagines about the potential behavior of the aborted children, she mentions some extremely typical experiences of a mother. The poet establishes the fact that this mother is not going to talk about her pride and joy with her children or even the hardships and sacrifices of raising them, like most poems about motherhood do. It narrates the socio-cultural reality that compels the mother to have abortions. Details in the poem- like 'winding the sucking-thumb' / or 'scuttling off the ghost' (7-8), are things which strikingly suggest that she at least knows every typical experience of a mother with a child.

Brooks' "The Mother" was first published in 1945. It was about thirty years before the court decision, which guaranteed women the right to have an abortion. Regarding the aborting rights, hooks, in *Feminism for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, describes, "In those days poor women, black women included, often sought illegal abortion" (26). hooks explains the history when abortion was illegal. Her view is relevant for the study of motherhood because it reflects mother's unusual expression of love to their unborn babies by committing a crime named abortion. By writing this poem, Brooks takes some heavy-duty; a responsibility that encourages women to raise voice for liberty and civil rights. Concerning Brooks' poetry, Kathy Rugoff reveals

that Brooks' primary concern is to focus African American people's lives especially the lives of black women in the context of evolving social, cultural, and political events. In "The Historical and Social Context of Gwendolyn Brooks's Poetry" published in *Critical Insights: Gwendolyn Brooks*, she notes, "From her first book, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), to her final publications, Brooks's primary focus was on the lives of African Americans in the context of evolving social, cultural, and political events in the United States" (22). Rugoff focuses on Brooks' concern, which is to bring changes in the lives of unprivileged group. Brooks makes constant efforts to cure the problems of African American women and through her poetry she highlights the crucial issues and their effects in their lives.

Brooks establishes her authority as a reporter of urban life through the range of voices and perspectives she captures. Reflecting on Brooks' poetry, Charles M. Israel and William T. Lawlor argue that Brooks' works create a clear picture of African American community with poverty which is the sign of racism and social injustice. In "Biography of Gwendolyn Brooks" they state, "Brooks' poems about ordinary people create a vivid and complex picture of America's poor, with poverty both sign and symbol of racism and injustice" (9). Israel and Lawlor describe poverty as a sign of injustice and racial oppression. The mother in this poem is poor and helpless therefore, she becomes the victim of racism and sexism. To save her children from poverty stricken situation, she kills them in her womb before they come in this earth.

Each poem in *A Street in Bronzeville* is differently voiced from the one that immediately precedes it. Some narrate social issues while some others are on political issues. The poem "The Mother" moves through pregnancy, childbirth, and the lives and deaths of the speaker's imagined children, capturing the unrest of the street life in

Chicago's Bronzeville where aborted life is ineffectually mourned. The mother of the poem is pensive, self-serving, and harshly insistent on her sacrificial love. Accepting the fact that Brooks' *A Street in Bronzeville* is based on urban life which captures the voices and perspectives of poor people, Jane Hedley, in "Race and Rhetoric in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks", expresses:

In the original "Street in Bronzeville" series, Brooks establishes her authority as a chronicler of urban life through the range of voices and perspectives she captures and the ironies she builds into these poems by various means. Each poem is differently voiced from the one that immediately precedes it: some go inside a particular neighborhood resident's house and head, while others have the impersonal stance of a ballad or an epigram. (110)

According to Hedley in *Street in Bronzeville* series, Brooks narrates an account of urban life. The poems are differently voiced and have impersonal themes.

Brooks has always addressed the serious issues of life such as abortion, color discrimination, domestic abuse, alienation, and motherhood in poverty. She has actively created models of personal and communal dignity as poetic blueprint for cultural survival. Through her work, she manages to convey the force of desire, regret, and affirmation without sentimentalizing the role of the mother. Maria K. Mootry believes that Brooks' characters are taken from urban ghettos who demonstrate the milieu of black urban life. Reflecting on Brooks' characters, Mootry, in "Down the Worlwind of Good Rage: An Introduction to Gwendolyn Brooks", explains:

Brooks' characters are largely taken from the dispossessed, the unheroic residents of America's urban ghettos (named by custom, "Bronzeville"). These characters dramatize a microcosm of black urban life- its struggle, its small

triumph, its survival. By focusing on them, Brooks has been able to engage, often indirectly, some of the major social issues of her time including war and peace, racial injustice, and plight of women. (3)

Mootry observes that Brooks' characters are the poor people who live in American ghettos. Reflecting their condition, she indirectly exposes the contemporary social issues such as social conflict, racial disparity, and gender oppression. Mootry's words are relevant for this study because in the poem "The Mother" Brooks exposes the condition of marginalized and unprivileged group, who are black women/mothers. Brooks shows how socio-cultural circumstances define and limit women's boundary.

The poem, "The Mother," was controversial at the time of its composition. Due to its non-poetic subject matter, Harper and Brothers' chief editor Richard Wright suggested to exclude the poem from the collection *A Street in Bronzeville*. Regarding Wright's view about the publication of the poem "The Mother", Falvey discloses, "Richard Wright, who was asked to review *A Street in Bronzeville* for Harper and Brothers, praised the collection, but recommended leaving out "The Mother" because of its non-poetic subject matter" (124-25). Later, Brooks insisted on its inclusion in her 1945 collection, *A Street in Bronzeville*, over the objections of her literary advocate, Richard Wright and it was published in the same anthology.

The poem is realistic and expresses the pathetic condition of black women especially black mothers who live in Bronzeville. Melhem reveals that Brooks contends poverty as the main cause behind abortion. In *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice* he explains that Brooks' emphasis was, "not the abortion but the poverty that made for ambivalence in the mother, thwarting her maternal desire" (17). Melhem clarifies that due to poverty the mother aborts her children. The mother feels emotional after aborting them.

Through the use of simple language and spontaneous expressions, the poet exposes a realistic picture of African American society. Relating the issues expressed in Brooks' works, Bolden, in *Urban Rage in Bronzeville: Social Commentary in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, 1945–1960*, writes that the book *A Street in Bronzeville* comprises "a collage of racism, sexism, and classism of America in its illumination of the people who strive to survive Bronzeville" (13). Bolden exposes that besides the sentiment in the first and second part and the confusion in the third part, the poem is strikingly realistic and it reflects the problem of racism, sexism, and classism in America. The mother speaks about her abortions in a reflective manner. She attempts to gain sympathy from the readers through her argument that she committed the abortions not out of malice but for love of her children. As a bold mother she aborts her children to protect them from poverty stricken situation. The poem shows that a mother loves her children either they are alive or dead. Through the poem Brooks reflects the softness of a mother's heart and proves that a mother is the living Goddess on earth.

Brooks' "The Mother" explores the impact of society on the life of black women, especially on the life of black mothers. Mother-love is at the heart of the poem. Despite of unfavorable socio-cultural circumstances, the mother struggles a lot for the safety of her offspring. The poet depicts the powerlessness and poor socio-economic conditions that compel the mother-narrator's extreme response and ultimate self-victimization. Due to her deep attachment to her children, the mother decides to protect them from poverty stricken situation and racial oppression; therefore, she takes the bold decision to kill her children. The mother's response to the situation makes her an assertive mother figure. Akin to Brooks' works, Wright also depicts strong and courageous mother figures in his narratives. Though he does not talk about

the disputed issues like abortion, he narrates similar themes in *Black Boy* with the story of an assertive mother.

Wright's *Black Boy* (1945) narrates about Richard Wright's escape from hopeless slavery in the South to freedom in the North. Wright describes the events of his life in a chronological order. He spends his childhood and adulthood in the South: Mississippi, Arkansas and Tennessee, and later he moves to Chicago, where he establishes his writing career and becomes a member of the Communist Party. Reflecting on Wright's narrative, Donald B. Gibson opines that Wright's fictional autobiography is based on his personal experiences of life that he receives in the South and the North. In "Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and the Trauma of Autobiographical Rebirth" he describes, "The stuff of Richard Wright's *Black Boy* originates from his experience of life in the South, in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee. The shape of the work, however, derives from Wright's experience in the North. . . . Chicago and New York for some years" (109). It is a narrative of the writer's journey from innocence to experience in the Jim Crow South. The novel fictionalizes the real-life experiences of the author and represents the themes of motherhood, racial discrimination, and gender oppression. As a child, Richard shows his impulsiveness and his ultimately self-destructive tendencies. He grows up in the South and goes to work shortly after graduating from the ninth grade, and furthers his education through reading. Finally, Richard realizes that he has the power to convey powerful emotions through literature. He decides to be a writer and moves to Chicago to pursue his dream.

The narrative begins with Richard, who lives in Jackson, Mississippi, in the crowded home of his grandparents. The household includes Richard, his mother, father, brother, and his uncle. It replicates the subhuman living conditions of slaves.

Richard, an irritable four-year-old boy, reacts against his mother's demand for quiet by experimenting with fire until he sets the house ablaze. Later he hides under the burning structure. The mother Ella beats him until he becomes unconscious. He narrates, "I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness" (3). This episode provides a paradigm for Richard's young life. It creates self-destructive consequences and crushing rejection for him.

The centrality of family life is at the heart of the novel. Richard's mother Ella Wright plays a crucial role in Richard's life. She is the single biggest factor that has shaped his life. Regarding Ella's role in Richard's life, Horace A. Porter, in "Richard Wright's Portrait of the Artist in *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*", asserts, "Wright's mother not only instructs him in the high moral values of civilized society, but she also teaches him how to survive in a hostile and impoverished environment" (73). Porter observes that Ella plays a significant role in Richard's life. Being a role model for her children, Ella tries her best to discipline Richard. As Richard himself expresses, "All morning my mother had been scolding me, telling me to keep still warning me that I must make no noise. And I was angry, fretful, and impatient" (1). She often disciplines him harshly, when he makes any mistake. She often punishes him by lashing him with a switch to make him lead a better path. Porter further marks, "She instructs him in those traditions of black life that are sustaining—the necessity of learning to persevere, the ability to maintain grace under pressure, the practice of containing one's pain" (73). Porter's views are relevant for this study because he reveals the deep devotion of a black mother who teaches her son how to survive in a hostile and impoverished environment. Despite the destructive and hate breeding atmosphere of racism that prevails in the South, Ella Wright teaches Richard the

civilized way to live in society. As an assertive mother figure, she devotes herself for the welfare of her children.

Richard does not like the discriminatory environment in which African Americans have to live in the South. He rejects religion and its values because he believes that white God cannot help the poor African American community. Surrounded by hostility directed at him from all quarters, Richard rejects religion as deceptive in its premises and hypocritical in its practices. He dislikes white people's irrational attitudes and discouraging behavior. His white granny even creates problems for him at home. Granny tells Ella, "I want none of that Devil stuff in my house!" (47), warning Richard she articulates, "You're going to burn in hell" (48). The school principal denounces Richard when he refuses to deliver the speech of humility at his graduation ceremony from ninth grade. The whites attack Richard for being a smart Negro when he undertakes unskilled jobs in private homes or at businesses during his stay in the South. From the bitter experiences he gains in the South, Richard learns that the essential law of existence is struggle against oppressive forces. This view explains the pervasive naturalism of *Black Boy*.

After he graduates from the ninth grade and begins working in Memphis, he gets impressed by the works of H. L. Mencken, Theodore Dreiser, and Sinclair Lewis. Regarding Richard's experience with reading, Bloom, in the Introduction of *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Richard Wright's Black Boy*, explains, "At eighteen, reading Mencken, he learns audacity, the agonistic use of language, and an aggressive passion for study comes upon him. After reading the *Main Street* of Sinclair Lewis, he is found by the inevitable precursor in Theodore Dreiser" (5). Bloom reveals that Richard learns a lot of things from reading, even it helps him to determine his future. Reading helps him to understand human life, society, and this world. He knows about

his own insights into the brutal nature of existence which are valid and potentially the stuff of serious literature. When he discovers the explosive power of language he decides to become a writer.

Richard suffers for years from the unbearable behavior of white people. He often feels the impact of their displeasure, repeatedly losing jobs when they resent his ambition. He feels extreme irritation under the dehumanizing stereotypes they superimpose on him. When Richard attains adulthood, he finds himself separated from the black community because of his dismissal of religion, his resistance to follow white rules, and his contempt for passive consent in response to white domination. Concerning Richard's response to hostile world, Claudia Tate, in "*Black Boy: Richard Wright's Tragic Sense of Life*", remarks, "He (Richard) emphatically defies those who would silence him, and even blatantly declares his ambition to be a writer" (48). Tate explains Richard's irritation against dehumanized stereotypes of racist society. Richard's opposition against religion and white rules shows his contempt for racial disparity. His strong determination eventually, becomes central to his depiction of black people.

Wright depicts the life-threatening situation of African American males in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Richard's uncle gets lynched for being too successful. The writer also knows of a black youth who gets murdered for forgetting the strict sexual taboos surrounding interchanges between black men and white women. In most cases black community remains silent due to the fear of white assault. Regarding black community's muteness against oppression, Tate explicates, "Keeping silent had a special significance within the Black community; it indicated acceptance, submission to the conditions of life, especially those caused by racial practices" (47-48). Tate reveals that in black community keeping silent means

acceptance or submission to the conditions of life. Her view is relevant to understand race relation between the blacks and the whites in American society. Richard himself is assaulted without provocation by white youths. In the beginning he silently moves from the place. But later he participates in street battles between white and black adolescents. Tate further marks, "Throughout *Black Boy*, Richard is repeatedly told to be silent, but he finds that it is against his fundamental nature to withhold his expressed opinions" (48). Richard's insistent pursuit to move to North is thus a reaction to the physical assault which is exercised against the black community.

Expressing the three possible strategies that Negroes use to resolve the problem of racism, Ralph Ellison in "Richard Wright's Blues" dictates:

In the South of Wright's childhood there were three general ways: They could accept the role created for them by the whites . . . they could repress their dislike of Jim Crow social relations while striving for a middle way of respectability . . . or they could reject the situation, adopt a criminal attitude, and carry on an unceasing psychological scrimmage with the whites, which often flared forth into physical violence. (11-12)

Ellison unfolds three possible ways the blacks choose to resolve the problems of their lives and to express their reaction against racist social order. Ellison's words help to understand the mentality of poor blacks in a racist society. Richard's attitude is nearest the last. He always opposes the discriminatory behavior and gets ready to struggle against physical violence.

Ella's desertion by her husband reflects women's oppression in a racist and sexist social order. Richard's father Nathan Wright, an illiterate and unskilled laborer, is one of the oppressors. In search of work, Nathan moves with his family to other states and it brings instability in Richard's life. Nathan deserts the family by

abandoning his wife Ella and her children. Richard's mother, Ella, burdened with responsibilities begins to work in a white household to fulfill the basic needs of her children. Describing his mother's pathetic situation Richard articulates, "My mother finally went to work as a cook and left me and my brother alone in the flat each day with a loaf of bread and a pot of tea. When she returned in the evening she would be tired and dispirited and would cry a lot" (8). When Richard's father leaves the family, the overall responsibility falls on the shoulders of his mother. To fulfill the basic needs of her family, she works as a house maid. In the evening when she returns home, she is tired. Due to Nathan's irresponsible activities, everyone in the family hates him. Relating to Nathan's insincerity, Charles T. Davis argues that due to his irresponsible activities Richard's father becomes an object of hate and scorn. In "From Experience to Eloquence: Richard Wright's *Black Boy* as Art" he notes, "The father, because of his desertion of his mother, was early in Richard's mind, perhaps in the sentiments of other family members, too, an object of hate and scorn" (57). Davis explains that Wright reflects the image of a careless father through the character of Nathan, which is an indication of male domination in black community.

Richard implies that his mother's physical pain symbolically associates with the racial and gender subjugation of the entire African-American race in the South. As the narrative reveals, "My mother's suffering grew into a symbol in my mind, gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the suffering" (87). Richard feels that the only way out of the cycle of race and gender subjugation is to move to a place where African American can make their own lives, and to attempt to heal their problems.

Wright presents a grim portrait of violence, suffering, and disintegration through his work. He has documented the emotional truths of his childhood and their devastating consequences in his life and in the life of other members of his family. The central motif of the work is the hunger, which affects every facet of Richard's life. Richard's physical and emotional hungers are due to his family's worsening poverty after his father's abandonment and his mother's prolonged illnesses that result in his alienation from other black people. And his intellectual hunger is due to his limited formal schooling and the repressive religious fundamentalism of his maternal relatives. Regarding Richard's hunger, Daniel Rees in *Hunger and Modern Writing* expresses, "*Black Boy* is the fulfillment of Wright's promise to become a writer, but it is also, as its subtitle states, "A Record of Childhood and Youth", an account of his early experiences of hunger and want that became synonymous with his desire for independence and a better, fairer world" (111). Rees' words reflect the experiences of hunger in Richard's life. Hunger occurs in two main ways in *Black Boy*: the first is the physical kind that is caused by poverty and social forces beyond the narrator's immediate control, such as the break-up of his parent's marriage, his mother's illness, or his own inability to find employment due to the color of his skin. The second kind of hunger is the metaphorical kind that conveys a sense of longing or yearning. It is the hunger that becomes equated with his desire for knowledge and his insatiable appetite for literature. Hunger differentiates Richard from his peers, his family, and society in general.

Thus, *Black Boy* provides an excellent background to express Wright's fictive vision and his own perspective on life. Regarding Wright's vision as depicted in the text, John Reilly in Afterword opines, "It is precisely Wright's insight into the dynamics of man in society that is his strength as a writer. *Black Boy*, recording the

growth and development of this insight, is thus the story of a writer's education" (288). Reilly contends that the narrative exposes Wright's perceptive of role of men in society. It is relevant for the study of motherhood because it exposes socio-cultural circumstances that define the boundary for the Blacks, black women in particular. Ella, a prominent mother figure, struggles for better prospects of her children. She is the single crucial figure who plays a dynamic role in Richard's life. Being a strict mother, Ella tries her best to lead Richard in a prosperous path. Despite socio-cultural barriers and unfavorable atmosphere of racism and sexism that prevails in the South, Ella Wright teaches Richard the way of living harmoniously and civilized manner. As an assertive mother figure, she devotes herself for the welfare of her children.

The works of African American literature such as McKay's "My Mother", Hughes' *Not Without Laughter*, Brooks' "The Mother", and Wright's *Black Boy* reveal black mothers and their struggle along with socio-cultural circumstances. Written during the phase of Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement, they narrate the assertive deeds of black women. Literature written after the World War I incorporates the changing attitude of African Americans along with changes in society and the notion of motherhood. During the first half of the twentieth century whites started associating with the African Americans. Social and political movements encouraged black women/mothers to be assertive. Through social integration and adjustment, they got opportunity to participate actively in the development of the US. They actively involved in economic, social and political arena.

Instead of presenting women as the mute victim of brutality, the literary works of these periods reflect strong and courageous mother figures, who try hard to bring changes in their situation. The speaker's mother in "My Mother", Aunt Hager in *Not Without Laughter*, the mother who has done multiple abortions in "The Mother",

and Ella in *Black Boy* are the prominent mother figures who devote themselves to their family and children. They perform their motherly tasks courageously, though they have social and cultural restrictions. Due to the domination of racist and sexist ideology in social arena, they go through different trials and tribulations while performing their responsibilities as a mother. In spite of certain hurdles, they proceed boldly to cope with the challenges; therefore, the review of above mentioned works suggests them as assertive mother figures.

The reflection of black mothers and their struggle in a rigid socio-cultural arena is a common theme in African American literature written during Black Arts Movement and Postmodern phase. The literature of both the phases generally addresses the issues of interracial tension, socio-political awareness, the relevance of African history and culture to the blacks in the United States, and women's awareness for their rights. During this period of history women struggled for self-sufficiency and autonomy. The depiction of black motherhood goes along with other important issues and forms a diverse notion. The dominant discourses expose self-expressive and liberated motherhood and its representation can be seen in literary works. Beginning with the review of Giovanni's poem "Mothers", this section advances with other works such as Morrison's *Sula*, Angelou's "Momma Welfare Roll", and Walker's *The Color Purple*, respectively.

Giovanni's "Mothers" explains the poet's awkward affection for her mother. Taken from her collection of poems *My House* (1972), the poem reveals the role of society and cultural in performing responsibilities as a mother. The poem reflects that the speaker is not only narrating the story of her mother, but she is telling about her mother through the perspective of a young child. The repetition of the word 'remember' infers the poet's relation with the past. The speaker seems curious to know

about many things in life. She uses words such as dark, night, moonlight, which associate with ambiguity or unclearness. The poem tells that the world around seems unclear for the child. It becomes evident in the third stanza when the speaker says, "mommy always sat in the dark / i don't know how i knew that but she did" (11-12). The speaker feels as if she is missing something about her mother.

Through the voice of the speaker, Giovanni captures family dynamics with subtle accuracy reflecting deep attachment between the mother and the daughter. The speaker describes her visit to her mother and the way they exchange their love. She voices, "kissed / exchanged pleasantries / and unpleasantries" (2-4). The meeting calls up a memory from childhood. They get fascinated and talk for some time. And then the unpleasant environment pulls a warm comforting silence around them and they begin to read separate books. The scene implies that the things unexpressed between the speaker and her mother cause an awkwardness that put them in different places in their lives. The speaker goes on to describe her mother sitting in the darkened room. She articulates, "She was very deliberately waiting / perhaps for my father to come home" (27-28). It shows that the mother is submissive to her father.

Mother's deliberate waiting for her father reflects woman's subordinate position in society. Regarding the mother's deliberate waiting William J. Harris argues that Giovanni reveals her domesticity through her poetry. In "Sweet Soft Essence of Possibility: The Poetry of Nikki Giovanni" he observes, "In *My House* she declares her domesticity loudly, militantly, perhaps to give herself confidence in her new role" (23). Harris discloses that Giovanni's reflection of domesticity indicates women's secondary position in black family life. Harris's idea is significant to realize the situation of mothers in black families. The speaker concludes the poem with the hope that she has taught this affection and obedience to her generation in which they will

recite it along the line of reproduction. The poem is not written about any historical or racial events, but about the speaker's childhood and mother. The speaker feels that it is essential to learn to deal with happiness and affection to overcome the pains and apathy which are innate to humans.

Giovanni's unique and insightful poetry shows her own experiences and her evolving awareness of the world. Her transformation from child to young woman, from naive college student to seasoned civil rights activists, and from daughter to mother make her learn a lot of things. Emphasizing Giovanni's revelation of her personal experience through her work, Harris explicates, "Like many poets of the period she is autobiographical and . . . the poetry is always direct, conversational, and grounded in the rhythms of Black music and speech. Her poems are also unified in that they are written from the perspective of a Black woman" (19). Harris exposes that Giovanni's poetry expresses her personal experiences and strong racial pride and respect for family. Through her creative work she exposes how a naive turn into vocal. Her works take the author closer to her audience regardless of age, race, gender, or social class. She provides the visual, auditory, and kinetic expressions to identify the individual black woman's voice which is often silenced by racism and sexism.

Giovanni writes about her role as a black woman and expresses her feminist perspectives in her work. Reflecting Giovanni's view about the dual oppression of black women, Virginia Fowler, in *Nikki Giovanni*, states, "I started as a writer concerned about the black situation in America and . . . I have come to realize that gender bias is a real problem. It's difficult to be a woman, but being black and female produces a double blind" (127). Fowler's words are relevant to understand the double oppression of black women. The lines address the growth and changes of Giovanni as

a black woman, as an individual, and also as a writer who observed the condition of black people in America during the growth of the Black Arts Movement. Her subject matters for the most part have always been the same but her perspectives changed slightly or completely due to her life experiences and her development as an individual. Giovanni's works also have a reflecting tone towards her connection and celebration towards women, especially mothers and grandmothers.

Giovanni's position as mother helps to understand the social and cultural boundary and struggle of black womanhood and motherhood. She praises mothers and grandmothers in her works. Describing the similar view, Fowler in her work *Nikki Giovanni* remarks, "Giovanni's poetry celebrated women, especially mothers and grandmothers" (24). Fowler expresses that Giovanni insists on claiming and valuing the mothers and grandmothers. She acknowledges and honors women, mothers and grandmothers. Focusing on socio-cultural norms of her time, Giovanni shares the contribution of women in black women's struggle in America. She also reflects black women's subordinate position and their transformation from naive to vocal as it happens in the case of her mother and in her own case as well. For Giovanni the mother is a guide and guardian and a source of empowerment because she learns social and family values from her.

Similar to Giovanni's "Mothers", Morrison's *Sula* (1973) explores the struggle of a black mother who passes through unexpected circumstances, which transform her from naive to active and vocal mother. The narrative depicts the picture of a black community in Medallion, Ohio between 1919 and 1965. Two childhood friends, Nel Wright and Sula Peace begin an inseparable childhood, but as they grow up, the tides of their individual lives pull them apart. Sula, raised by her one-legged grandmother Eva, is dismissive of all community conventions. She stands in opposition to the ideal

of a woman due to her reluctance toward getting married or having children. Concerning Sula's attitude to social conventions, Barbara Christian, in "The Contemporary Fables of Toni Morrison", expresses, "She (Sula) keeps herself outside the sex, race, and class definitions of the society" (34). Christian argues that Sula loves to stay outside of social conventions of family life. In opposition of the community norms, she sleeps with Nel's husband. Eventually, Sula becomes ill and passes away. Through her work Morrison focuses on the social conventions and the issues of motherhood, racial discrimination and gender oppression.

The narrative describes the lives of women in matriarchal household. It investigates the repressive white society's influence on the black community in a chronological sequence. Regarding the sequence of events in *Sula*, Agnes Suranyi, in "*The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*: Black Female Experience from Childhood to Womanhood", marks:

Morrison projects the history of the obliteration of a black community, and then reconstructs its history chronologically in retrospection. The Prologue of the novel focuses on specificity and difference, the history of the community, nostalgia for its past, the violence done to it, and the consequences of that violence, predicting the future that brings about total annihilation. (17)

Suranyi opines that Morrison, as a social reformer, exposes the lives of blacks through her literary creations. By exploring the events of violence and its consequences in a chronological order, she predicts the future that brings about total destruction.

Motherhood is the central theme of the novel. The most dominant maternal figure is Eva Peace, Sula's grandmother and the owner of a huge house, where Sula spends a great part of her childhood. Eva, who was once a submissive wife, is now very active and vocal mother. She faces various difficult problems after her husband

abandons her. To ensure the survival of her three children Eva faces many difficulties. Concerning Eva's struggle, Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos argues that despite various difficulties, Eva protects her children till the last moment of her life. In her work "*Sula* and the Primacy of Woman-to-Woman Bonds" she marks, "She (Eva) is strongly, fiercely, rationally and roughly protective until the end of her life" (81). Demetrakopoulos contends that Eva's devotion to her children makes her use different tactics. As a conscious mother figure, she boldly faces all the obstacles to overcome the situation.

The mystery related to Eva's amputated leg remains the source of endless narratives for the people of the Bottom. Eva never shares the reality to anybody. Though she mutilates herself by sticking her leg under a train to collect money from insurance companies, she keeps the tragedy secret. Demetrakopoulos further explains, "She (Eva) has literally sacrificed her own mobility for her children" (82). She sacrifices the part of her body when Eva realizes that there is no other option of obtaining money to fulfill the basic needs of her children. Demetrakopoulos stresses the immobility of mother Eva through the physical incompleteness of her body.

When Eva realizes that it is difficult to make her son Plum free from drug addiction, she sets him on fire and kills him. And at one point when Hannah herself catches fire, Eva immediately jumps out of the window and tries to put out the flames, even she is a handicapped. Regarding Eva's devotion to her children, Hortense J. Spillers, in "*A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love*", states, "Eva behaves as though she were herself the sole instrument of divine inscrutable will" (69-70). Spillers argues that Eva's actions demonstrate as if she is the sole decision maker for her children's future. Eva's actions are the results of her intense motherly love to her children. The deep emotional bond between Eva and her children is inexplicable.

Eva and her children spend a miserable time due to unsupportive socio-cultural circumstances. To deal with poverty, gender oppression, and racial discrimination practically, the mother, Eva detaches herself physically as well as emotionally from her children. Because of unavailability of jobs, Eva leaves her children in the care of Mrs. Suggs and moves from that place. The narrative reveals, "She left all of her children with Mrs. Suggs, saying she would be back the next day" (34). She returns eighteen months later. Morrison implicitly narrates about doubly marginalized protagonists, who are both female and black. Regarding the socio-cultural circumstances of black women/mothers, Marie Nigro, in "In Search of Self: Frustration and Denial in Toni Morrison's *Sula*", notes, "The business of survival is an everyday concern for Eva and Hannah, but because they are Black women in the 1920s, the only paid work available in Medallion is as domestics for ungrateful White families or as prostitutes" (17). Nigro contends that Morrison exposes the pathetic situation of the blacks through the depiction of doubly marginalized protagonists and their socio-cultural circumstances. Due to unfavorable socio-cultural circumstances and very few job opportunities for women, the mother Eva and her children have to face many difficult problems. The mother Eva's circumstances indicate the historical experiences of African American women, which have made a great impact on parental relationships.

The novel describes the negative impacts of poverty, racism, and gender disparity on the blacks. The narrative is based on the Bottom's black community and it exposes the lives of black people, especially the lives of black women. Morrison pursues Sula's peaceful life from her childhood in the 1920s until her death in 1941 and her mutual bonds with her friend Nel. Reflecting on the plot of the novel *Sula*, Nigro states, "*Sula* celebrates many lives: It is the story of the friendship of two

African American women; it is the story of growing up Black and female; but most of all, it is the story of a community" (15). Nigro argues that the novel *Sula* is the story of a community, where the blacks and the whites live together. The novel reveals the influence of variables such as race, class, and gender in society in general, and in the black community of Medallion in particular.

The narrative centers its focus on the community of Medallion, Ohio. The town is located in the hills, where less wealthy and typically black population inhabits. The area is referred to as the Bottom, though it is hilly. The community is formed when a white slave owner tricks his naive black slave into accepting hilly mountainous land that is hard to farm and very troublesome instead of the actual bottom (fertile valley) land that he has promised. The white master convinces him that the hilly land is indeed bottom land, it is the bottom of heaven. As the narrative reveals, "when God looks down, it's the bottom. That's why we call it so. It's the bottom of heaven - best land there is" (5). The inexperienced slave accepts the land, which is worthless for farming. Concerning the relation between master and slave, Trudier Harris argues that the struggle between white master and black slave is the struggle between the presence of power versus the absence of power. In her work "Sula" she asserts, "The basic discrepancy inherent in such interactions is also apparent: power (including the language skills to control or create reality) versus the absence of power" (108). Harris exposes the fact that due to absence of power, the blacks have to pass through difficult trials in a racist society, as it happened in the case of naive slave whom the cunning master convinces to take the infertile hilly land.

Nel Wright and Sula Peace are the two main characters of this novel. Both of them are female characters and disadvantaged due to their gender. Nel and Sula, both have completely opposite views about life. Regarding the differences between Sula

and Nel, Robert Stepto reveals that Nel accepts community values because she is aware of rules, while Sula rejects. In "Intimate Things in Place" he marks that "Nel knows and believes in all the laws of that [Medallion] community. She is the community. She believes in its values. Sula does not. She does not believe in any of those laws and breaks them all. Or ignores them" (14). Stepto's description suggests Sula's disregard against community values. Sula herself is a total rebel against all society, all conventions, and nearly all moralities.

Nel plays a socially acceptable role as a woman, submissive wife and mother whereas Sula opposes social stereotypes. She is viewed as evil by the people in her community. Spillers believes that in spite of a lot of differences between Nel and Sula, they are interdependent on each other. In "A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love" she notes, "As Morrison goes on to discuss the idea, Sula and Nel are to her mind an alterity of agents—"two sides of the same person, or two sides of one extraordinary character"" (75). Spillers demonstrates the interdependence between Nel and Sula, in spite of their contrary attitudes. Though they live apart for a longer period of time, Nel cries out for and longs for her friend and soul sister Sula at the end.

Morrison attempts to establish women as powerful characters and grants them enough space to make both conscious and impactful decisions. By breaking traditional stereotypes, she promotes feministic values to bring changes in the lives of oppressed women. Focusing on the crucial issue of race and gender, Barbara Smith, in her path-breaking essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism", asserts, "A Black feminist approach to literature, that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers, is an absolute necessity" (21). Smith explicates feminism as a political theory that promotes struggles to free all women. Smith's ideas help to

internalize the situation of women in bondage and their struggle for freedom. Sula has a feminist spirit and refuses to melt into the typical pattern of a woman under male domination. As the narrative reveals, She "discovered years before that (she was) neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to her" (52).

Living with her grandmother Eva, Sula learns about female autonomy. She decides to lead her life on her own terms. Relating to Sula's association with her grandmother, Karen Carmean, in "Sula", describes, "Sula's upbringing in her grandmother Eva's house is the most significant factor in developing her attitudes" (151). Carmean's depiction reveals the grandmother, Eva's role in Sula's life. Sula encounters both racism and sexism. She is placed in a situation in which she has no release for her wild spirit. Sula knows that it is difficult for her to live out in the world with the freedoms of a man. She attempts to emancipate from masculine hegemony and feels that marriage is simply a type of confinement. This abnormal thinking towards marriage is thus inherited from her mother, Hannah, and grandmother, Eva, who both experienced negative marriages. Regarding Sula's opposition of traditional values, K. Sumana, in "Gender in Relation to Race and Class: *Sula*", explains, "Her (Sula's) entire life represents a rejection of traditional notions of feminine responsibility. Sula refuses to see women as only wives and mothers" (74). Sumana's words reflect the revolting nature of black women. Nel follows social stereotypes and becomes a slave to racism and sexism while Sula strives and feels emancipated.

Morrison's *Sula* is crucial to internalize the experiences of black mothers in a racist and sexist social structure. The narrative illustrates the complexity of motherhood and gender oppression, challenging stereotypes commonly associated with black womanhood /motherhood. The various realities of the women characters show the heterogeneous experiences of motherhood under slavery. In *Sula*

motherhood reflects the many possible manifestations of such bonds. The mother, Eva is a victim of oppressive society. She takes overall responsibility of her children when she is abandoned by her husband BoyBoy. Her opposition against the white racist society, her self-mutilation in order to receive insurance money to support her family, her relieving her child's pain, and finally when she throws herself from a window into the fire in an attempt to save her daughter, Hannah, are the things that show her motherly bond to her children. Eva, Hannah, and Sula refuse to follow the traditional roles. Reflecting black women's unwillingness to perform traditional roles, Harris, in "Sula", describes, "Morrison's women similarly refuse to be bound by traditional morality or traditional roles. In their new guises, then, they exhibit the freedom, the ability to make or create themselves, that is more closely associated with black folk culture than with historical black communities" (122). Eva acts as a dictator dictating the lives of her children, and grandchild. She plays the roles of life giver, nurturer, protector, dictator, and a compassionate destroyer. Eva, who was once a submissive house wife, finally transforms into a strong and vocal mother. The mother's experiences in "Momma Welfare Roll" are similar the experiences of the mother Eva in *Sula*. Both the mother figures follow the same path to overcome the hardships created by socio-cultural stereotypes.

Angelou's "Momma Welfare Roll" speaks about the condition of women in black community and the courage of a mother who receives welfare with pride. Taken from her collection of poems *And Still I Rise* (1978), the poem reveals the role of society and culture in the life of black people, black women in particular.

Concentrating on the theme of motherhood, Angelou narrates the story of one particular African-American woman in "Momma Welfare Roll". Through her work, Angelou makes it clear that the story is not, in fact, the story of an individual, but of

many like that women who live in despair and poverty in suburbs all across the United States. The author reflects the anguish of black mother through visual depiction. The poem begins with an image of the mother. The mother is putting her hands on her hips and forming a triangular shape with her arms on both sides. It looks as if she is angry. The little girl, who is the speaker, sees the weakness of her bones. Due to her physical weakness the mother cannot work and earn a living for herself and her children, therefore, she has to live on welfare, as the title of the poem specifies. Reflecting on social and gender subjugation of black women, Angelou depicts the picture a mother.

Angelo uses the image of a black woman/mother to portray the need for deep social understanding rather than welfare. The mother, a victim of oppressed society, has a deep sense of love to her children. Due to poverty, she does not have enough to fulfill the daily needs of her family. The visual depiction creates a picture in the readers' minds. Reflecting the mother's body and posture, the speaker reveals, "Her arms semaphore fat triangles / pudgy hands bunched on layered hips" (1-2). The shape and posture of her body shows that the mother is an African American woman, who spends her life below poverty line. Regarding Angelou's poetry, Yasmin Y. DeGout, in "The Poetry of Maya Angelou", argues, "Angelou's poems are introspective pieces that render the personal experiences of their speakers" (127). DeGout reveals that Angelou, through the voice of the speaker, expresses her personal experiences in her works. The description of her children and her house reveal the pathetic situation of the blacks as well. The speaker speaks. "Her children, strangers / . . . / rooftop tag, and know the slick feel of / other people's property" (7-11). This description reflects the poor and unhygienic living conditions of the family. Darkened doorways represent the unavailability of electric facilities. Due to poor economic condition of the family,

the kids can only play in the streets because the mother has no money to buy toys for them.

The mother has faced numerous cases of injustice, which have apparently led her to frustration. She accuses social and cultural values that have made her life miserable, even than she does not move away from performing her motherly responsibilities. Angelou again uses a visual image of jowls quivering that makes things very clear. The image of mother's jowls quivering represents the resentment of the poor and underprivileged class. The lines "Too fat to whore / too mad to work" (12-13), reflect the injustice and oppression black women face. The mother is upset at society's treatment to her and for throwing her under poverty line. She needs deep social reconciliation because there is no option before her. This poem describes the attitude of mother and other black women on welfare. Relating to the black mother's attitude to welfare, Lyman B. Hagen, in *Heart of a Woman, Mind of a Writer, and Soul of a Poet*, explicates, "In "Momma Welfare Roll", Angelou speaks about the courage of a mother who goes on welfare, and acknowledges the demeaning turmoil she experiences when accepting government assistance" (130). Hagen observes that the mother receives welfare as her right, though she faces humiliation while accepting the government assistance. The mother uses her strength solely to guide and protect her family. Without making any confrontation with the white community, she pursues her goal by receiving welfare. The speaker expresses, "They don't give me welfare / I take it' (18-19). The last line describes the attitude of non-charity. She takes things from them because she believes it is her right.

Angelou raises voice for blacks, especially for black women, who have ever been oppressed. Through her works, she reflects the dilemma of poor and unprivileged people. Concerning Angelou's poetry which demands rethinking of the

barriers, DeGout opines, "Angelou's poetry calls for a rethinking of the notions that limit human beings or thwart humanism" (127). DeGout's words are significant to realize the situation of black women in a racist society, who are the mute victims of race and gender subjugation. Through her works, she addresses both the basic human spirit, and social issues.

The poems in *And Still I Rise* cover a wide range of topics and themes. The themes of most of her poetry are mother-love, painful loss, family, loneliness, social injustice, racism, slavery, and the strength of women's voices. Regarding the themes of Angelou's poetry, Joyce Boyarin Blundell, in "Review of *And Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou" published in *Library Journal*, asserts, "Angelou's new volume of poetry enlarges on themes from her autobiographical writings and earlier poetry . . . the book succeeds as a statement of one black woman's experience, and of her determination not only to survive but to grow" (1640). Blundell claims that through the experience of one black woman, Angelou shows the determination of all black women, who are concerned with survival and the right to a personal identity.

And Still I Rise is Angelou's third volume of poetry, published in 1978. The anthology consists of thirty-two poems and divided into three parts. Carol E. Neubauer clarifies the fact in "Maya Angelou: Self and a Song of Freedom in the Southern Tradition" when she narrates, "The book consists of thirty-two poems, which are divided into three sections, "Touch Me, Life, Not Softly", "Traveling", and "And Still I Rise"" (136). The present poem is taken from the second part of the text "Traveling", which focuses on the hardships, such as drug addiction, child abuse, inner-city life, and conditions in the Old South, that the author and others have experienced. Likewise, Ellen Lippmann, in the "Review of *And Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou" published in *School Library Journal*, notes, "Part II, "Traveling" details the

hardships encountered by the author and/or her people—drug addiction, child abuse, inner-city life, and conditions in the Old South" (108). Lippmann unveils that part two explains the difficulties faced by the author and other women of her race. And Part Three, "And Still I Rise", which gets its name from the volume's title poem, repeats the themes in Part One and emphasizes the strength she finds in herself and in her community.

Most poems published in *And Still I Rise* reflect the hopeful determination of black people, who desire to rise above difficulty and discouragement. Reflecting on the content of the third volume, Neubauer, in "Maya Angelou: Self and a Song of Freedom in the Southern Tradition", states, "As the title of Maya Angelou's third volume of poetry, *And Still I Rise*, suggests, this collection contains a hopeful determination to rise above discouraging defeat" (136). Neubauer opines that Angelou's main concern is to uplift the Negro community, therefore, she encourages black people through her creation. Two of the poems in *And Still I Rise*, "Woman's Work" and "Momma's Welfare Roll", speak about women positively. Robert B. Stepto argues that Angelou's creativity leads her to the best position. He contends that Angelou's best poems borrow "various folk rhythms and forms and thereby buttresses her poems by evoking aspects of a culture's written and unwritten heritage" (52-53). Stepto compares the poems in *And Still I Rise* to the works of renowned writers such as Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Sterling Brown.

Angelou exposes the cultural construction of motherhood in African American society by reflecting the circumstances of the mother in "Momma Welfare Roll". The mother in the poem is the representative of all black mothers. Due to her deep love and devotion for her children, the mother feels anguish and despair because she knows that her children cannot have the kind of childhood that every child deserves.

The African-American mother walks into government offices for the welfare as her portion. Being an oppressed creature, she proceeds ahead and rightfully receives the welfare. Her action demonstrates her courage to raise voice against inequality and oppression. The overall description puts her in the category of oppressed yet vocal mother. It is a realistic depiction of black women in a racist and sexist social structure.

Likewise, Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) reveals the struggle of an African American mother named Celie and her escape from oppression and male brutality. An epistolary novel, made up of letters written by Celie and Nettie, *The Color Purple* narrates the issues of motherhood, racism and gender oppression. Celie writes letters in non-standard dialect. She initially addresses to God because she has no one else to help her bear this terrible knowledge and later addresses to her sister Nettie. Celie's stepfather, Alphonso repetitively rapes and beats her. Then, he forces her to marry Mr. — (Albert), a widower, who has four children. Albert, who is in love with a blues singer named Shug Avery, does not treat Celie properly. He mistreats her like her stepfather and merely accepts her as a servant and an occasional sex partner. Eventually, Celie leaves Albert and moves to Memphis, where she starts a business of designing and making clothes and frees herself from her husband's suppressive control. Regarding Celie's struggle, Brenda R. Smith, in "We Need a Hero", asserts, "With *The Color Purple*, Walker sets forth a modern myth of empowerment for African American women, one that liberates them from their history of oppression, subordination and silence" (4). Smith argues that Walker's narrative reveals the story of African American women's liberation from subordination and oppression. Celie gets support from Shug Avery, and his rebellious daughter-in-law, Sofia, in her personal evolution.

Walker illustrates the oppression of black people, especially the oppression of black women/mothers through her work. Relating to Walker's narratives, Patricia Harris Abrams reveals that Walker illustrates the social ills which other writers hesitate to explore. In her work "The Gift of Loneliness: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*" published in *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*, she asserts, "Alice Walker attacks head-on the taboos that most black writers shy away from . . . Like the author Zora Neale Hurston, whom she admires, Walker says she writes about taboo because she is not embarrassed by anything black people do" (28). Abrams exposes that Walker raises some distinct and prohibited issues in her narratives. Through Celie's character she exposes how a mother faces incest and oppression and struggles to regain her self-esteem and confidence.

The narrative unfolds the difficulties and gradual triumph of Celie, a black woman who was raised in rural isolation in Georgia. She resists the paralyzing self-concept forced upon her by her step father and husband. Reflecting on Walker's literary creations, Barbara Christian clarifies that Walker's works primarily focus on the struggle of black people, especially the struggle of black women. In *Black Women Writers*, she admits, "The focus on the struggle of black people, especially black women to claim their own lives, and the contention that this struggle emanates from a deepening of self-knowledge and love are characteristics of Walker's work" (457). Christian's concern reflects the deeper aspect of walker's narrative, which is the depiction of black women's struggle. When Celie realizes that it is difficult to survive independently, she begins to build relationships with other black women, especially those engaging forcefully with oppression. Celie's relationship with Harpo, a courageous woman and Shug Avery, an independent singer, helps her to get success in her mission.

The novel encapsulates the events that happen in rural Georgia and a remote African village Olinka, and exposes the problems of racism and sexism. Due to her dark skin, Celie hates herself and feels that her body is a constant source of her exploitation. Concerning insecurity and self-hatred, Rich, in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, explains, "Fear and hatred of our bodies often crippled our brains" (284). Rich's words express the inner state of African American people who hate themselves due to the black color of their skin. Celie, a black woman, thinks herself ugly because of her black complexion, which becomes the cause of her self-hatred. She feels hopeless and inferior. Celie's lack of confidence makes her an object of oppression. Like Celie, Sofia's case is another example of racial and gender subjugation. Sofia, a black woman, rejects the proposal of working as a maid in a white household and later imprisoned for her disloyalty and disobedience.

Walker exposes the issue of male dominance, violence, sexism, sexual abuse, and oppression through Celie's account. From the very beginning the narrative reveals the appalling plight of Celie, the protagonist. Celie is continually abused by her step father Alphonso and later by her husband Mr. —. Alphonso threatens Celie that if she reveals the secret to others, it will kill her mother. As the narrative reveals, "You'd better not tell nobody but God. It would kill your Mammy" (3). Because of the fear of her mother's death, Celie keeps the matter secret and reveals it to God through her letters. Alphonso represents society's view on African American women by treating Celie as an object, and offering her up to any man that comes asking for a wife. When Celie is forced into loveless marriage, it does not bring any better prospects for her. She is treated more or less like a slave in a slave auction.

Celie's stepfather convinces Mr. — (Albert) to marry her by informing him about Celie's submissive nature. Concerning Albert's dealing to Celie, Donna Haisty Winchell, in *Alice Walker*, expresses that Albert "looks her over like a head of livestock and marries her in desperation because he needs someone to cook and clean for him and take care of his four children" (86). Winchell mirrors the black women's subjugation and exploitation in black communities. Black men treat black women like animals. Celie faces the same fate when she is forced into a loveless marriage. As Celie narrates, "Mr. — marry me to take care of his children. I marry him cause my daddy made me. I don't love Mr. — and he don't love me" (61). Celie's situation represents the situation of black women in general. Black men may be victimized by racism, but sexism allows them to act as exploiters and oppressors of black women.

Celie gets constant abuse and oppression even after her marriage. She faces brutal physical and sexual abuse throughout her life due to the blackness and womanness of her attributes. Regarding women's subjugation, Stevi Jackson, in *Women's Studies: Essential Readings*, states, "Gendered subjectivity can be seen as constituted ideologically, ensuring the continual reproduction of dominant masculinity and dominated femininity" (9). Jackson explains the fact that gendered subjectivity is a type of constructed ideology which ensures the belief of dominant masculinity and dominated femininity. The women in Walker's novel face constant obstacles and lifetime abuse due to black people's gender biased attitude.

Like Jackson, Estelle Disch also describes about gender discriminatory system of the West. Disch, in *Reconstructing Gender: A Multicultural Anthology*, explicates that Western society has an "A and Not-A" system. "A" represents the "normal, dominant" gender, while "Not-A" represents the subordinate and different gender (99). Disch's idea is relevant to understand the situation of black women in American

society. Society deems men as "A" and women as "Not-A" category. Celie and other female characters in *The Color Purple* fall in Not-A category, therefore, they become the victims of racist and sexist oppression. Walker presents women as poor and helpless creatures, who bear the scars of oppressive forces at every step. Mary Donnelly believes that Walker's works give voice to voiceless people. In *Alice Walker: The Color Purple and Other Works*, she argues, "Walker's work gives a voice to those that have no voice: usually, though not always, poor, rural black women" (7). Emphasizing the key concern of Walker's works, Donnelly demonstrates the circumstances of poor black women.

The novel is in epistolary form and written in two voices. In the beginning Celie, the narrator, addresses to God and then Nettie, who is Celie's sister, addresses to Celie from Olinka in Africa. This aspect of narrative brings to the theme of repression of the voice and the breaking of silence. Both Celie and Nettie break their silence in their addresses. The letters do not reach the addressee, one to the God, who does not have any physical existence and the other, Nettie's letter to Celie which are hidden by Albert, Celie's cruel husband. God and Mr. Albert are presented as the sole authority holder because of being male. Lori Duin Kelly believes that the God who silences the blacks' stories and the black male who silences black women's voices are similar. In her essay, "Theology and Androgyny: The Role of Religion in *The Color Purple*" published in *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, she writes that "to Celie, raped at fourteen by her step-father and trapped in a loveless marriage and a cycle of domestic abuse as was her mother, male means power, and so it is no wonder that she characterizes God as a 'he'" (8). Kelly's words reflect the blind belief of black women, who believe men as powerful and women as weak in this world.

Nettie's letters to Celie reveal the account of Olinka tribe in Africa. The people of Olinka tribe live in a male dominated society similar to that of men and women in the American South. The only roles available to women are those of wife and mother. Harris Abrams observes that Walker reveals the history of oppression through epistolary style of writing. In her work "The Gift of Loneliness" she opines, "This epistolary method provides Walker with a means of revealing the past in order to provide an understanding of the source of the oppression of the black woman" (29). Harris Abrams explains that Walker's use of epistolary method is a strategy to expose the causes of black women's oppression.

Walker introduces the concept of "womanism" in the novel. Womanism refers to a belief which exposes the everyday experiences of women of color. It reflects the predicament of racism, sexism, and classism in African-American communities and helps to promote women's cultural and social identity, diversity and inclusiveness. As black feminism struggles to liberate the black women from brutal domination of the society, womanism also works by struggling against sexual, racial, heterosexual violence, and subjugation. Defining the term womanist, Walker, in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* articulates, "Womanist . . . A woman who loves women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture" (xi). To Walker, womanist usually refers to courageous and willful behavior. She describes that one is womanist when one is committed to the welfare of humanity. Walker's definition of womanist highlights that feminism and womanism are two different concepts.

Celie writes her letters in non-standard language because she is uneducated. Walker uses the term black folk language for Celie's non-standard form of language. Speaking about the language used in the novel, Lauren Berlant, in "Race, Gender, and Nation in *The Color Purple*" published in *Critical Inquiry*, points out, "*The Color*

Purple opens with Celie falling through the cracks of a language she can barely use" (837). Berlant expresses that the broken dialect represents the complacency and inferiority African American women internalize. Due to limited access to educational opportunities, black women in America are forced to bear the burden of domesticity. Regarding Celie's language use in her letters, Linda Selzer in "Race and Domesticity in *The Color Purple*" published in *African American Review*, argues that the women's broken English, specifically Celie's limited knowledge of the larger world, points to the "domestic site she (Celie) occupies as the novel's main character"" (67). The language Celie uses reveals domestication of black women. And it also reflects black women's ignorance, which compels them to fall victim of abuse, oppression, and discrimination.

From her personal experiences, Celie learns that the patriarchal culture is abusive to all women. When she meets other women and works collectively with them, she realizes that women are no way subordinate to men. They can be equal to men, in supremacy, in knowledge, and in matters of love and money. Feminist scholar Gloria Steinem, Walker's former colleague and close friend, praises Walker's talent. She elaborates that through her works Walker helps to transform the lives of oppressed group. In "Alice Walker: Do You Know This Woman", Steinem asserts that *The Color Purple* is particularly transformative because the "pleasure (in it) is watching people redeem themselves and grow . . . It's an organic morality of dignity, autonomy, nurturing, and balance" (290). Steinem believes that Walker's main concern is to bring changes in the existing situation of deprived group. In the novel Celie and Shug are presented as the two most abused women. They form a deep bond and their suffering brings them together in strong solidarity. When Celie returns to

live in Georgia near the end of the novel, she is no longer weak and submissive. Her bondage with other women transforms her into a capable, self-assured female.

Celie is a representative figure of an African-American woman and mother. Her voice stands for the whole community. When she is oppressed by the male members of her own community, she writes letter to God to communicate about her tribulations. She writes letters because she wants to resist abuse and oppression. Regarding Celie's reaction to male domination in *The Color Purple*, Critic Martha J. Cutter, in "Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker's Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in *The Color Purple*", argues that the novel is about a woman who is able to successfully resist the "violent patriarchal inscription of male will onto a silent female body" (163). Cutter opines that Celie's experience is similar to the experiences of many other women/ mothers of her race. During the course of struggle Celie passes through unexpected circumstances and eventually she finds her path towards her own self through her writing.

Walker's narrative adds a stone in the structure of the study of black motherhood creating an individual identity of the African-American woman Celie. The letters written by her demonstrate her oppression in a patriarchal society, where there is no space for women. In spite of the restrictions and barriers of patriarchy, Celie constantly performs her motherly responsibilities. Walker's epistolary style of narration has enabled her to tell an emotional tale of black women's struggle for equality and independence. Celie as a black woman and mother tries her best to overcome the obstacles. The lifelong struggle she makes transforms her from a meek and submissive woman to strong and vocal mother.

The literature written during Black Arts Movement phase and Postmodern phase reflects the social and cultural conventions of the periods. Due to black people's

ownership of publishing houses, magazines, and art institutions, they produced profound and innovative creations. They linked art and politics in order to assist in the liberation of black People. African American women also played vital roles in local and national organizing efforts. Literary works written by the blacks also got recognition and became the part of university curriculum. The women's rights movement brought significant changes in the society during 1970s, which handed black women a prominent place in the family. Black women also begin to get success in business, politics, administration, and education sectors. Due to growing concept of feminism and womanism around the world, black women's role in society also changed. They began to pursue a perfect life for themselves.

The works produced during Black Arts Movement and Postmodern periods represent self-expressive and liberated motherhood by reflecting the dominant discourses that define the role of black mothers. Giovanni's "Mothers", Morrison's *Sula*, Angelou's "Mamma's Welfare Roll", and Walker's *The Color Purple* depict black mothers and their struggle along with social and cultural context. Giovanni's "Mothers" explains the awkward affection between mother and daughter. In spite of male domination and limited boundary and roles for the black women/mothers, she performs her motherly responsibilities perfectly. The mother, Eva in *Sula* faces various difficult problems after her husband abandons her. Due to oppressive social and cultural values, Eva has to suffer. She strives hard to minimize the obstacles. Eva's self-mutilation to receive insurance money to support her family, her unexpected bold decision to relieve her son Plum from drug addiction, and her attempt to save her daughter, Hannah, reflect her deep motherly bond to her children and her response to the situation. In "Momma's Welfare Roll" the mother reflects her deep devotion to her children by accepting welfare from the government agency. By

opposing the discriminatory attitude of racist and sexist social structure, she accepts the welfare with pride. And Celie in *The Color Purple* is the victim of racist and sexist oppression. She expresses her plight through her letters to God. In spite of unfavorable social circumstances and family environment, she performs her motherly role honestly. As a perfect mother she struggles for a better life for herself and her children. The mothers in each case struggle against derogatory and oppressive socio-cultural values to find their identity. Due to various factors such as racism, sexism and classism, they pass through pathetic circumstances; even then they expose their discontent either through their action or words. In spite of all these difficulties, they perform motherly responsibilities and raise their voice against oppressive forces. Therefore, the review of above mentioned works suggests that they are oppressed yet vocal mothers.

2.4. Conclusion

This review shows that motherhood is the central issue in African American literary creations. The works written during different phases of literary development reflect the construction of motherhood, which is determined by contemporary socio-cultural discourses. The mother figures in the selected texts seem ordinary women, who are well familiar with social and cultural conventions. They know about the restrictions made for them by social and cultural values and the responsibilities they have to bear.

The perception of motherhood, both as a cultural concept and a literary theme, has come to considerable changes over the course of history. The notion of motherhood during antebellum and post-bellum societies was solely based on devotion, self-sacrifice and restriction to the domestic sphere. During the period of Slavery black women/mothers had to perform an all-inclusive role such as the role of

black woman, black man and white woman but they had no right to marry and have a family life. Though there became some changes in social and political arena after Civil War, the role and responsibilities of black women remained unchanged in African American society. The image of black mother in literature was subversively undermined through the use of various narrative strategies in dominant discourses. Black women/mothers strengthened their position during Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement phase. Due to political and social transformation in the US, black women's arena also changed in the society. They got some liberty and began to raise their voice for freedom, equality, and justice. During Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement period black women/mothers turned from mute victim of society into strong and courageous woman. Women's liberation movements began during Black Arts Movement and Postmodern phase. During Black Arts Movement phase black people showed their cultural pride through their art. Showing pride in their African American identity, black women began to appear in public arena. Under the influence of the feminist movement after 1968, they expressed themselves through their artistic creations. They opposed racial disparity and sexual exploitation. In the subsequent phase, liberated social and cultural values strengthened them more and changed the notion of motherhood in African American society. Feminist and womanist movements also made strong contribution by bringing them together and making them learn how to challenge socio-cultural stereotypes.

The literature of the phase of Slavery and Post-slavery reflects domesticated motherhood. The social and cultural discourses confine women inside white household to look after black and white children. Black women have to perform an all-inclusive role of a mother. They face unfavorable circumstances at every stage, which bring a lot of pain and suffering for them. Due to chattel slavery and barbaric

racism, the black mothers have to digest unavoidable pain and suffering as a mute creature. Harper, Jacobs, Dunbar, and Johnson in their works depict social and cultural stereotypes that keep black women/mothers inside a strict boundary. Similarly, the literary works written during Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement phase represent assertive motherhood. Due to changing socio-cultural circumstances, the black women's position also changes in society. When they perform motherly responsibilities, like the mothers presented in previous phases, they also go through difficult trials and tribulations but they show courage to overcome the challenges. The works of McKay, Hughes, Brooks, and Wright reflect the changed notion of motherhood in African American literary works, which transform their role in social arena. The literature written during Black Arts movement phase and Postmodern phase reflect self-expressive and liberated motherhood by exposing the troublesome experiences that black mothers have to face. In spite of difficulties and oppression, black mothers raise their voice against slavery, racism, and sexism. Giovanni, Morrison, Angelou, and Walker reflect this new notion of motherhood through their works explicitly.

African American women have to suffer twice. Firstly, they have to face the masculine oppression given by nature and culture. As it happens so often in black families, black men suppress their wives, partners or daughters, even though they know how it feels to be colored. Secondly, they are met with racial prejudices and discrimination even by white women who know the inconveniences of being a woman. Because of socio-cultural circumstances black women face much more pathetic situation than black males. Black women are exploited as laborers in the field, workers in the household, breeders for white slave-owner, and objects of sexual assault. In spite of so many obstacles at every step, black mothers struggle a lot for the

welfare of their children. Looking into the representation of the concept of motherhood in African American literature written during different phases of literary developments, this study reflects that black mothers always set out to fulfill the demands of mother work to protect, nurture, and train.

Review of the selected texts in this study adds to the current literature changing notions of black motherhood. The works of African American literature provide an appropriate ground for presenting social norms and collective beliefs about the notion of motherhood. In their discussion of the mother image they point out how socio-cultural norms define the image of the perfect mother. In African American literature, especially since the phase of Slavery, it is now in particular the previously marginalized group i.e. authors of color draw a somewhat different picture of maternity as opposed to the prevailing "white" notions of ideal motherhood. They frequently emphasize the strong emotional attachment of black mothers to their children, depicted repeatedly as resulting from shared experiences of oppression. Black mothers are recurrently presented in their will to impart the crucial amount of self-confidence and inner strength to their children which is necessary in order to survive in a sexist and racist social order.

Chapter Three

Representation of Black Motherhood in African American Literature

This chapter analyzes African American literary writings in order to explore the notion of motherhood in African American society and how the notion of motherhood changes over the course of history. To examine the role and responsibilities of black mothers in African American society as reflected in literary works, each text is closely observed. The works selected for analysis deal with human suffering in general; and the experiences of the marginalized, downtrodden and oppressed group in particular. The specific areas of interest guiding this process are: (a) the notion of motherhood and its reflection in African American literary works; (b) changing notions of motherhood over history; and (c) the impacts of society, culture, race, and gender on the self-esteem and self-concept of black women/mothers. Other areas of interest are challenges of being a mother and the unique challenges of being a black mother and its impacts.

3.1. Introduction

Black women have been subjugated in their everyday lives since the black immigrants had moved to the US as European White's slaves. The anti-racist movement, that began during the phase of Slavery and continued in the succeeding phases, for equality and freedom, has become the part of black women's struggle. Black women, who performed their roles as women and mothers, have been devalued. The devaluation of black women can be noticed through structural racism, which refers to a system wherein public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work to perpetuate racial inequality, leading to the significant gap between the blacks and the whites. This study aims at exploring black motherhood in the discourses of culture and sociology, produced during different

timeframes. The meaning and representation of motherhood is explored by assessing, analyzing, and interpreting the works of African American literature.

I have divided this chapter into three sections. The first section demonstrates the notion of motherhood during the phase of Slavery and Post-slavery and its reflection in literature by analyzing Harper's "The Slave Mother", Jacobs' *Incidents*, Dunbar's "Lonesome" and Johnson's *The Autobiography*. The second section analyzes McKay's "My Mother", Hughes' *Not Without Laughter*, Brooks' "The Mother", and Wright's *Black Boy*, to reveal the construction of motherhood and its representation in literary works during Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement period. Similarly, the third section focuses on the works produced during Black Arts Movement and Postmodern phase such as Giovanni's "Mothers", Morrison's *Sula*, Angelou's "Momma Welfare Roll", and Walker's *The Color Purple* to explore motherhood in the contemporary society and how the literary discourses of the time represent it. Each section begins with the background information of the periods and then analyzes the selected texts by examining the changing values along the historical lines.

3.2. Slavery and Post-Slavery Phase: Dehumanization and Devaluation of Black

Motherhood and its Representation in African American Literary Writing

Slavery refers to the condition in which individuals are owned by others. Concerning slavery, David Brown and Clive Webb, in *Race in the American South: From Slavery to Civil Rights*, assert, "At root, slavery was the ownership of one human being by another human being, with the slaves' chattel status (chattel means 'movable possession') akin to that of any other item of property, such as a horse or a piece of furniture" (19). The institution of slavery began in America in 1619 when nineteen African slaves were brought ashore in the British colony of Jamestown,

Virginia. Recounting the detail about the beginning of slavery, Dorothy Schneider and Carl J. Schneider, in *American Experience: Slavery in America*, write, "In 1619, Dutch traders brought ashore near Jamestown in Virginia some 19 blacks, whom they had seized from a captured Spanish slave ship." (49). Throughout the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries many African people were brought to America and forced into slavery. Slavery in the United States was the most difficult movement that African-American people had to endure. As a pervasive ideology of black inferiority and white superiority, slavery was a much more tightly controlled and restrictive system of bondage that denied slaves a place in society. Until 1660, the blacks were treated in a similar fashion to white indentured servants in the South and the terms 'servant' and 'slave' were virtually interchangeable in practice. This situation changed around midcentury, when planters realized that the blacks could be tied to longer terms of service. After slavery was gradually codified and Africans became widely associated with the debased position of slave and white attitudes hardened. Brown and Webb reveal, "Legal bondage gradually evolved after 1660 and major slave codes were passed in Virginia in 1680 and 1705, and in South Carolina in 1690, 1696, 1712 and 1740" (24). After 1660, slavery's grip tightened in Southern states by closing loopholes which compelled the blacks to seek freedom for themselves and their children.

Slave codes, which were written in response to changing circumstances, were passed in different Southern states. Instead of father's, the slave children had to follow the condition of the mother. Reflecting on the strict codes of slavery, Brown and Webb explain, "The children of black mothers became slaves regardless of the condition of their father . . . Bondage became hereditary, passing from mother to child" (27). Brown and Webb reveal that the children had to follow the condition of

the mother under the system of slavery. The notions of the permanent inferiority of the blacks became much more reasonable as slavery literally began to run through bloodlines. With the passage of time blackness became associated with a servile condition and whiteness with freedom. The Africans, who were forcefully removed from their families and imported into the Southern states, were compelled to work as servants in white households and laborers in the production of crops such as tobacco and cotton. Not only did men have an increasingly hard time getting by, but women did as well. Women slaves experienced the same fate as those of men. They were expected to labor as hard as men and faced the lash if they did not meet their master's expectations. The slave masters expected them to perform as much task as they could by the incessant use of the whip, regardless of sex. The phase of Slavery came to an end on January 1, 1863, when President Abraham Lincoln declared the emancipation of the slaves. Describing the declaration of the emancipation of slaves in America, David Brion Davis, in *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*, points out, "The "Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy" declared that on the first day of January 1863, all persons held as slaves within any state or states . . . shall not then be practically recognized, submitted to, and maintained, shall then, thence forward, and forever, be free" (314). This momentous decision, marked as the official beginning of freedom for enslaved African Americans, came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of African slaves who had been facing injustice and oppression in the US.

Slavery affected black women/mothers' lives as well as their social status and sense of identity. Black women/mothers were subjugated to tremendous everyday torture such as whipped, raped, and separated from their families. They were deprived of their rights and reduced to mere bodies for producing more slaves. And mother-

child bonding in this context was not in accordance with the white society rules. Sexual exploitation of black women was a legitimate method of exercising white patriarchal power. Regarding the physical harassment of black women, hooks, in *Ain't I a Woman*, describes the act of rape as "an institutionalized method of terrorism which had as its goal the demoralization and dehumanization of black women" (27). hooks reveals that sexual exploitation did not only deprive black women of their individuality and sexuality, but it also terrorized and demoralized them. Black women were compelled to have as many children as they could to please their owner. The slave owners preferred to breed black women with white men to gain more profit. hooks further reveals, "Slaveholders preferred to breed black women with white men, as mulattoes frequently brought a higher price on the market or easier to sell" (40). The notion of motherhood was influenced by specific racist discourse and practices, male supremacy, and southern culture of slavery.

The narratives of slavery were authored by African American writers such as Jupiter Hammon, Lucy Terry, Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Harriet Jacobs. They brought contemporary issues in public through their literary efforts. They illustrated the historical context of American slavery and exposed the illogical, irrational and unfair relationship between the white slaveholders and the oppressed black slaves. Jacobs's autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) is the best-known examples. Describing the uniqueness of Jacobs' work, William L. Andrews, in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, explains:

Harriet Jacobs turned her autobiography into a unique analysis of the myths and the realities that defined the situation of the African-American woman and her relationship to 19th century standards of womanhood. As a result,

"Incidents" occupies a crucial place in the history of American women's literature in general and African-American women's literature in particular.

(789)

Andrews reflects that Jacobs' *Incidents* occupies a crucial place in the history of American women's literature because it narrates the real situation of African American women and their relation to nineteenth century standards of womanhood.

After the end of slavery and the American Civil War (1861-1865), a self-conscious black literary ambition emerged among the blacks. African American authors such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, James Weldon Johnson, Marcus Garvey, and Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote literature describing the condition of the blacks in the post-war situation. They introduced their works with the themes of segregation, lynching, social and racial justice, and political rights.

The texts, such as Harper's "The Slave Mother", Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Dunbar's "Lonesome", and Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, expose the construction of black motherhood and its representation in literary works. Each text examines how social and cultural stereotypes construct the notion of motherhood during the phase of Slavery and Post-slavery and how this notion changes with the passage of time.

3.2.1. Mother's Exclusion from Maternal Rights in "The Slave Mother"

Harper's "The Slave Mother" deals with the horrors of slavery. It voices protest through the voice of a mother. Harper depicts the pain and suffering of an enslaved mother who is forced to face the reality of her limited relationship with her child. The mother loves her son from the core of her heart, but she is excluded from her maternal rights due to chattel slavery. She is sympathetic to her own situation and to the situation of her son because she faces a constant threat of her son being ripped

from her arms and sold to another plantation. The poem deals with the issue of slave woman's motherhood, racial and gender oppression, along with the evils of slavery.

The poem expresses the anguish and despair of a slave mother when her young child is sold and is forever lost to her. It illustrates one of the cruelest aspects of slavery which is the separation of children from their mothers for slave trade.

Regarding Harper's theme, Hildegard Hoeller, in "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper", marks, "Harper's poetry skillfully gives voice to the plight of slaves" (172). Hoeller observes that Harper's work expresses the pathetic condition of slaves. Through harsh imagery, the poet draws attention to the slave mother's deep attachment to her children. The mother feels difficulty at the loss of her child and cries with pain. Expressing the grief of the slave mother who is forcefully separated from her son, the poet expresses:

Heard you that shriek? It rose
 So wildly in the air,
 It seemed as if a burdened heart
 Was breaking in despair. (1-4).

The lines describe the circumstances of the mother who looks sad. The word 'shriek' itself represents feelings of grief, anger, suffering, and helplessness of a mother. This is the sound of great pain being inflicted on a human being. The words such as "shriek" and "wildly" also depict a mother's animalistic fight for her child. It demonstrates the mother's deep bond to her son. The poet appeals to hear the cries, see the clasped hands, and sad eyes of the slave mother. The words and phrases used in the poem are extremely powerful in representing Harper's idea about the effect of slavery on slave women especially on slave mothers.

The poem primarily concentrates on the effects of a mother's separation from her child. The lines, "As if a storm of agony / Were sweeping through the brain" (11-12), reinforce this idea. The slave mother is being presented as a suffering woman with emotions such as pain and despair. The poem narrates the mental agony of the mother, who does not want to stay away from her child. Addressing the mother's desire, Rich, in *Of Woman Born*, asserts, "a natural mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children" (22). Rich argues that a mother gets utmost gratification when she gets opportunity to spend most of her time with her children. Rich's idea is relevant because she tells that the mother's fulfillment lies in the company of her children. By reflecting the slave mother's agony, the poet humanizes her and transforms her into a being that lives and feels. The poem rejects the notion of the slave as being less than human.

The slave mother wants to protect her child so she hides her young son under the folds of her kirtle (loose garment that is worn over a dress). As the speaker articulates, "Her boy clings to her side / And in her kirtle vainly tries / His trembling form to hide" (14-16). The child, who desires not to be sold, makes worthless efforts for his safety. He looks to his mother who shows an internal sensation of helplessness. The keyword for the internal sensation on the lines of the poem above is 'vainly tries'. In the poem Harper clearly establishes the relation between slave mother and non-slave mother, who have parental desire to protect and comfort a much loved child.

The poem reveals the agonizing truth of the evils of slavery and black women's oppression in a racist and sexist social order. The line, "He is not hers" (17) is crucial and repeated three times, reflecting the constant thought that must permeate the thoughts of the slave mother. Concerning the status of slave mother's child, Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought*, asserts, "Children born of enslaved Black women

were slaves" (50). Collins' view clarifies that under the bounds of slavery, the slave mother's son does not belong to her. Instead, he belongs to the slave master. Collins further explains, "Under such a system in which the control of property is fundamental, enslaved African women were valuable commodities" (51). The slave mother and her boy are property, and like all property, they can be sold or disposed of according to the wishes of their owner. Focusing on master-slave relation, Renate Papke, in *Poems at the Edge of Differences*, describes, "She is the biological mother ("her blood is coursing in his veins."). But as slaves, she and her boy, who is not even called her son, are the properties of the slave owner who might also be the biological father of the boy" (48). Papke clarifies that being a biological mother, the slave mother has no right to claim her baby because she and her child, both belong to the slave master under chattel slavery. The mother has a connection to the child through biology and nature even then she faces a constant threat of her son being ripped from her arms and sold to another plantation. The idea threatens to break the "wreath of household" in every slave family (7). Papke further explains that, "The imagery of wreath in the last stanza and the shriek of the first stanza could suggest that the poem refers to the Garner incident from 1856. Margaret Garner was a fugitive slave mother from Ohio who killed her three-year-old daughter to prevent her from slavery" (49). The poem reflects how the institution of slavery destroys the black family and the individual familial relationships. Harper depicts the pain a mother feels at the loss of her son because the child is the most precious jewel for her in this world. Supporting Harper's view about mother-child relation, Rich opines, "The mother-child relationship is the essential human relationship" (127). The poet creates compassion and anger at the plight of slave mother, who has the feeling of any mother, whether

she is black or white. Harper also draws attention how society often views individuals who are held captive as less than human.

The meaning of Harper's poetry cannot be understood without any knowledge of the social and cultural context of slavery in which the poem "The Slave Mother" was composed. Due to Abolitionist Movement, Southern slave owners become stricter to their slaves. Harper herself encounters the cruelties of slavery and articulates it explicitly in her poem. As the speaker expresses, "They tear him from her circling arms / Her last and fond embrace" (33-34). The speaker shows the situation of pain and despair due to separation experienced by the slave mother and her son. Within the parameters of slavery, the slave mother's children are taken as property, they belong to slave master than the mother. Regarding slave mother's position, hooks, in *Ain't I a Woman*, notes, "The offspring of any black slave woman regardless of the race of her mate would be legally slaves, and therefore the property of the owner to whom the female slave belonged" (16). hooks declares that under slavery the children of any slave woman belong to slave master. Despite the fact that the mother loves and desires to protect her child, the harsh reality reveals that the son does not belong to his mother due to strict slave codes.

The mother accepts the reality that her son would someday be sold as a slave to some plantation owner. In the same line of argument, Patricia Liggins Hill remarks that Harper narrates the evils of slavery in her abolitionist poetry. Describing the major theme of Harper's poetry, Hill, in "A Study of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's poetry", points out, "The major theme of Harper's abolitionist poems is the evils of slavery. Even though she was born free in Baltimore, Maryland in 1824, and educated in the north in Pennsylvania and Ohio, she identifies readily with the brutalities of the Southern slavery system" (98). Hill contends that Harper expresses the brutalities of

Southern system of slavery through her poetry. Harper's poetry adds wood to the already flaming freedom flame created by previous authors. This flame spreads and eventually leads to the Civil War, which then ends slavery in the States and brings the ultimate change.

The mother, the protagonist of the poem, is a slave woman, who works in a white household. The lines, "She is a mother, and her heart / Is breaking in despair" (39-40), show her situation in the society she lives in. The word 'despair' indicates the imagery of internal sensation. Despair refers to a feeling of dissatisfaction, which is seen in the slave mother. She has lost her hope for a better life. The mother is sympathetic to her own situation and to the situation of her son, whom she is unable to protect from the effects of dehumanized slavery. Emphasizing the pathetic condition of slave women, Katie Geneva Cannon, in *Black Womanist Ethics*, describes, "The Black woman lived with constant fear, and most of the time she had to endure the reality of having her husband and her children sold away from her with the likelihood that she would never see them again" (49). Cannon argues that slave women spend their whole life in a constant fear such as; fear of humiliation, detachment, and oppression. Enslaved African-American women's motherhood is frequently infringed upon by slavery. This all shows the despair, dissatisfaction and suffering of a slave mother in a racist and sexist social order.

Harper presents how socio-cultural norms affect the women of color while performing their role as a mother. The poet shows slave mother as a protesting and suffering woman because she is deprived of maternal rights. Harper exposes the truth that in a racist and sexist society there is no space for the blacks and women. By telling the slave mother's horrid story, she focuses on the institution of slavery and its horrors. In addition, she forces the readers to accept the slave mother's testimony as

truth because this separation of mother and child is not universally understood. She believes that only a slave can truly understand the pain of separation and loss that is described in this poem.

3.2.2. Enslaved Mother in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* exposes a slave's struggle for freedom. Based on Jacobs' autobiography, the narrative depicts her role as a woman and a mother. Linda Brent, the protagonist, spends a happy childhood but she experiences physical and mental torture and constant threat of rape when she grows up. She is determined so she makes constant efforts to achieve freedom. She hides herself in her grandmother's attic, leaving her children behind. Later, Linda escapes to the North, where she reunites with her children and eventually gets freedom. Encapsulating the issues of motherhood, racism, and gender oppression, the autobiography exposes the situation of women under slavery.

Linda, a female slave, is the prominent mother figure. She performs her motherly responsibilities perfectly. To protect herself and her children from the dehumanized effects of slavery, she flees from her slave master's house and hides in a small room at the top of her grandmother's house for seven years, where she faces a lot of problems. As she describes, "The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor. There was no admission for either light or air, and she continues to describe the attic room as following, "The air was stifling; the darkness total" (128). Linda decides to stay in an inconvenient place for a longer period of time due to her maternal instincts and deep attachment to her children.

Linda knows her presence matters for the wellbeing of her children. Exposing children's dependence on their mother, Rich expresses the view that the human species are more dependent on mother care during infancy than any other species of

living creatures. In *Of Woman Born*, she explicates, "The human species is dependent on maternal care in infancy much longer than any other animal species" (101). Like Rich, Linda understands this fact and well aware of the responsibilities of a mother. To bring happiness for her children and herself, she decides to stay closer to them and copes with all the challenges that come before her while residing at the top of her grandmother's house. As she narrates, "At last I heard the merry laugh of children, and presently two sweet little faces were looking up at me, as though they knew I was there, and were conscious of the joy they imparted. How I longed to tell them I was there!" (129). When Linda sees her children contented and playing happily in care of her grandmother, she feels satisfied.

To preserve her self-respect Linda chooses Mr. Sands as the father of her children. She considers that Mr. Sands, a white man, will free their children from the dehumanized effects of slavery. Soon after Linda realizes that under slavery the status of a child is derived from his/her mother. Concerning the status of the slave child, who follows the condition of the mother, Gloria Thomas Pillow, in *Mother-love in Shades of Black*, marks:

The powerful and profoundly perverted institution of slavery defined life for the Africans brought to America and for their descendants. One of its basic tenets was that "the child shall follow the condition of the mother", which insured that, through the matrilineal line, their debased status would continue into perpetuity, providing an infinite supply of free labor for the developing new territory. (10-11).

Pillow reveals the fact that in slavery the child follows the condition of the mother. This principle is widely adopted into the laws of slavery in the US. Therefore, the children of Linda and Mr. Sands get the status of mixed-race slaves. Due to the

bounds of slavery, Linda suffers at every stage. Though she faces difficult problems, she makes constant efforts to save herself and her children from the disheartening effects of slavery.

For her children's safety, Linda gets ready to pay a high price. Before she sees an opportunity to escape, Linda hides herself in a tiny hole for about seven years as if she is a prisoner. She no longer wants to submit herself to Dr. Flint and does not intend to abandon her family. As she speaks, "I suffered for air even more than for light. But I was not comfortless. I heard the voices of my children. There was joy and there was sadness in the sound. It made my tears flow" (128). The devotion, Linda demonstrates to her children and family, puts her in the category of a dedicated mother. To keep her children safe from their slave master and to keep her family together, she bears unbearable pain and suffering by hiding out in a crawlspace.

To secure her children's future, Linda has to pass through unexpected trials and tribulations. She imposes herself into imprisonment and passes through innumerable difficulties. Focusing on Linda's role as a mother, Angelita Reyes, in *Mothering Across Cultures*, explains, ". . . in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs (Linda Brent) postpones her actual escape from the South for seven years because of her children. Her role as a mother at that time is more important than escape" (17). Rays reveals that Linda bears unbearable pain and suffering to protect her children from the dehumanized effects of slavery. The motherly responsibility she performs reflects her deep attachment to her children. Due to the strict social codes for black women, she suffers physically, as well as mentally even then she does not cease her efforts and in the end she gets success in her mission.

The narrative reflects the circumstances of black women under slavery. Linda becomes pregnant to resist slavery. Her pregnancy signifies the female slave's

complicated journey to motherhood. Due to her affair with a white man, Linda passes through a desperate state of mind. She reasons that slavery has shattered all prospects of her life as she narrates:

If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery. I want to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me. (60)

Jacobs puts in plain words that slaves like Linda cannot make any decision about their future because they are the property of their masters'. Linda intends to marry and have a good family life but her prospects have been ruined by slavery. The desires to keep herself chaste and preserve her self-dignity create a lot of problems for her. She struggles all over her life for a better future.

In this autobiography Jacobs delineates the female experience of slavery primarily through images of motherhood. The incidents that happen in Linda's life reflect that she bears painful experiences due to unfavorable socio-cultural circumstances. She negotiates all those difficulties skillfully. Through a consensual sexual relationship with a white man named Mr. Sands, Linda manages to bring freedom for herself and her children. Regarding Linda's struggle to achieve a good life, Henry Louis Gates Jr., in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, opines that Linda Brent is an icon because she "represents the struggle for freedom, the preservation of family and the plight of black African American women" (279). Gates explains that Linda becomes an epitome because she represents the struggle for

freedom and the plight of black African American women. Finally, a network of friends, family members, and abolitionists helps Linda escape to New York, which brings decades of bondage over for her family.

Due to her persistent struggle, eventually, Linda becomes able to save her children from the devastating effects of slavery. Jean Fagan Yellin, Jacobs' biographer, in "Harriette Ann Jacobs 1813–1897", claims that Jacobs' *Incidents* is a "first-person tale of a heroic mother who rescues her children from slavery" (2030). Yellin further marks that "it presents a brave protagonist and her devotion to family relationships, her quest for freedom and independence, which represents the quest of the entire black community, as well" (2030). Yellin describes Linda as a heroic mother because she struggles for family reunion and independence. Linda's pursuit for freedom represents the quest of the entire black community. Through the depiction of a mother's painful struggle to protect her family, Jacobs presents the devotion of black mother to her maternal works.

Incidents reveals that motherhood is an important aspect of the female slaves' experience. The narrative exposes that slavery affects the lives of black children by limiting the boundary of slave mothers. The slave mothers have to rely either on the extended family, or on the community for the wellbeing of their offspring. Linda passes through the same circumstances. Due to the constant threat of sexual exploitation and harassment, she leaves her children in the care of her grandmother. She refuses to allow herself to become a producer for the slave market, as slave women do. Focusing on slave women's situation and circumstances, Joanne Braxton, in *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, points out that slave women are "objects of sexual desire" as well as "profitable commodities . . . considered valuable only when increasing their owner's stock" (20). Exposing the real picture of the system of

slavery, Braxton asserts that women slaves are valuable commodities because they increase the stock of their owners. Linda's denial compels her to hide herself into the attic of her grandmother's house by limiting her role as a mother. She allows Aunt Martha, her grandmother, to assume the role of big mama.

Like grandmothers in African-American culture, Aunt Martha in *Incidents* serves as a big mama. As a perfect guide and guardian, she performs her motherly responsibilities to her children and grandchildren. Linda reports, "I had been sheltered so long by the dear grandmother; where I dreamed my first young dream of love . . . my children came to twine themselves so closely round my desolate heart" (174). Justifying grandmother's role as a guide and guardian, Gloria Thomas Pillow, in *Mother-love in Shades of Black*, asserts, "Without either parents, Brent finds sanctuary with her maternal grandmother" (14). Pillow reveals that Linda gets parental care from her grandmother. Aunt Martha serves Linda and her children as a mother in absence of their parents. Regarding women's motherly responsibilities, John Ernest, in "Motherhood beyond the Gate", marks that, "true motherhood was the expression of womanhood in history, the preparation of children for lives in the world" (183). Ernest argues that true motherhood means to train the children for lives in the world. His view is useful to understand the role of Aunt Martha in the life of her children. She prepares Linda for the world following her mother's death and similarly she prepares Linda's children in her absence.

Due to the black color of her skin Linda faces a lot of problems in her life. At twelve, she goes to work Dr. Flint's family, where she and other servants get tortured by the new family members. Dr. Flint beats the servants for no reason. As she narrates, "The cook never sent a dinner to his table without fear and trembling; for if there happened to be a dish not to his liking, he would either order her to be whipped,

or compel her to eat every mouthful of it in his presence . . . cram it down her throat till she choked" (15). Flint tortures the servants by using absolute power for no reason. Like her husband, Mrs. Flint also takes advantage of her dominance. She spits in the pans to prevent the cook and the other slaves from eating the leftovers.

Linda also gets punished when she wears a new pair of shoes. Mrs. Flint asks her to walk on snow bare foot which is a very terrible and awesome task for her. She obeys the command of her cruel mistress as a result she gets sick. Flint family mistreats her and looks at her activities suspiciously. Concerning master-slave relationship, Wilma A. Dunaway, a sociologist, in *Slavery in the American Mountain South*, observes, "Slave-owners afraid that slaves might spread messages to slaves on other plantations and start a revolt against their masters" (227). Dunaway explains that slave owners are always suspicious to their slaves' activities. In addition, they consider slaves as their property and therefore, not let them enjoy the same rights as those enjoyed by the whites. By representing the master-slave relationship, Jacobs exposes the dehumanizing effects of slavery on both the master and the slave; the master due to his power to oppress and the slave due to his submissive nature of being oppressed.

Sickness of Linda's son and the birth of her newborn girl are some other events that make her feel helpless. She loves her children so she desires for the children's demise because she believes it is better to die instead to survive in slavery. As she articulates, "Death is better than slavery" (69). Slavery creates such thoughts in the minds of slaves, as some slave-mothers actually kill their own children themselves or wish they were not alive, only to save them from growing up as slaves. Linda contemplates about the difficult situation she herself is facing. As she narrates, "When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been

before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women" (86). Linda knows that slavery is terrible for men but it is far more terrible for women, therefore, she struggles all over her life for the better prospects of her children.

Linda and other black women encounter male oppression which brings unbearable suffering for them. When Linda turns fifteen, her master Dr. Flint begins to whisper vulgar words into her ear. She expresses, "But I now entered on my fifteen year- a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import. I tried to treat them with indifference or contempt " (30). Linda understands the intention of her lascivious master. Regarding Dr. Flint's activities, Deborah Gray White, in *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, marks, "Slave masters wanted adolescent girls to have children, and to this end they practiced a passive, though insidious kind of breeding" (98). White reveals about the hypocrisy that slave masters use for tempting teen age slaves to have children. Linda understands her master's intention so she keeps herself indifferent. She knows if she responds, it might have harmful consequences.

Dr. Flint frequently reminds her about the superiority of the white race. As she narrates, "He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things" (30). Flint frequently sends notes to Linda. Mrs. Flint gets suspected, which further gives rise to her feelings of jealousy. Relating to Mrs. Flint's jealousy, Minrose C. Gwin, in "Green-Eyed Monsters of the Slavocracy", states, "In the mistress-slave relationship, the white woman exerted ultimate power, and that power could transform sexual jealousy into intense cruelty" (39). Gwin's illustrates the fact that in slavery jealous mistresses always impose blame on slave women. Her view is useful to understand the mentality of Mrs. Flint, who imposes ultimate power on slaves to express her sexual jealousy. Mrs. Flint often has heated arguments with Dr.

Flint. As Linda narrates, "I had entered my sixteenth year and every day it became more apparent that my presence was intolerable to Mrs. Flint. Angry words frequently passed between her and her husband. He had never punished me himself, and he would not allow anybody to punish me" (35). Linda knows the reason behind their quarrel but pretends to be unaware. Besides the constant risk of sexual abuse and bodily threats, slave women also have to deal with jealous mistresses as it happens in Linda's case. Dr. Flint's abusive treatment and Mrs. Flint's Jealousy reflects gender and racial oppression of black slave women.

When Linda grows up, Dr. Flint forces her to sleep with him. To fulfill his intention, he builds a house for Linda in a secluded place. As she narrates, "He told me that he was going to built a small house for me, in a secluded place, four miles away from the town" (59). However, Linda outweighs his plan. She finds ways to divert his attentions and thus gets into a relationship with Mr. Sands, a free white lawyer, hoping that this will hold back Flint. Focusing on Linda's response against Dr. Flint's misbehave, Grace McEntee, in "The Ethos of Motherhood", argues that Linda decides to become a mother "not because motherhood is "the most important symbol of womanhood" but for the protection against rape it could give her" (223). McEntee unveils the techniques that slave women use to protect themselves from the dehumanized effects of slavery. The sequence of events shows that slave women use various many strategies and take vital decisions to save themselves from racial and gender oppression. Like McEntee, Candice Pipes also recites about the strategies that slave women use to protect themselves from slavery. In *It's Time To Tell: Abuse, Resistance, and Recovery in Black Women's Literature*, Pipes explicates that Linda wants to escape from her master's sexual violation so she "chooses to have sex with a kinder, less predatory white man . . . as an act of agency and self-protection" (26).

Pipes points out that Linda uses strategies to avoid white society's domination and sexual abuse. She chooses a safe path to protect herself by making relation with a kind and civilized white man.

After Linda declares that she would not become a concubine in the slave system, it takes a turning point in her life. She takes a risk by compromising her reputation and entering into a sexual relationship, with Mr. Sands, in the hope of her future children's safety and freedom. In this way she protects her chastity. hooks, in *Ain't I a Woman*, describes the action as "black women who resisted sexual exploitation directly challenged the system" (27). By making relation with Mr. Sands, Linda not only avoids sexual abuse, she also challenges the system of slavery.

When Linda becomes nineteen years old, she gets pregnant second time. This incident infuriates Dr. Flint. He cuts off Linda's hair to punish her. Describing Flint's aggressive reaction to her pregnancy, Linda recounts:

When Dr. Flint learned that I was again to be a mother, he was exasperated beyond measure. He rushed from the house, and returned with a pair of shears. I had a fine head of hair; and he often railed about my pride of arranging it nicely. He cut every hair close to my head, storming and swearing all the time. I replied to some of his abuse, and he struck me. (86)

When Dr. Flint gets the message of her second pregnancy, he cannot tolerate it. He abuses and cuts off all her hair to demoralize her. If she speaks in return, he would beat her. It reflects racist society's ill-treatment to black women. They have no rights even they cannot conceive a baby against the will of their masters'.

Jacobs' autobiography comments on the female slave's experiences and exposes the difficulties that Linda, a slave mother, encounters when she tries to mother her children. The narrative reveals the pain and sufferings of a devoted

mother. Being a slave, Linda controls her body to protect herself and her children from cruel slavery. Jacobs presents Linda's actions as largely determined by the effect they will have on her children and their eventual emancipation. Slavery creates a barrier for her and forces to hide herself in the crawl space above her grandmother's cabin. Regarding Jacob's circumstances, Caroline Levander, in "Following the Condition of the Mother", opines that "Jacobs is able to negotiate her own motherhood within the confines of the slave system" (33). Jacobs (Linda) performs her motherly responsibilities in spite of the numerous barriers of the system of slavery. Linda's deep attachment to her children does not allow slavery to blunt and destroy her natural affection for them. Due to her separation from her children, she intensifies her desire for freedom. Her grandmother, Aunt Martha assists her at every stage. She takes on paternal responsibility by keeping an eye over her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Due to unfavorable socio-cultural circumstances for slaves, Linda suffers all over her life and eventually gets success in her mission.

3.2.3. Segregated and Confined Mother in "Lonesome"

Dunbar's "Lonesome" expresses the deep and intimate attachment between the mother and child. The poem conveys the extent of the poet's sadness in absence of his mother. In fact, the mother receives the same sort of emotions in the absence of her son, though there is little indication of her feelings. The poet goes outdoors for writing poetry leaving her behind and that makes the mother suffer alone at home. Through this poem Dunbar exposes the pathetic condition of a black mother, who spends time in segregation and confinement by encompassing the themes of motherhood, racism and gender oppression.

Dunbar's deep and intimate association with his mother is evident. The speaker has intimate relationship with his mother. He contemplates his sadness over her

absence. As he expresses, "Mother's gone a–visitin' to spend a month ertwo, / An', oh, the house is lonesome ez a nest whose birds has flew" (1-2). In the absence of his mother, the speaker feels weak and helpless. He compares the house with a nest without a bird. The poem shows the deep attachment between the mother and the son. Regarding mother-child relation, Rich argues that the depth of mother child relationship never gets disturbed by any egoistic consideration. In her work *Of Woman Born* she asserts, "The relationship between . . . mother and son . . . furnishes the purest examples of unchanging tenderness, undisturbed by any egoistic consideration" (186). Rich's words are significant to realize the deep attachment between mother and child. Dunbar shows the same sort of mother child relation in the present poem. The poem parallels Dunbar's own relationship with his mother. The poet often expresses the same melancholy when he travels outside of Dayton, Ohio to promote his poetry.

The speaker's separation from his mother seems heartbreaking. He expresses that even the food does not taste him better since his mother has gone for a visit and expresses his deep and desolate feelings in words as, "The food ain't got the pleasant taste it used to have to me. / They 's somep'n' stickin' in my throat ez tight ez hardened glue, / Sence mother's gone a–visitin' to spend a month er two" (10-12). The absence of the mother makes the poet feel uneasy at home. Remembering her he cries time and again and feels helpless. Even the delicious food becomes tasteless for him. Due to absence of his mother, he gets pleasure nowhere. Happy things in life now seem sad to him. All the time he contemplates about her and looks all around. No beautiful object and no natural sound sooth his heart because he desires to get the glimpse of his mother. Expressing his deep emotions in words the speaker reveals:

The sparrers ac's more fearsome like an' won't hop quite so near,
 The cricket's chirp is sadder, an' the sky ain'tha'f so clear;
 When ev'nin' comes, I set an' smoke tell my eyes begin to swim,
 An' things aroun' commence to look all blurred an' faint an' dim. (25-28)

Thinking of the poet as the speaker, Dunbar suggests that life changes significantly when he and his mother are apart. No matter where he is, the poet always tries to make his mother feel as if he were there with her. He writes her letters, seeks her advice, and sends her money. It is Dunbar's way of suppressing the sadness and guilt he feels over leaving.

Though the poem shows little indication of the feelings of the speaker's mother, the mother gets the same sorts of feelings in the absence of her child. In fact, Dunbar leaves for town to promote his poetry, leaving his mother behind in a segregated and confined environment, which becomes the cause of the mother's suffering. Regarding the mother's placement at home, Chodorow, in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, states, "Because of their child-care responsibilities, women's primary social location is domestic" (9). Chodorow exposes the fact that due to their child care responsibilities mothers are generally compelled to stay at home. The cultural stereotypes confine women/mothers inside the boundary of the house. The mother in the poem faces the same situation. She stays at home in a segregated and confined environment because of her responsibility to her family and home.

The mother suffers a lot to get the company of her loved one, who is her son. The line, "You're purty lonesome, John, old boy, since mother's gone away" (18), offers the clue of his age. It shows that he is still a child for his mother. The notion of Dunbar as an "old boy" speaks volumes about his feelings of his relationship with his mother. He could be implying that although he is a grown man, she cares him as a

child and he feels dependent on her as a child. The poem asserts that mother-love is deep and inexpressive.

The son of slaves, Dunbar, expresses the personal experience of racism and male superiority through this poem. He remembers restriction of Jim Crow Laws in the development of his talent. The laws enforced segregation, which became a barrier for African-Americans. Dunbar's complexity as a person derives from his victimization by racism. Dunbar was warmly supported by his family since childhood; therefore, he never quite frees himself from dependence on his mother. The absence of mother becomes the symbol of segregation from opportunities and confinement to a low social status for him. In reality, it was his mother who stayed at home and Dunbar who left for months to promote his poetry. His mother used to have the same sorts of feelings in the absence of her son. She used to suffer for months to get a glimpse of her beloved son.

The poem reflects how socio-cultural stereotypes define the role of a mother in a racist and sexist social order. The speaker's mother, who devotes herself in the care of her family, gets separated and confined. Regarding woman's assigned role in a male dominated society, Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, argues, "To devote herself to children, husband, home, estate, country, church – this is her a lot, the lot which bourgeoisie has always assigned to her" (240). Beauvoir contends that woman's devotion to her family is the main cause of her oppression. The mother in this poem is devoted to her family as a result she becomes the victim of socio-cultural norms and male superiority. Mother's confinement inside the boundary of her house and isolation reflects women's inferiority and limited role in black family.

Dunbar recounts his emotions of childhood memory which give the audience the best impression of African American heritage. He succeeds in searching for and

discovering some of his African-American roots. As he articulates, "We've killed the fattest chicken an' we've cooked her to a turn; / We've made the richest gravy, but I jest don't give a durn" (7-8). The lines indicate Easter, a festival of feast and celebration. The description of preparing chicken gravy at special occasions reflects the pattern of African American life. At Easter they sacrifice animals to celebrate the rebirth of Jesus. It shows that Dunbar's interest in demonstrating the uniqueness of the black culture through an accurate depiction. He considers his poetry his songs. Most of his works are in formal English, though he uses Negro dialect. Regarding Dunbar's poetic language, Gene Jarrett, in "Entirely Black Verse from Him Would Succeed", reports, "Fifty of the fifty-six total poems in his first book, *Oak and Ivy* (1893), are in formal English. Dunbar's third book, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, a combination of the poems of *Oak and Ivy* and *Majors and Minors*, contains eighty poems in formal English" (515). Jarrett makes clear that most poems written by Dunbar are in formal English.

Dunbar uses Negro dialect within the formal structure of poetry. He accomplishes two major things in his dialect poetry. Firstly, he searches for, and discusses, his African roots. Secondly, he demonstrates the uniqueness of the black race through an accurate depiction. Dunbar feels that there are themes of black life which can be adequately used with the use of dialect as a medium of expression. Relating to the themes of Dunbar's dialect poetry, J. Saunders Redding, in *To Make a Poet Black*, observes that "Dunbar knew what could be done with dialect and how far it could be made to go as a poetic medium. He knew the subjects it would fit – the sweet delight of calf love . . . the satisfactions of full stomach, the distractions of an empty one, the time mellowed pain of bereavement" (64). Redding reveals that through the medium of his dialect poetry, Dunbar expresses the themes of black life. In the same line of argument, Ralph Ellison describes Dunbar as the first black poet

who introduces African American literature as a source of strength for the blacks.

John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, in *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, express Ellison's view about Dunbar's works as "something which makes for our African American strength, which makes for our endurance and promise" (292). Ellison contends that Dunbar's poetry praises African American heritage. He finds this completion in his emotions and in his childhood. Dunbar's works demonstrate that African-Americans are making significant progress as a people. Describing Dunbar's placement in literature, Jarrett argues, "Dunbar as more African than American" (517). Jarrett's words indicate that Dunbar's dialect poetry emerged as a significant part of African-American writing, which uncovers the roots of the black race.

Dunbar's works reflect the difficulties that blacks face in American society and the efforts they make to achieve equality. "Lonesome", taken from Dunbar's collection of poetry *Lyrics of a Lowly Life* (1896), demonstrates the socio-cultural stereotypes that confine black women/mothers in a strict boundary. The poet and his mother receive the same sort of emotions, when the poet goes out to develop his poetry, though there is little indication of the mother's feelings. The reality is that the poet goes outdoors for writing poetry leaving his mother behind in a segregated environment that makes the mother suffer alone at home. In this way the poem reflects the picture of a domesticated mother, who spends time in segregation and confinement.

3.2.4. Dedicated Mother in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* follows an unnamed narrator (ex-colored man) of mixed ancestry through a racist, US society. The unnamed narrator is light-skinned enough to pass for white. In the beginning he

admits, "I know that in writing the following pages I am divulging the great secret of my life, the secret which for some years I have guarded far more carefully than any of my earthly possessions" (1). He first, relates his childhood in a small town in Georgia after the Civil War, where he is raised by a single mother and an absent father. After some time, the narrator and his mother move to Connecticut. They get regular support in the form of monthly checks from his father. The narrator's mother enrolls him in a private school, where he soon proves himself a good student. The white color of his skin and innate talent helps him to study at school without issue. Later he moves to other places and gains more knowledge about American society and white people's attitude to the blacks. The novel encapsulates the themes of unfair social mobility, racism, motherhood, and women's oppression.

The Autobiography begins with the unnamed narrator, who lives with his unwed mother in Georgia and later moves to Connecticut. The narrator is unnamed because he is the bastard son of a wealthy white man and a mixed race servant. Reflecting on the unnamed narrator's identity, Robert Fleming, in "Contemporary Themes in Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*", explains, "The main character is nameless in a figurative sense because he is the bastard son of a wealthy white Southerner and a mulatto servant" (120). Unfolding the secret related to the narrator, Fleming argues that the main character is nameless because he does not have any identity.

Johnson's *The Autobiography* exposes the predicaments of an unwed black mother, who is not accepted by her white lover as his wife. Due to unfair socio-cultural circumstances for black women/ mothers, she becomes the victim of unjust society. The narrator's mother plays a crucial role in his life. She loves her son from the core of her heart and supports him at every step. By providing him luxurious

facilities and preparing good clothes, she maintains his dignity. In spite of difficulties, she makes him able to overcome the obstacles of his life. Describing the mother's supportive role in his life, he narrates:

My mother and I lived together in a little cottage which seemed to me to be fitted up almost luxuriously; there were horse hair-covered chair in the parlor, and a little square piano . . . and a few books in a glass-doored case. My mother dressed me very neatly and I developed that pride which well-dressed boys generally have. She was careful about my associates, and I myself was very particular. (5)

The narrator feels as if he is being encapsulated in a sort of cushioned world, where he can get whatever pleases him. His mother looks after him like an aristocrat who has no connection with the outside reality. He seems to live in a comfortable world, holding onto his middle-class status. To forget her personal problems and painful circumstances, she plays the piano and sings hymns and old Southern songs in the evenings. She teaches her son important lessons, such as playing the piano, reading books, and doing simple arithmetic, to the narrator. Concerning a woman's motherly duties, Rich in her work *Of Woman Born* asserts, "She (mother) exists for one purpose: to bear and nourish the son" (186). Rich views that to nourish her son is a mother's primary responsibility. As a perfect mother, the narrator's mother nourishes her son as her primary responsibility and devotes her whole life for better prospects. In spite of a lot of pain and obstacles of life, she makes constant efforts for her son's happiness. She does not seem to have friends but is cordial with the women who come to her home bringing sewing.

The narrator's mother performs her responsibilities sincerely. She always makes efforts for her son's physical and emotional wellbeing. At school when the

narrator faces discriminatory behavior, he feels upset and asks his mother about the reason behind it. As he expresses, "Tell me mother, am I a nigger?" (12). Paying attention to his emotional remark, she tells the boy about his father who is a white man. Until his revelation at school, the boy does not realize that his mother belongs to black race. She has no other children and has never married because she truly loves her son. With the passage of time the narrator also learns about the deep attachment between his mother and father. The boy's mother expects letters from the man every month. The narrator notices intimate bond between his mother and father. His mother loves and defends his father in their conversations, though he does not choose to live a good family life with her. Regarding white men's attitude towards black women, Joseph Washington, in *Marriage in Black and White*, states, "White men have failed to be serious in their relationships with the black women in comparison to the seriousness of relationship between the black men and white women" (61). Washington explains about the seriousness of the relationship between white men and black women and argues that white men take black women lightly even if they are deeply engaged with them. This insincerity of the relation can be seen when the narrator's father visits her. She feels very happy and wishes that he would stay there longer. As the narrator reveals, "My mother was all in smile; I believe that was one of the happiest moments of her life" (21). She dies shortly after the narrator's high school graduation. After that the narrator does not hear anything from his father. The novel exposes the mother's deep attachment to her son. The unfair race relation makes her suffer; even then she struggles a lot for a prosperous future of her son.

Discriminatory treatment to black children at school makes the narrator realize that he belongs to black race. One day the principal comes in the class and asks all the white children to stand. When the narrator rises, the principal asks him to retake his

seat. The narrator gets upset and later he understands the reason behind the principal's discriminatory behavior. When he returns home, he asks his mother if he is black. As narrated, "I buried my head in her lap and blurted out: 'Mother, mother, tell me, am I a nigger?'" (12). Reluctantly, she tells him that she is a colored woman so he is not considered white, even though his father is a wealthy white man. Explaining the concept of racial identity in America, Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought*, remarks, "U.S. notion of racial purity, such as the rule claiming that one drop of black blood determines racial identity" (133). Collins clarifies that people who contain even one drop of black blood are considered to be black in America. The narrator's mother is a mixed race woman, therefore, he belongs to black race. The event makes him feel that he is a mixed race child and he realizes how race affects every facet of American life.

After graduating from school the narrator chooses to attend the Atlanta University for further education. Atlanta proves to be uninspiring for the narrator. He decides not to stay there when all of his money is stolen. He moves to Jacksonville, Florida, and finds a job at a cigar factory, where he has to read newspapers for the Spanish-speaking workers. Observing their activities and behaviors, the narrator divides colored people into three categories. The first category is the desperate class, which includes ex-convicts, drunks, and loafers, who hate the whites. Domestic servants, who are generally simple, kind-hearted, and faithful, fall in the second category. They love and respect their white employers who, in turn, become fond of them. The well-to-do and educated African-Americans fall in the group of third category. They are concerned with the race question so white people take them suspiciously. Observing the three categories of colored people he describes:

I shall give the observations I made in Jacksonville as seen through the light of after years; and they apply generally to every Southern community. The

colored people may be said to be roughly divided into three classes . . . There are those constituting what might be called the desperate class – the men who work in the lumber and turpentine camps, the ex-convicts, the bar-room loafers are all in this class . . . This class of blacks hate everything covered by a white skin, and in return they are loathed by whites . . .

The second class, as regards the relation between blacks and whites, comprises the servants, the washerwomen, the waiters, the cooks, the coachmen, and all who are connected with whites by domestic service . . . Between this class of the blacks and the whites there is little or no friction.

The third class is composed of the independent workmen and tradesmen, and of the well-to-do and educated colored people; and, strange to say, for a directly opposite reason they are as far removed from the whites as the members of the first class I mentioned. (44-45)

The narrator believes that the class factor plays a vital role in race relations. As long as African Americans remain submissive to white dominance, no racial conflicts take place. In his opinion the black working class people are generally "simple, kind-hearted, and faithful" (45), because they tolerate white violence and oppression.

Lower class blacks are illiterate and frustrated with their living conditions. To prevent them from revolting, white community terrorize them with threats and violence. The black upper class and "the Talented Tenth", that is according to Du Bois, the group of public intellectuals, promoters of social change, and future leaders are also oppressed and threatened with violence.

The narrator notices the crudest reality of racism in lynching scene. One night, he sees a group of white men burn a black man alive. The narrator feels disturbed when he sees the horrific event. Reflecting on the humiliation and shame he feels, the

narrator expresses, "A great wave of humiliation and shame swept over me. Shame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with; and shame for my country, that it, the great example of democracy to the world, should be the only civilized, if not the only state on earth, where a human being would be burned alive" (106). The lynching scene reveals the climax of racism. Before this moment, the narrator spent most of his time with educated and liberal white people. This event solidifies the narrator's fateful decision to pass as white, and save himself from potential torture at the hands of white men who do not hold a rational viewpoint on race relations.

In describing the black victim's pathetic situation in graphic detail, the narrator demonstrates the dehumanization and victimization of the black body. He shows the strategies that the whites use to objectify the black subjects. Regarding lynching, West, in *Race Matters*, asserts, "White supremacist ideology is based first and foremost on the degradation of black bodies in order to control them. One of the best ways to instill fear in people is to terrorize them" (86). West reveals that the whites use lynching as a strategy to instill fear in black folks to terrorize and keep them under control. The question how human beings transform into savage beasts remains ambiguous. The black lynching victim, who is depicted as, "a man only in form and stature" giving out "cries and groans" and the white lynch mob, which is portrayed as a "crowd yelling and cheering" (106), represent the crude reality of racist social order. The scene of brutality and savagery leaves the protagonist helpless. The memory of the victim's unforgettable cries and groans profoundly bewilder and disturb him.

Filled with humiliation and shame, the narrator decides that he will not submit himself to that savagery. He plans to abandon his race in order to escape from the horrific treatment to which black people were subjugated. Unfolding his decision to hide his identity, the narrator describes, "I finally made up my mind that I would

neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race; but that I would change my name, raise a mustache, and let the world take me for what it would; that it was not necessary for me to go about with a label of inferiority pasted across my forehead” (108). The narrator was once willing to be part of the black community, now he understands what it means to be a black man. To get opportunity, he decides to put himself in first place, in order to have a dignified life.

The narrator's experiences at school and other places make him learn the hardships of living as a black. Concerning the narrator's experiences of living as a black, Judith R. Berzon, in *Neither White Nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction*, explains:

He is not being honest with himself . . . the hard lesson that he had learned in school and during the intervening years, when he had lived as a black man, was surely that he would be categorized as either black or white. And since he does not look like a Negro, according to the conception of most whites, he must know that he will be treated as a white man. (156)

Berzon observes that the bitter experiences the narrator faces at school and work places make him conceal his real identity. His possibility and ability to pass has been repeatedly hinted at in the course of the narration. Social pressure has imposed its patterns onto his behavior but he has always gone beyond them, defying categories. Finally, he decides to leave the South for New York City. Justifying his decision to move, he narrates, "I knew that it was shame, unbearable shame. Shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals" (108). Thus, he disassociates himself from the category of victimized African Americans due to racial oppression.

The narrator, who is visibly white and legally black, explicitly narrates his fragmented self and the social and cultural experience of being African American under conditions of white supremacy. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* uses the term as "double consciousness" for this fragmented self of the Negroes. Regarding the narrator's sense of looking at himself through the eyes of others, Du Bois points out:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this 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 his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body. (3)

Explaining the concept of double consciousness/duality, an internal conflict experienced by subordinated groups in an oppressive society, Du Bois expresses the feelings of the unnamed narrator, who passes through many ups and downs due to double standard of his life. According to Du Bois double consciousness, the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, is an internal conflict that African Americans experience. His notion of duality is being split between two warring ideals- one American and other Negro. For Negroes it means seeing oneself from the viewpoint of a typical white American and from his own viewpoint as it happens in the case of the narrator in this novel.

Due to gender inequality the narrator's mother passes through difficult circumstances throughout her life. Being a hardworking African American woman, she becomes the victim of racist and sexist social order. She loves a white man and bears his child, but he does not marry the narrator's mother. Regarding black woman's relation with a white man, hooks, in *Ain't I a Woman*, observes, "A complex system of negative myths and stereotypes daily socializes white men to regard black women as

unsuitable marriage partners" (65). hooks' remark helps to comprehend the socio-cultural practices, which hinder a white man to marry a black woman. Due to her belongingness to the black race, the white man does not marry the narrator's mother. He suggests her to move to Connecticut to provide the narrator better educational opportunities. The narrator's mother gets convinced and moves to Connecticut with her son. As he informs, "My father was about to be married to a young lady of another great Southern family; she did not neglect to add that another reason for our being in Connecticut was that he intended to give me an education and make a man of me" (25). She never falls out of love with her son's father and faithfully defends him when she can. The narrator describes, "She loved him; more, she worshipped him, and she died firmly believing that he loved her more than any other woman in the world" (25). Finally, she dies with a false belief that the narrator's father loves her more than any other woman. She dies of an illness but her supposed lover does not come to take a last look of her; even he does not send any message to his son (the narrator).

The narrative presents the issues of social mobility, motherhood, racial discrimination and gender oppression. The writer shows how dominant discourses construct motherhood in a racist society. As a perfect mother, the black woman nourishes her son as her primary responsibility and devotes her whole life for his better prospects. She performs all her motherly responsibilities honestly but the social norms do not favor her. Society restricts the marital bond between her and her white lover. Due to unfair race relation, she passes through a lot of pain and suffering even then she makes constant efforts to bring happiness in the life of her son. Reflecting mulatto protagonist's decision to pass for white, the novel reveals the crisis that black body encounters. At the same time the novel challenges central myths and establishes assumptions regarding lynching; such as the myth of the black man as a culprit, of

white superiority, of race as a biological concept, and of racial purity. Featuring an unnamed mulatto as its narrator, the novelist illustrates the struggle of a suffering and dedicated mother, consequences of racial discrimination and violence on the black people, and gender oppression in a racist and sexist social order.

The analysis of Harper's "The Slave Mother", Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Dunbar's "Lonesome", and Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* have revealed the dehumanization and devaluation of motherhood in African American community during Slavery and Post-slavery periods. Black women, especially the black mothers pass through innumerable trials and tribulations while performing motherly responsibilities. Due to socio-cultural circumstances and race related issues, enslaved women and their children get separated, even if they belong to the same owner. The slave mother in the poem "The Slave Mother" and Linda in *Incidents* are some representative mother figures, who spend a tough life due to slavery. Social and cultural norms confine them inside the boundary of a white household. Motherhood is a site of exploitation for them, though it encourages them to resist for their causes. Black mothers perform an all-inclusive role that is the role of a black man, black woman, and white man; they do not get any space in the community. The predetermined violence of slavery disrupts conventional meanings attached to the word mother. In "The Slave Mother" Harper expresses the anguish and despair of a slave mother when her young child is sold and is forever lost to her. Due to unfavorable socio-cultural circumstances, she cannot save her child from the dehumanized effects of slavery. And in *Incidents* Jacobs claims the rebellious ground of her social identity and formulates her resistance to human bondage. By depicting her narrator's maternal sentiments, she struggles against the existing beliefs concerning black woman's indifference to her children. She establishes an important

association between her protagonist Linda and domestic ideologies. Relying upon an understanding of maternity as a form of inborn attachment, Jacobs shows Linda's actions as largely determined by the effect they will have on her children and their eventual liberation. Jacobs represents motherhood as a force that resists slavery and its supporters. Converting her body and reproductive abilities from sites of exploitation to vehicles of resistance, Linda challenges the authority of the slave master and proceeds to liberate her children.

The speaker's mother in "Lonesome" and the narrator's mother in *The Autobiography* are the representative mother figures of the post-bellum society. They are restricted by social and cultural values of the time. In spite of social, cultural, and political changes that took place after American Civil War, hardly any change appeared in the prospects of black women/mothers. To perform their primary responsibilities, they pass through a series of difficulties. They struggle both as blacks and as women in the society for survival. While they are discriminated against by racism, they even undergo domestic violence and maltreatment at the hands of men. Being members of suppressed class, they have no right to express their individuality. At every stage they face inhuman treatment which creates unbearable pain and constant suffering for them. Dunbar's "Lonesome" exposes the picture of a suffering mother, who spends time in segregation and confinement and Johnson's *The Autobiography* shows how black women/mothers are deprived from their rights. By demonstrating the socio-cultural stereotypes both the writers reflect that black women/mothers are confined in a strict boundary. They strive for their rights but the social norms do not favor them. As a perfect mother, the black women perform all their motherly responsibilities honestly even then they do not get any space. Society restricts them in all spears. In this way, Harper's "The Slave Mother" Jacobs's

Incidents, Dunbar's "Lonesome", and Johnson's *The Autobiography* candidly describe the domestication of black motherhood.

3.3. Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement Phase: Turbulent Social

Reformations Empowering Black Women to be Assertive

The Harlem Renaissance refers to the artistic explosion of black people. It took place in Harlem between the end of World War I and the middle of the 1930s. Focusing on the features of Harlem Renaissance, George Hutchinson, in the Introduction of *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, marks that it is "a movement of black self-assertion against white supremacy" (1). In American History this period is marked as an explosion of expression by African-Americans. Harlem Renaissance is also known as the New Negro Movement, which brought a new way for the blacks to show off their talents. Describing the growth of the phase, Ordner W. Taylor, in "Harlem Renaissance" published in *Icons of African American Literature*, explains, "The Harlem Renaissance – also known as the New Negro Movement – was a cultural phenomenon that arose from specific historical and political events culminating in the self-definition and further development of African American through literature, music, and theatre" (105-106). During the period of this literary flowering among black writers, Harlem became the Mecca, the stimulating Holy City, where black writers, artists, musicians, photographers, poets, and scholars traveled to find a place to express their talents. Taylor further writes, "Harlem became a Mecca for African Americans seeking an experience in self-determination" (108). The factor that contributed to the rise of the Harlem Renaissance was the Great Migration of 1920s when African Americans moved to the Northern cities. The literary works sought to declare the growth of a common consciousness among African-Americans. This movement has attempted to show that the American mind

must consider about a fundamentally changed "Negro". The prominent literary figures associated with the movement include Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Nella Larsen.

The New Negro movement also promoted the growing American Civil Rights Movement of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s which made a powerful impression on black writers of the period. The Great Migration of African Americans began during World War I, and reached its peak during World War II. During this period many black people moved from Southern states of America to Northern cities, where they found work in factories and other sectors of the economy. This migration produced a new sense of hope and independence in the black community. It also contributed to the vibrant black urban culture and literary writings. Black writers made efforts to address these issues with their writings. Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Lorraine Hansberry are some prominent literary figures of the phase.

The texts, such as McKay's "My Mother", Hughes' *Not Without Laughter*, Brooks' "The Mother", and Wright's *Black Boy*, analyzed in this section demonstrate the construction of black motherhood and its representation in literary works. Each text reveals how dominant discourses construct the notion of motherhood during Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement phase and how this notion changes along the historical lines.

3.3.1. Ailing but Audacious Mother in "My Mother"

McKay's "My Mother" explores the aspect of motherhood during the phase of the Harlem Renaissance. He shows how, not only womanhood, but motherhood was an important aspect of black life. Representing the mother as a strong individual much unlike the ideas of women crafted by society at the time, the speaker depicts how

socio-cultural norms limit the role of black women/mothers. The poet presents her as an assertive mother figure because in spite of her serious illness, she does not hesitate; even she asks her son to perform his worldly tasks instead of roaming around her. The speaker recounts how his mother's death distresses and upsets him. He feels a sense of loss over the departure of his mother, and this sense of loss overwhelms him when writing this poem.

The poem begins with a request from the poet's friend Reg, who wishes him to accompany to the field. However, the poet stops because of his mother's deteriorating health condition. He wishes to stay at home in the company of his mother, who is lying in her bed and waiting for her upcoming death. The poem reflects deep attachment between the mother and the son. His mother's worsening health makes the poet hesitant. Describing the situation at home, the speaker articulates:

Reg wished me to go with him to the field,
 I paused because I did not want to go;
 But in her quiet way she made me yield
 Reluctantly, for she was breathing low. (1-4)

The speaker is well aware of his mother's illness and wants to sooth her. In spite of his friend's request to go to field, he decides to stay at home and look after his ill mother because she is the source of inspiration for him. Relating to McKay's relation with his mother, Max Eastman in the Introduction of *Harlem Shadows* explicates that McKay was raised by a "wise and beautiful mother" and lived an early, "happy tropic life of play and affection" (vi). Eastman argues that there was a deep attachment between the poet and his mother. The speaker stays at home and feels anxious about his mother, as she is breathing with great difficulty, but she consoles him that she will survive. As the speaker articulates, "Her eyes said: I shall last another day" (8). In spite of her

serious health condition, the mother shows courage by permitting him to go to complete his task. The mother's bold decision to let her son go reflects her love to her son and her courage against the challenges of the world. She understands her motherly responsibilities and plays a dynamic role for her son's preservation, growth, and social acceptance. Regarding mother's responsibility, Sara Ruddick argues that mother work is characterized by fulfilling the demands by preservation, growth, and social acceptance. In *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, she marks, "To be a mother is to be committed to meeting the demands by preservative love, nurturance, and training" (17). Ruddick's ideas are relevant because she talks about the dynamic role of a mother in her children's life. Like a committed mother, the speaker's mother gives him permission to go to field. She shows courage to let her son go. Almost content with this, he goes away, but on the hills he hears the church bell ringing, which informs about someone's death. The speaker narrates, "When o'er the hills we heard a faint bell ringing" (10). At the same time a messenger comes there with an unpleasant expression and informs him about his mother's demise. The message upsets the speaker. As he expresses, "A boy came running up with frightened face; / We knew the fatal news that he was bringing" (13-14). The speaker feels totally helpless. He realizes that he has lost his world because of his deep attachment to his mother.

Moving on to the second section, the speaker describes the normal activities of life, which go on as usual. As he recites, "The dawn departs, the morning is begun, / The trades come whispering from off the seas," (15-16). The speaker feels that there is no hindrance to routine life at his mother's death. Early the next morning people begin their work as usual. It shows people on earth are busy with their jobs. The speaker realizes that nothing changes over the earth due to his mother's demise. He reveals,

"Over the earth where mortals sow and reap / Beneath its breast my mother lies asleep" (27-28). In the meantime, the feeling of belonging to the land overcomes the feeling of loss. Despite expressing his grief, the poet realizes that everything belongs to this earth, and his mother lies asleep under its breast. This feeling relieves to his bereaved soul.

McKay's "My Mother" is a good example of how motherhood is an important aspect of black life during Harlem Renaissance. The speaker shows his mother as a strong individual much unlike the ideas of women crafted by society at the time. The line "Her eyes said: I shall last another day." (8), illustrates the African American woman; a woman of determination and strong-will. The poem is a simple description of a black woman's place, not only in the poet's life, in the larger society as well. Through the description of a tragic event, the speaker reveals that his mother is the most influential force in his life.

McKay's works accurately portray the dehumanized and appalling state of Negro community during the 1900's. He sheds light on the burning issues of his time. McKay gains recognition for his concern to the predicament of his fellow blacks, which he expresses through his works. He devotes his art and life to social protest. Regarding McKay's concern to his race, Robert A. Smith, in "Claude McKay: An Essay in Criticism", explains, "Although he was frequently concerned with the race problem, his style is basically lucid. One feels disinclined to believe that the medium which he chose was too small, or too large for his message. He has been heard" (272). Smith admits that McKay exposes the problems of black race through his work in a logical manner. His work is remembered for the bravery and the nobility he has demonstrated. McKay's creation performs as a driving force for others.

Taken from collection of poems *Harlem Shadows* (1922), the poem reveals the socio-cultural circumstances that construct the ideal of motherhood for black women. The speaker has the sense of loss and feeling of pain after the demise of his mother. The poem is set in the countryside, where children are playing and people are doing their work. Highlighting the activities in nature, the poem is dedicated to the speaker's mother. McKay focuses his attention on the burning issues of the blacks for whom struggle is life. The poet presents the picture of an assertive mother through the description of rural life. The race problem acts as a hindrance to his artistic creation.

3.3.2. Responsible and Bold Mother in *Not Without Laughter*

Hughes' *Not Without Laughter* portrays African American life in Kansas. Focusing on the effects of racism on the community, the novel centers around Aunt Hager, a strong and courageous matriarch and her grandson Sandy Rogers. Sandy, raised by his grandmother, experiences the instances of poverty and racial aggression all over his life. The narrative focuses on the role of Aunt Hager in Sandy's life. The writer uses Sandy as an example to advocate the seriousness of the experience greatly felt throughout the African American community. Concentrating upon the social construction of motherhood in African American society, the narrative demonstrates women's roles and effects upon Sandy's life.

Aunt Hager, the matriarch, lives in the segregated town of Stanton, Kansas, with her children. She lives in a mixed working class community where the whites peacefully live together with the blacks. She works hard to earn for their living. As the financial pillar of her household, she takes in laundry to fulfill the basic needs of her family. She describes her struggle in the narrative, "An' I been washin' fo' white folks ever' week de Lawd sent sence I been here, too. Bought this house washin', and made as many payments myself" (104). Hager, a complex and multidimensional

character, works hard for the better prospects of her children. She wears a clean apron and loves watermelon. Like the stereotypical mammy, she is an extremely sincere and pious woman.

Aunt Hager lives in a mixed community and maintains good relation with her neighbors. As a generous and available woman, she helps her neighbors in the hour of need. She believes that it is her responsibility to help the needy ones. Reflecting on Aunt Hager's generous activities and altruistic attitude, the narrative reveals, "All the neighborhood, white and colored, called his grandmother when something happened. She was a good nurse . . . Aunt Hager always came when they called, too, bringing maybe a little soup that she had made or a jelly" (25). Due to her liberal outlook and altruistic attitude to the community, everyone likes Aunt Hager in the neighborhood. When they hear the news of her demise, black and white people come to her house with gifts to manifest their gratitude of her loving and generous actions towards the community of Stanton.

Aunt Hager plays a crucial role in the life of Sandy Williams. As a perfect guide and guardian, she brings up Sandy throughout his unstable years of adolescence. She teaches him the value of industry and cleanliness. As she instructs, "Wash yo' face good sir, put on yo' clean waist, an' polish yo' shoes," (96). By giving him instructions, Aunt Hager teaches Sandy the important lessons of life. Regarding mother's influence on her children, Rich, in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, argues, "Mothers have as powerful an influence over the welfare of future generation" (44). Rich contends that mothers have a powerful influence over their children's deeds. Her words are relevant to internalize Hager's influence over Sandy's behavior. Aunt Hager guides her daughters and grandson the way to a brighter future. Applying rhetorical strategies and through the transmission

of memory, she encourages her grandson to lead a better path. Hager believes that education is the only tool that enables a person to get out of the whirlwinds of minor and poorly paid jobs.

Hager places high hopes in Sandy, whom she wants to make a race hero, such as Douglass, Du Bois, and Washington. Expressing her dream for her grandson's future, she narrates:

But they's one mo' got through school yet, an' that's ma little Sandy. If de Lawd lets me live, I's gwine make a edicated man out o' him. He's gwine be another Booker T. Washington . . . he can help this black race o' our'n to come up and see de light and take they places in de world. I wants him to be a Fred Douglass leadin' de people. (104)

Hager mentions the names of the key African-American figures like Du Bois and Washington because she desires to make her grandson Sandy a race hero by educating him. She believes that education is the only tool that can make him able to understand the world. To make him a better human being, Aunt Hager makes a constant encouragement.

Aunt Hager and Aunt Tempy promote Sandy's quest for education. Though they adopt two different ideologies, they encourage him to develop his skills. Aunt Hager supports the Washington formula that stresses vocational education and Aunt Tempy has a deep faith in Du Bois and his teachings of a classical education. When Sandy grows up, he embraces both the Washington's and Du Bois' ideologies. He compromises between the two and forms a new belief and applies both the teachings.

Aunt Hager uses African oral tradition to transmit memory to her children. By unfolding the descriptions about great historical events such as the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln's freedom or visions of the Lord, she teaches Sandy important

lessons. As the narrative reveals, "Through the long summer evenings they sat together on the front porch and she told her grandchild stories . . . the war, Abe Lincoln, freedom; visions of the Lord; years of faith and labor . . ." (129). Hager plays the role of a perfect advisor and role model for her children. Through her stories she reminds her children about the importance of hard work and discipline in life. Reflecting on the importance of stories in Sandy's life, Andy Oler, in " Their Song Filled the Whole Night: *Not Without Laughter*, Hinterlands, Jazz and Rural Modernity", describes that "throughout the novel, Sandy's coming of age has been nurtured through the front-porch storytelling of his family and the rest of Stanton's African- American community" (94). Oler accepts that stories told by his grandmother play a dynamic role in Sandy's life. They provide him a better understanding of the race relation in the US. Sandy memorizes most of Hager's teachings and acquires important lessons. His learning from his grandmother's struggle and hard work continues to shape and determine the course of his life even after her death.

Despite the destructive and hate breeding atmosphere of racism that prevails in the society at large, Aunt Hager maintains good relation with the people of her community. She believes that there are good and bad people in all races, therefore, she asks Sandy not to judge people by the color of their skin. She advises him, "White folks is white folks, an' colored folks is colored, an' neither one of 'em is bad as t' other make out" (129). Hager suggests her grandson Sandy to maintain peace and harmony in the community.

Hughes presents Aunt Hagar as a mature and civilized woman who holds great values. Through her industriousness, deep faith in God, high morals and perfect vision, Hager stands as a role model and assertive mother figure for young Sandy. Highlighting Hager's influence on community, Matthew Mosley, in his dissertation

The Feminine Representation of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois in Langston Hughes' Not Without Laughter, explains that "Hager's occupation fills a need in the local community and establishes her economic value. Her occupation also intertwines two notions of Washington's ideology, cleanliness and industry" (12). Mosley describes that Hager's occupation as a washer woman fulfills the need of the local community and makes her economically stable. She has been working hard to accomplish the needs of her family since she came to Stanton. Her occupation interlocks the two notions of Washington's ideology, cleanliness and industry. The narrative also suggests the limited opportunities black women possess in a racist society.

Through the description of black American life, Hughes aims to expose the issue of racism in the United States. The novel reflects Hager's love for humanity. Despite class and race subjugation, Hager refuses to let hatred enter her heart. She advises her family members, "White people maybe mistreats you an' hates you, but when you hates em back, you's de one what's hurted, cause hate makes yo' heart ugly- that's all it does. . . . There ain't no room in de world fo' hate, white folks hatin' niggers an' niggers hatin' white folks" (132). She asks them to love white people because not all white people are bad. Hager wants to create peace and harmony, therefore, she maintains good relation in her neighborhood. Reflecting Aunt Hager's attitude to white community, John P. Shields, in "Never Cross the Divide: Reconstructing Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter*", points out that "religion, especially as experienced by Aunt Hager, provides a source of catharsis, a release for pent up anger. Its hope comes in the form of a promised after life where skin color will not be held against anyone and all will be equal before God" (603). Exposing

Aunt Hager's faith in religion, Shields reveals that Hager loves to maintain harmony in the society she lives in.

Due to her deep faith in religion, Hager does not struggle against the prevailing racist order. Jimboy opposes Aunt Hager's attitude to white race and condemns the racist order prevailing in the United States. Responding to Aunt Hager's faith that the God hears him, Jimboy expresses with frustration:

I don't care if He does hear me, mama! You and Anjee are too easy. You just take whatever white folks give you- coon to your face, and nigger behind your backs—and don't say nothing. You run to some white person's back door for every job you get, and then they pay you one dollar for five dollars' worth of work, and fire you whenever they get ready. (66)

Jimboy faces a lot of problems due to white society's discriminatory attitude to the blacks. He criticizes racist values. Aunt Hager's words do not bring any positivity in him. He believes Aunt Hager and Anjee as submissive women, who never raise their voice against racial subjugation. For Jimboy honesty is above all because it makes a man morally stronger.

Sandy's mother Anjee works for a white family. In the community of Stanton, there is a huge gap between the poor blacks and the rich whites. The poor African Americans live in wooden shacks, while the prosperous whites, such as Mrs. Rice reside in a comfortable mansion. As the narrative reveals, Mrs. Rice resides in "the long residential street, with its large houses sitting in green shady lawns far back from the sidewalk" (57). Through the portrayal of Stanton community, Hughes demonstrates the racial inequality among the population. Sandy sees the pathetic situation of his mother at white family's kitchen when he comes face-to-face with the verbal abuse his mother experiences at the hands of Mrs. Rice. Regarding the whites'

treatment to the blacks, West argues that poverty and selflessness of black population always create problems for them. In *Race Matters* he explicitly points out, "The fundamental crisis in black America is twofold: too much poverty and too little self-love" (63). West's idea is useful to know the living condition of poor blacks in America. Due to poor economic status and loyalty in nature, black women like Anjee, get ill-treatment.

Like other black students, Sandy experiences discriminatory attitude at school. Due to the black color of his skin, he is separated from the whites. Even the teachers in the class keep black children in a separate row. As he describes, "'Albert Zwick," she said and the last white child sat down in his place. "Now," said the teacher, "you three colored children take the seats behind Albert. You girls take the first two, and you," pointing to Sandy, "take the last one" (97). Despite segregation and hate breeding environment at school, Sandy attends his classes in the prospects of a better future. Through the depiction of school environment, Hughes exposes the condition of the blacks in American society. He narrates, "Being colored is like being born in the basement of life, with the door to the light locked and barred—and the white folks live upstairs" (46). Sandy's experiences in school and work places make him realize the cruelty of racial discrimination.

Hughes demonstrates the difficulties of obtaining job for the blacks through the description of Jimboy, a blues man. Sandy's father, Jimboy spends most of his time travelling with his guitar. He has no permanent job so he involves himself in some seasonal activities to earn for living. Through the reflection of the condition of Jimboy, the writer reflects the complexities that black Americans face. To most Americans, Jimboy, a blues performer, is a failure, a nonproductive member of society. The narrative also reveals how music ties black people with their African

cultural heritage of song and dance. Regarding the importance of blues in the lives of the blacks, Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought*, opines, "Blues was not just entertainment- it was a way of solidifying community and commenting on social fabric of working class black life in America" (105). Collins clarifies that music plays an important role in the black community. It echoes the feelings of working class blacks in America.

By narrating women's predicaments in a racist society, Hughes exposes the issue of gender oppression. The narrative represents Aunt Hager with her limits and shortcomings. Despite her masculine roles in the family and society as well, she remains feminine. Hughes assigns the elderly woman with the features of ancestor who possesses the stereotypes of Southern black woman. Hager takes care of her family and pours ant-racist ideals in her children's minds through her stories and harmonious manner of living with the whites. Expressing her anti-racist views, she remarks, "White folks is white folks, an' coloured is colored, an' neither one of t'em is bad as t'other make out . . . When you starts hatin' people, you gets uglier than they is – an' I ain't never had no time for ugliness, cause that's where de devil comes in- in ugliness!" (129-130). Aunt Hager explains that hatred creates disharmony and destruction in the community and it makes the hater worse than the oppressor. She suggests her offspring to live harmoniously by creating a conducive environment in the society. Hager refuses to be trapped in the destructive compartments of a system that breeds hatred. Most women characters such as Aunt Hagar and Anjee, in the novel are bound to domestic work under a white family. They face difficult problems due to white supremacy and male domination.

By portraying the picture of the community of Stanton, Kansas and Hager's struggle for survival in a racist social order, Hughes shows the predicaments of black

women in African American society. Aunt Hager, the prominent mother figure, lives in a mixed community, where the blacks and the whites cohabit. She works hard and performs her maternal role honestly by sacrificing her whole life for the better future of her children. In spite of oppressive socio-cultural values, she proceeds ahead maintaining peace and harmony with the people of her community. As an assertive mother figure, she struggles hard and fulfills the demand of her children.

3.3.3. Impoverished but Heroic Mother in "The Mother"

Brooks' "The Mother" explores the impacts of poverty stricken situation and social values on the life of a black mother. Encapsulating the theme of motherhood as its central aspect, the poem expresses the emotions of a Bronzeville woman who has had multiple abortions. The mother has continuing anxiety and anguish because of her difficult decisions. The very first line of the first stanza, "Abortions will not let you forget," (1), immediately draws attention to the title, "The Mother" and to the importance of the word love. The poem exposes the mother's deep attachment to her children that compels the mother narrator to express extreme response and ultimate self-victimization.

Addressing the mothers who have done abortions like herself, the narrator declares that they will never forget their 'killed' children. Though the poem talks about an illegitimate subject 'abortion', mother-love lies in its heart. The narrator gives a graphic description of the fetus (child in the womb) that is forced to be born dead by the mothers. As she expresses, "You remember the children you got that you did not get, / The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair," (2-3). She reminds the mothers that they have missed the pleasures of bringing up their children. The speaker expresses very sensitive and sentimental emotions. Like an experienced mother, she knows very well the typical experiences and pleasures of having and bringing up a

child. The phrases like 'winding the sucking-thumb' or 'scuttling off the ghost' (7-8), strikingly suggest that she at least knows every typical experience of a mother with a child.

The speaker then turns to her own situation and accepts the fact that she has aborted her babies. She reveals that she has heard the voices of her killed children in the air and seen them in her dreams. By envisioning the maternal role of a woman which includes giving birth, suckling babies at her breast, hearing them cry and play games, she even thinks of the love and marriages of her children and feels herself guilty of destroying their life. She has sinned against them because she has stolen the joys of lives from them. Regretting her own action of doing abortion, she admits:

I have said, Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized

Your luck

And your lives from your unfinished reach,

If I stole your births and your names,

Your straight baby tears and your games,

Your stilted or lovely loves, your tumults, your marriages, aches, and your

deaths, (14-19)

The speaker ultimately accepts the responsibility of her acts. She makes excuses and she ends up by only saying that she loves them all from the core of her heart. Though she feels herself responsible for having these abortions, she does all this against her will. As she speaks, "If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths, / Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate" (20-21). The mother knows that she has stolen from her unborn children's life that was rightfully theirs. She emphatically declares that she kills her children because she wants to protect them from the hopeless poverty. The mother's act of abortion demonstrates her deepest emotions and

exceptional courage to save her children from the dehumanized effects of slavery. Regarding mother's unique way of expressing love, Rich, in *Of Woman Born*, states, "Throughout history numberless women have killed children they knew they could not rear, whether economically or emotionally . . ." (258). Rich argues that when women feel themselves unable to provide proper care to their children, in most cases they kill them. Her idea helps to realize the situation of the mother who has done multiple abortions. The mother in this poem feels herself helpless to provide any care and protection to her children so she kills them. This heinous act of abortion or infanticide demonstrates the mother's deep attachment to her children. In the poem "The Mother", the mother cannot get rid of her guilt. She can only confess and express her love for her killed children, for partial relief.

The mother keeps on repeating her declarations of love for her unborn children as she continues to speak of her uncertainty. Despite her decision to abort them, she proclaims her love for them. She declares, "Believe me, I loved you all" (31). The final line, consisting of only one word, "All" (33), is particularly effective. It stands in stark contrast to the apparent harshness of both her decision and her own attitude toward that decision. She has convinced herself that she did those abortions out of love and she did the right thing. As a sensitive mother she pleads for the reader's sympathy. The mother wants to protect her children from the hardships of life and the world, therefore, she shows courage to abort them. Reflecting the mother's circumstances, Kate Falvey, in "The Taboo in Gwendolyn Brooks' 'The Mother'", asserts:

The mother of the poem is wistful, appropriately self-recriminatory, perhaps self-serving, and jarringly insistent on her sacrificial love. In the contemporary wake of Toni Morrison's 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning horror story, *Beloved*, a backward glance at Brooks' Bronzeville mother gives evidence of a woman

who has been forced (as she suggests when she asks herself: "Though why should I whine, / Whine that the crime was other than mine?" (23–24) to abort her children, perhaps to save them from a life of grinding poverty and despair. (126)

Falvey describes the fact that the mother kills her children because she wants to save them from difficulties of life. Mother's concern for her children and her own circumstances make her decide to have the abortions. Falvey shows similarity between the mother in this poem and the mother character named Sethe, in *Beloved*. Both express their deep love by killing their children. The voice of the mother resonates with the voice of all motherhood, sounding the primal chords of hope and insistent love even in the face of ceaseless losses.

Taken from Brooks' *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), the poem depicts the condition of poor black women, who are the victims of racist, sexist, and classist oppression in American society. During the 1940's, when mechanization made agricultural jobs scarce, Bronzeville, a black neighborhood located on Chicago's South Side, was a place of shelter for Southern blacks. Brooks' works, including "The Mother", reflect women inhabiting Bronzeville, which expose the painful experiences of black women. Regarding Brooks' creative art, James Merrill, in the Introduction of *The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks*, argues, "Brooks took especially seriously the inner lives of young black women: their hopes, dreams, aspirations, disappointments" (xvii). Merrill views that Brooks' works depict aspirations and disappointments of young black women. Poverty, the merciless culprit, makes black women take many harsh unwanted decisions.

Brooks, through her work, expresses the tragic and dehumanizing aspects of the ghetto experience. Supporting this idea Falvey explains, "Brooks lived in Bronzeville and gave poetic voice to the experience of marginalized blacks whose

chances and choices were limited by poverty and racism" (124). Falvey's words are relevant to understand the limited choice of the poor black women, who take the decision to abort their children. Brooks ventures deep beneath the surface of the ghetto experience to uncover areas of a poor person's life that frequently go unnoticed and should not necessarily be considered terrible or ugly. The poem records the poet's view of post war society as seen through the eyes of a mother, who is poor and whose children are the victims of war. Supporting this idea, Melhem notes that Brooks' poetry reveals the lives of "the offspring and orphans of war" (71). She focuses on the effects of poverty on black mothers and their children.

The poem reveals female experience by expressing mother's emotional outpour of the sense of guilt. Falvey further writes, "'The Mother' exposes the hard reality of many women's lives by breaking the silence and making the private, often shameful act of abortion dramatically public, while confronting the taboo subject of women's sexuality and lack of reproductive control" (124). The speaker has aborted her children, partly deliberately, and remembers the fetus. The poem is typically female in its subject, expression, and theme.

Brooks in "The Mother" expresses the pain of a mother, who aborts her child. The mother imagines simple activities that the child would have done if he or she was born. The inner pain of abortion of the child is far greater for a mother than the external pain she faces. Through this poem Brooks reflects an exact representation of a mother who loses her child. She is sad about the beautiful future, which will never come into existence because the child will not come into the world. In the line "You will never wind up the sucking-thumb or scuttle off the ghosts that come" (7), she clearly explains that the beautiful future is lost.

Brooks depicts the socio-cultural norms that demoralize black women who abort their children. Breaking the ideals of a good mother, the protagonist shows courage to have abortion. The title, "The Mother" is ironic, for this mother, who has lost her children because of very difficult and painful decisions, that she believes the best. Regarding the mother's decision, Collins argues that black women use different strategies to protect themselves and their children from oppression. In *Black Feminist Thought*, she explains, "Depending on historical time and place, African American women employed the range of strategies in challenging the rules governing our subordination. In many cases Black women practiced individual protest against unfair rules and practices" (216). Collins' view is relevant because she talks about the strategies that black women use to combat against unfair practices. To challenge the rules that govern her subordination, this mother uses the strategy of aborting her children. The poem reflects the cultural construction of motherhood and women's oppression in a male dominated society. Due to hopeless poverty, the mother takes a harsh decision to abort her children. She wants to save her children from the difficulties of the world she faces, so she takes this bold decision. It reflects the mother's assertive deeds for the safety of her children.

The poet uses simple language and spontaneous expression to express her feelings, which make readers hopeful to find the theme on maternal love. In this context Brooks optimistically upholds both the title and the theme. She praises the mother who takes unexpected decision to save her young ones. Concerning the circumstances of the mother, John Gery, in "Subversive Parody in the Early Poems of Gwendolyn Brooks", asserts that Brooks' title "demonstrates both the importance and impotence of conventional motherhood for a woman in the ghetto" (51). Describing the strength and weaknesses of conventional motherhood, Gery reveals how Brooks

reflects the helplessness of black mothers in the ghetto. Another important unifying device in the poem is memory. The narrator remembers the past and her decisions of abortion, which have drastically affected her present. She feels that past decisions keep her intruding into the present. The remembrance moves between her dreams of what might have been and the harshness of her memory of what caused her to decide as she did.

The poem brings out the plight of the black mothers with great intensity of feeling of love, which only a woman would feel, understand, and convey. Brooks is able to touch the socio-cultural norms of her period, which limit the boundary of black women/mothers and prohibit them from aborting their children. The poet presents the mother as an assertive woman, who in the face of poverty feels helpless and confined. To save her children from the obstacles of life, she takes bold decision by aborting them. Her miserable condition is brought out with great sensitivity and understanding.

3.3.4. Abandoned but Daring Mother in *Black Boy*

Wright's *Black Boy* narrates the hardships and obstacles of a black family. The novel focuses on black mother's struggle for the wellbeing of her family. The writer presents her as an assertive mother figure because she struggles against unfavorable socio-cultural norms boldly and teaches the same lesson to her son Richard. Richard suffers from hunger all over his life. His hunger is not only for food but also for acceptance, love, and an insatiable hunger for knowledge. Richard challenges parental authority by defying to his aunts and uncles even challenging them to physical violence. He opposes the strict religion followed by his grandmother. He also refuses to read the script required by his school principal and stands up to the whites at his work place and even against communist party. Throughout his life, he faces the

need for a loving family to help and encourage him, but his family in a way, unknowingly helps to form his independence. Richard's father abandons the family after he has an affair with another woman and it creates hardship for the family members. His mother Ella supports him at every stage of his life and encourages him to overcome the challenges. The novel captures the issue of motherhood, racism, and women's oppression by exploring the mother-child relationship in a poor family.

Richard's mother Ella Wright plays a crucial role in his life. Mother-love is at the heart of the novel. A much better role model and strict mother, Ella tries her hardest to discipline Richard. As Richard himself tells, "All morning my mother had been scolding me, telling me to keep still warning me that I must make no noise" (3). She often disciplines him harshly and punishes him by lashing him with a switch. When he accidentally lights the house on fire, Ella beats him until he nearly dies.

The plot captures most of the moments when Ella is sick. However, she presents parental authority when she disciplines Richard. She is compassionate and independent due to her ability to take care of the family when her husband abandons them. The meaning less pain and endless suffering that she faces in her life creates negative impacts in her children's minds. Reflecting the harmful effects of the unfavorable circumstances in his mind, Richard narrates:

My mother's suffering grew into a symbol in my mind, gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering. Her life set the emotional tone of my life, colored the men and women I was to meet in the future, and conditioned my relation to events that had not yet happened, determined my attitude to situations and circumstances I had yet to face. (87)

Richard's mother's pathetic condition hunts him all the time. Due to poverty and other factors the family faces a lot of problems. The night when Richard's mother tells him that she wishes to die, he feels helpless. The only eye witness of her pain, Richard realizes the world as an unfair place to live in.

Ella, a strong and courageous woman, is the single breadwinner of her family. She trains Richard to be strong and to take care of himself by teaching him effective strategies. When the boys in the street beat him and take the grocery shopping money forcefully from him, Ella simply reacts by giving him a stick. As he narrates, "If those boys bother you, then fight for yourself" (15). Ella's response shows that the aim of his mother's actions is to instruct Richard on the manner to protect himself and to live in those difficult periods. Regarding Richard's conflict with the boys in the street and his mother's response to the situation, Darbaz Azeez Sadeq, in "The Projection of Racism in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*", explicates, ". . . his (Richard's) own mother would be the one who instill a sense of self-defense in the child by giving him a thick stick to be used as powerful weapon against the neighboring white kids" (70). Sadeq's words reflect mother's support and encouragement against domineering forces. She tries to make him bold and independent because she feels that this is the only way he can survive in a racist society.

As an assertive mother figure, she instructs Richard to be bold. The energetic, independent spirit Richard develops at home leads him to refuse to accept the codes of behavior the white world has set for Southern blacks. Richard encounters various difficult problems between the ages of four and seventeen. Due to his self-reliance and ability to fight back against oppressive forces, he overcomes every obstacle.

Ella provides her children maternal care and support. She believes that her support and proper care help them to be civilized and self-reliant. Regarding

children's dependency on their mothers, Rich, in *Of Woman Born*, asserts, "The human species is dependent on maternal care in infancy much longer than any other animal species, and in creating a situation in which they could nurture and rear infants safely and effectively, women became the civilizers, the inventors of agriculture, of community, some maintain of language itself" (101). Rich's words are valuable to understand the importance of mother in the life of her children because she declares mother as a civilizer, inventor, and preserver of language. Ella performs her motherly responsibilities perfectly. She nourishes the lives of her children by providing them proper care. After her husband leaves the family, she begins to take on additional work in the kitchens of white families. As he narrates, "My mother finally went to work as a cook" (14). Later, the mother Ella succumbs to a series of strokes even then she does not hesitate.

Richard has no father-figure at home. Ella, the sole parental authority, is the guide and guardian of the family. She teaches Richard the basics of reading and writing. As he narrates, "She taught me to read, told me stories. On Sundays I would read the newspapers with my mother guiding me and spelling out the words" (20). Ella knows that her primary responsibility is to feed her children, even than she manages time to teach her young ones. She even rewards Richard with bliss when he successfully revolts against his grandmother's will. As he expresses, ". . . my mother smiled when I told her that I had defied them. She rose and hobbled to me on her paralytic legs and kissed me" (126). Her suffering, her paralysis, and private sorrows do not hinder her from influencing her son.

Ella shows a special concern for Richard. When Richard publishes "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre", the rest of the family attacks him, but Ella shows sympathy through her concern. She suggests him to be serious while writing. As the

narrative reveals, "Son you ought to be more serious", she said. You're growing up now and you won't be able to get jobs if you let people think that you are weak minded" (147). Ella is one of the few people that motivate Richard. Her problems do not hinder her from influencing her son. Like an assertive mother figure, Ella's protection does not come from her comprehension of Richard's intellectual hunger but it comes only from core instinct of motherliness.

The novel also concentrates on Richard's understanding of whiteness and blackness. From an early age it becomes difficult for him to understand about two categories of people that is black and white. Describing his childhood experience, Richard narrates, "At last we were at the railroad station with our bags, waiting for the train that would take us to Arkansas; and for the first time I noticed that there were two lines of people at the ticket window, a "white" line and a "black" line" (41). Remembering the event of his childhood, Richard tells about the two lines of people at the ticket counter. It reflects Richard's inability to understand the racial gap between the blacks and the whites. Even at the age of six, Richard's hunger for understanding this aspect of his life is prevalent. He explains by saying: "I wanted to understand these two sets of people who lived side by side and never touched, except in violence" (41). He questions the adults around him, asking them about the racial inequalities he sees and why they have come to be. He asks questions to his mother regarding race and its social construction. But he never receives any satisfactory answer. In fact, he is typically punished for asking such questions.

Richard does not understand that how the whites are associated with good and the blacks with being bad. Due to his inability to recognize the social characteristics attributed to the whites or the blacks, Richard feels unsure whether his light-skinned Granny falls in the category of white race or black race. Ella makes clear for him that

in the world of the South there are no gradations of the blacks, anyone who appears even slightly black is treated as inferior. He never receives any valid answer about race issues. Richard sees no difference between the blacks and the whites so he does not treat them differently. This causes problems for him when he grows up, particularly at school and work places. At school he finds the principal to be a pawn of the white power structure. Concerning white teacher's attitude to black students, Warren J. Carson, in "Realities of the South in Wright's *Black Boy* and Selected Short Fiction", explains, "Wright perceives that the principal's role is more to retard the development of black students by teaching them to conform to what white folks want rather than encouraging the students to think, speak, and act freely" (148). Carson reflects the situation of black students at school, where the teachers are biased. The principal does not support the black students. At graduation when Richard does not deliver an address to appease the whites in the audience, he has to face principal's hostility.

Richard suffers many frightening and violent encounters with racism in Jackson. Two white Southerners, Pease and Reynolds create problems for him at his optical shop job. They claim that such skilled work is not meant for the blacks. Richard tries his best to act more appropriately but he soon realizes that it is very difficult to carry it on. He gets upset and finally moves from the job. As he narrates, "It was simply utterly impossible for (Richard) to calculate, to scheme, to act, to plot all the time" (161-162). Richard faces difficult situations when he works with the whites of the South because they generally discourage him. Due to discriminatory attitude of the whites to black race, he desires a world where he would be accepted regardless of his skin color. Regarding Richard's racial harassment, Dan McCall, in "An American Life" marks, "Malcolm X was to say explicitly what Wright's portrait

presents implicitly, that black Americans dealing with the white man are "dealing with a man whose bias and prejudice are making him lose his mind, his intelligence, every day" (40). McCall's words clarify white people's attitude towards black race in America. Richard understands that living in the South does not mean living as a human being, but means eating, sleeping, and working as a black man in a predominantly white world. He knows that the only way to survive as a black man is to move to the North, where the blacks face less discrimination. He opines, "The North symbolized to me all that I had not felt and seen; it had no relation whatever to what actually existed. Yet, by imagining a place where everything was possible, I kept hope alive in me" (147). This hope follows him everywhere and it makes him believe that at some point he will be able to live in an environment that is comprehensible to him.

When Richard gets a job in a brick yard for bringing pails of water to the thirsty black laborers, one day a white boss's dog bites him on the thigh. Afraid of infection, Richard reports this event to the supervisor with a view to receiving adequate medicines, but instead of getting medicine Richard gets a very bitter remark. The supervisor says, "A dog bite cannot hurt a nigger" (143). It shows the pathetic lives of black folks in the South. Grandpa's inability to receive pension and Uncle Hoskin's murder by white men are some other scenes that represent racial hostility and oppression. Grandpa has been wounded in the Civil War, but never receives his disability pension. This fact annoys him. For decades Grandpa writes letter after letters to the war department to claim his pension. Due to his black skin, nobody takes the matter seriously and he does not receive his pension at all. Uncle Hoskins runs a successful saloon business. White people feel jealous about Hoskins's business success. When their jealousy reaches a peak, they kill Hoskins and threaten the rest

of his family. Reflecting on black people's life in the South, McCall describes, "When Uncle Hoskins is killed, 'fear drowned out grief' . . . Hoskins was dead, but . . . There was no period of mourning. There were no flowers'. None of those tokens with which a culture makes peace with its dead are allowed—there is too much danger that the white man will 'kill all his kinfolks!'" (34). McCall exposes the fact that black people, even cannot mourn and express their grief after the demise of their loved ones in the South. Due to white people's threat the family flees to West Helena, Arkansas.

Ella's abandonment by her husband exposes the women's vulnerability and oppression in male dominated society. Richard's father, Nathan Wright deserts the family when Richard was six years old. He abandons his wife Ella and her children, which creates difficult problems for them. His mother, Ella, burdened with responsibilities, begins to work in a white household to fulfill the basic needs of her children. The narrative reveals, "My mother finally went to work as a cook and left me and my brother alone in the flat each day with a loaf of bread and a pot of tea. When she returned in the evening she would be tired and dispirited and would cry a lot" (14). To fulfill the basic needs of her family, Ella works as a house maid. She returns home tired in the evening after the daylong work. Even then, she calls her children and talks to them.

When Richard's parents face each other in court over financial issues, Richard expects his father to be kind and humble. But he feels ashamed of his father's acts. His father acts confidently and pretends that he is doing whatever he can for his family. As narrated, "I am doing all I can, Your Honor, he mumbled grinning" (24). Finally, he wins the approval of the court. This all makes Richard very upset. Richard expresses his feelings saying, "It had been painful to watch my mother crying and my father laughing" (24). His mother is in a state of emotional turmoil. It becomes very

difficult for her to accept the court decision. When she arrives home she again weeps bitterly. As he reveals, "Back at home my mother wept again and talked complainingly about the unfairness of the judge who had accepted my father's words" (24). Richard's father represents black male's irresponsible attitude to his family. Being a father figure, he responds to the situation by drinking and womanizing. Regarding Richard's father's activities, Robert Felgar, in *Understanding Richard Wright's Black boy: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources and Historical Documents*, asserts, "(Nathan) is a selfish man who abandons his family and later on as a sharecropper who represents slavery" (39). Felgar exposes the domineering attitude of black males, who oppress black women for no sufficient reason. Richard's father, as a representative black male figure, abandons the family for no reason.

Richard believes that his mother's physical pain as the cause of gender subjugation. She gets oppressed by white authority as well as by her own husband. Regarding Ella's predicaments, McCall explicates, "His mother's agony touched everything, "gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering" (38). McCall believes that due to poverty, ignorance, helplessness, hunger and other reasons, Ella suffers all over her life. In spite of difficulties and poverty stricken situations, she proceeds boldly and tries to fulfill the demand of her children until her last breath. Richard feels that the only way out of the cycle of gender subjugation is female autonomy which can be achieved through moving to the North where African Americans can make their own lives, and attempt to heal their problems.

Richard's insatiable hunger for knowledge is also apparent in the novel.

Focusing on Richard's hunger, Daniel Rees, in *Hunger and Modern Writing*, marks, "Hunger is intimately bound up with the pivotal moments in Wright's life, such as his broken relationship with his father, his awakening consciousness of his own individuality while living in an orphanage, his friendships at school, his growing love of reading and books, and his obsessive desire to escape life in the South" (122). Rees words helps to comprehend Richard's insatiable hunger. Richard tries his best to satisfy his thirst for knowledge, but his efforts make him more ravenous. As narrated, "The plots and stories in the novels did not interest me so much as the point of view revealed. I gave myself over to each novel without reserve, without trying to criticize it; it was enough for me to see and feel something different . . . Reading was like a drug, a dope" (219). Each piece of reading enlightens him to a world, where he never travelled. He experiences different world at every step. Charles Davis perceives that the knowledge he acquires from books is bound up with the development of Wright's artistic talents. In "From Experience to Eloquence: Richard Wright's *Black Boy* as Art" Davis argues that "those qualities supporting and sustaining the growing boy's imagination are just those preventing a successful adjustment to life in the South" (63). Davis exposes that the knowledge Richard acquires from reading helps him to understand the world better. He acquired a lot of knowledge about the many possibilities of life. Though his intense appetite for knowledge often alienates him from others, he does not feel any type of hesitation. He believes that his appetite for knowledge is his greatest asset because it motivates him and leads his life to success.

In *Black Boy* the writer depicts the influence of society and culture on black people's family lives. The mother child relationship suffers from the problems that racism and sexism bring about. Ella provides the motherly love that her children need.

In spite of socio-cultural stereotypes and unfavorable circumstances, she fulfills the demands of her children like an assertive mother. In a society where circumstances are harsh for a mother without a husband, it is harsher for Ella for whom survival is prioritized. Though Ella faces various challenges, she copes with all those challenges boldly and fulfills her motherly responsibilities sincerely.

The analysis of the works on motherhood such as McKay's "My Mother", Hughes' *Not Without Laughter*, Brooks' "The Mother", and Wright's *Black Boy* produced during Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement phase reflect the representation of assertive motherhood. Through the examination of the socio-cultural discourses that define and limit the role of black mothers, the writers show how the notion of motherhood changes over history. The mother, in the poem "My Mother", Aunt Hager in *Not Without Laughter*, the mother who has done numerous abortions in "The Mother" and Ella in *Black Boy*, are some representative mother figures of the time, who pass through difficult circumstances. Due to social and political transformations, women's roles also transform in society. Like the mothers of the phase of Slavery and Post-slavery, the mother figures represented in literary works during Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement phase do not get severity of pain at every step. Social and cultural norms provide them some liberty as a result they show courage to move ahead. The notion of motherhood also changes along with changing social and cultural values. They struggle both as blacks and as women in the society for survival and better prospects of future generation. In some cases, they undergo domestic violence and maltreatment at the hands of the whites and men, they cope with challenges boldly. At every stage they move forward with courage and determination. The strong will the black mothers show during performing motherly responsibilities makes them assertive mother figures.

3.4. Black Arts Movement and Postmodern Phase: Black Mother's Journey from Voiceless to Voiced State

Black Arts Movement, rooted on the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement, relates broadly to the African American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Dated from approximately 1960s to mid-1970s, Black Arts movement is also known as the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. During this period black activists and writers experimented with forms of self-advocacy through writing, political lobbying, and armed struggle. Exploring the characteristics of Black Arts Movement, Larry Neal, in "The Black Arts Movement", explains, "The Black Arts Movement envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America" (28). Amiri Baraka, an established publisher, poet, playwright, and critic, made the symbolic beginning of the movement. The literary artists of this movement, Amiri Baraka, Addison Gayle, Jr., John A. Williams, James Alan McPherson, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Nikki Giovanni, produced a large body of works which reflected the spirit of black people's cultural pride and self-determination. The works of creative artists raised voice for black people's racial pride, self-sufficiency, and equality. During Postmodern phase, the period after mid-1970s, the works of African-American writers began to be acknowledged by academia as a legitimate genre of American literature. Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Alice Walker, the prominent writers of the phase, won the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for their artistic creations.

The works, such as Giovanni's "Mothers", Morrison's *Sula*, Angelou's "Momma Welfare Roll" and Walker's *The Color Purple* analyzed in this section demonstrate black motherhood and its representation in literary writings. Each text reflects how social and cultural stereotypes construct the notion of motherhood during

Black Arts Movement phase and Postmodern phase and how this notion changes over the course of history.

3.4.1. Confined but Expressive Mother in "Mothers"

Giovanni's "Mothers" narrates the struggle of a mother in a male dominated society. The poet through the voice of the speaker explains her awkward affection to her mother. The mother is confined and silenced but she expresses her thoughts through her actions. The poet demonstrates how socio-cultural norms confine a woman/mother inside the boundary of the house. The poem begins with the words "the last time I was home / to see my mother we kissed / exchanged pleasantries" (1-3). It reveals the intimate relationship between the mother and the daughter. When they read books, a warm comforting silence spreads all around the room. This implies that they share very few thoughts together, which creates an awkwardness that puts them in different places in their lives. When the speaker says, "I remember the first time / I consciously saw her" (7-8), she argues that for the first time the daughter begins to understand the active role the mother has in the family. The speaker recollects the moments where she observes her mother. She watches her mother sitting on a chair who always sits in the dark. As she reveals, "always sat in the dark" (11), deliberately waiting. She describes the time where she begins to recognize her mother's struggle, who waits for her husband night after night. It shows the mother's deep devotion to her family.

As a loving and caring mother figure she takes care of her family members. Regarding mother's position in the family, Rich, in *Of Woman Born*, explains, "The "family" really means "the mother," who carries the major share of child rearing, and who also absorbs the frustrations and rage her husband may bring home from work" (54). Rich's words are relevant to grasp the ideas expressed by Giovanni in this poem

because she describes about a mother's devotion to her children and family. The speaker's mother devotes herself in child rearing absorbing the frustrations and rage of her husband. Though, through her observation, she questions what her mother is waiting for, she fully comprehends the pleasantries and un-pleasantries that her mother passes through. In spite of difficulties and oppression, the mother performs her motherly responsibilities for her family.

The speaker thinks that her mother puts too much trust in men. Part of her mother's struggle is waiting for her father to come home. The speaker learns a lot of things from the struggle of her mother, who has a deep devotion to her husband and children. Describing women's family responsibilities, Nancy Chodorow, in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, opines, "Women's family role become centered on child care and taking care of men" (5). Chodorow mirrors that it is a woman's primary responsibility to take care of her husband along with her children. Her view helps to understand the role that the speaker's mother performs.

Through the depiction of men's primary position in black families, the poet shows women's oppression. The mother, who has a deep devotion to her husband and children, does not have a proper space in her family. The speaker learns a lot of things from the struggle of her mother. Reflecting on mother's role in her daughter's life, Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought*, writes, "The mother-daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship among black women. Countless black mothers have empowered their daughters by passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African American women" (102). Collins' view is essential to know mother's role as a provider of practical knowledge to her daughters. Seeing the mother performing her responsibilities, the speaker gets enlightened and teaches the same

lesson to her children. She teaches her son the morals of being a good man and be obedient to God, as she admits:

i taught it to my son
 who recited it for her
 just to say we must learn
 to bear the pleasures
 as we have borne the pains (36-40)

The speaker expresses that they have born the pains, this means that mothers who bring up their children without guidance create the same people who hurt them as mothers in their generation. The lines are significant to realize that mothers are responsible for bringing the good and bad people in the world. She believes that they must learn to bear pleasures as they have learnt to bear pain. It suggests mothers need to learn how to bring better people in the world.

Though the speaker's mother represents herself as a guiding figure for her children, she holds a secondary position in her family. She waits for her husband till after mid night. Watching her mother waiting for the father to come home reflects one of the un-pleasantries that she learns to share with and understands from her mother. As she describes, "she was very deliberately waiting / perhaps for my father to come home" (27-28). It demonstrates woman's subjugation in a male dominated society. She keeps herself awake waiting her father till mid night, which indicates male superiority and domination. The husband ignores her by coming late, even then she waits for him night after night. Despite her mother waiting for the father or waiting for a dream, the mother still has authority in the family, which helps her to teach her daughter her motherly responsibilities.

Taken from collection of poems *My House* (1972), Giovanni writes of mothers and their children, childhood memories, and of black Africa. The poems mark a new dimension in tone and philosophy. Giovanni suggests that black mothers are pivotal factors in the family. They are the nurturers and pathfinders for their children. The mothers spread knowledge to their children and to the communities in which they reside. Despite the argument against matriarchy and against dominant female figures in black families, the mother in Giovanni's poem "Mothers", is an extremely influential figure over her daughter's development and over what her daughter eventually teaches to her son. To deal with happiness and to overcome the innate pains, Giovanni shows affection, differences, and allusions in the poem.

The poem indicates the culture and the history that these two women, mother and daughter, share with each other. The mother, who is the victim of socio-cultural stereotypes, teaches her daughter about life. She does not speak anything in words but expresses her emotions through her actions. Being a victim of male oppression, she falls in the category of oppressed yet vocal mother. Using the first person pronouns such as "I, me, and my" the speaker stresses the importance of mothers and the way they affect their children's lives. The poem interestingly tells the story of her mother through the perspective of a young child. The use of many first person pronouns shows that the speaker was at one point the child. The repetition of the word 'remember' infers the childhood memory of the speaker. The speaker seems to be very curious to know about her mother. Many aspects seem to be unclear, as to the speaker's connection with the mother.

3.4.2. Exploited yet Vibrant Matriarch in Morrison's *Sula*

Morrison's *Sula* explores the lives of women in poverty and mother's unconditional love for her children. The narrative demonstrates the repressive white

society's influence on the black community. Morrison clarifies how society and culture define the role of a mother by depicting the picture of a mother Eva, who later transforms into a vocal woman. By revealing the situation of female characters, who are the victims of racial and gender subjugation, the novel narrates the story of three generations living together.

The most dominant maternal figure in *Sula* is Eva Peace, Sula's grandmother and the owner of a huge house, where Sula spends a great part of her childhood. In this narrative Morrison exposes the complexity of black women's experiences as mothers. Examining mother-child relation in Morrison's narratives, Rebecca Ferguson, in *Rewriting Black Identities*, argues that in Morrison's fictions "the connection between mothers and children assumes central importance . . . partly because this subject (and the experience of black women generally) had been long neglected by many black male authors" (16). Ferguson contends that the main concern of Morrison's narratives is mother-child relation because black male writers generally neglect this area. Eva has a deep devotion to her children. She faces various difficult problems after her husband abandons her. When her husband leaves her with a small amount of money, five eggs, and three beets, she has to endure a miserable winter with three children to fulfill their daily needs. To ensure the survival of her three children and herself, Eva takes a bold decision. She contemplates of the misery and decides to do something to bring changes in her situation. The narrative reveals, "She shook her head as though to juggle her brains around, then said aloud, 'Uh uh. Noo' . . . As the grateful Plum slept, the silence allowed her to think. Two days later she left all of her children with Mrs. Suggs, saying she would be back the next day" (34). After being abandoned by her abusive husband, Eva leaves her children with a neighbor, Mrs. Suggs promising to return the next day.

Eva, though handicapped, comes back with some money after eighteen-month. She returns "with two crutches, a new black pocketbook, and one leg" (34). As soon as Eva comes to Bottom, she gives Mrs. Suggs a ten-dollar bill and reclaims her children. The narrative details, "First she reclaimed her children, next she gave the surprised Mrs. Suggs a ten-dollar bill, later she started building a house on Carpenter's Road, sixty feet from BoyBoy's one-room cabin, which she rented out" (34-35). The aforementioned lines show Eva's maternal love and sacrifice. The importance of absence is stressed here literally, through the physical incompleteness of Eva's body as well as the style of narration. Throughout the novel, the mystery related to Eva's amputated leg remains the source of endless narratives for the inhabitants of the Bottom. Eva never shares the reality to anybody. Though she mutilates herself by sticking her leg under a train to collect money from insurance companies, she keeps the tragedy secret. She sacrifices the part of her body when she realizes that there is no other option of obtaining money to fulfill the basic needs of her children.

Morrison portrays the mother Eva whose role looks extremely ambiguous. The focus of the novel revolves around Eva Peace and her struggle in a racist and sexist society. Eva, the backbone of her family, has responsibilities to her children. Finding a job and being financially stable seems out of imagination for black women. Eva has to think of her children when she takes any vital decisions. She does not want to affect them by the choices she makes. Regarding Eva's situation, Dayle B. DeLancey, in "Motherlove is a Killer", states:

The very existence of her children bars Eva from most jobs, as they are too young to be left alone during standard working hours. This has a markedly negative emotional effect upon Eva, a woman whose pride is highlighted throughout the novel. She misses her family, but cannot use them as a resource

because she is too proud to go home to them with half-starved children in tow.

(15)

DeLancey describes that mother-love becomes economically and mentally dreadful due to the absence of the father. Eva, a mother of three children, knows that it is not easy for her to leave her young children behind when she goes to work. Hannah, the five years old girl cannot care other siblings while Eva stays outdoors. As the narrative discloses that Hannah is "too young to take care of the baby alone" (33). Eva thinks deeply of the matter. And finally her deep love to her children makes her take a bold decision. She decides not to see her half starve children for some months.

Eva once again takes a dramatic decision when she rescues her son Plum from drug addiction. When she realizes that it is difficult to make Plum addiction free, she sets him on fire and kills him. The narrative exposes, "Eva stepped back from the bed and let the crutches rest under her arms. She rolled a bit of newspaper into a right stick about six inches long, lit it and threw it onto the bed where the kerosene soaked Plum lay in smug delight" (47-48). When Eva enters Plum's room to see his condition, she realizes that it is very difficult for her to protect him. She sprinkles kerosene all around and lights the fire to kill him. Eva's decision to kill him shows her deep expression of love to her children. At one level, Eva's act of killing her son Plum seems a form of sacrifice: a mother sacrifices the life of her son to protect him from misery. At another level, it is an act of selfishness, because when she finds her son unable to perform properly and fulfill her desires, she kills him. Eva believes that she has the right to decide for the better future of her children.

When Hannah asks her mother Eva about the reason behind killing Plum, Eva becomes speechless for some time. A little later she answers saying that Plum, a drug addict, is a burden for her family and it would be very difficult for him to survive in a

racist society. Examining Morrison's novels, O'Reilly illustrates that Morrison builds upon black women's experiences of and perspectives on motherhood to develop a view of black motherhood that is, in terms of both maternal identity and role, radically different from motherhood as practiced and prescribed in the dominant culture.

Exposing the struggle of black mothers in a racist and sexist society, O'Reilly, in *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of Heart*, explains:

Morrison explores how mothers such as Eva in *Sula* and Sethe in *Beloved* in their struggle to provide care and love in resistance against a culture that denies them, claim a maternal power that upsets comfortable notions of maternal powerlessness, particularly as such pertains to black women who are expected to be powerless in a racist and sexist culture. While such expressions of maternal power may disturb readers, maternal power is according to Morrison, essential for black mothers to perform the necessary tasks of motherhood. (44)

O'Reilly opines that Morrison explores the situation of black mothers and their struggle for survival. The roles as a mother they perform are unique and different from the traditional notions of motherhood. While such roles disturb readers, according to Morrison they are essential for black mothers. Eva's act of killing her son Plum does not put her in the category of uncaring mother, though this act challenges the dominant ideology of motherhood. She kills and frees Plum, as she cannot free him from his heroin addiction. O'Reilly further writes, "When a child is in pain, the first desire and the duty of the mother is to put an end to the child's suffering. The only way Eva can see to stop suffering of her child to kill him" (149). Except killing, Eva does not have any option. She wants him to go away from her life like a human being.

The narrative reflects the difficulties Eva faces seeing her son deteriorating and behaving like an infant again, due to the drug addiction. Regarding Eva's response, Hortense J. Spillers argues that she acts differently from that of ordinary mothers. In "A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love" she asserts, "Eva behaves as though she were herself the sole instrument of divine inscrutable will" (56). Spillers' words are relevant to internalize the situation of black mothers, who are the victims of racist and sexist oppression. Eva justifies her action by showing difficulties for a drug addict person to survive in a racist society, where people of black community pass through a lot of hurdles. Eva struggles a lot to keep Plum alive during infancy and when she sees him not appreciating his own life, the life she gives him, she decides to kill him. In their study of African American literature Joyce Elaine King and Carolyn Anna Mitchell have found protection as a primary aim of black mothers. In *Black Mothers to Sons*, they manifest two completely opposed modes of mothering, "mothers who whip their sons brutally 'for their own good' and mothers who love their sons to destruction through self-sacrifice and overindulgence" (9). In *Sula* the mother character Eva falls in the second category. She has a deep sense of attachment to her children so she takes this unexpected decision. She kills her son to protect him.

At one point when Hannah herself catches fire, Eva immediately jumps out of the window and tries to put out the flames, even she is a handicapped. When she sees her daughter Hannah burning in the yard, she cannot control herself. Slowly she comes close to her window, breaks the window pane and jumps out in the yard to save her daughter. The narrative reveals, "She rolled up to the window and it was then she saw Hannah burning . . . Eva knew there was time for nothing in the world other than the time it took to get there and cover her daughter's body with her own . . . she threw herself out of the window" (75-76). In this way, she comes to catch fire in the first

place. Eva's actions are the results of her intense motherly love to her children. This deep and emotional bond is inexplicit for them. Eva gives up many things in life to ensure the survival of her children. Her actions reflect the sufficient proof of her motherly responsibility. Eva's perspective of motherhood is about enduring the hardships for her children; she does not have time for playing due to her constant struggle for survival. Her methods of expression of love are unique. She never expresses her love in words; she expresses her deep love and attachment for her children through her actions, instead.

Both Eva and Hannah face a lot of problems. The communication gap between mother and daughter and the lack of motherly bond influence Hannah's views of mothering and the perception of herself. Describing the mother-daughter relationship in *Sula*, Marianne Hirsch, in *The Mother/Daughter Plot – Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, explicates, "Although Hannah is herself a mother, her discourse is circumscribed by her daughterly relation to Eva and by conventional and clearly inapplicable conceptions of motherhood and maternal love" (180). Hirsch clarifies that due to the communication gap between mother and daughter and Eva's unconventional ways of expressing mother love, Hannah does not know how to treat her daughter properly. The narrative shows a gap in the relation between Hannah and Sula as there is a gap in the relation between Eva and Hannah. Sula hears Hannah's statement, "she does love Sula, but simply does not like her" (57). The denial of unconditional motherly love leaves Sula deeply hurt. Hirsch points out that in *Sula*, "Mothers and daughters never quite succeed in addressing each other directly; mothers fail to communicate the stories they wish to tell" (182). The narrative exposes that the main problem of the Peace family is not the lack of love but it is the lack of communication.

Motherhood represents the relationship which is based on cultural conditioning and obligation. When male characters leave their families apart, African American women face a lot of problems. The lack of the support makes them a bit indifferent and independent. In *Sula* the mothers fail to communicate their struggle to their children and the children miss their mothers' love and attachment, therefore the relation becomes complicated. Hirsch asserts, "Sula's family, although more communicative, succeeds no better in bridging the distance between the lives and the perspectives of the three generations" (180). Hirsch's words make clear that Eva fails to communicate the circumstances with her children, but her love flows incontestably. She fails to communicate her self-mutilation in order to receive insurance money to support her family, her relieving her child's pain, when she sets him on fire to alleviate him from drug addiction and when she jumps through a window into the fire in an attempt to save her daughter, Hannah.

Sula illustrates the complexity of motherhood, challenging stereotypes commonly associated with black mothers. The mother, Eva takes overall responsibility of her children. Regarding Eva's role, Patricia Hunt, in "Transfigured Categories and the Politics of *Sula*", states, "Eva, of course, is the first woman; she is, in terms of her name, "mother of all living." But Morrison's Eva is Adam in her power to name, and she is also life-taking" (174). Hunt believes that Morrison's Eva is different from the first woman named Eva. Her opposition against the white racist society, her self-mutilation in order to receive insurance money to support her family, her relieving her child's pain, when she sets Plum on fire to alleviate his painful memories of the war and his drug addiction and finally when she throws herself from a window into the fire in an attempt to save her daughter, Hannah, are the things that show her motherly bond to her children. Eva acts as a dictator dictating the lives of

her children, and grandchildren. She plays the roles of life giver, nurturer, protector, dictator, and a compassionate destroyer. In spite of society's constant oppression, she expresses her emotions explicitly.

In *Sula* Morrison depicts her concern with the issue of racial discrimination that affects the lives of the blacks, who fight to lead a respectable life. The history of the Bottom with its roots in slavery exposes one of the perfect examples of racism. The Bottom gets its name from a cruel joke which is played by a white master on a slave. The story of the Bottom denotes white man's lack of sympathy and concern for the survival of the blacks. A white farmer once promises his black slave freedom and rich bottom land in exchange for some very difficult task. On completion of the work, the farmer does not fulfill his promise. He gives the slave his freedom, but instead of providing him the fertile bottom land, he gives him a hilly land. The white farmer convinces the naive slave that the hilly land is bottomland because it is the bottom of heaven. The slave unfortunately does not know any better so he accepts the land, as the narrative describes:

The master said: "Oh no! See those hills? That's bottom Land, rich and fertile."

"But it's high up in the hill," said the slave.

"High up from us," said the master, " but when God looks down, it's the bottom. That's why we call it so. It's the bottom of heaven- best land there is."

(5)

The white master convinces the slave that the hill is the bottom of heaven. In this way the blacks get the hilly, barren land where the planting is back-breaking. The soil slides down and washes away the seeds and the wind lingers all through the winter.

Another example of racial discrimination in the novel is concerned with Helene Wright, Nel's mother. When Nel goes to New Orleans with her mother Helene to attend her grandmother's funeral, she faces discriminatory attitude of the whites. The white conductor looks down on Helene and orders her to move into the other cabin which is for the blacks. He calls Helene using derogatory language as, " what you think you doin', gal?" (20). The train conductor publicly humiliates her. Instead of showing any reaction her mother smiles, as if nothing has happened. As narrated, she "Smile(s) dazzlingly and coquettishly at the salmon-colored face of the conductor" (21). By smiling Helene covers her racial insult and oppression. The pain of humiliation of this incident gives a deep imprint on Nel's mind and she starts searching her identity. As she says, "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel, I'm me. Me" (28). After this effect Nel cultivates a close relationship with Sula who opposes racist ideals.

Eva's oppression at the hand of the male members of her family exposes women's oppression in a male dominated society. The narrative reveals that Eva's marriage to her husband BoyBoy does not go longer. The troubled marriage ruins her life, as the narrative reveals, "After five years of a sad and disgruntled marriage BoyBoy took off. During the time they were together he was very much preoccupied with other women and not home much. He did whatever he could that he liked, and he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third" (32). Due to her husband BoyBoy's bad habits, Eva had to go through a hard time. The white patriarchal model of the man being the main provider is not followed by all black men. The experience of slavery, emancipation, racism and white supremacy affects black men and women in a variety of ways. As hooks in *We Real Cool* explains, "Many males were as uninterested in traditional sexist roles as were females" (11).

hooks exposes the attitude of black males in society. BoyBoy leaves Eva for no reason, even he does not show any concern to his children. He pays a visit to Eva's house only three years after his departure. At the moment he shows no regrets for abandoning her. As narrated, "BoyBoy didn't ask to see the children, and Eva didn't bring them into the conversation" (36). BoyBoy does not feel himself responsible for Eva's children. The narrative shows a more complex picture of family dynamics in the black community, one in which the white patriarchal model of the man running the house is not the standard.

Eva and her children spend a miserable time due to poverty, gender disparity, and racial discrimination. The collapse of Eva Peace's marriage to BoyBoy creates economic and emotional problems for her and her children. Reflecting Eva's circumstances, DeLancey argues, "When Eva's husband of five years, BoyBoy, leaves her to raise the three children on her own . . . we see at once the financial and emotional pressure that childrearing places upon disadvantaged African-American mothers" (15). DeLancey reflects that due to father's absence, Eva and her children feel helpless. There is no bread winner in the family. They face emotional as well as economic hardship.

The novel describes the negative impacts of poverty, racism, and gender disparity on the mother-child relation. Morrison illustrates the complexity of motherhood that is based on cultural conditioning. She challenges the social stereotypes which are associated with black women/mothers. Morrison develops a view of black motherhood that is, in terms of both maternal identity and role, radically different from motherhood as practiced and prescribed in the dominant culture. The influence of culture and society in general, is considered to be of great importance to identity development and mother child relationship. The novel demonstrates the

struggles of the mother Eva and her efforts for the better prospects of her children. Though there is no one to support her, even than she copes with challenges boldly. Morrison exposes Eva an oppressed yet vibrant and vocal mother because in spite of unfavorable circumstances she faces, she shows her response through her actions. The mother child relationship portrayed in the novel suggests the unique history of black women/mothers. Morrison implicitly narrates about doubly marginalized protagonists, who are both female and black.

3.4.3. Subjugated but Outspoken Mother in "Momma Welfare Roll"

Angelou's "Momma Welfare Roll" exposes the realistic depiction of a subjugated but outspoken black mother, who receives welfare with pride. Taken from her collection of poems *And Still I Rise* (1978), the poem reveals black women's plight in American society. Angelou here speaks in the voice of a child watching her mother, as the mother stands with her hands on her hips and her arms form a triangular shape on both sides. This posture of the mother represents a semaphore, a system of sending signals from ships over the sea using flags. The mother's posture sends a signal to the child in unequivocal terms that her mother is upset. The posture of the mother could have quietened a little girl, but the speaker is determined to express her thought. Motherhood and racial and gender oppression are prominent issues expressed through this poem.

The speaker, a little girl, reveals that the mother, who stands by forming a triangular shape on both sides, is a black woman. She loves her children from the core of her heart. The use of phrases, such as "pudgy hands" and "layered hips" (2), suggest the heavy weight of the black mother and her belonging to poor community. The speaker presents the mother as a poor, uneducated, and traumatized woman. She then states that due to a diet of fatback and lima beans her mother has gained extra

weight. As she recites, "Where bones idle under years of fatback / And lima beans" (3-4). Fatback, the layer of adipose tissue under the skin of a pig's back, can be used as a substitute for the pork meat that the mother cannot afford to buy or cook for herself and her children. The reference to fatback and lima beans reflects the lives of poverty that black women are forced to live. Being a single bread winner of her family, it is her responsibility to fulfill the needs of her children. The deep attachment between mother and her children compels her to work hard. Regarding black women's motherhood, Siphokazi Koyana, in "The Heart of the Matter" opines, "Motherhood was usually associated with domesticity and reproductive labor (work inside the home) for white women in America . . . for black women and women of other racially oppressed groups, motherhood was, and always has been, inseparable from work, both productive (income-earning) and reproductive" (68). Koyana's argument is relevant to comprehend black women's motherhood, which has been associated with productive and reproductive works. In spite of poverty, the mother fulfills the demand of her family by serving her children fatback and lima beans. Fatback and lima beans are cheaply available; therefore, she chooses them as the major part of her diet. However, they are not healthy by any means, and lead to her having the kind of figure that the child describes.

The mother belongs to a poor family. In spite of poverty ridden situation, she desires to fulfill the basic needs of her children so she expresses an accusatory tone for her children. It shows the mother's deep attachment to her children. She feels burdened with responsibilities because she does not have anyone to support. Absence of father figure in black families indicates black mother's dual oppression. She wants to satisfy her children by fulfilling their basic needs instead of making them the victim of racist and sexist social order. Concerning the black mother's situation, Rich asserts

that the weight of responsibility is the heaviest of social burdens for women. In *Of Woman Born* she writes, "The physical and psychic weight of responsibility on the women with children is by far the heaviest of social burdens. . . . The powerless responsibility is a heavier burden even than providing a living" (52). Rich hints that the mother in this poem is burdened with the weight of responsibility which she feels heaviest of social burdens for her. The mother's anger stems from the fact that her children do not enjoy the same privileges as the children of more financially-secure families. She expresses, "Her children, strangers / To childhood's toys, play" (7-8). The deprivation of the toys makes the mother concerned about her children's plight and her helplessness. It reflects black people's dilemma and rage in a racist society. Instead, her children play in darkened doorways, and the rooftop of houses in the seedy neighborhood in which they live. Sometimes they even trespass on other people's property because they have nowhere else to go.

The mother feels anguish and despair because she knows that her children cannot have the kind of childhood that every child deserves. Describing mother's attachment to her children, Rich argues, "Mother-love is supposed to be continuous, unconditional" (46). Rich indicates the consistent and unconditional efforts of the mother for better prospects of her children. The description of the games that her children play and houses, where they live, suggest the situation of the ghettos, the urban areas where poor African-American families live all across the United States. The houses in ghettos do not have any facility. Even the rays of the sun do not reach to their roof tops and doorways, as the suburban houses of rich, upper class, white families do. The small houses are usually so close that it is easy to trespass on other people's property. The use of the term "slick" (10), is also remarkable. Slick suggests slippery, which has negative connotations. Angelou's use of the term "juvenile

delinquency" signifies the petty crimes, which are committed by children of families living in low-income areas.

The speaker becomes even more desperate in its tone. The poem reflects black women's oppression through the speaker's voice when she reveals the poverty stricken state and lack of familial support make black women work as prostitutes. But her mother cannot even do that because she is too fat to be considered attractive. As the poem reveals, "Too fat to whore," (12). The conventional American beauty narrative does not consider black women to be beautiful and fit. Regarding the image of black women in American society as reflected in media, hooks, in *Ain't I a Woman*, points out, "In television shows the predominant image of black women is that of the sex object, prostitute, and whore. The second image is that of the overweight nagging maternal figure" (66). hooks reveals that American society takes black women as sex object and as overweight maternal figure as media reflects them. The society treats them as inferior and useless goods. According to the speaker the other justification for the woman's joblessness is that she is "too mad to work"(13). The word mad has two meanings; one is anger and the other mental instability. The poem suggests that the black mother wants to do some work to fulfill the basic needs of her family but due to no job availability for her, she feels mad. In this way the poem reveals women's dual oppression in a racist and sexist society.

The black mother expects for a better future to come. Every morning when she rises, she tries to confront the harsh reality of her life that she has nothing at all to offer her children. It exposes the plight of African-American women, who are confined to low-wage and unskilled jobs that does not provide even one square meal a day for their families. Expressing the plight of black women, Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought*, asserts, "Work as alienated labor can be economically exploitative,

physically demanding, and intellectually deadening - the type of work long associated with black women's status as 'mule'" (48). Collins opines that black women work longer hour but they get low wages, even it becomes difficult for them to fulfill the basic demand of two times meal a day. The mother gets furious because she knows the reality. She takes the welfare given by the government but does not see this welfare as charity. She looks upon it as her right. She believes that the government provides welfare due to the mounting pressure of the blacks. This display of force is the mother's show of rebelliousness that leads to respect her and makes her a vocal woman. Feminist thinkers often comment on how women who refuse to be docile and submissive are often viewed as mentally ill because of the vigorousness of their reactions to the injustices they face on a daily basis.

Due to poverty and lack of familial support, crimes have been repeatedly committed against the black women. Expressing her anger, the mother quivers her jowls, which suggests her frustration and sadness to the pathetic state of black women. It is not hard to imagine the mother's feelings, which lead to such a mixed mental state. Concerning the mother's situation, Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought*, explains, "Black women's poverty across diverse societies remains associated with their responsibility for children, often without sufficient male support" (242). Collins exposes that black women's poverty is associated with their responsibilities for their children because they get no support from their male partners. The mother is burdened with responsibilities and she does not have any support. She receives welfare, which implies the appalling situation of black mother. It also suggests that there is no father figure in the family, therefore the mother feels herself solely responsible for the care of her children. If the father were there to bring home a paycheck, the mother wouldn't have to receive welfare from the government.

Then, the poet reflects the mother walking into government offices to demand her welfare. The black mother strides into government offices to receive her portion. The word portion has the same sense as the word share or part. The mother raises voice against discriminatory attitude of the whites and looks upon welfare as her portion, which she has received as her right. She argues that black women must be provided welfare as the compensation because they are oppressed in American society due to racism and sexism. She thinks white males as predators because they victimize black women time and again. She does not feel any hesitation when she clutches on to the welfare money and walks away with pride. Despite her poverty, she is able to maintain a sense of dignity, which makes the mother an inspiring character.

Through her works, Angelou gives a voice to all black people, especially the black women/mothers, who have ever been oppressed. She presents the socio-cultural circumstances of the black mother, who accepts welfare with pride because she thinks it is her right to get it. Though the mother has limited boundary and access, she is bold and expressive because she raises voice against the discriminatory attitude of the white society. With her strong spirit, Angelou speaks out for the poor and the deprived community. Her main concern is with humanity by exploring the experiences of the people in society. Regarding Angelou's poetry, Lynn Z. Bloom, in "Critical Views on Maya Angelou's Poetry in General", explicates, "Much of Angelou's poetry, almost entirely short lyrics, expresses in strong, often jazzy rhythms, themes common to the life experiences of many American blacks—discrimination, exploitation, being on welfare" (21). Bloom reveals that Angelou's poetry expresses the experiences of American blacks. The poems cover a wide range of topics including mother-love, painful loss, sexual awakening, social injustice, continuing discrimination, Southern racism, the struggles of slavery, segregation,

sexism, the nature of women, rape and abuse, and perhaps most passionately, the strength of women's voices.

3.4.4. Maltreated yet Resolute Mother in *The Color Purple*

Walker's *The Color Purple* reflects the forms of oppression that the blacks and women experience. Written in the form of letters, the novel expresses the thoughts and emotions of the protagonist Celie, who struggles in a racist and sexist world. She writes letters to God because she does not have anyone to understand. She fears to express her feelings in words so she expresses it by writing letters to God. Through the letters the readers learn about Celie's life and the life of other characters. Celie faces various ups and downs and she gets relieved by a family reunion at the end of the novel. Walker reveals the themes of motherhood, racism and gender oppression through her narrative.

The novel begins with a female character Celie, the protagonist and narrator. Reflecting on Celie's position in the novel, Maritta Schwartz, in "Telling and Writing as Means of Liberation in *The Color Purple*", describes, "Celie plays two roles in the novel; first she is the narrator and second she is the main character" (7). Celie, a traumatized woman, deserves the qualities of a loving mother. She belongs to a poor family. Being the oldest female sibling and due to her mother's illness Celie takes on her mother's responsibilities as the one who cooks, cleans, and looks after her younger siblings. As the narrative reveals, "By the time I git all the children ready for school it be dinner time" (4). Like her mother, all day she keeps herself busy in the care of younger siblings. Describing the mother-daughter relation, Rich argues that daughters learn interpersonal skills from their mothers. In *Of Woman Born* she asserts, "The first knowledge any woman has of warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, sensuality, mutuality, comes from her mother" (218). Rich's idea is relevant because Celie learns

women's tasks from her mother and she uses this knowledge in the care of young siblings when her mother does not have strength to perform motherly duties. The only direction for her in life is a life of domesticity, which becomes the cause of her oppression. Concerning women's position in society, Chodorow, in *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory*, explains that "the acceptance of the domestic ideal is the foundation of women's oppression"(7). Chodorow opines that the acceptance of domestic ideal for a woman is the base of her oppression. The same thing happens in the case of Celie. Celie accepts the role of a traditional woman, therefore, she faces domestic violence.

Celie represents the maternal image. She reveals the situation of black mothers perfectly. Through her work, Walker presents the role of society and culture in the construction of motherhood. Celie, an oppressed mother, raises children in spite of many difficulties. She faces physical violence even though she does not run away from motherly responsibilities. When Mr. --'s wife becomes unable to provide nurturing for her children, Celie cares for the children's upbringing. She concentrates on every detail in the house and unconsciously starts acting like a mother, as the narrative reveals, "He got four children, instead of three, two boys and two girls. The girls hair ain't been comb since their mummy died . . . I start trying to untangle hair. They only six and eight and they cry. They scream" (14). Celie maintains a good relationship with her husband's children and treats them as a mother. Her husband mistreats her; even then, she displays hidden desire to be loved and cared for. Even by losing subject position and losing her identity, Celie demonstrates a commitment to motherhood. She shows that women are not only able to bear children; they also take more responsibility for infants and children than men do, and sustain primary

emotional ties with infants. Through Celie's character, Walker illustrates how a mother struggles to regain her self-esteem and confidence.

Walker presents black people's tradition and racial exploitation through the representation of dehumanized characters. Most of the black characters shown in the novel live in substandard housing separated from the white population. They have their own cemetery, church, school and they are forced to wait in lines until the whites are served. It is common for the whites to beat the blacks and treat them as if they are animals. Even the poorest of the whites consider themselves superior to any black.

Celie's father's case is one example of racial oppression. Celie's real father gets murdered because of his prosperity in a world of white supremacy, where the blacks have no rights. Due to the color of his skin, his prosperity makes him an outsider in a racially confined world and, therefore, he gets murdered. As Celie reveals "My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me" (197). It shows the pathetic condition of the blacks in a racist society. Blacks are the victims of racist ideology. They have no rights; neither they can get prosperity, nor spend a comfortable life.

Sofia, Harpo's wife faces the same fate of racial oppression. She is the victim of violence. When mayor's wife asks her to take the responsibility of her children, Sofia denies. Due to her disregard to white community, white woman beats her. As narrated, "She say, would you like to work for me, be my maid? Sofia say, Hell no" (81). They send her jail and deprive her from her children because she refuses to be a maid in a white family. In jail Sofia gets tortured. As the narrator says, "They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swole from head to foot" (82). Concerning black women's situation in a racist society, hooks, in *Ain't I a Woman*, explains, "White men may have

discriminated against black women slaves in choosing to allow only males to be drivers or overseers, but they did not discriminate in the area of punishment. Female slaves were beaten as harshly as male slaves" (23). hooks clarifies that black women have to face the same sorts of punishment in a racist society as black men receive. Even in jail black females get cruel punishment like males until they become submissive. The difficulties that Sofia endures demonstrate the difficulties of combating cultural and institutional racism.

Through her work Walker traces the lives of black women who struggle to secure a better life and a dignifying place. The writer focuses on women's painful experiences and their feminist and womanist consciousness. Celie, a victim of sexual and communal abuse, faces a lot of problems in her life. Besides all her duties, her step father rapes and impregnates her. Because of her immaturity, Celie does not understand about her pregnancy. She narrates, "Dear God: I am fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (3). Her pregnancy along with her mother's sickness burdens her. Celie performs the role of a mother with a complete dissatisfaction. She becomes the victim of her step-father's sensual desire twice. Explaining her abusive father's oppression, Christian Froula, in "The Daughter's Seduction: Sexual Violence and Literary History", marks, "The abusive or seductive father does serious harm to the daughter's mind as well as to her body, damaging her sense of her own identity and depriving her voice of authority and strength" (147). Froula opines that the abusive father always makes serious harm to his daughter's mind by damaging her physically and mentally as well. Celie's abusive father makes her series harms. Her victimization at the hands of her father is too appalling and not different from other

victimized characters. Later, the corrupt man compels her to marry an older man who needs a worker in the farm, not a wife.

Celie's married life does not proceed smoothly. She faces many ups and downs. Her husband also oppresses her like her step-father. Motherhood is a duty forced upon Celie. In spite of difficulties, she performs the role of a mother. As she pities her mother's situation with her step-father, she pities herself for having babies and for losing them. Her mother's illness escalates when she sees Celie unable to move. As she narrates, "She ask me bout the first one Whose it is? I say God's. I don't know no other man or what else to say. When I start to hurt and then my stomach start moving and then that little baby come out . . ." (4). When her mother asks her about the baby in her womb, she keeps the matter secret. She does not want to hurt her mother telling that the child belongs to her father.

Celie, transforms into a happy, successful, and independent woman, when she meets other women and realizes her strength. She turns from a submissive and oppressed wife to a vocal woman. Regarding the strategies Celie uses to overcome the obstacles, Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought*, describes, "The act of acquiring a voice through writing, of breaking silence through language, eventually moves her (Celie) to the action of talking with others" (119). Collins discloses that Celie prefers independence to protect herself from male oppression. Initially, she writes letters to God to break her silence. And later she begins sewing clothes, which is traditionally thought of as a job for women, who are confined to a domestic role. Celie makes it a medium to expose her creative self-expression and a profitable business. After being voiceless for so many years, she is finally content, fulfilled, and self-sufficient and transforms into a voiced woman. When Nettie, Olivia, and Adam return to Georgia from Africa, Celie's circle of friends and family is finally reunited.

Celie is not oppressed and ill-treated by the whites but she is oppressed by the males of her own race. Concerning Celie's oppression, hooks, in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, asserts, "It is obvious that most Black men are not in positions that allow them to exert the kind of institutionalized patriarchal power and control over black women's lives that privileged white men do in this society. But it is undeniable that they do exert a lot of power over women and children in everyday life" (124). hooks exposes the fact that black females are not oppressed just from the whites; they are submitted and terrorized within the same community. Though black men do not have institutionalized patriarchal power and control over black women's lives that white men possess in the society, they use power over women and children. Celie's initial victimization at the age of fourteen demonstrates black men's brutality to their women. She establishes herself well within the traditional male female sex role of patriarchal society adopting to the cult of true womanhood, an ideology developed during the early nineteenth century that tied a woman's virtue to piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Like Celie, Sofia bears the same fate. She believes that "a girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (39). Sofia opposes Harpo's mistreatment by beating him back.

Walker reflects the women's struggles and the reasons that have obliged them to be mute. The text celebrates black consciousness through the narratives of women. Reflecting on Celie's consciousness, Collins opines, "In *The Color Purple* Walker creates the character of Celie, a black adolescent girl who is sexually abused by her step-father. Writing letters to God and forming relationship with other black women help Celie find her own voice, and her voice enables her to transcend the fear and silence of her childhood" (125). Collins explains that Celie finds her voice by writing

letters to God and forming relationship with other women. The plight of exploited black women recurs as a major theme in the narrative.

Black women in Walker's novel help each other to find the way to happiness and to a cheerful life. Shug for instance refuses to leave Celie's house until she confirms that Celie's husband will not beat her anymore. Before leaving, she insists on teaching Celie the way to smile and love herself. The letters written by her sister also have a great influence upon her behavior and make her more confident as she knows that her children are still alive and that Alphonso is not her real father. Shug helps her in improving her sewing talent. The changes in Celie's life drive her to struggle for her rights. Gradually, she becomes independent. She goes to Memphis with Shug despite of her husband's consent. Regarding Celie's transformation into an independent, creative woman, Harris Trudier, in "From Victimization to Free Enterprise", states, "From a used and abused woman, Celie emerges as an independent, creative business woman . . . She moves from being Hurston's mule, the beast of burden, to physical and mental declaration of Independence, to a reunion with her children and sister" (14). Trudier reveals that the protagonist, Celie turns from being an abused black female to a self-independent businesswoman. Due to women's solidarity, she becomes more independent and vocal and finally it helps her to reunite with her offspring.

In the same line of argument, Ana Maria Fraile-Marcos describes about Celie's transformation as an independent human being. Reflecting on how she turns to a self-conscious human being, Fraile-Marcos, in "As Purple to Lavender" notes, "From the meek, subdued, obedient, and accepting person . . . to a self-conscious human being who is just starting to appreciate her own worth. . . . Her inferiority complex, due to violence, to male chauvinism, and to poverty, is being erased because of the supportive bonds between black women in the novel. (122). Fraile-Marcos

explicates that when Celie knows her worth, she turns into a conscious human being and begins to appreciate herself. Her bonds with other black women help her to overcome the challenges of her life. Walker provides Celie an opportunity to speak and to express her thoughts and desires. Walker's Womanism, a movement which states that women should stand for their rights and help each other to prove their identities while putting an end to men's supremacy, reinforces this idea. Defining Womanism, in *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*, Walker declares, "Womanism is an empowered form of feminism just as purple is a bold and empowered version of lavender" (29). Emphasizing the importance of womanism for black women, Walker reveals that women should help each other to combat structural racism and sexism. Due to the close bounding between women, Celie and other women characters get out from the complex web of society.

The Color Purple reflects the role of social values, culture, and racism in the life of black women, black mothers in particular. Celie's oppression by the male members of her own race is comparable to that of the whites' domination over the blacks and males' domination over women. The novel emphasizes the fact that women are able to succeed if they work collectively and try to understand each-others problems. Celie begins to develop an awareness of the possibilities of freedom with the arrival and protection of Shug Avery. She becomes more independent and vocal. Exposing Celie's transformation from object to subject position, hooks, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, argues, "Celie undergoes from her movement from object to subject to her success as a capitalist entrepreneur" (47). hooks contends that it is Celie's constant struggle that transforms her from object to subject position. Her sister Nettie teaches her how to read and write and Shug shows her how to be beautiful, independent, and powerful. She also teaches her how to love herself. Sofia

tells her how to persist and how to be strong in a patriarchal society. These four women help each other to undergo problems of race and gender in a society where women especially the black women have no rights to speak.

The analysis of the works produced during Black Arts Movement phase and Postmodern phase, such as Giovanni's "Mothers", Morrison's *Sula*, Angelou's "Momma Welfare Roll", and Walker's *The Color Purple* reveal the representation of self-expressive and liberated motherhood. Through the examination of the socio-cultural discourses, this analysis exposes that the notion of motherhood changes with changing socio-cultural values. The evaluation of the roles of black women in each text demonstrates that black women, especially the black mothers pass through oppressive circumstances while performing their responsibilities as mother. But instead of keeping silence like the mothers who belonged to earlier phases, they express their experiences and communicate about such difficulties to others. They are oppressed by white community and black males as well. In spite of difficulties and oppression, they raise their voice against oppressive forces. Due to the developing concepts of feminism and womanism, society changes its norms and provides women liberty to express their causes. The mother, in the poem "Mothers", Eva in *Sula*, the mother who receives welfare in "Momma Welfare Roll" and Celie in *The Color Purple* are the prominent mother figures who disclose their painful experiences by challenging the socio-cultural and racial stereotypes. Though the unfavorable circumstances such as torture, domestic violence, and maltreatment, escalate the severity of challenges even more for them, they struggle all over their lives for survival and better prospects for future generation. Representing the challenging circumstances and voices of black mothers, the writers of this phase have used their art as a platform to campaign the causes of black women, especially the causes of

black mothers. They have maintained a very vocal stance in their candid revelation of the silencing and marginalization of the women. They are best able to represent the transformations of their characters and communities.

3.5. Conclusion

After analyzing the works of African American literature I have found that mothers are crucial figures in African American society and motherhood is a social construct. Black women/mothers play an important role in the family and society as well. They love their children and care for them in spite of the multiple tasks they perform. The mother-child bonds are strong among them and they often take extreme measures to care for their offspring. The mothers face difficulties such as sold, whipped, brutalized, hanged and treated as objects in the hands of savage white society and uncivilized black men as well. Through the portrayal of terribly burdened mother-child relationships, the writers justify the importance of the role of black mothers as a safe refuge for their children. Although they are not ideal mothers, they express their unconditional love in an unconventional manner. The ways of mothering reveal the circumstances that distort mother-child relationships under the forces of racism and sexism. Due to unfavorable socio-cultural norms and values, it becomes difficult for the black mothers to fulfill their expected gender roles.

In antebellum and post-bellum society motherhood for enslaved black women was translated into an all-inclusive role that incorporated the roles of black men, black women, and white women. Due to slavery, black women were confined within the boundary of their master's house and assigned to look after black and white children and perform other household jobs. True black women were nonexistent, as they were expected to complete the same tasks as men; operate in a continual state of reproduction, replenish the slave economy, and perform as wet nurses and domestic

servants for the whites. Motherhood for black women became a source of subjugation, though it encouraged them to resist for their causes. They embodied an identity which suggested that black women specialize in the wholly impossible. Gender for black women was only important in the context of motherhood and it created a separate and unique identity for them. The African American literature written during Slavery and Post-slavery phase expose the representation of domesticated motherhood. Harper's "The Slave Mother" Jacobs' *Incidents*, Dunbar's "Lonesome", and Johnson's *The Autobiography* candidly describe the domestication of black motherhood.

Domestication refers to the act of domesticating someone. It reflects women's position in the home and their domestic chores. The expectations placed on the mothers by society, such as norms concerning gender roles and the stereotypical views about their behavior, domesticated black mothers.

The black women gave their domesticity an advantageous twist by reshaping that traditional role to fit themselves into the new ideals of the twentieth century during Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement phase. After World War I African American society introduced itself as an independent and intellectual society by revealing the richness of their culture through artistic creations. Black women, who wanted to move away from the "Old Negro" ideas and "Mammy" images, shaped the identity of the "New Negro" within their own neighborhoods. Remaking black women's image in accordance with the perception of the "New Negro" meant challenging the traditional images and roles of black women, which were established first by the white community later by the black male population. The identity of "New Negro" brought refinement, assertiveness, and racial consciousness in them. The notion of motherhood also changed due to changing socio-cultural values.

Motherhood for black women became a source of empowerment because of their

placement in families. Black mothers provided a strong, nurturing home as well as emotional support to their infants. They embarked upon a journey of self-discovery and made efforts to remake their identity and actively sought to find their place in American society. Through their efforts to persist and overcome the unacceptable past image, the black mothers focused on individual accomplishments and freedom without the stigma of gender or race. They strived towards improvement and advanced through education, political involvement, and socio-economic activities and transformed themselves into assertive mothers. The literary works published during these periods also reflect striving black women, who want to find their place in American society. McKay's "My Mother", Hughes' *Not Without Laughter*, Brooks' "The Mother", and Wright's *Black Boy* explicitly reveal the assertive deeds of black mothers in their works. The black mothers' struggles for identity and courage to overcome the challenges make the mother figures assertive mothers. The Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement are the two phases that have dealt with the assimilation of black people in public places interacting with mix audiences.

The works produced during Black Arts Movement and Postmodern phase depict the self-expressive and liberated black motherhood through the examination of dominant discourses of the time. By joining hands with feminist and womanist movements, the black women made efforts to find their own identity in American society. Literature published during the phases demonstrates the African American women's cultural and historical experiences along with black mothers' struggle for self-assertion and the effects of feminism on their self-esteem and self-concept. Black mothers pass through unavoidable circumstances, get unfair treatment, and oppressed by the whites and black males even then they proceed ahead exposing the oppression they face. Giovanni's "Mothers", Morrison's *Sula*, Angelou's "Momma Welfare Roll",

and Walker's *The Color Purple* represent self-expressive and liberated motherhood by narrating the socio-cultural discourses. They depict black mothers' never ending struggle and their self-assertion due to feministic views. Black women/mothers face a lot of oppression; even then they strive hard to assert their identity as human beings. Like the mothers represented in earlier phases, they are neither suffering mothers nor assertive mothers, they fall in the category of vocal mothers.

Black women/mothers have been negatively stereotyped in American society for a long time. They have been portrayed as submissive and passive while at the same time seen as disobedient and assertive. Such contradictory representations are doubly imposed on black women. The knowledge that we have about black women during Slavery and Post-slavery phase shows two main descriptions: a sexual object for the master's pleasure or a mammy figure that devotes all her time to her master's family instead of her own. Due to unfavorable socio-cultural circumstances black mothers face a lot of suffering all over their lives. Unwanted physical and sexual harassment compel them to take on the de-sexualized role of the 'mammy' to try and get away from the horrible sexual acts committed against them. Afterwards during Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement phase black women/mothers reshaped their identity by giving their domesticity an advantageous twist. Black peoples' awareness of their rights, literacy, political and social changes, women's rights movements, and changes in government policies are some factors that bring some changes in the construction of motherhood. Social and cultural discourses help black women to change their image. Unlike performing the role of mammy figure, black women assimilate themselves into the new ideals of twentieth century. The new ideals make black mothers stronger. During the Black Arts Movement phase of 1960s to mid-1970s and Postmodern phase, mid 1970s onwards, black women seem to gain

more control over their sexuality, lives, and destinies as well. They become the parts of feminist and womanist movements and make efforts for their self-identity and liberation in the United States. The works of literature reveal liberation of black motherhood. The representation of strong black women, who face racist and sexist oppression, can be seen throughout literary works. The literature shows the depiction of oppressed yet vocal black mothers, who take control over their lives, as well as the things and people that mattered to them.

This research demonstrates the representations of motherhood from the phase of Slavery to subsequent phases exploring the shifting values, identities and ideologies of black women. The literary works published during the phase of Slavery and Post slavery depict the all-inclusive role of black mothers. In spite of a lot of difficulties and oppression, they perform multiple roles. They are confined within white household to look after black and white children and to perform household chores. Social norms and values are not favorable for them; even then they show their devotion to maternal works. Though the unjust society oppresses them, they carry on their efforts for the welfare of their offspring. The dominant discourses of the phases of Slavery and Post-slavery construct domestication of black motherhood, which is explicitly represented in the literary works of the time. The literature produced during the phase of Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement represent very strong and courageous black mothers. Social and political movements change the notion of motherhood empowering black women's self-identity. Though they face various sorts of exploitation, racial and sexual harassments, and social injustice, they show courage by raising voice against injustice and oppression. The literary works of the phases of Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement represent assertive motherhood by depicting the socio-political development of the time, which changed the social and

cultural discourses of motherhood. The literary efforts created during Black Arts Movement phase and Postmodern phase represent self-expressive and liberated motherhood by exposing mothers' overall responsibility in family and society. The literature of these periods presents the black mothers with some positive and proactive force. In spite of being the victims of racist and sexist oppression, black women speak against social injustice, disharmony, and disorders. They struggle for self-expression and self-identity. They aim at helping blacks achieve full equality with whites. The present research on black motherhood shows that the gradual changes in socio-cultural values bring changes in the notion of motherhood. The changing values make black women stronger. They upgrade their level of confidence and make them feel their worth.

Black women/mothers have been found to be strong in the face of multiple oppressions tied to race, sex, and class. They often have been the sole caretaker and provider to their children. Due to white privilege and racist and sexist stereotypes, they struggle with high self-esteem and self-concept. The tradition of assertiveness and independence seems to have evolved from oppression. Since African-Americans have been the victims of discrimination and segregation, low self-esteem was assumed to be a result of minority status. Therefore, with the passage of time black women have developed survival strategies that prevent them from internalizing negative messages from the larger culture and at the same time maintained a strong sense of self. African American mother's ability to develop and maintain high self-esteem becomes a major personal and family accomplishment. The support of community seems to act as an important ingredient in the development of self-esteem in African American women/mothers. In sum, unique experiences, social and cultural influences, race and gender related issues affect black women's lives and gradually

make their self-esteem and self-concept high. These factors enable them to raise their voice against injustice and oppression by changing their attitude and behavior to racist and sexist social order.

This research reveals that the experiences of black women/mothers, as represented in literary works, are unique due to their dual oppression and limited access. The devaluation of black women roots to the institution of American slavery. For black women slavery was a devastating experience. They were separated from their homeland and family and compelled to perform hard work, subjected to mental and physical degradation, and denied their most basic rights. Enslaved black women were beaten mercilessly, separated from loved ones, and treated as property in the eyes of the law. Their bodies were regularly violated for others profit and pleasure. They did not have option except to bear the imposed torture. Whites treated black women as hypersexual, who deserve sexual exploitation or as breeder women lawfully usable for populating owner's plantations with new slave stock or for the generation revenues. In the American plantation system that developed by the mid-eighteenth century, childbirth was an economic advantage for the master, who multiplied his labor force through slave pregnancy. The average enslaved woman at the time gave birth to her first child in the early teens, and thereafter, bore one child every two and a half years. This cycle, encouraged by the master, continued for a longer period of time without benefiting to the mother. The proven fertility made her more valuable to her owner.

The burdens that came with childbearing were enormous for enslaved black women. They were expected to fulfill the needs of the master and his family before their own children. On the large plantations the slave mothers returned to the fields soon after giving birth, leaving their children behind to be raised by others. Though

they did not have opportunities for child-care, mothering responsibilities of black women were simply added on top of their usual duties. Due to deep bond between mother and their children, slave mothers often chose to stay in bondage, while their male counterparts attempted to escape. Regarding the position of women in the past, Cooper in her work *A Voice from the South* writes, "Women's education was inadequate, their social status was humiliating, their political power was nil, their practical and personal grievances were innumerable; above all, their relations to the family—to their husbands, their children, their friends, their property—was simply insupportable" (67). Cooper's views are relevant to internalize the situation of black mothers. Due to inadequate educational opportunities, humiliating social status, limited political access, innumerable personal grievances, awkward family relation, and lack of property rights, they were compelled to pass through unexpected circumstances. The black women were forced into sexual relationships for the purposes of reproduction. The more traumatic for them was that they might be witness to their children's suffering the same fate.

In the past and still today, black women have largely been dehumanized and devalued and rejected by mainstream culture. They have been facing similar sorts of experiences, in spite of a lot of social and political transformations. They are deemed ugly, undesirable and less feminine. The notion that black women are worthless is a message that is transmitted through multiple external forces or social institutions. The rejection and devaluation put them in a separate category. The analysis of the literary works demonstrates that the literary portrayal of motherhood represents the unique history and experience of African American women. In addition, it clarifies that the dominant discourses play an important role in the construction of motherhood and the notion of motherhood changes with changing socio-cultural norms. Being a mother is

an important social role in African American society, though mothers do not have power, control over material resources or rights over their procreative capacities.

Chapter Four

Conclusion: African American Mother's Travail from Suffering to Liberty

The representation of motherhood in African American literature lies at the heart of this dissertation. This study has followed the creative works published during different phases of historical and literary development to discover the placement of mothers in family and larger society as well. Different components such as society, culture, race, and class that construct mother's role and identity have also been observed through the assessment and analysis of literary works. By examining socio-cultural values, this research contributes to our knowledge about the role of dominant discourses and the impacts they make in the lives of black women, black mothers in particular, who have been the victims of racist and sexist subjugation.

This study has recognized the unique expression of black motherhood by giving voice to black women's role and position in society that have been largely ignored or discussed in limited contexts. It has provided valuable information about the interplay of socio-political situation, culture, race, and gender on the changing notions of motherhood during different phases. Finally, the qualitative methodology, such as narrative inquiry approach, employed for analyzing and interpreting the literary works, has enabled the researcher to generate new knowledge about and challenged old existing notions of black motherhood. The knowledge generated from this research will serve as a foundation for future research endeavors in this area and for improving the condition of black mothers. The collected sources, which unfold the circumstances of the blacks, have shared the experiences, struggles, and thoughts of black women, black mothers in particular. The mothers exposed in the primary works are some representative mother figures, who are guided by the norms of society and culture that construct the notion of motherhood in African American society.

The analysis of literary works has revealed that black mothers have to pass through difficult circumstances while performing motherly responsibilities. They respond to the challenges differently; in some cases, they bear the pain like mute victims, some other cases, they face difficulties boldly, and some other cases, in spite of a lot of difficulties and oppression, they proceed ahead communicating about their pains, either through words or actions, to others. The works written during the phase of Slavery and Post-slavery, such as Harper's "The Slave Mother", Jacobs' *Incidents*, Dunbar's "Lonesome", and Johnson's *The Autobiography* have revealed the representation of domesticated motherhood. Socio-cultural discourses confine black mothers within the boundary of white households by providing them an all-inclusive role, such as the role of black man, black woman, and white woman. Black mothers are assigned the role of a mother, who loves and cares her children, and the role of a father, who fulfills the basic needs of her family. Harper, through her work, illustrates one of the cruelest aspects of slavery which is the separation of children from their mothers for slave trade. By focusing on anguish; a slave mother feels when her young child is sold, the poem shows how the institution of slavery destroys the black family and the individual familial relationships. Enslaved African-American women's motherhood is frequently infringed upon by slavery. By telling the slave mother's horrid story in her poetry, Harper forces the reader to accept the slave mother's testimony as truth because this separation of mother and child is not universally understood.

Like Harper, Jacobs narrates a detailed description of a slave woman's struggle, her physical abuse, and sexual harassment by highlighting the fact that the journey to motherhood is complex for a slave woman from the very moment of her baby's conception. To keep her children safe from her slave master and to keep the

family intact, Jacobs' protagonist, Linda sacrifices her comfort and happiness by hiding out in a crawlspace. She struggles all over her life and suffers physically, as well as mentally; even then she does not cease her efforts and eventually gets success.

Dunbar's "Lonesome" exposes the segregation and confinement of black women/mothers. Due to male superiority, the mother is confined inside the boundary of the house, leaving the male members free to roam around. Dunbar's protagonist, the mother, suffers all over her life to get equality and freedom, though there is little expression of her feelings. Depicting the mother's situation indirectly, Dunbar demonstrates the role of socio-cultural values that confine women/mothers in a limited boundary. Likewise, Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* narrates a black mother's struggle and suffering due to unfair race relation, which prevents her from marrying a white man. By expressing the struggle of a mixed race woman, Johnson presents the lives of black people in a racist society and white society's attitude to black women. Emphasizing the socio-cultural norms that prevent black women to marry white men, Johnson shows the limited boundary of black women/mothers during nineteenth century.

The works written during the phase of Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement, such as McKay's "My Mother", Hughes' *Not Without Laughter*, Brooks' "The Mother", and Wright's *Black Boy* have reflected the representation of assertive motherhood by revealing the bold and courageous deeds of black mothers. McKay's "My Mother" explores the aspect of motherhood during the phase of the Harlem Renaissance. He shows womanhood along with motherhood as an important aspect of black life. Presenting his mother as a strong individual much unlike the ideas of woman crafted by society at the time, the speaker demonstrates how socio-cultural norms limit the role of black women/mothers. McKay presents her as an assertive

mother figure because in spite of her serious illness, she does not hesitate. She understands that it is her motherly responsibility to play a dynamic role for her son's preservation, growth, and social acceptance. McKay's work is a simple description of a black woman's place, not only in the poet's life but in the larger society.

Similarly, Hughes' *Not Without Laughter* portrays African American life in Kansas. Reflecting upon the effects of race and gender on the lives of black people and the community as well, Hughes' sheds light on the predicaments of black people and their struggle for living in a racist society. The main storyline concentrates on Sandy's awakening to the sad and the beautiful realities of black life. Raised by his grandmother, Aunt Hager, an ordinary, black woman, who bears the features of a perfect mammy, Sandy gets a new direction, drive and motivation. Depicting the character of Aunt Hager, Hughes mirrors how socio-cultural norms construct motherhood in African American society.

Brooks' "The Mother" explores the impacts of poverty stricken situation and social values on the life of a black mother. Encapsulating the theme of motherhood as its central aspect, the poem expresses an emotional outpour of the sense of guilt by a mother who has performed one or more abortions. Brooks depicts the powerlessness and poor socio-economic conditions that compel the mother-narrator's extreme response and ultimate self-victimization. The heinous act of abortion or infanticide demonstrates the mother's deep attachment to her children. She convinces that she did those abortions because she loved her children and wanted to save them from dehumanization. She is not only a woman who has killed her children while they were in her womb, but a loving and courageous mother, who wants to protect her children from the hardships of life and the world. The voice of the mother resonates with the voice of all motherhood, sounding the primal chords of hope and insistent love even

in the face of ceaseless losses. The poem is specifically about female experience because it is based on a woman's experience of aborting a child and then personally feeling guilty about it, as a mother.

Likewise, Wright's *Black Boy* (1945) narrates the hardships and obstacles faced by a poverty-stricken black family. Wright demonstrates the protagonist, Richard, who suffers from hunger, not only for food but also for acceptance, love, and an insatiable hunger for knowledge. Richard's mother Ella Wright is the single biggest factor that has shaped his life by providing him training to be strong and courageous. Though socio-cultural values limit her role, Ella tries her best to make him independent because she feels that this is the only way for him to survive in a racist society. Like an assertive mother figure, Ella's protection comes from her core instinct of motherliness. Wright exposes that in a society where circumstances are harsh for a mother without a husband, it is harsher for Ella for whom survival is prioritized.

The works written during Black Arts Movement phase and Postmodern phase, such as Giovanni's "Mothers", Morrison's *Sula*, Angelou's "Momma Welfare Roll", and Walker's *The Color Purple* have exposed self-expressive and liberated motherhood. Though they pass through a lot of prejudice and oppression while performing their role as mother, they never move back from their responsibilities. In spite of oppressive environment, they express their feelings either in words or through their actions. Giovanni's "Mothers" explains the poet's awkward affection to her mother. She demonstrates how socio-cultural norms confine a woman/mother inside the boundary of the house. Giovanni narrates the significant role of the mothers, who are responsible for bringing people in the world. The poem reflects mother's secondary position in male dominated society. The mother's awakening and waiting for the father till mid night indicates male superiority. Despite her mother waiting for

the father or waiting for a dream, the mother still has authority in the family. Giovanni suggests that the mother, through her actions, teaches her daughter about motherly responsibilities. Despite the argument against matriarchy and against dominant female figures in black families, the mother in Giovanni's poem "Mothers", is extremely influential over her daughter's development and over what her daughter eventually teaches her son.

Morrison's *Sula* narrates the condition of women in a patriarchal society and mother's unconditional love to her children. The focus of the novel revolves around Eva Peace and her struggle. Eva's actions such as her self-mutilation in order to receive insurance money to support her family, her relieving her child's pain when she sets Plum on fire, and finally when she throws herself from a window into the fire in an attempt to save her daughter, Hannah, are the results of her intense motherly love to her children. The mothering ways, that the mother Eva shows, could be read as attempts to protect her family, not just as maternal selfishness. Morrison demonstrates the complexity of motherhood by challenging stereotypes, which are commonly associated with black mothers. By playing the roles of a life giver, nurturer, protector, dictator, and a compassionate destroyer, the mother, Eva expresses her motherly love through her actions. Like Morrison's *Sula*, Angelou's "Momma Welfare Roll" is a realistic depiction of American society. The poem shows how social and cultural values define motherhood responsibilities. In spite of poverty, Angelou's protagonist, the mother fulfils the demand of her family. The mother is concerned with her children's plight though she doesn't have anyone to support. Through her work, Angelou reflects black people's dilemma and rage in a racist society. She reveals women's dual oppression in a racist and sexist social order. The mother looks upon welfare as the reparation that must be made to women like her by the dominant white

male population of American society for victimizing them time and again. Despite her poverty and lack of support, she is able to maintain a sense of dignity and that is what makes the mother an inspiring character.

Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) expresses thoughts and emotions of the protagonist Celie, who struggles in a male dominated world. The letters in *The Color Purple* are a vehicle through which the readers learn about Celie's life and the life of other characters. In spite of unfavorable socio-cultural circumstances, Walker's protagonist, Celie performs the role of a mother well by representing her maternal image. The only direction for her in life is a life of domesticity, which is the cause of her oppression. Walker presents her as a skilled mother who raises children in spite of many difficulties. Even by losing her subject position and losing her identity, Celie demonstrates a commitment to motherhood. Walker shows that women are not only able to bear children; they also take more responsibility for infants and children than men do, and sustain primary emotional ties with them. Through Celie's character, Walker illustrates how a mother struggles to regain her self-esteem and confidence.

Based on the analysis of the chosen works, this research has established that motherhood is a social construct, which is determined by dominant discourses and the notion of motherhood changes with the changing socio-cultural values over the course of history. The texts, produced during the phase of Slavery and Post-slavery, have reflected the representation of domesticated motherhood in African American society. Due to slavery and racist and sexist stereotypes, mothers have to work in white families and perform an all-inclusive role. They pass through many trials and tribulations while performing their responsibilities to their children and families. The mother figures represented in the selected texts share common features, in spite of differences in their circumstances. They have to pass through similar fate of

discrimination and disillusionment. The gruesome experiences of mothers, such as the slave mother in the poem "The Slave Mother", Linda in *Incidents*, the speaker's mother in "Lonesome", and protagonist's mother in *The Autobiography*, have explicitly demonstrated the difficulties and dilemma of black motherhood. The horrible stories of black mothers' confinement, physical and sexual abuse, constant pursuit and violence, and unfulfilled dreams reflect the challenges they have faced, which have constructed their identity.

The literary works published during Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement phase demonstrate the representation of assertive motherhood. Due to some changes in socio-political arena, the discourses of motherhood also transform and strengthen black women. Black mothers dedicate themselves to their family and children by establishing their own space in a racist and sexist social order. Like the women/mothers of Slavery and Post slavery phase, they are not confined within white households. While performing their responsibilities as women and mothers, they pass through inevitable circumstances but they cope with all the challenges boldly. The socio-cultural norms of the time encourage them to be assertive to the discriminatory attitudes of the white world. The literary representation of the mother in the poem "My Mother", Aunt Hager in *Not Without Laughter*, the mother who has done multiple abortions in "The Mother", and Ella in *Black Boy* have revealed the assertiveness of black mothers.

The examination of the works produced during Black Arts Movement and Postmodern phase have demonstrated the self-expressive and liberated motherhood. The women of this phase struggle for self-sufficiency and autonomy. Social and cultural values support their struggle. They make constant efforts for recognition and identity. Due to feminist and womanist movements, socio-cultural stereotypes,

regarding the placement and role of black women in family and larger society, change. Black women/mothers get liberty for outdoor activities, which assist them to speak for their causes. Black women's struggles for freedom and empowerment are an individual concern as well as a concern for the larger community. They prioritize family life, autonomy, and liberation. The mother in the poem "Mothers", Eva in *Sula*, the speaker's mother in "Momma Welfare Roll", and Celie in *The Color Purple* are some representative mother figures, who are guided by socio-cultural values.

This study has revealed that socio-cultural, race, and gender factors affect black women's lives, especially the lives of black mothers' and make an impact on their attitude, behavior, self-esteem, and self-concept. During Slavery and Post-slavery phase, African-Americans were the victims of discrimination and segregation, therefore, low self-esteem was assumed to be a result of minority status. White society's racist and sexist stereotypes make black women/mothers struggle with high self-esteem and self-concept. The tradition of assertiveness and independence seems to have evolved from oppression. Gradually, black women/mothers have developed survival strategies to prevent them from internalizing negative messages from the larger society. And at the same time these strategies have helped them maintain a strong sense of self. In spite of difficulties and oppression, they have been found stronger. In this context, African American mother's ability to develop and maintain high self-esteem becomes a major personal and family accomplishment. The support of the community seems to act as an important aspect in the development of self-esteem in black women/mothers.

This research has demonstrated that motherhood, as a source of oppression as well as empowerment, encourages black women to struggle against racism and sexism. If black women did not have motherly responsibilities for their children, they

would not show so much courage to combat against structural racism and sexism. In addition, the research has also discovered the fatherly position of black mothers, bearing the sole responsibility of the family, in black communities. Though they are poor, burdened, and oppressed, they show courage to struggle against challenges for the sake of their children's better prospects. In this way, the literary portrayal of motherhood represents the unique history and experiences of African American women. Furthermore, the research on African American literary works has also reflected the temporal evolution of black women/mothers from voiceless to vocal, from the phase of Slavery to present time.

The findings of this study are useful to understand about the changing notions of black motherhood. Reflecting upon social and cultural stereotypes that have defined the role and responsibilities of black mothers, it demonstrates how social and cultural conventions construct and transform the notion of motherhood. The literary representation of black motherhood provides a conceptual clarity for understanding how they have been moved from the margins to the center of analysis.

4.1. Recommendations for Future Research

In addition to insights for policy and practice, my study suggests important areas for additional research. The findings from this study have raised additional questions for future researchers, such as how motherhood is a source of empowerment for black women; in what way black motherhood compels black males to be responsible; what factors contribute to the temporal evolution of black women/mothers from speechless to vocal; in what way black women's experiences, as represented in literary works, are similar to the experiences of the women of other ethnic groups and what way they are different; how cultural construction of motherhood in African American society differs from cultural construction of

motherhood in Nepali society and what are the similarities; which are not asked in this research. The black women's troublesome stories suggest that more research is needed to internalize the impact of racist and sexist subjugation on the normal life of black mothers and their offspring.

The impacts of various factors such as society, culture, race, and gender on the construction of black motherhood, trouble the myth of black women's unconditional love to their children and persistence they expose to fulfill motherly responsibilities. The authors, who belong to different phases of African American literary development, have revealed that the mothers' identity construction involves persistent negotiations of power, most often within social institutions. More research is needed to understand the violent histories of slavery, racism, and sexism against marginalized groups and the impact of these factors on black women's life and identity as woman and mother. By framing the women's experiences with socio-cultural contexts, the hope is to unveil the double standards of dominant discourses that sanction the struggles of black women in families and societies as well.

To gain a deeper understanding of the construction of motherhood, this research has focused on the historical and political development of the US along with the socio-cultural circumstances. Further research could be done by exploring the multiple roles that black women perform to adjust themselves in a racist and sexist social order. More research could examine more works and bring better understanding of the area.

4.2. Implications of the Research

The research on black motherhood can be practically useful for the researchers, social workers, scholars, feminists, human rights campaigners, and teachers. They view many practical implications of this research. However, this study

raises several challenges and barriers that black women face related to systemic oppression and it provides logics in support of its practical significance.

Firstly, this research supports the views that black rights activists, black feminists, social workers, and researchers provide about the condition of black women, black mothers in particular. It can be helpful for the better prospects of black women, especially for the better prospects of the black mothers, who have extraordinary experiences of bearing and rearing children.

Secondly, this study supports the scholars, social science researchers, and policy makers, who want to bring changes in the lives of people who belong to marginalized communities, in the lives of black women/mothers in particular. By analyzing the socio-cultural boundary of black women/mothers, they can create conducive environment to bring changes in their situation and uplift their living standards.

Further, historians, gender studies experts, and anthropologists can also benefit from this research because it may help them to understand the history of African slaves in America and the life conditions they faced in cotton fields in the South and industrial world in the North.

As this research has illuminated, financial hardship of black mothers that extend beyond individual needs. The unstable financial situations make black women the mute victim of racism and sexism. They often times receive welfare, a humiliating experience for some, to supplement the insufficient financial packages they are given as a support. For the women who experience the pain of poverty during childhood, hope for transcending economic barriers through independence and persistence.

4.3. Personal Reflection

Through the journey of this research I have internalized the role of dominant discourses in the construction of motherhood. I have learnt about the black mothers, who had lived experiences of slavery, class and race subjugation, harassment, torture, and injustice. They face dual oppression due to racist and sexist social order. When I initially read the narratives, I was disturbed because the texts revealed the accounts, which were far away from my imagination. I contemplated over the matter for long and finally I realized that I had privilege and the power of analyzing and interpreting those accounts which reveal the arena of African American lives.

As I begin reading, analyzing, and interpreting the texts, I found that the socio-cultural stereotypes affect the lives of black women, black mothers in particular. The recounting of pain triggered memories created upsetting and saddening environment for me. Through my process of analyzing and interpreting the texts, I found the intimate details of the lives of women in black communities. I used their stories in the pursuit of social justice by challenging dominant narratives of black womanhood. The pain and dilemma of black mothers made me upset time and again. Even then I continued my efforts to achieve success in my mission.

My research has highlighted the notion of motherhood in African American society as reflected in African American literature and the way the notion of motherhood has changed during different phases of historical and literary developments. In doing so, I have not only provided insight into the meanings and experiences of motherhood among the blacks, but I also have exposed the impact of socio-cultural, racial, and gender factors in black women's lives. In addition, through the examination of the literary representation of motherhood, my work specifically has explored the unique history and experiences of black women as mothers,

considering the influence of motherhood in black women's overall personality. It has acknowledged the nuances of unfavorable circumstances across minority group.

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