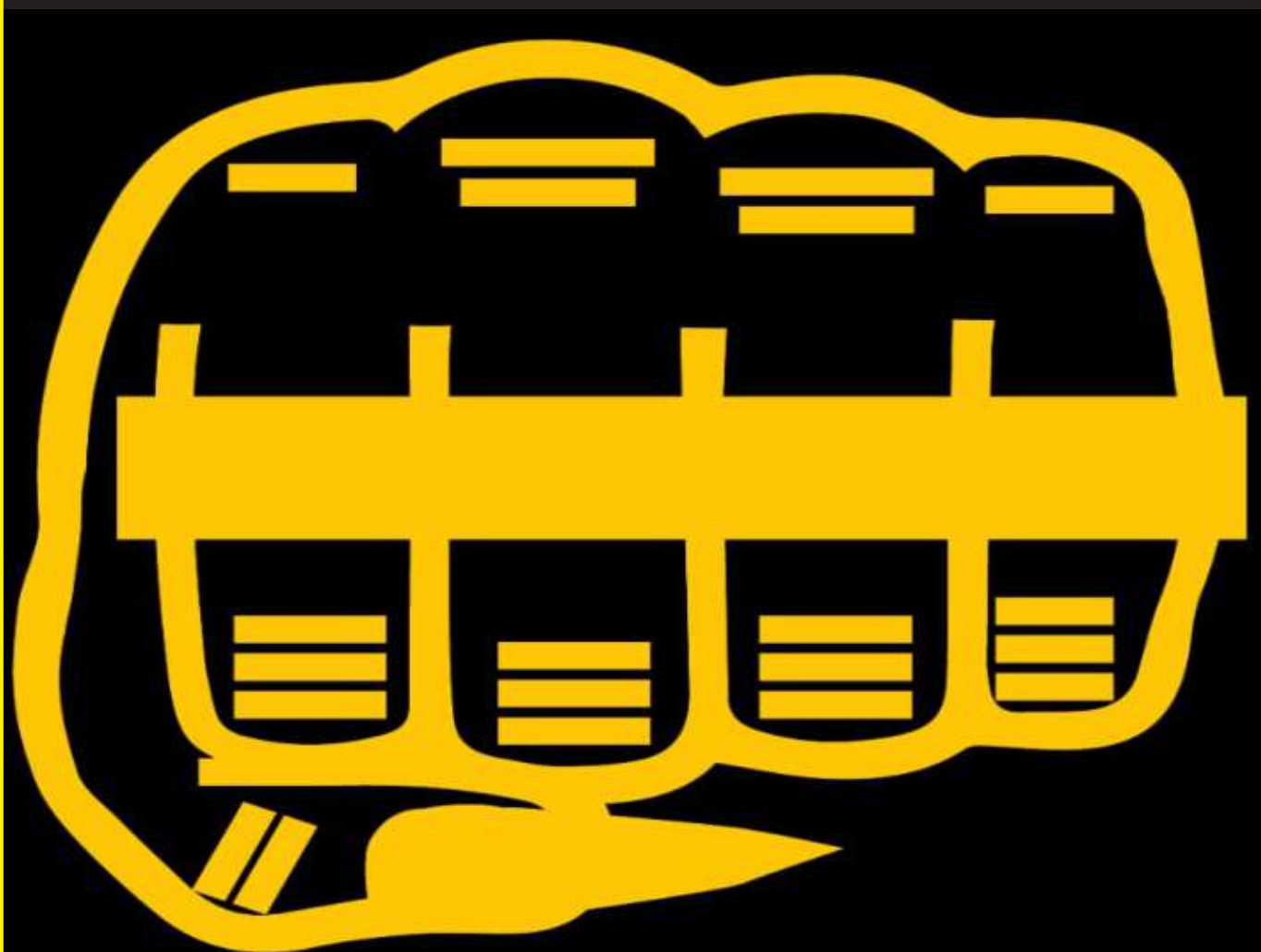
Quest for Black Womanhood in the Fiction of Gayle Jones Toni Cade Bambara and Ntozake Shange



Dr.Sandu Paigavan

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By

7th Nov, 2023

ISSN 2395-6968

Published by,
Dr. Pramod Ambadasrao Pawar
Editor-in-Chief,
Epitome Journals, Aurangabad (MS), India
"Aashna", Gut No. 145, Plot No. 63-64, Row House No. 2,
Behind Chate School, Alok Nagar,
Satara Parisar, Aurangabad - 431005, MS, India
Mob. 08888951510
Email : epitomejournals@gmail.com / iamdrpawar@gmail.com
Website :

Authored by,
Dr.Sandu Paigavan,
M.A., SET, Ph.D.,
Associate Professor of English,
Dnyanopasak College, JINTUR,
Dist. Parbhani - 431 509(Maharashtra)
Email : sspaigavangmail.com
India.

Printed at
M/s Ajantha Printing Press
Aurangabad - 431120
MS, India

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THE MODERN MYTH: TONI CADE BAMBARA'S *THE SALT EATERS* (1980)

Toni Cade Bambara, one of the major African American women novelists of the last quarter of the twentieth century bears a complex vision of life. Farah Jasmine Griffin (1996 :229) observes that Bambara was writer with "a social vision" who left us the legacy of social struggle and showed that writing can be both "beautiful" and "political". Griffin Comments:

> Bambara left us a legacy of social vision and social struggle… legacy that writing can be both beautiful and political … a legacy that insists upon the spiritual dimension of art and politics, a legacy in word and in deed… For the word is deed.

Bambara claims and acts upon the strength of people as individual and as communities. Bambara was "committed to the struggle in the world that are revealed in her writing. Farah Jasmine Griffin (ibid) further points out:

> "She (Bambara) was committed to the struggles of the oppressed people throughout the world; though she conducted her cultural work in and for Black community. These struggles convinced her of the need of coalition between the people of color, as in (her novel ***The Salt Eaters*** 1980).

Bambara's mission in her novel/fiction/writing is to prove a legitimate way to participate in the empowerment of the community. In an interview-article "Salvation Is The Issue" with Mari Evans, Bambara asserts:

> Writing is a legitimate way, an important way, to participate in the empowerment of the community that names me (Mari Evans 1984:42)

In an interview with Beverly Guy-Sheftall Bambara also points her same "commitment is to use writing as a tool to get in touch with the self." (Roseann P. Bell 1979:231) She uses writing not only as a means of transformation in the society but to explore the human self and psyche.

As a self described nationalist-feminist-socialist, Bambara, as Elliott Butler-Evans (1989:10) argues Bambara reviews her works in triple modes of domination:racism, which she argues, allows whites to define and determine the existence of Blacks, and patriarchal oppression, through which all males exercise hegemonic privileges in their relationship with women, and the placing of women at the lowest rung of society. For Bambara the struggle against racism is embodied in a battle of "truth", a truth that stands in opposition to the interpretation and representation in the discourses of whites. " Bambara elucidates this position in her two interviews. In an interview article "Salvation Is The Issue" with Mari Evans, Bambara comments :

> One we are at war. Two, the natural response to oppression ignorance, and mystification is wide awake resistance. Three, the natural response to stress and crisis is not breakdown and capitulation but transformation and renewal to. The question I raise from ***Gorilla, My Love*** (1972) to ***Sea Birds Are Still Alive*** (1977) to ***The Salt Eaters*** (1980) to ***Faith of the***

> ***Bathier*** is, is it natural (sane, healthy, wholesome, in our interest) to violate the contracts/covenants we have with our ancestors each other, our children, our selves, and God? (ibid.:47)

For Bambara "salvation is the issue" and that is why she confesses that "I produce stories that save our lives", (ibid.:41). Writing thus for her functions to redeem people from the evil, darkness of ignorance.

She again proclaims the same motto of her writing in her interview with Claudia Tate. Bambara declares:

> We are at war, and that war is not simply a hot debate between the capitalist camp and the socialist camp over which economic/ political/ social arrangement will have hegemony in the world. It is not just a battle over turf and who has the right to utilize the resources for whomsoever's benefit. The war is also being fought over the truth:
> What is truth about human nature, about human potential? My responsibility to myself, my neighbors, my family and the human family is to try to tell the truth. That ain't easy. There are so few truth speaking traditions in this society in which the myth of "Western Civilization has the allegiance of so many. We have recently been encouraged and equipped to appreciate the fact that truth works; that it releases the Spirit and that it is a joyous thing. (Claudia Tate 1983:17)

In the same interview Bambara further argues that literature has the "potency for social transformation" and so she portrays the "truth about people lives" in her works. Bambara comments:

> I do not think that literature is the primary instrument for social transformation, but I do think it has potency. So I work to tell the truth about people's lives: I work to celebrate struggle, to applaud, the tradition of struggle in our community, to bring to center-stage all those characters … (ibid:18).

This "celebration of people's struggles" is seen in most of her stories and the novel.

The battle for "truth" that Bambara would wage against racism is echoed in her struggle against sexism. In ***Black Women*** (1970:8), her edited collection of black feminist essays, poems and short stories and the first publication of its kind, Bambara comments that in psychology, natural science, literature, the research strategies perpetuated the subjugation of Black women. She observes about the oppression of Black Women:

> When the experts (White or Black male) turn their attention to the Black Woman, their reports get murky, for they usually clump the men and woman together and focus so heavily on white people have done to the psyches of Blacks, that what Blacks have done to and fro themselves is overlooked, and what distinguishes the men from women forgotten.

Bambara advocates a radical restructuring of male-female relationships, proposing the rejection of masculine and feminine roles and the construction of a selfhood/Blackhood that displaces gender differentiation, thereby enabling the "Black community to move in

unison against racist oppression". With this objective in mind, Bambara (ibid.:101) further comments:

> I have always opposed the stereotypic definitions of "masculine" and "feminine" because I always found that either or implicit in those definitions antithetical to what I was all about and what all revolution for self is all about. I am beginning to see…. the usual notions of sexual differentiation in roles as obstacles to political consciousness that the way those terms are generally defined and acted up to in this part of the world is a hindrance to development.

Bambara's is thus a Black nationalist discourse. Through her entire writing and the fiction particularly, Bambara explores how African American women have been caught in the synergetic triple jeopardy of race, gender and class, the recurrent theme of entire African American women's writing.

The female protagonist as a political and social activist in African American women's fiction has sufficiently long tradition. Way back Paule Marshall's second novel ***The Chosen Place, Timeless People*** (1969) portrays Merle Kinbona as a political activist. Similarly Alice Walker's ***Meridian*** (1976) depicts the life of a civil rights activist of the same name and furthers the tradition. And Toni Cade Bambara's ***The Salt Eaters*** (1980) paves the same thorny path.

Bambara Christian (1986:179-180) comments that the novels of mid-1970s and early-1980s, the novels of the "second phase" portray the heroines as "Socio-Political actors" in the world. Their stance is

"radical" and "rebellious". It is a "visionary leap" of the fiction and a "rebellious act", and a "revolt on the part of African American women novelists".

Velma Henry, a civil rights activist and a computer analyst at a transchemical plant, crazily attempts double suicide by slitting open the veins of her wrists and even if that is not sufficient by thrusting her head in a gas oven, but survives and resurrects in the end with the healing by Minnie Ransom, "a fabled faith healer of the district". (4) ***The Salt Eaters*** (1980) has an "epic" vista between these two poles.

While she was sitting in the process of completing the novel, Bambara voiced her central concern in writing this novel:

> I gave myself an assignment based on the observation: there's a split between the spiritual, psychic and political forces in my community. Not since the maroon experience of Toussaint's (17431?-1803) (a Black liberator of Haiti) era have the psychic technicians and spiritual folk (medicine people) and guerillas (warriors) merged. It is a wasteful and dangerous split. The novel grew out of my attempt to fuse the seemingly separate frames of references of the camps. It grew out of an interest in identifying bridges; it grew out of a compulsion to understand how the energies of this period will manifest themselves in the next decade. (Elliott Butler –Evans: 1989:174-5)

The novel springs from this urge to unite these two forces. The modern and ancient modes of healing and brought together in the novel.

Bambara again voices the same concern in an interview with Claudia Tate:

> Several of us had been engaged in trying to organize various sectors of the community-students, writers, psychic adepts etc and I was struck by the fact that our activists or warriors and over adepts or medicine people don't even talk to each other. Those two camps have yet to learn-not since the days of Toussaint L'Ouverture (17432?-1803) anyway, since the days of the maroon communities. I suspect to appreciate each other's visions, each other's potential, each other language. The novel then came out of a problem solving impulse-what would it take to bridge the gap-to merge those frames of reference to fuse those camps? (Claudia Tate 1983:15-16)

W. Maurice Shipley (1982-27) is of the opinion that ***The Salt Eaters*** is a serious novel interwoven of many subjects. Shipley comments:

> In ***The Salt Eaters***, Bambara has interwoven mythmaking, psychological and sociological drama, literary and factual history with political and philosophical realities.

The Salt Eaters is a long, intricately written, trickily structured, full of learning, "heavy" with wisdom altogether, what critics mean by a "large" book. And so Gloria T. Hull argues that ***The Salt Eaters*** is a book that that one must read. She elaborates the novel's structure and places it within the tradition of canonized texts of African American literature. She argues about the significance of the novel:

> It is daringly brilliant work which accomplishes even better for the 1980s what ***Native Son*** did

> for the 1940s, ***Invisible Man*** for the 1950s or ***Song of Solomon*** for the 1970s. It fixes our present and challenges a way to the future. Reading it deeply should result in personal transformation, teaching it can be a political act. (Barbara Smith 1983 :124)

Gloria T. Hull thus establishes the novel in the canon of African American fiction. Hull further maps the vista of the subject the novel encompasses in these words:

> ***The Salt Eaters*** is such a 'heavy' book with its universal scope …ancient and modern history, world literature, anthropology, mythology, music, astronomy, physics and biology, mathematics, medicine, political theory, philosophy and engineering. Allusions to everything from space-age technology through Persian folklore to black American blues comfortably jostle each other (Pryse & Spillers 1985:226).

One cannot afford to neglect such 'serious' piece of work that enriches our lives. Russell Sandi (1992-175) labels ***The Salt Eaters*** a "difficult novel" as it is comprised of a many voices from the present as well as the "past" that intersect and interrupt one another and make this a work of "high complexity".

The Salt Eaters a novel Melisa Walker (1991:182) calls "epic" in scope is divided into twelve chapters. A relatively short novel of less than three hundred pages long, there are seventy five named characters most are identified by their vocation or social roles; artist, politician, trade unionist, bus driver, journalists, engineers, musicians, doctors, activist, teachers as

well as a masseur, a dance instructor and jewellery maker. Indeed, the novel typically reveals the characters public roles before their private ones. The novel takes place in an imaginary town Claybourne in Georgia. The novel opens with Minnie Ransom's appeal to Velma, "Are you sure, sweetheart that you want to be well?" The same appeal is repeated persistently to the end of the novel to invoke Velmas to wholeness, health till she resurrects in the end. The opening of the novel takes us to the point where Velma Henry, after her double attempts of suicide is brought to the Southwest Community Infirmary for healing by Minnie Ransom, "a fabled faith healer of the district." The actual 'healing' process lasts less than two hours but the post modernist techniques of disconnected and fragmented flash-back and 'flash-forwards' and collages used in make it more complex. The novel thus runs from present to past and past to present again. This weaving of past-present-and future makes the book beautiful. As Velma perches on the white stool in the healing room of the Infirmary, Minnie's question sets her on the train of past memories in her life-her life as a civil rights activist,-sexism in the movement, forming a different group by women called 'Women of Action,' participation in the group of 'Seven Sisters', her involvement in the 'Academy of 7 Arts' with James Lee Henry, Obie, her husband; and she a computer analyst at the Transchemical. Her personal life with Obie, her mother Mama Mae, her Godmother M'Dear Sophie Heywood. Not only that Velma but other characters also recall their past or set on the past journeys of their lives and Bambara intricately weaves, interconnects all the threads delicately and beautifully.

But as Velma, the protagonist is a black Civil Rights activist in the late 1970s, the actions of the novel take place in 1978 the Bicentennial year when Dr. Julius Meadows has just turned down the part of Crispus Attucks (the ex-slave who is the hero of the American Revolution) in a pageant after learning that his light skin he will have to play the role in blackface. The main thrust of the novel is to chart the denouement of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1970s that was at its peak in the 1960s. Thus the splintered black Civil Rights Movement is the main canvas of the novel. Susan Willis (1987:129) defines that the novel attempts to link "black activism" to social and political situation. Willis comments:

> Toni Cade Bambara's novel ***The Salt Eaters*** represents the attempt to link the spirit of black activism generated during the sixties to the very different political and social situation defined by the eighties.

The central issues on which the entire novel is built include issues of gender and sexism. Elliott Butler-Evans (1981-181) argues that Velma attempts suicide because of her discord with Obie, her husband and her disappointment as an activist. Butler-Evans comments:

> Confronted with the demands and contradictions of the movement into public arena and the discord in her marriage to Obie at the personal level, Velma is driven to madness and attempted suicide… Velma's attempted suicide can be red as an act of rebellion against the injustices experienced by her, and other women.

Perched on a stool before Minnie Ransom, Velma listens her appeals, but her mind takes her on to the journey of the events that led her to this disastrous event.

Velma recalls the private, personal and public worlds that overlap in her memories: the day she was baptized, an emotional encounter with her husband. She recalls her falling in love with Obie and their courtship. She recalls how she had a worn the kind of blouse to bring James Lee Henry, called Obie now under her spell.

She recalls Obie making a sport of appeal, a reconciliation of some sort. In the issue of race, gender and class, the elements predominating the novel, the key issues of gender and sexism lie in the strained husband-wife relations between Obie and Velma that led her to suicidal attempts. Obie's following remarks throw sufficient light on their relations. Velma has the memories of what Obie says:

> "Let me help you, Velma whatever it is we… what ever we're at now … I can help you break that habit… Learn to let go of past pain… like you got me to stop smoking … " (22)

He (Obie) was making an appeal; a reconciliation some sort, conditions, limits and agenda, help. Something about emotional caring or daring. James Lee could be tiresome in these moods. Her memories of Obie's appeal continues:

> "It takes something out of you, Velma, to keep all those dead moments alive. Why can't you just … Forget … forgive …
> and always it's some situation that was over and done with ten, fifteen years ago. But here

> you are still all fired up to your jaws in ancient shit" (22).

Velma points that (She and Obie) are different people, that their natures are different, they don't match and it causes clashes between them. She answers Obie:

> "We're different people, James, Obie. Somebody shit all over you, you forgive and forget. You start talking about we're all damaged and colonialism and the underdeveloped blah blah. That's why everybody walks all over you" (23).

Obie comments that Velma is the only person to every try to walk over him. To this Velma retorts "That is why I just can't stay with you. I don't respect." But now Obie is afraid of Velma as usual because he thinks, "... Anytime you are not in absolute control, you panic"(23). She recalls how Obie again asks her to forget the past. He says "Can't we, Vee? Push all that past aside dump all of it." (25) His hands were churning the air and the spiach thread was wiggling. And he urged, "Create vacuum for good things to rush in, Good things."(25)

In the family and married life Velma is not treated equally and properly by Obie. The chasm opens at home. Velma is not only a wife, a mother but a staunch civil rights activist and a computer analyst. Her experiences in these fields also reveal gender oppression and sexism. In husband wife relations she suffers at the hands of Obie, and as an activist it is by the male colleagues. A part of this activist life she works in the

Academy of 7 Arts, run by Obie. The rift and chasm at the Academy, the change there is one of the factors in tense family relations.

The Salt Eaters views racial conflict from a different angle. Velma's construction of the past raises issues about male participation and performance in liberation struggles and places male and female difference in liberation struggles in the foreground. As an activist Velma recalls the experiences with other male activists. But here also she finds rampant sexism and gender inequality. A devoted activist "who trudged through the dust, through rain, through mud. She remembers an incident when Marcus Hampden a trade Unionist was 'imported' to deliver a lecture before their group of activists women activists are seriously listening to him, taking down the notes, but we have contrasting picture of what male activists are doing during the speech. It presents the lack of concern on the part of male activists.

When Hampdedn fiddled, next to her, fiddled with the zipper on his cordovan boots while Velma, distracted, was remembering some absurdly shiny boots back in the days of marching.

Her memories criss-cross with each other. She again listens to women activists raising issues . Women campaigned together when men vacationed on Jekyll Island. They raised money for South Africa add, composed it, gathered up the signatures and the money replaced it and absorbed the backlash. They never got reimbursed for toll calls, postage or gas. The women activists trudged the dust, through the rain, through

mud, while the male activist walk the corridors of the hotel in the Chinese pajamas.

The narrative strategy is particularly effective in the juxtaposition of two images when Velma invokes her past to recall her involvement in political activism. Even basic amenities are not available to women activists. Velma rubbed her forehead, leaned back her chair and recalled:

> It had been a Gulf Station of course she remembered that, the boycott had been still in effect and she'd felt funny going in there, even if it was just to use the bathroom (as she was menstruating) and a nasty bathroom with no stall doors, and in a Gulf Station too, to all the outrage. She'd been reeking of wasted blood and rage. (34)

The dedicated services of the women activists on one hand and the philander male leaders including Obie on the other hand, having nothing to do with the movement. What a contrast! Velma remembers:

> Exhausted she was squinting though the dust and grit of her lashes when the limousines pulled up, eye stinging shiny, black, sleek and the door opened and the cool, blue of the air conditioned interior billowed out into the yellow and rusted evening. Her throat was splintered wood. Then the shiny black boots stepping onto the parched grass, the knife creased pants, the jacket hanging straight, the blinding white shirt, the sky blue tie. And the roar went up… Flanked by the coal black-men in shiny sunglasses and silk and steel suits he made toward the platform.(35)

Juxtaposed is Velma's picture is pains. She carried in search of toilet, some water to wash up, a place before to dump her bag before her bag broke or her shoulder was permanently pulled from the socket. And rounding a bend the dulcet tones of the speaker roaring out overhead. She thought of him:

> Some leader, he looked a bit like King, had a delivery similar to Malcom's dressed like Stokely, had glasses like Rap, but she'd never heard him say anything useful or offensive. But what a voice…. and the people had bought him. What disaster. But what a voice . he rolled out his r's like the quality good yard goods he'd once had to yank from the bolts of cloth in his father's store in Brunswick Georgia, till the day an anthropologist walked in with tape record and camera doing some work on Jekyll Island Blacks and would he be so kind as to answer a few questions about the lore and legends of the island folks, and "discovered him and launched him prominence.
> "Leader Sheeet." (35-36)

It is irony of movement to have such leaders and followers but contrasted is Velma's dilemma :

> And no soap. No towels. No tissue. No machine. Just a spurt then a trickle of rusty water in the clogged sink then no water at all. And like a cat she'd to lick herself clean of grit, salt, blood and rage. (36)

And Velma recalls how she'd purchased the cowerie-shell bracelets for her artist sister, Palma who is painter, less as momeneto more as a criticism. Bought the cowerie shells to shame her for she should have

been on the march, had no right to the cool solitude of her studio painting pictures of sailboats while sisters were being raped and workers shot and children terrorized.

Velma remembers Ruby a co-activist pouring her anger. Women activists do all the work, make coffee, sell a programme, but everybody is paid for a work except the women. There's no grant for them and women have witnessed that men are only drinking at bars and doing nothing when women book a hotel for a conference, women caucus, vote, lay out the resolution, build a union, a guild and organization. Velma comments:

> You all continue lollygagging at Del Giorgios renting limousines and pussyfooting around town profiling in your three piece suits and imported pajamas while the people sweat it out through hard times. (37)

The heated discussion takes her on a flashback within a flashback. She has memories another incident of how men activists including Obie are philanderers. Women activists had camped somewhere and the incessant rains had delinked them from other activists. Everything, everybody was caked with red mud, it was like ancient mud mothers. The tents were collapsing, the bed rolls mildewed. The portable toilets had long since not worked. The children on errands in indescribable clothes and barefoot. Worms too. Many running down with fevers. One doctor making rounds, stumbling with sleeplessness and impotence. Velma goes to the hotel for help in pitiable condition.

> Her shoes dangling around her neck… she'd hitched but mostly walked, keeping her eyes

> strictly off her swollen feet. Gone up to the hotel to make some calls find another doctor, locate the support group, to bring food and aspirin, phone in the press notices. Try to locate James's group that had gone to meet up with King in D.C.
> She was hanging on to the counter with both hands, nails splitting, hands swollen the phone to heavy to consider handling…. She could barely stand up. (38)

In such a traumatic condition she hears the easy laugher. It was a familiar voice. On the dulcet tones. And she looked into the mirror, the speaker and his cronies and women, those women, coming down the corridor to her great shock and dismay Velma finds Obie and his friends, the male activist with other women in the hotel, when Obie has told her to be going to D.C. to see King. Obie a philanderer! Velma couldn't believe it. This is one of the reasons in the personal life that makes Velma crazy to commit suicide.

The heated caucus again brings the scene in the hotel before Velma's eyes. She was too shocked to believe and stand:

> Her legs trembling with fatigue, her nose stopped up, her skin caked with mud, her face, her hair dusted with insect wings and pollen. Hanging by her nails her backbone on fire, her bowels boiling (and in the mirror she saw) man laughing with women… and the man who could be leader… Any minute she'd be a heap on the floor, a puddle of red mud on the carpet. (39-40)

But somebody (Obie) holds her and consoles :Velma, Aw baby don't get angry about things over and done with." (41)

Elliott Butler-Evans (1989-279) comments that Bambara's putting these two images of male and female activists and leaders in the Civil Rights Movement "demythologizes" the male figures and shows Velma "heroic". He observes:

> The juxtaposition of two images not only demythologizes the male figures but shows Velma to be heroic and the person with the political commitment. The male body is presented as an aggregate of signifiers and suggests superficiality rather the substance.

Obie thinks that the chasms were beginning in his life of an activist and in his personal life he wanted wholeness again. Obie muses that things are not same at the Academy of Seven Arts where the programmes bases on Civil Rights Movement are implemented. He ponders :

> It was starting up again, the factions, the intrigue. A reply of all the old ideological splits… Camps were forming to tear the Academy apart. He should make rounds somewhere in the building…. The sly gathering was afoot, no doubt. And tomorrow the polarities would have sharpened, the splits widened. He sat staring at the cement floor as if for cracks. He wanted wholeness against. Everybody at the Academy was asking "What ever happened to third world solidarity?" (90)

But the violent activists have created the chasm further at the Academy. Arms were found hidden at the Academy which caused severe criticism and Obie couldn't act quickly:

> But then the hotheads had brought the guns into the place and the splits widened and Obie had not moved quickly enough been forceful enough was overcome with ambivalence. "Have to be whole to see whole," Mrs. Haywood had counseled them. H'd tried to stay on top of all diverse plans and keep the groups with the Academy. A deep rift had been developing for centuries. (92)

Obie realises Velma's significance and value at the Academy and home in peacekeeping process. She was vital and important there too. He thinks :

> … He was probably exaggerating but things had seemed more pulled together when Velma had been there, in the house and at the academy. Not that her talents ran in peacemaking vein. But there'd been fewer opportunities for splintering wither around, popping up anywhere at any time to raise a question, audit a class, monitor a meeting, confront or cooperate. It was all of a piece Velma around. (92)

They were the key people: 'Jan, who ran the ceramics and sculpture division' Jan and Ruby coordinated the newsletter staff. Bertha ran the nutrition programme. But Velma is multifaceted. Obie recalls:

> Velma had run the office, done the books, handled payroll, supervised the office staff and saw to it that they were not overlooked as resource people for seminars, conferences and trips, wrote the major proposals and did must of the fundraising. It took him, Jan Marcus (when he was in town). Daisy Moultrie and her mother (when they could afford to pay them),

> treasurer of the board, and two student interns
> to replace Velma at the Academy. (93)

Obie thinks that the fissures at home had 'yawned' wide, something "fine" had dropped through or perhaps he could not recognize Velma when people whispered and called her "a crackpot." (94) Obie simply could not believe Velma to be crazy and mad that would lead her to suicide. He thinks that Velma's miscarriage had affected her negatively. But it was sure that he couldn't know her as a women after such a long time:

> Or may be the cracking had begun years earlier
> when the womb had bled, when the walls had
> dropped away and the baby was flushed out.
> How long would it take to know the women,
> his woman?(94)

Obie is of the opinion that Velma "couldn't relax" so he'd grown "afraid of her." (162)

Suddenly there is thunder and rain and Velma remembers her heated argument with Obie the other day. She asks him to be true to each other. Velma points out his being a philanderer Obie's argument is that she comes home drained as she gives the best of herself away. Velma "throws away" the best of herself to the community- that is what Obie says. He says he also works for the community, but he likes their son and he objects to her taking a new job of computer analyst at the transchemical . Velma comments on his remarks that his objection to her fatigue and job are not worthwhile because when he is sleeping around

indiscreetly what example can he put before his younger brother, and still she has trusted his words. He objects to her new job. Obie retreated but she didn't trust him.

Elliott Butler- Evans (1989'174) comments the argument that Velma's disintegration is generated by personal failure rejects some of the major ideological representations of the novel. The difficulties that Velma (and other women) experience with male dominance, the disjuncture between the might of Black cultural nationalism and its efficacy as a political tool, and the tenuous grounds on which "the Black community is constructed go unnoted.

In a long interior monologue "I might have died". "She might have died" reflects on how she might have been died:

> "I might have died." She said aloud and shuddered. And it was totally unbelievable but that she might be anywhere but there. She tried to look around, to take in the healer the people circling her, the onlookers behind.(267)
> She might have died. Might have been struck by lightening where she sat. But then she might have died as an infant gasping but for M'Dear Sophie's holding hands. (271)

Velma's question is a question of "identity" and "freedom". In a society based on gender oppression and sexism, she has lost both of them. Keith E. Byerman (1985:123) puts these views succinctly when he observes:

> ***The Salt Eaters*** like Bambara's previous works, concerns a women on a quest for identity and freedom... disintegration is the primary concern of Bambara's only novel, as the black community, the main character and the Book's

> structure are all decentered. The principal action takes place in a clinic room where Velma Henry, a political activist who has attempted suicide, is being treated by Minnie Ransom, a root worker. The cause of Velma's actions seems to be her inability to deal with the conflicting demands of black community. Groups committed to feminism, ecology, political activism revolution, black capitalism, revolution, voodoo, and cynicism threaten her (Velma's) sense of self because she believes in achieving selfhood through work in the community.

Like Velma the protagonist the entire caravan of characters, major and minor, go on the train of memories. Sometimes their memories have independent tracks but as some of the characters are related with each others, their memories also crisscross with the memories of others, Obie, Minnie Ransom, Old Wife, Sophie Heywood, Palma, Ruby, Jan, Dr. Julius Meadows, Fred Holt, his friend Porter, Campbell are the major characters, Lil James, Mama Me, Roland, Doc Serge and others are the minor characters.

Many of the characters are struggling with conflicts of public and private life: most are identified by their vocation or roles. Many of the characters are little more than a name and vocation, for example, Velma is a computer analyst who may be sabotaging the data of the transchemical corporation that is polluting the neighbourhood; her husband is sleeping around, she feels alienated from her son.

Ruby and Jan the fellow activists talk of how Velma is incorporating another issue in movement and thereby broadening it. Ruby says Women for Action' is taking on entirely too much:

> Drugs, prisons, alcohol, the schools, rape, battered women, abused children. And Velma's talked the group into tackling the nuclear power issue. And the Brotherhood ain't doing shit about doing organizing." (199)

It was Mrs. Sophie Heywood who said,"keep the focus on the action, not on the institution, don't confuse the vehicle with the objective, all concerns are temporary and disappear." (199)

Ruby and Jan like other activists are worried about the future of the movement because:

> Malcom gone, King gone, Fannie Lou gone, Angela quit. The movement splintered, enclaves unconnected. (193)

They have heard that Velma is now working at the Transchemical as a computer analyst.

Fred Holt, the bus driver is driving the bus and carrying the women's troupe called Seven Sisters or Women for Action' among other passengers. He has marital problem and is afraid of losing his job. He is grieving for Porter a friend who was murdered. Fred Holt is driving a bus whose passengers include activists, planning to join other in the café and in the carnival celebration that is about to begin. But for Fred Holt the driver, the past relentlessly intrudes on the present. Among the passengers are seven young women, antinuclear activists returning from

a demonstration. While eavesdropping on the women's talk about Bakke, Carter, the KKK, and International Women's Day, Fred Holt begins to think of his friend "race man" doomed by his exposure to atomic blasts in 1955 but murdered by a crazy woman with knitting needles. Fred Holt, remembers :

> But whatever they talked about Porter always managed to bring it round to Yucca Flats, 1955, atomic blasts, no compensation. The man was hunted and now he was gone. (82)

Fred's memories of Porter alternate with through of his childhood, his marriage and the world around him. When he sees the "old men in tatters" he thinks "it could be the Depression again and fears, unemployment, and of return to poverty. Fred's musings alternate with those of his passengers, who drift into thoughts about their own personal and public parts.

Fred reads on the front to T. shirt of the activists: 'Seven Sisters 'Academy of 7 Arts' all the activists are in bossy T. shirt reading 'No Nukes' it would have meant staring the unbridled bosoms to read it all …he was old fashioned as his on son said, only that wasn't the term his son had used. He's worried about his job. He thinks he'd have to do something about his grey… hair… For years they hadn't hired colored guys. Now, just he was getting some seniority they were taking about early retirement. He again remembers Porter and their conversation:

When he sees the old man in tatters, it reminds him of Depression, a heartbreaking scene. The memories of Depression make Fred depressed and sad. They reveal the humanitarian approach of his family to share food with the poorer and make Porter sensitive to the suffering of other. The women activists in the bus talk of the job in nuclear plants raised after the World War II. But exposure to nuclear energy is carcinogenic and many newspapers which they are reading are carrying such news items the news of the effect of radiation on workers, second a suit against a chemical plant by workers who'd left years ago and were dying of cancer. They further discuss information about the Transchemical is being collected as to the condition of the plant, its effects on our lungs etc, and Fred is worried that they are going to dump him before pension time. He again thinks how he wanted to be a musician. He thinks Porter was unfortunately dead.

The all pervasive canvas of the novel unfolds by including ecology in the Civil Rights Movement. The disaster of nuclear radioactive energy causing lethal effect on human life is symbolized by Transchemical at Claybourne and the issue is included in the Civil Rights Movement by the protagonist, Velma Henry, who is computer analyst at the plant and is perhaps hijacking the data there. Similarly through Fred Holt and his memories of his friend Porter who died of getting exposed to radioactive rays, we realize the intensity of atomic blasts and exposure of human beings to it. Fred muses over it;

> And some asshole experts releases radioactive fumes in the air and wipes you out in the chair. Porter used to say we are dying from overexposure to some kind of wasting shit the radioactive crap, asbestos particles… (79)

He regrets that he'd not invited Porter 'race man' for supper for all the time of their friendship. Fred had to bribe a doctor to get his papers through and get the job with the bus company. Some kind of wasting disease was eating him up. Yucca flats, 1955, atomic test. Fred has many more memories of Porter:

> Porter, so neat. So well read, so unfull of shit. One of the few guys around who could talk about something other then pussy, poker, pool and TV had wanted to be a newspaper reporter, go all over the world go to Africa and so what that was like. They used to sit on them stools in the Pit stop like truck drivers with their knees out the talk about Africa…. And they'd talk about family, Fred's in New York, Porter's wife and kids in Canada. (81)

Dr. Julius Meadows who has come to observe Velma's treatment wanders in the Claybourne spring festival, Mardi Gras. He overhears politically charged talk and a griot appealing for transformation. The griot the tall man in bow, urging clear over the heads of the crowd:

> History is calling us to rule again and you lost dead souls are standing around doing the freakie dickie. (126)

And adjusting his pace to each beat in the traffic people scurrying or dawdling or bumping into each other, dreaming along the pavement the griot resumes his talk:

> "…never recognizing the teachers come among you to prepare you for the transformation, never recognizing the synthesizers come to forge new alliances, or the guide who throw open he new footpaths, or the messengers come to end all the excuses. Dreamer? The dream is real, my friends. The failure to make out is the unreality." (126)

Meadows was out of earshot but the words still resonated. His city and country mind drew together to ponder it all. Suddenly Dr. Julius Medows is assaulted by memories of the Civil Rights Movement.

Dr. Meadow's medicial schedule is so busy that he has no time to spare for other social, political activities like Civil Rights Movements. He realises that this contribution to the movement is negligible. The carnival did strange things to people evidently. He remembers that just before a year he'd been asked to participate in a Bicentennial pageant. He was to play the role of Crispus Attucks. He thought it a good part. He was flattered. He had got a number of history books to collect information about he role and to make it effective. He was ready but he declined to do it when he was asked to play it in blackface as his skin was light.

Dr. Julius meadows is watching Velma's treatment by Minnie, Leaning against the deck, playing with the buttons of the stereo and what the sees is amazing:

> that the right hand of the healer women was own its own that she had gone off somewhere and left it absent minded behind on the patient's shoulder. And it seemed that the patient was elsewhere as well. So like the catatonics he'd observed in psychiatric. The essential self gone off, the shell left behind. Dr. Meadows ran a hand through his hair and it cracked as though there wee a storm brewing outside the window, he gazed out wondering where the catatonia was, if it might be in the woods behind the infirmary, wondered if the two women had arranged a secret rendezvous in the hills and if going there he would find them both transformed, the older woman is full of lotus under a blanket like the weathered photos his roommate had brought back from India. The younger a laurel bush, as in some legend, blooming in some pieces. Somewhere in storybook memory. (57)

Dr. Meadows witness the miracle of healing by the fabled healer of the district and he is stunned.

Meadows acknowledges how limited his contribution of the movement had been. While others were marching and risking their lives, he had written checks.

Campbell is the waiter journalist presiding over he multi-ethnic crowd of engineers, writers, activists, and artist at the local trendy café.

Doc Serge, who runs the Southwest Community Infirmary is former gangster and pimp how now calls himself a Doc. Administrator or no, he is always dressed like, a first class "gangster" in a foreign film.

Elliott Butler-Evans (1989: 178) analyses the racial aspect of the novel in portraying the male and female participation in liberation struggles. He observes:

> ***The Salt Eaters*** views racial conflict from different angles. The reconstruction of the past raises issues about male participation and performance in liberation struggles and places the female differences in the foreground.

The faith healer/root worker Minnie Ransom is equally important character like the protagonist, Velma Henry. Minnie adds not only to feminist dimension of the novel but also the cultural and political aspect of the novel too. Elliott Butler-Evans (1989:182) following remarks underline this statement:

> The novel's feminist discourse is further developed through the depiction of Minnie Ransom, 'the fabled faith healer' of the district. Even her mode of attire-the dress made of kenti cloth, gelee, a specifically African headwear popular among Black women who identify with cultural nationalism semiotically addresses her cultural and political significance.

The novel opens with Minnie's appeal to Velma who has committed suicide and brought for healing to Minnie at the Infirmary, "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?" Minnie sat before Velma humming lazily up and down the seats dropping her silky shawl, handling it as though it were a cape she'd swirl any minute over Velma's head in "wife out Veronica, or as though it we a bath towel she was

drying her back with in the privacy of her bathroom. Her description in the novel is quite in the vivid colours:

> Minnie Ransom herself the fabled healer of the district, her bright-red flouncy dress drawn in at the waist with two different strips of kenti cloth, up to her elbows in a fringe of the shawl shimmering at her armpits. Her head, wrapped in some juicy hot pink gelee, was tucked way backing into her neck, her eyes peering down her nose at Velma as though old tiny spectacles perched there were slipping down. (3-4)

Minnie Ransom's unique attire representing Black cultural nationalism in further described:

> Miss Ransom in her flouncy dress and hip shoes with flowers peaking out of her turban and smelling like coconut Afrospray. (113)

Trudier Harris (2001:79) assesses Minnie as a "new, breed of strong, black women characters", as she is "equally important" to the narrative. The character of Minnie's strengthens the thesis of "strong, black, womanhood" of this dissertation that the very spirit of black womanhood is strong like Minnie and not fragile. She herself being strong, ransoms and saves Velma from the throes of death and makes her aware that not committing suicide but facing life bravely and spending if for the people of the community is real life. Actually Velma also belongs to what Trudier Harris calls the "new breed of strong black character", but she is a bit shaken and that is why she attempts suicide. But later on she survives the double attempts of suicide with the infusion of life force in her by Minnie and she resurrects in the end and knows

that her life is not only her own but it belongs to the community in which she lives.

Minnie and Velma, the two major and Ruby, Jan and other minor women characters who pave the tradition of strong black womanhood like the other black women characters, in the other novels studied here (in this dissertation) are equally forceful and strong.

Minnie is a 'savior' and spiritual healer she 'ransoms' or saves Velma Henry's spiritual well being. Trudier Harris (2001:80) comments:

> Bambara quickly sets Minnie a part, not her legendary healing abilities, and places her in a range of powers that exceeds Western rationalism, for it is in the context of broader range of cultural bases that Velma's healing will take place.

She is described as "legendary spinster" and an "Ole swamphag" (4). She is more than a witch. Her life has still been one of service to others. She has not been married and does not have children. Her extranatural abilities have given her the power to heal. She specifically becomes "mother" to Velma during the healing process. She uses African-American, African, and West Indian practices. Minnie's transformation, the unfolding of her gift of healing, had provided several occasions for her family and neighbours to be concerned.

Velma thinks whether Minnie was trying to hypnotize her? Minnie is the legendary spinster of Claybourne. Velma could see herself: hair matted and dusty, bandages unraved and curled at the foot of the stool like a sleeping snake, the hospital gown huge in front, but tied up too

tight in back. And Minnie Ransom perched on her stool actually waiting or answer. Minnie brings the fact to Velma's notice that here is no sense in wasting each other's time. It needed a lot of weight to be well. Velma's things when she is in Minnie's hands at the infirmary anything could happen. She could roll off the stool like a ball of wax and melt right through the floor or sail out of window, stool and all, and become some new kind of UFO. Anything could happen.

Minnie tells Velma that folks came to her in the infirmary "moaning and carrying on and say they wanna be well" and "healed"(9). The infirmary staff and other onlookers have opposite opinions about the healing. Some have total disbelief. But the others who believe in Minnie's miracle are also worried:

> Others, who had witnessed the miracle of Minnie Ransom's laying on hands over the years were worried. It wasn't like her to be talking on and on taking so long a time to get started (9).

Doc Serge thinks that the whole day's programme is disturbed. The other infirmary staff members are making cash bets with the patients and the various passers by that the healing session would take no more than five or ten minutes. Minnie's spirit guide, the Old Woman is to help, direct her in healing. Doc Serge strolled out, various and sundry folk strolling in. But the healer was not quick in her movement this time. She had sat there for the longest time playing with her straps of the patient's gown. And now she was goofing around deliberately it seemed exasperating the patient. She again appeals Velma "Just so's you're sure, sweetheart,

and ready to weight when you're well" (10). The twelve or the Master's Mind is around Min to assist her. Mama Mae Velma's blood mother and M'Dear Sophie Heywood Velma's God- mother attend the healing session. But when the healing started Sophie Heywood left the treatment room. Minnie was saying to Velma, "Are you sure, sweetheart? I'm just asking is all. Taking away the miseries and you take away some folks reason for living … ' (16), Minnie was discharging the negative feelings from Velma's soul and enthuse it with the life force, so that the will to alive should be created in her mind. As Minnie's hands went out people checked their watches thinking out it to be the official beginning or end of the healing.

Minnie again said to Velma:

> "I can feel sweetheart, that you're not quite ready to dump the shit … got to give it all up, the pain, the hurt, the anger, and make room for the lovely things to rush in and fill you full. Nature abhors a so-called vacuum, don't you know?" (16)

She waited till she got a nod out of Velma. Minnie persistently imbibes on Velma's mind the positive attitude so that she can recover from the shock.

Minnie's appeals resume after some interval. "Quit wrassling, sweetheart, or you may go under. I'm throwing you the life. Don't be too proud to live," (42) but Old Wife, who is with Min controlling the healing session comes to know that Velma, the patient is not following to what Min says. She (Velma) is somewhere else. Her mind is gone somewhere else as we know on the train of past memories. Old Wife brings this to

the notice of Minnie, " Say she can't hear you, Min, don't even see you. Henry gal off somewhere tracking herself". Minnie is worried when Velma is not responding to her healing so quickly. She asks old Wife, "What's ailing the Henry gal so, Old Wife? She's draining me." To this old wife retorts that perhaps Minnie has met her match. Minnie expresses her concern about the attempts of these women of committing suicide. She prays to God to have mercy on these poor women as they don't know what they are doing:

> Lord, have mercy, what's wrong with the women? If they ain't sticking their head in ovens and opening up their veins like this gal, or jumping off roofs, drinking charcoal lighter, pumping rat poisons in their arms and ramming cars into the walls … what's wrong. Old wife? What is happening to the daughters of the yam? Seem they just don't know how to draw up the powers from the deep like before. Not full sunned and sweet anymore. Tell me how do I welcome this daughter home to the world… (44)

Old Wife thinks that Minnie is all "wound up" that day. Old Wife says that she doesn't like Minnie's asking question like "Are you sure you wanna be well?" she expresses dissatisfaction about Minnie's healing. It didn't happen in the past. Bambara describes Minnie's procedure of healing in these elaborate words:

> Over the years it had become routine; she simply placed her left hand on the patients spine and her right hand on the navel, then clearing the channels, putting herself aside, she became available to a healing force no one had

> yet, to her satisfaction, captured in name. Her eyelids closed locking out the bounce and bang of light and sound and heat, sealing in the throbbing glow that spread from the corona of light at the crown of the head that moved forward between her brows that fanned out into a petaled rainbow, fanning, pulsing then contracting again into a single white flame…(47)

Minnie's art and power of spiritual healing is further explained. She possesses some spiritual and extra natural healing powers Minnie possesses what the modern scientific medical doctors like Dr. Meadows don't have. Bambara brings out the different between the two camps. She comments:

> And (Minnie) learned to read the auras of trees and stones and plants and neighbors, far more colorful for more complex. And studied the sun's corona, the jagged petals of magnetic colours…
> On the stool or in the chair with this patient or that, Minnie could dance their dance and match their beat and echo their pitch and know their frequency as if her own. Eyes closed and the mind dropping down to the heart bubbling in the blood then beating fanning out, flooded and shining, she knew each way of being in the world and could welcome them whole again open to wholeness. Eyes wide open the swing from expand to contract, dissolve, congeal, release restrict, foot tapping throbbing in song the ebb and flow of renewal she would welcome them healed with her into her arms. (48)

Minnie discusses with Old Wife, who is omniscient what should be done to heal to Henry girl. She asks Old Wife further to give her some magic root or bat bone from her reticule bag.

Velma proves a difficult case for Minnie and one explanation springs from the loa, old Wife asserts:

> "Maybe you've met you match, Min.'
> "What you say?"
> "Say she sure is fidgetin like she got he betsy bugs.'
> "She one of Oshun's witches, I suspect. What's Oshun's two cents worth on the matter? Maybe she'd like to handle this Henry gal herself."
> "I don't know about the two cents cause I strictly do not mess with haints, Min. I've always been a good Christian."
> "When you gonna stop calling the loa out of their names? They are the laws alive.

Trudier Harris (2001-85-5) further point out the potentials of these characters:

> Bambara's placing of the *loa* side by side with Christianity and indeed giving the non-Christian a slight edge … posits them as providing and additional source for power. For Bambara, there's a less a clash of cults then a synthesizing for them a syncretism… (Nadeen evokes… Jesus and denies later) Bambara's black women characters therefore use all forms of belief known to them, in order to influence their words.

Minnie's in unable to cure/heal Velma quickly she finds it difficult to retrieve Velma on the path of life way back from the suicidal road of death. As her incessant appeals to Velma continue, it makes an ever

prolonged session. And suddenly it sounded like thunder in the distance. The spring festival, Mardi Gras is being celebrated and enjoyed by the people from distant corners. When people heard the thunder, people at different camps have different reactions at different places, at the side way trendy café and at the infirmary. This supernatural element in the novel which is culminating point and climax adds another dimension to the novel. Velma is basically being treated by a spiritual folk healer like Minnie and not by an advanced medical doctor like Dr. Meadows, an M. D. As Bambara has asserted the very inspiration of writing this novel, as is pointed out earlier, is to fill the chasm and bring the two camps, spiritual, folk, traditional and modern science, medicine together. The supernatural element of thunder, rain and lighting enrich and strengthen the spiritual folk healing element that will culminate in healing Velma in the end.

A sudden downpower and then lightening suggest as if Bambara wants to indicate that the supernatural elements are helping Minnie to heal Velma. Thus these supernatural elements have their role hand/participation in healing Velma and it is a cataclysmic event:

> A sudden downpower with no warning …
> the lighting had flashed lighting up the purple smeared sky …Damballah. A grumbling, growing, boiling up as if from the core of the earthwork drew a groan …Of whatever cataclysmic event it might turn out to be, for it couldn't be simply a storm with such frightening, thunder as was cracking the air as if the very world was splitting apart.

> It could be the thunder of cannons. It would mean war, or angry gods demanding someone be flung into crater. volcanoes, boiling up. Vomiting up flames and lava, death running in the streets soon to over take the café. Or and explosion at the plant (245)

Minnie notices that the music played on stereo for healing is helpful because Velma is coming back to life. She tells this to old wife. Even Doc Serge also notices and at the infirmary suddenly there is rumbling. Door opened and Fred came in and saw Doc Serge and the two women Velma and Minnie.

Campbell wondered if the portable radio in the kitchen might inform him similar storms in the other part of the country in the other parts of the world. In the park thunder catches Marcus. Obie receives a message to come to infirmary and he is worried about Velma. And there's an earthquake. There's fear and dread at unspeakable level in the air because of thunder, and lightening, and the sky is lit. Sophie Haywood thinks that Velma will come back to life at Minnie's call. It was sure that the downpower was no spring shower.

And in this tense and climax atmosphere, Velma resurrects at the end of novel. Bamara pictures Velma's coming back thus:

> Minnie Ransom staring. Her hands sliding off the shoulders of silk. The patient turning smoothly on the stool, head thrown back about to shout, to laugh, to sing. No need Minnie's hands now. That's clear. Velma's glow aglow and two yards wide of clear and unstreaked white and yellow. Her eyes scanning the air around Minnie, then examining her own hands,

> fingers stretched and radiant. No need of Minnie's hands now, so the healer withdraws them, drops them in her lap just as Velma, rising on steady legs, throws off the shawl drops down on the stool a burst cocoon. (295)

The Salt Eaters is a novel-Bambara's first and therefore immediately differentiated from her other works. Ruth Elizabeth Burks thinks that its language is the language of twists and turns, its sophistication, its punctuation, and its highly imaginative tones. She comments:

> Its (the novel's) characters speak a little, because have lost the desire to communicate with each other through words. Their thoughts, as conveyed by Bambara are more real to them than that which is real. (Mari Evans 1984-55)

Ruth Elizabeth Burks further points out that the "resurrection" that occurs at the end of the novel sets the people free. Velma, the central focus of this work, "epitomizes failure of language". She attempts to take her own life, she both slits her wrists and sticks her head into an oven to make sure that it will be enough. Burks further continues:

> …her (Velma's) double attempts of suicide fails, she is miraculously saved from physical death, but lost in a spiritual emptiness that must be filled before she can be whole. Her "insanity" the emptiness inside of her, must be replaced with spirituality which eventually derives its strength and power from within… all she has to do is to want to be well and spiritually whole. Velma must perceive that she is the instrument of redemption for her people, as are we all. Like Christ, she must die (at least symbolically) and live again to absolve herself

> and her people from the current sin of apathy. But unlike Christ's her metamorphosis into the world of spirit derives its strength from her people, African people. She must refind her roots by spiritually imbibing the swear of her people who have nurtured the earth for centuries (ibid.: 56-57)

Sophie Heywood. Velma's godmother thinks:

> "Why did Velma attempt suicide? Why didn't she think of us the people? Did she think that her life is only her own? Way didn't she think that she belonged to us, we people?"

The question raised by Sophie Heywood are correct. But had Velma thought in that manner she would not have committed suicide. But Velma realizes this large perspective, and thinks in that broader angle, and that's why she decides not to die but not live not for herself alone but for the society in the end of the novel.

Sitting on the stool Velma recalls how women activists including Palma and Ruby and other women activists raised question about the sexism in the Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore Jan and Ruby who are among the other activists of Seven Sisters and other passengers in the bus that Fred is driving, describes the movement splintered. They discuss that civil rights and antiwar movements have been replaced by the women's movement and the antinuclear movement. They discuss that when King is gone, Malcom is gone, Fanni Lou gone and Angela is quiet, the Civil Rights Movement has no furture. Ruby, and Jan who are waiting for Velma and do not know about her suicide attempts. They are

thinking of how Velma is working at the transchemical plant and it is not a healthy place to work, even though she is working in the office wing. Jan points out that the workers at the plants have to report for a medical care once in a month to the company infirmary and the most dangerous thing is that they can't see their own records.

Ruby and Jan further discuss the major threats of the looming dangers of the transchemical plant to the society. It seems that somebody at the plant wiped out the entire records. It is shocking. They Ruby and Jan discuss how it is done by moving low values to first byte and the propogating through the entire data base. Whoever this 'somebody' is he/she fouled up the entire computer bank. All the records were erased. All is gone and it is total blank and empty. Velma is interrogated for this.

Ruby and Jan discuss this issue of ecological and environmental threat of the transchemical plant and radioactive disaster at length. The plant has been shipping flatcars of sludge some kind of contaminated sludge, right through town to some burial grounds for radioactive waste that a plant in Albama uses. And Velma who is working as a computer analyst at the plant is reported to have pulled the secret information and passed it to some investigative journalist; or some environmentalist group. That's why she is being interrogated by the plant authorities so she has asked the other activists to be in touch with some lawyers for legal advice if in case a suit is filed against her or the plant.

They go on discussing the issues of nuclear reactors, uranium-mines a international anti nuclear movement. Ruby imagines that the end of the world will be because of atomic explosion. She says:

> "All this doomsday mushroom-cloud end of plant numbah is past my brain… I think all this ecological stuff is a diversion." (242)

To this Jan gets angry and succinctly elaborates on the issue that it is not a diversion but a capitalist politics in these words:

> "They (the issues) are connected, whose community do you think they ship radioactive waste through or dig up waste burial grounds near? Who do you think they hire the dangerous dirty work at those plants? What parts of the world do they test-blast-in? And all them illegal uranium mines dug up on Navejo turf-the crops dying, the sheep dying, the horses, water, cancer, Ruby, cancer. And the plant on the Harlem River and don't get stupid on me" (242)

Ruby thinks that Jan is sounding like Velma. To this Jan points out to Ruby that there's connection between the transchemical plant and the power configurations in the city and the quality of life in the city, region, country and the world. Ruby and Jan throw light on the antinuclear ecological movement and how the capitalist or first world countries are bringing the lives of people in third world countries or minority communities in danger. This aspect of the Civil Rights Movement which is one of the themes to the novel is brought forward and elaborated by Ruby and Jan.

Depiction of the two 'negative' male images in the novel are of "boymen" and of Roland, Obies brother, as rapists. The "boymen" also described as the "welfare man" and "halfmen" represent the decay and disintegration of the community. The text emphasizes their intimidation and exploitation of the women in the community. Seen through the eyes of Meadows, the narrative present an unsavoury and depressing portrait of the boymen.

This depiction of boymen as predators recalls the earlier representation of Roland, Obie's brother, as rapist. In both instances, the male, in pursuit of their own gratification, dehumanises the women in the community. This narrative strategy that allows the readers to witness and experience Roland's act, the novel presents it through the combined perspectives of Obie and Roland.

The focal point or centre of the action is the Southwest Community Infirmary of Claybourne, Georgia the pivotal action of healing Velma takes place at this venue. Bambara describes the ancient building of the infirmary and the tree shading it thus:

> So the Southwest community Infirmary established in 1871 by the Free Coloreds of the Claybourne went up on its spot and none other at the base of Gaylord Hill directly facing the Masons Lodge, later the Fellowship Hall where the elders of the district arbitrated affairs and knew the Academy where the performing arts the martial arts, the medical arts, the scientific arts, and the arts and the humanities were taught without credit and drew from the ranks of the workers, dropouts, students housewives,

> ex-cons, vets, church folk, professionals, and alarming number of change agents, as they insisted calling themselves. (120)

Minnie daily places the pots of food and jugs of water under the tree planted by the Free Blacks near the infirmary for the loa that resides there. Bambara describes the life history of the tree in these words:

> …at the back of the infirmary the woods began. They passed the Old Tree where Minnie Ransom daily placed the pots of food and jugs of water for the loa that resided there. Old Tree, the Free coloreds of Claybourne planted in the spring of 1871. The elders in course white robes gathered round the hole with digging sticks: the sun in their eyes; planted the young sapling as a gift to the generations to come, as a marker in case the Infirmary could not be defended.

The text contains musical images. Human existence is a dance, one that has multiple dimensions. Illness interrupts the dance. Minnie's job is to eliminate whatever interferes with the music and the dance.

The flashbacks and flashforward are the techniques or characteristics of the novel's postmodernist traits. Elliott Butter Evans (1989-:182) proves the point with the help of Fredrick Jameson. He argues:

> …The reader encounters (in ***The Salt Eaters***) some of the traits or signs that Fredrick Jameson identifies with postmodern discourse. Among these are pastiche and collage as structuring devices; the emergence of schizophrenic textual structure: a displacement of history by "historicism" in which the past is reread and

> reconstructed in the preset, and a valorizing and privileging of nostalgia.

The structure of the novel comes very hear to the conglomeration of collage of different scenes placed after one another not in sequence but in zig-zag and criss cross way. Velma's attempt to suicide reveals her madness and schizophrenia which is another characteristic of the post modernism found in the novel. Elliott Butter-Evans (1986-176) further comments about the postmodernism of the novel.

> Fredrick Jameson's appropriation of Lacan to read schizophrenia as one of the "basic features of postmodernism"… and experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material. Temporal discontinuities and "isolated, disconnected discontinuous, material signifiers are inscribed within the text, there is heteroglossia of voices in the novel also.

The Salt Eaters is such a disconnected text that it is very difficult to comprehend it. Along with Velma's madness we find numerous characters culminating in heteroglossia of voices that is the basic symptom of postmodernism.

Susan Willis (1987-139) also accepts postmodernism of the novel because of the disconnected and fragmented narration. She observes:

> …the novel approximates a postmodern narrative, whose profuse array of disconnected details denies interpretation and suggests a world where meaning no longer pertains.

Talking about the structure of the novel in an interview with Claudia Tate, Toni Cade Bambara comments that the sections of ***The Salt Eaters***

are closer to "gospel" then to jazz (Claudia Tate 1983:29) but Elenor Trylor judges the novel "a modern myth of creation in a jazz mode." (Mari Evans1984:59) Eleanor Traylor finds that the novel is so rich in contents that it is a "modern myth of creation of life that is told in jazz mode." It has the qualities of a myth that have all pervasive and appealing to all. And the creation of life Velma's coming back to life from death is told in a folkloric way-in a jazz mode.

Janelle Collins (1996-36) defines the postmodernism, in the novel. Fragmentation and other traits of postmodernism are in it. She comments:

> Like other postmodern works. ***The Salt Eaters*** combines fabulism and realism, adopts a non-mimetic form of presentation, rejects linear history in favor of flattened one-dimensional chronology of events, displays multiple angles of vision rather a "decentred" subject rather than a unified subjectivity in the character of Velma Henry, offers a labyrinth of events instead of a plot to follow, and rejects closure in favor of open ended meaning.

Similarly John Wideman (1980:14) argues that "the stream of consciousness" technique is used in the novel:

> Through flashbacks, stream of consciousness, a complex interweaving of plot, subplot and digression, the substance of Velma's life and the reader must synthesize the mosaic piece together …in its best moments the novel recalls Faulkernerian montage.

One of the three working titles which Bambara used to help her stay focused "In the Last Quarter", The Seven Sisters," and "The Salt Eaters" this she retained Bambara explains:

> Salt is a partial antidote to snakebite …to struggle to develop, one needs to master the ways to neutralize poisons. "Salt" also keeps the parable of Lot's wife to the fore. Without a belief in the capacity for transformation, one can become ossified (Susan Willis 1987:231)

The novel also has some references to this effect:

> …the mudmothers were painting the walls of the cave and calling to her …woman with snakes in her hair …trying to tell her about the difference between snakes and serpents, the difference between eating salt as an antidote to snakebite and turning into salt, succumbing to the serpent. (8)

Salt is so important in life, Sophie Heywood muses that "you never really know a person until you've eaten salt together" (147) As eating salt is necessary to know a person or an antidote to snakebite, similarly throw off the excess salt out of body is also important. When Obie is thinking over the crises in his personal as well as public life, the masseur, Ahiro tells him that what he really needs is a good cry which will shed off the excess salt through his tears. Ahiro cites a legendary example to prove the point. Ahiro said:

> "Obie you know what you really need?"
> "What"
> "A good cry, man. Good for the eyes, the sinuses, the heart. The body needs too throw off its excess salt for balance. Too little salt and

> wounds can't heal. Remember Napoleon's army? Those frogs were dropping dead from the scratches because their bodies were deprived of salt. But too much…" (164)

Velma also remembers using salt for snakebite as an antidote, she'd knows different remedies for snakebite and the bite of serpent for lifetime. She recalls how Daddy Dolphy's snakebite is treated with salt by M'Dear Sophie Heywood. Daddy Dolphy had also told her about the use of salt as and antidote to snakebite in the woods that time. She recalls :

> M'Dear had dropped her basket and salt his shirt with her shears before Velma knew what had happened. Had pushed him on the found and taken his knife from him and silt open his shoulder before Velma could cry out "Quick, Salt." And she'd managed to find it in the gathering basket and knew somehow it was salt and not some other odd thing to be bringing along to the woods. Daddy Dolphy had gulped some, held some is his mouth and was ripping of his sleeve when M'Dear snatched a fistful of leaves from a bush and packed a salt poultice into the wound and tied up his shoulder tightly with the sleeve tourniquet. "Helps neutralize the Venom." M'Dear explained, her voice calm as if certain the twisting of the sleeve would do the rest. "To neutralize the serpent is another matter," Daddy Dolphy had winked, taking deep breaths. (257-58)

Velma knows that she has learned the art of resistance to snakebite in life from the great men and women who resisted slavery like Douglass, Ida B. Wells to W.E.B DuBois. She muses:

> She thought she knew that. At some point in her life she was sure Douglass, Tubman, the slave narratives, the songs, the fables, Delaney, Ida B. Wells, Blyden, DuBois, Garvey, the singers, her parents. Malcom, Coltrance the poets, her comrades, her Godmother her neighbors and had taught that. Thought she knew how to build immunity to the sting of the serpent that turned would be cells, could be cadres with cargo cults. Thought she knew how to build resistance, make the journey to the center of the circle, stay posed and centered in the work and not fly off, stay centered in the best of her people's traditions and not be available to madness. Something crucial had been missing from the political / economic / social/ cultural/ aesthetic/ military/ psychosocial/ psychosexual mix. (258-59)

Bambara conveys the message through Velma's understanding that to eat salt is to resist the ills in the life and society. For Bambara "salvation is the issue" and she writes "to save our lives" (Mari Evans 1984:41) for Velma to be a salt eater is to neutralize the poison, ills in the various struggles she is waging in civil nights movement. Both Velma and Minnie Ransom are the women in the movement are salt eaters but they sometimes struggle on different planes.

Trudier Harris (2001-89) calls Minnie a salt eater who has learned not to succumb to the bite of serpent… whether the serpent is the madness

of potential chemical warfare and suicide in the 1960s and '70s.

Melisa Walker (1991:181) explains the significance of the titles of the novel in these words:

> The title ***The Salt Eaters*** focuses the reader's attention on those who are seeking health

> rather than on those who are doomed. Salt eaters are people who still practice the old folk medicine, including eating salt as a cure for snakebite. The cure the novel seeks, however, is for the disorders caused by poisons that afflict the character's minds, and by extension the society they create."

Melisa Walker (1991-187) also comments on the "narrative anarchy" at the end of the novel:

> ***The Salt Eaters*** does not end with despair. Velma does get well; the community is revitalized. But how? The final chapters are increasingly characterized by what Frank Kermode calls "narrative anarchy." Something happens that changes everything. But what? The hazy end of the novel mars its intrinsic structural and aesthetic beauty.

The novel reveals great potentials and not only critiques the ills in the personal life of civil right activists but foreshadows the larger span of the movement. Velma eats the salt as an antidote to the ills in the society to which her life largely belongs. Highly complex, using the postmodernist techniques, the novel is a labyrinth and "a modern myth of creations of life" as it creates the life of Velma i.e. she "resurrects" from death as Ruth Eleanor Burks points, like "Christ" for her people. Her double attempt of suicide fail and she is miraculously brought back to life by Minnie's healing. Coming back from the throes of death to life is indeed a modern myth of life, the dance of life defeats the dance of death.

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RADICAL THEMES:
THE FICTION OF NTOZAKE SHANGE

Ntozake Shange sums up the central concerns of her writing art in her well-acclaimed choreopoem ***for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf***:

> "Being alive and born a woman and being colored is a metaphysical dilemma/ I haven't conquered yet… my spirit is too ancient to understand the separation of soul and gender." "Somebody almost walked off wild all my stuff". (4)

These lines from the choreopoem best characterizes the sentiments expressed by playwright, poet, short story writer, novelist and essayist Ntozake Shange who has more than thirty books to her credit. The above chorepeom, which appeared at Broadway in 1976 struck a chord that appealed to women of every race, class and age. This choreopoem made her "an angry young black feminist." Shange's attention to women's untold stories brought a productive career of performance pieces, fiction, poetry and essay collection all stretching expectations as they articulate women's experiences.

Shange's heroines recall experiences of women who have been rejected verbally and physically, abused and discredited. Her characters draw strong emotional response because of their determination to survive destructive forces and to build a future that will allow women to soar. While Shange has been heralded as a leading feminist author she is

much concerned with the plight of Black men as with that of women globally. Some common themes is Shange's work include hypocrisy, racism women's self effacement, stereotyped roles for Black people and infidelity. Her works link race, class, gender issues thereby illuminating the condition of the masses of African American. The major theme in Shange's writing is the abuse of women and children.

Shange explores life's "nappy edges", the metaphorical terrain just beyond healthy fixed social definitions. She pursues the intimate humane connection with the world as well as one's inner most selves manifested as a dynamic affirmative rawness. Valerie smith et. al. (1991:379) observe:

> Here (in Shange's art) holistic vision, within which language, music, movement icon, and time and space are manipulated so that poetry becomes drama and dance, the political is simultaneously the aesthetic and the personal, and spiritually offers insights which ultimately empower one to grapple with the problematic social word.

Addressing the fact that her writing has been, almost entirely women centered. Shange writes:

> "You have to remember there's an enormous ignorance about women's realities in our society. We our selves suffer from frightening lack of clarity about who we are. My work attempts to ferret out what I know and touch in women's body, if I really am committed to pulling the so called personal outta the realm of non-are … we must learn our common symbols, preen then and

> share them with the world." (Contemporary Authors Vol. 85-88; 534)

Shange theorizes about the oppressive experiences of women. In all her works Shange suggests that black women should rely on themselves, and not on black men, for completeness and wholeness. She speaks for the women of every race who see themselves as disinherited and dispossessed.

In an essay entitled, 'It is not so good to be born a girl' Shange discusses the disadvantages and restrictions that hinder a fulfilled life for African American women, looking that female all over the world and throughout history have been victimized and exploited sexually and emotionally from birth. Societies have thrown women away, sold them, and sewn up their vaginas, and in contemporary times Shange avers rape and violent crimes against women make even attending midnight mass dangerous.

In much of her works Shange draws upon her personal experience as a black woman to passionately express her concerns with racial, political feminist issues.

Elizabeth Brown comments on the significance of Shange's work:

> In works that blend poetry, music and dance, Shange articulates the ramifications of being black and female. Poignantly speaking to and for numerous women of every race who perceive themselves as disinherited and dispossessed, Shange's life and works give dimension and clarification to the current feminist movement in America. (DLB 38:240)

Many black women writers suggest through their images that Black women's happiness or completeness hinges upon guidance from strong black men; but Ntozake Shange's works contain numerous images of black women who are forced to become self sufficient because black men in their lives will not or cannot provide financial and emotional stability for women.

Claudia Tate (1983:149) commenting on Shange's black feminist visions sasys:

> "Shange portrays the turmoil in black feminist psyche in all its various hues and moods and it renders her works multidimensional multilayered."

Neal A. Lester (1986:717) comments that Shange is not only a champion of women of color but people of color:

> As a black person as a black woman, as a black feminist, as a black artist and a female artist Shange champions the woman of color especially and people of color generally as they move toward optional self consciousness, positive self identity and unlimited self-realization in an oppressive and blatantly sexist and racist modern society. A crusader for renewed race consciousness, preservation of the black race, and accurate documentation of the people of color, Shange not only renounces the "redundancy of being sorry and colored at the same time in the modern world" but expounds on "metaphysical dilemma of being alive and being a woman and being colored".

Shange instills racial self esteem and consciousness in the black race so that they should feel that to be black is not be sorry in the modern world but a metaphysical dilemma.

Barbara Christian (1986:179) comments that the African American women novelists of the seventies and eighties are committed to an exploration of self as a central rather than a marginal issue. The novels of the eighties, the novels of the Second Phase take "radical and a visionary leap" like the novel mid-1970s in addition to the critique of sexism and racism. Barbara Christian observes that a common, motif runs through the fiction of this period-Toni Morrison's ***Song* of the Solomon** (1978) and ***Tar Baby*** (1980), Gloriya Naylor's ***The Women of Brewster Place*** (1980), Toni Cade Bambara's ***The Salt Eaters*** (1980) Alice Walker's ***The Color Purple*** (1982), Ntozake Shange's ***Sassfrass, Cypress and Indigo*** (1982), Audra Lorde's ***Zami*** (1982), and Paule Marshall's ***Praisesong for the Widow.*** The theme of racism and sexism pervade all these works by black women.

The motif of "liberation" is also reflected and repeated in these novels of the early eightis. These novelists use African motifs in their works. Barbara Christian (ibid.: 181) further explains:

> In fact in many of these novels, African and American women become important motifs for trying out different standards of new womanhood.
> What is particularly interesting about these novelists of African elements in relation to the

> concept of women is their sense of concreteness rather than abstraction.

Barbara Christian (ibid.:182) highlights that one of the remarkable specialists of these fictional works by African American women in the early eighties, is the 'mobility' of their characters, as black women in previous literature were restricted in space by their condition:

> Mobility of black women is a new quality in these books of the early eighties for black women, as in much of the previous literature, they were restricted in space by their conditions. This mobility is not cosmetics. It means that there is increased interactions between black women from the U. S., the Caribbean, and Africa as well as other women of color. And often it is the movement of the major characters from one place to another.

Shange's protagonists Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo move from Charleston, South Carolina, to Los Angeles San Francisco, New York and to Daufuskie island respectively.

Barbara Christian analyses that not only is the mobility through space but from one class to another. The African American women's fiction in the twenties focused on upper middle class black women, novel of the forties, tended to emphasize proletarian women, or the novels of the seventies featured lower-middle class women, many novels of this period present the development of black women who have moved from one class to another as a major theme of the work.

Barbara Christian concluded that thematically and stylistically, the tone of the fiction of the early eighties communicates the sense that

women of color can no longer be perceived as marginal to the improvement of all African American women.

Besides the author of the well-noted choreopoerm for ***colored girls***… Shange has written three novels: ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** (1982), ***Betsey Brown*** (1985) and ***Liliane: Resurrection of the Daughter*** (1994). Her work has focused on the "fury of black women at their double subjugation in white male America" as Mel Gusson has written in ***The New York Times*** (1976). "I am a war correspondent after all", Shange noted in ***Publishers Weekly***, "because I'm involved in a war of cultural and aesthetic aggression".

Her first novel ***Sassafrass Cypress & Indigo*** (1982) adapted from the novella ***Sassfrass*** (1976) is "a neo-slave blues narrative, a radical black feminist *Kunstlerroman*" of the three black young adolescent sisters and their mother Hilda Effania. The second novel, ***Betsey Brown*** (1985) shows racism and human nature through the eyes of "a thirteen-year-old black girl, and her latest novel, ***Liliane*** : ***Resurrection of the Daughter*** (1994) continues Shange's interest in adolescent girls, coming of age, developing a new form through a serials of dialogues between Liliane and her psychoanalyst.

Ntozake Shange strives to fill void in the female literary cannon. With her choreopoem and novels she has joined the ranks of a prominent black women who are giving a voice to their sisters. Through her works, the audience is exposed to the issues facing black women as they develop into adulthood. Issues of racism, sexism are addressed. The paths taken are unique to the individual. Each women fulfills her self with a

particular interest from which she derives power, be that interest music, dancing or weaving cloth. These women must also learn to relate to and separate themselves from the men in their lives. Shange writes in ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** that the novel is dedicated to "all women in struggle". Within that statement lies the power of her writing. Her works are about black women but they are indeed for all women. She uses Ebonics in a manner that doesn't exclude any gender, class or culture. Rather it invites all genders to enjoy as well as understand and confront issues facing us.

Shange comments in an interview with Barbara Lyons:

> Unless black women are writing the piece, we're being left out in the same way we were used to be left out of literature. We don't appear in things we write them ourselves (Barbara Lyons (1987:90)).

This oppression of black women is addressed by the characters in her writings. Black women are often deprived of their sense of childhood because they must immediately begin striving for recognition in home and community.

In ***for colored girls…*** one of the dancers, a lady in brown sings, solemnly "dark phases of womanhood/of never havin been a girl" (3) and continues with the realization that the invisibility of black women is like death.

Geta LeSeur (1992:168) comments that the heroines of her choreopoem and novels, Shange sings the black girl's song. Sassafrass,

Cypress, Indigo, Betsey, Liliane tackle the invisibility of black women and carve their own places in the society.

Shange is a 'black radical feminist' in the sense that she deals with the issues plaguing the black women in an unconventional way through her writing. Her ideological concerns found expressed through her similar unconventional forms of expression prove this point. The struggle of her adolescent and young girl protagonists is well suited to the postmodernist techniques that she apply in most of her fiction. In the ideological and thematic sense Shange is "radical" and at formal and structural level she is "postmodernist" her radicalism is also found expressed in her overt exploration of radical lesbianism. The postmodernism in the novel is revealed through the use of collage, and pastiche or epistolary forms, litters, recipes, dreams, invitations, and rituals etc.

The notable and conspicuous trope of Shange's fiction is her exploration of the psyche of the young and adolescent black girl protagonists. All her protagonists in the three novels to be studied here are young and adolescent black girls striving on the journeys of their maturation and maturity and fulfillment of Black womanhood. Shange maps the trajectories of their individual quest and search of black womanhood facing the turmoil of white racism and black sexism in their paths. Their roads and paths to self-discovery are not easy ones. Shange's obsession of young and adolescent black girl protagonists is seen through Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo, Betsey Brown and Liliane in her three novels. What is more noteworthy and unique is that Shange names these

novels after the names of these adolescent black girls protagonists underlying the fact that though minor, these girl heroines are noteworthy and significant. Thus she develops a new sub-genre of having young, adolescent black girls as protagonists and moreover most of them like Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo and Liliane are artists. So having these two characteristics of having adolescent black artist girls as protagonists of her novels, Shange creates "a new sub-genre of black *Bildungsroman* and black radical *Kunstlerroman*". This is Shange's unique contribution to African American feminist fiction of her obsessive exploration of psyches of black young radical artists girls as protagonists in her novels.

The use of folklore in the fiction distinguishes the works of African American women writes/novelist in general and Ntozake Shange in particular. With the characters of Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo, Shange introduces the element of African, African American folklore too in the novel. This is one of the hallmarks of African American feminist literature and fiction, as seen is one of the characteristic elements of Black feminist aesthetics. These African American writers and African American women novelists as seen in the case of Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara and Ntozake Shange in this dissertation employ the African/African American folkloric element in ample way to weave the textures of their fiction. Gayl Jones uses the blues element in both of her novels with black dialect in ***Corregidora*** (1975) and ***Eva's Man*** (1976) an creates the folkloric ethos. In Toni Cade Bambara's novel ***The Salt Eaters*** (1980) Minie

Ransom is 'a fabled faith healer', who uses ancient African spiritual healing methods and cures Velma Henry. She represents/symbolizes the ancient African, African American spiritual healing powers. Ntozake Shange's Indigo in her novel ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** (1982) is also a spiritual healer, midwife and musician. She plays natural rough blues on her fiddle. She knows magic and has a moon in her mouth. Sassafrass is visited in her dreams by past blues singer and queen, like Billie Holiday and Mamie Smith and they give her tips. Cypress is at last moves from The Kushaites Returned to Azare Bosom The Sons and Soil, a dancing troupe that raises money for Civil Rights Movement. The use of folklore in these fictions to create the African/African American ethnic ethos seems to be one of the characteristics of black feminists aesthetics.

A) NTOZAKE SHANGE'S *SASSAFRASS, CYPRESS & INDIGO*: A BLACK RADICAL FEMINIST KUNSTLERROMAN

> Make a song…… (so) all us spirits can hold it and be in your tune…..sing best as you can….make us sing a liberation song.
> -Billie Holiday
> (***Sassafrass Cypress & Indigo*** 81-82).

The African American feminist fiction in the early 1980s, as Barbara Christian (1986:179) points out took a "visionary leap" and became more "radical" in its portrayal of lives of black women. This transformation is seen not only in the thematic or ideological sense but also in the stylistic

and structural innovative concerns of form and technique in the contemporary African American women novelists. These novelists 'rebelled' against the conventional and traditional ideology and form of fiction. In its ideological and thematic concerns the novel of 1980s are radical and structurally or at formal level they are 'postmodern'.

Ntozake Shange's first novel ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** (1982) can be defined as a black radical postmodern feminist novel in this sense, as it changes the conventional notions of patriarchal fiction writing in both the ideological and structural sense. Ii is a saga of the three colored an adolescent and young artist sisters Sassafrass, Cypress Indigo and their mother Hilda Effania. The novel maps the trajectories of their coming of age and maturity, their growth and development as artists as black young women in the white racist and black sexist American i. e. in Charleston, South Carolina. The novel encompasses the post Civil Rights Movement period when it was at its denouement depicting Cypress partially involved in it.

The novel is the story of the three sisters and their mother. The eldest sister Sassfrass is a weaver like her mother and is also 'blocked' poet. She moves to North to Los Angeles and lives with her artist lover Mitch and tries to weave a life out her work. The middle sister Cypress is a classical ballet dancer. She is moving from New York to San Francisco and then to New York for her career. Indigo, the youngest still "a child has to much South in her" and also has a moon in her mouth. She can make and hear her dolls talk and has the greatest gift of faith healing. She is seeing

the obvious magic of the word and moreover she is a midwife. The novel maps the growth of these three young adolescent black artist sisters in a delicate and intricate way that culminates to not only "a radical blue feminist *Bildungsroman*" but also "black radical feminist *Kunstlerroman*", i. e. a *Bildungsroman* about an artist.

Get LeSeur (1992:168) aptly comments in this regard:

> The novel ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** is a perfect example of how a homeostatic relationship can be achieved. As creative as Shange is, the book can be analyzed for these three complimentary levels…culture, education and the development of four women, Hilda Effania and her three daughters, Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo. By examining the importance of customs in the novel the way in which she read the book and the character she uses to tell her story, the reader readily grasps a new alliance in writing, which in essence is the creation of new subgenre of the female *Bildungesroman*.

What is noteworthy of Shange in this novel to be mentioned initially is her unprecedented use of the historically neglected and inferior feminine material in it. Jean Strandness (1987:11) comments on this unique phenomenon in this novel:

> Historically, what has been associated with the masculine has been deemed important; what has been associated with the feminine has been trivialized. In ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo***, Ntozake Shange, drawings from the personal realm of women's everyday experience and from the ancient folk traditions of women's spirituality, incorporates a number of these

> "trivial" images, activities and modes of expression-dolls, flowers, stones, feathers, apples, recipes, trees, the ocean, menstruation, dreams, spells, weaving, dancing, psychic-healing-to depict the individual and the archetypal personalities of three sisters-Sassafrass is a weaver, Cypress, a dancer; and Indigo, a healer-and to evoke their world.

The novel, besides challenging linear plot structure the very characteristic of post modernistic technique, adopts a cyclic structure representing the three sisters and their mother connecting them. It is also "a neo slave blues narrative".

The opening sentence, "where there is a woman there is music" telegraphs the novels concerns, for all three women-the weaver and poet Sassafrass, the dancer Cypress, and the midwife Indigo-venture off from their Charleston roots seeking out to realize themselves a creative purposeful persons. Their mother Hilda Effania serves, alternately a comically well-intentioned but maddeningly conservative chorus commenting upon the array of options varying degrees of success, the sisters find themselves home again. Their mother's love has made their pursuits possible. But Hilda is expected to force her children free into a stress filled world of greater freedoms.

Structurally ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** is a circle of concentric rings, as Shange introduces Indigo first, then Sassafrass, then Cypress then return to Sassafrass, and finally to Indigo again. Jean Strandness (1987:303) comments on this structural tie up of the novel:

> This structure suggests the circular temenos (sacred space) in practices of woman's

> spirituality and so emphasizes the depth of the connection between the sisters, as well as their interrelatedness…this structure also reflects the extent to which each women is connected to the transpersonal realm with Indigo at the center as most psychic, then Sassafrass, and then Cypress, as the most worldly Sassafrass, and then Cypress, as the most worldly of the three at outermost edge…The circle motif suggested by the overall structure of the novel appears too at the conclusion of the novel when Cypress and Indigo return home to celebrate the birth of Sassafrass's first child as the two women and their mother Hilda Effania circle around Sassafrass to bewitch her in support and encouragement. Here the circle of women can be connected with themes of interconnection, healing and empowerment.

While the structure of ***Sassafrass Cypress & Indigo*** may be viewed as a circle of concentric rings, it can be viewed as weaving with different strands and motifs.

Jean Strandness (1987:303) compares three sisters-Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo with the triple Greek Goddess, Moerae, the weavers of the destiny and this links the novel with rich and ancient Greek mythology. Jean Strandness comments:

> The relationship of the three sister evokes an allusion to the Greek Moerae, the Triple Goddess, the weavers of the destiny; and that the archetypal Goddess, is sometimes viewed in a global, contextual way as "the interwoven fabric of being…the web of…the pattern".

The names of the three sisters are unique, evocative and meaningful. Mary Daly comments on naming a person is significantly in this regard. She observes:

> Women have had the power of *naming* (emphasis in original) stolen from us…To exist humanly is to name the self the world and God…Words which, metrically speaking, are identical with the old become new in a semantic context that arises from qualitatively new experience. (Jean strandness: 1987:303).

In Shange's novel Hilda Effania gives her daughters the names of three trees, which are used in dying clothes and also having healing; powers- Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo. Since Hilda Effania is a weaver who loves her profession, these names connote a special bonding between mother and daughters. Growing up all the girls learn to dye, warp, and weave; thus they see a manifestation of their own name in a piece of cloth something useful and aesthetic, and connect personal with the world. The roots and bark of these healing trees have traditionally held healing powers; and so too, eventually, each daughter in her own way becomes a healer connecting with other people.

Jean Strandness (1987:304) comments on the folkloric prospect:

> Further with its branches reaching out into the sky and its roots into the earth, the tree is a universal symbol of a cosmic connection between heaven and earth in the Creole mythology of Voudoun, the girls grow up in Charleston, the androgynous god Ledba, the initial provocative whole, "May manifest itself

> as the Tree of Life, or the crossroads, word and the invisible immortal realms".

Similarly each of the three daughters develops in an individual way, the powers of the Tree of Life and her spiritual abilities to link with other worldly realms.

Each daughter has rich and complex of connotations in her name from which we draw meaning: in giving her daughters the names of Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo, Hilda, Effania identifies their potential germ of connection with her, the material world. Other people and other worldly realms. In naming them Hilda Effania empowers her daughters.

Barbara Christian (1986: 202-3) explores the significance of the title of the novel:

> The names of Shange's sisters are key to their characters. Sassafrass is the name of an indigenous green American plant. It is said that the explorers knew they were approaching South Carolina by the scent of this herb used by the Native Americans and then by blacks as a medicinal tea. Cypress is a name of blue green tree that grows in America. It is also associated with North Africa as a wood that holds water. Indigo is an indigenous American plant, precious in the 16th century for the blue dye. Planters came, originally, to raise Indigo in South Carolina before they considered the cultivation of cotton.

Sassafrass, the eldest daughter is a weaver like her mother and also a poet. As has been pointed out earlier, Barbara Christian comments that

mobility is the hallmark of the African American feminist fiction of the early 1980s. Earlier it was a common feature that the black heroines were confined to limited space. But with the changing scenario they venture off to distant places in the pursuit of their missions and careers. It also happens in the case of all the three protagonists of this novel. Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo leave their home Charleston, South Carolina, for Los Angeles San Francisco and to Deufskie Island with Aunt Haydee respectively to accomplish their goals in life. Sassafrass falls in love with Mitch a tenor-saxophone player who is also an ex-convict and a junkie. In Los Angles the evocation of her joy, however would not have been credible even in Haight Ashbuy in 1967:

> Sassafrass, was so full of love she couldn't call anybody anything without bringing good vibes from a whole lot of spirits to everything she touched. (168)

But the reader cannot comprehend Sassafrass, 'devotion for Mitch is a cad and a bully. Sassafrass is a vague character. She weaves and joins the New Africans spirituality movement, leaves Mitch but comes back, gets pregnant, and has a baby named Ella Mae. Hilda Effania, girl's mother, and Aunt Haydee the midwife help with the birth.

Jean Strandness (1987: 303) comments on the metaphorical and archetypal significance of Sassafrass:

> Sassafrass exemplifies the classical Persephone archetype. Persephone is daughter of Zeus, king of gods and men and Demeter. She was obliged to spend six month in the Underworld,

> returning to the earth again in the spring. Away from her mother's home Sassafrass falls in love with a Hades figures Mitch, a seven-foot-tall jazz saxophonist whom she perceives as "the cosmic lover and wonder of wonders". She directs all her creative energy towards him- cooking for him, creating macramé wall hangings of the black heroes for their house, bolstering his ego, and loving him. She becomes obsessed with pleasing him, sinking deeper and deeper into the shadow realm of her own psyche.

Initially Mitch appears to embody the creativity to be a male muse, He urges Sassafrass to write:

> "Look, Sassafrass, I just want you to be happy with yourself. You want to write and create new images for black folks, and you're always sitting around making things with our hands…now Sassafrass, get into yourself and find out what's holding you back".

Sassafrass does authentically want to write: She also wants to write to please Mitch- "Sassafrass was supposed to be a writer". Ironically, it is Mitch (and Sassafrass participatory identification with him, that is blocking her ability. Mtich is a male chauvinist. He boasts her at a gathering of his friends.)

Mitch's music expresses "pure rage and revenge" Sassafrass listens to him practicing for hours. When she discovers he is a drug-addict, Sassafrass describes feeling "lost in the depths of Hell" as a result. Although she loves Mitch, being with him paralyzed her. For Sassafrass, living with Mitch is like being in Hell and Hades.

Sassafrass thinks:

> When women make cloth they have time to think, and Theban women stopped thinking and the town fell" (92).

Sassafrass covers her walls and clothes herself with the stories of African American woven by her own hands. She makes tangible the fruits of her mind:

> Certain of the necessity of her skill for the well being of women everywhere, as well as for her own. (92)

The motion of the shuttle through the thread on her loom "conjure(s) images of women weaving from all time and all places" (92).

Mitch devalues Sassafrass's weaving. He denounces a sequin-and-feather vagina shaped hanging Sassafrass has made in honor of Josephine Baker, "because it wasn't proper for a new African women to make things of such a sexual nature. "But, in the end, it is through her weaving, her mothers craft, that Sassafrass, finally taps into her creative potential as a writer.

On getting infuriated like the Creole goddess Oshum because of listening the reading of a book called ***Ebony Cunt*** by one of Mitch's friends, Sassafrass goes to her room and "almost unconsciously," begins the process of warping it. As she does so, she chants, a woman coming into her power:

> Making cloths bein a woman & longin
> to be of the earth
> a rooted blues

This is a turning point for Sassafrass. Weaving feels "essential" to her. It links her with her heritage- "her mama had done it, and her mama before that". Weaving puts her in frame of mind that opens her creative potential in words and language. For her weaving and word making are interrelated "When women make cloth they have time to think" (92). Sassafrass feels whole integrated, and authentically purposeful.

Jean Strandness (1987: 304) comments:

> As a representative of the Persephone archetype, in weaving and finding her voice, Sassafrass has emerged from Hades and returned to the Mother (the feminine principle).

She leaves Mitch and goes to live with her sister, Cypress, where she reads about ancient civilization and begins to write. In this process, she is encouraged in her endeavors by psychic visions of Billie Holiday and Mamie Smiths:

> We need you, Sassafrass, we need you, to sing best as you can: that's our nourishment, that's how we live".

Jean Strandness (1987: 304) comments:

> Yet like Persephone, Sassafrass is drawn back into Hades-She return to Mitch. Eventually the two move to a Creole Voudoun spiritual community.

Here Mitch complains and curses the deities and does drugs. But Sassafrass participates fully in the community life, desiring to become a priestess of Oshun- "to heal, to bring love and beauty where she wants". In a group of ritual honoring Shango, Sassafrass's patron, she prays to

have child. After she is warned that the child will be cursed if she does not renounce the father, Sassafrass is possessed by the archetypal goddess Oshun and in the throes of wrath, she grabs a jar of honey and pours it into the bell of Mitch's saxophone. She continues to spread it all over the horn until he finally becomes silent.

The next morning she has a vision of her mother "lying on a bed of oranges, surrounded by burning yellow candles, eating honey". Freed from the bonds of Hades, Sassafrass returns home to her mother- "to find the rest of (herself)".

Annis Pratt observes that many female protagonists in nineteenth and twentieth century women's literature have identified psychologically with the values of a:

> " 'horrible husband, who stops her dead in her tracks. In women's experience, the gynophobia shadows and the animus are often fused in a masculine character who loathes the woman character every bit as much as she loathes herself, reinforcing her self-blame and dragging her into compliance with social standards…Confronting the horrible husband the female character falls into madness, determines to commit suicide or lapses into a zombie like state that precludes further development". (Jean Strandness: 1987: 305)

Shange, by having, Sassafrass complete the Persephone, cycle including the descent to the underworld and in return to mother, alters and transforms this pattern. In fact in her relationship with Mitch, Sassafrass does practically become paralyzed:

> Sassafrass was weak from Mitch's torrent. She sat so still her old fear of actually being a catatonic came back". (182)

But by drawing to the psychological strength she gains from her weaving as a catalyst, the encouraging visions of Billie Holiday and Mamie Smith, the Wrath of the archetypal goddess Oshun, and the sustained support her mother-all of which could be linked with Demeter archetype. Sassafrass completes the Persephone pattern and comes into her own.

When Sassafrass and Cypress first leave home what they actually find is the opposite of their mother's dreams of nice husbands, big houses and trips to Europe. Mitch, an ex-convict and junkie with whom, Sassafrass is living, beats her severely and she has to leave him.

It takes Sassafrass a long time to individuate herself from her man. She lives with Mitch, a chauvinistic musician who dominates her life and with whom she has cacophonous relationship. He wants her to pursue her interests but at the same time wants her to wait on him and cook his meals. Because she identifies herself to her man, she endures his attitudes. These interactions among male and female characters expose degrees of sexism, as Shange says in the ***Massachusetts Review*** interview:

> It's like creating a world of women that's women-centered so aberrant male forms really look aberrant. (Brenda Lyons 1987: 687)

Sassafrass doesn't muster the strength to leave Mitch until his sexist behavior reaches gigantic proportions and with the companionship of

two friends, he directs a sexually explicit song at her. So she finally explodes:

> I'm not about to sit here and listen to a bunch of non account niggahs talk about black women; me and my sisters; like we was the same bought and sold as slave auction… breading heifers the white man created cause y'all was fascinated by some god damn beads brought you on the continent"(89).

Sassafrass leaves Mitch and goes to Cypress but in spite of his beatings she comes back as she loves and needs him:

> She needed Mitch because Mitch was all she loved in herself" (98).

We meet Sassafrass in highland park, Los Angeles, in an apartment she has covered with murals of African exploits" (77). Each doorway bears a macrame hanging designed for a hero to the Black community: Malcom X, Fidel Castro, Marcus, Garvey, Afchie Shepp, John Coltrane. The apartment reminds us of the spaces Robert Stepto labels "ritual grounds" in their tension between bondage and freedom.

Mitch beating her makes Sassafrass recall her father's domestic abuse and violence to her mother when she was a small child.

Arlene Elder (1992: 4) argues that the story of women now in choosing self respect, must lose her romantic dreams of life with the man she loves is of course a staple of much contemporary feminist fiction. Most important is her own artistry, linking her with her mother and a

heritage beyond her, to the long line women weavers representing an ancient, universal community of artists:

> Her mama had done it, and her mama before that; making cloth was the only tradition Sassafrass inherited that give her a scene of womanhood that was rich and sensuous, not tired and stingy (92).

Sassafrass is a blocked writer. The full expression of her creativity is hampered by her relationship with Mitch, and avant-garde jazz musician on the vanguard of the Black arts movement whose "voice" overshadows her own. Saadi Simawe (2000: 189) comments that Sassafrass relationship with Mitch provides a vehicle for Shange to critique the oppressiveness of the Black arts movement for women.

Weaving comes as easily to Sassafrass as breathing: it grounds her. Through weaving she feels her power and strength as women.

Sassafrass inspired by visit from blues women of the past, who also serve to ground her in the present. Warning Sassafrass of the ways in which her relationship with Mitch is impeding her creative development Sassafrass encounters with Blues queens Billie Holiday and Mamie Smith provide insight and encouragement in her process of finding her own voice as writer.

Billie Holiday comes to visit after Mitch challenges Sassafrass to stop making things for him and get into her writing. Sassafrass struggles to stop focusing her energy on Mitch and find a way:

> To get into her secrets and share like Richard Wright had done and Zora Neale Hurston… the

> way the Lady gave herself, every time she sang". (80)

Billie Holiday (The Lady) comes to talk to Sasafrass about the blues because she says it's the blues that's been keeping her from writing (81). The Lady tells her to:

> Sing best as you can… but don't get all high and mighty. Make us some poems and some stories, so we can sing a liberation song … We need you to be Sassafrass 'til you can't hardly stand it…. 'till you can't recognize yourself and you sing all the time". (81-81)

Because of Mitch she is unable to write or weave. Mitch admonishes her to:

> Get into yourself and find out what's holding you back. You can create whole worlds, girl" (79).

When her creativity is held hostage her dream/memory recalls the procession of the Lady. The Lady turns to the doorway on her right and shouts.

In the company of her sister Cypress, in San Francisco, Sassafrass dances, weaves and writes. Here she comes to know, Leroy, a musician and Cypress's friend. While Leroy sings bebop love messages to Sassafrass, she is singing spirituals, morning over Mitch (103) when Mitch's music begins to distract Sassafrass, Leroy countries with his own:

> Leroy sensed a soprano horn around Sassafrass…playing for all he was worth… He came back with his bassoon, and tried to pull Sassafrass out of the alien melody. (119)

It's Mitch's and not Leroy's music that seduces Sassafrass back to Los Angeles. She realizes that Mitch's "music echoed hot and dusky: almost blues but cradled in possible sunlight". (122) She hears "that heap of blues" (121). That has been playing her, but the romantic fantasy image comes back distorting reality and giving her false hope. Mitch's music seduces Sassafrass, temporarily giving her back her dreams of romance.

That night Sassafrass goes to a club to watch Mitch's band play. While sitting in the club waiting for the band to start, Sassafrass receives second visit form the past, this time from Mamie Smith. (126) Like Billie Holiday, Mamie Smith teaches Sassafrass about the blues. She warns Sassafrass: don't romanticize the blues, blues women or the blues life. Don't romanticize the past or the present. She says, see in me the suffering of your Mamma; hear in my song the anger, sorrow, fears, and the toughness of your ancestors. Mamie Smith shows Sassafras the similarities and differences between her own life and that of her blues foremothers. Implicit in Mamie Smith's message is something about self awareness-the need for Sassafrass to recognize her own blues, to see her own life for what it is as the romantic fantasy she would like it to be:

> Chile, if this wasn't one of your visions I'd be wearing the second-hand white lady's dress as you…(127)"

Rather than glamorize the lives of blues women Sassafrass must acknowledge their pain, suffering and ways of coping, as she must acknowledge the truth about her own life, her relationship with Mitch, and the blocks in her writing.

Mamie Smith dissolves "amid the clatter and excitement of Mitch's group, seething up" (127). Still trying his best to please her, Mitch puts on a good show:

> "Sassafrass, we gonn get it on tonight-for you. I'm do every blues luck I ever knew and I don't want you to carry nothin" (125).

Mitch's music is a double edged sword in the novel, both creative and destructive. As far as Sassafrass development is concerned, it is ultimately inhibiting. The destructive aspect of his music reflects that part of Mitch which requires Sassafrass's self-scarifies, and that part of him which is self destructive and crippled by him unhealed pain. The destructive aspect of Mitch's music reflects that part of Sassafrass which sacrifice self-respect and her own creativity to uphold the romantic fantasy and the false image of Mitch as her saviour, her Orpheus. The destructive aspect of her music reflects that part of Sassafrass's love for Mitch which is paralyzing and self-sacrificing, and the relationship, dynamics which stifle Sassafrass's creative development. Even when Sassafrass's dream to be a Mitch continues to act out and impede her process, finally in the throes of possession by the spirit of the African deity Oshun, Sassafrass silence Mitch by stuffing honey down the bell of his horn. (127)

Sassafrass covers her walls and clothes herself with the stories of African American women by her own hands. She makes tangible the fruits of her minds:

> Certain of the necessary of her skill for the well being of women everywhere, as well as for her own. (92)

The motion of the shuttle thorough the threads on her loom" conjure(s) images of women weaving from all time and all places" (92).

Cypress is a classical ballet dancer. She is the middle sister. Connecting with her own talents was never a struggle for her as it was for Sassafrass. As a young girl, she knew "dancing is a sensual experience that connects her with the world-a dancer is "someone whose body is interpreted the world". And, dancing connects her (and the audience) with the past, the ancestors:

> Deep drumming is heard from street; folks turn their heads backwards. ***The Kushites Returned*** leap, sweep down the isles, silk cloth flies in the air gleaming with silver threads, the painted dancers burst through the darkness…. It's so magic folks feel their own ancestors coming up out of the earth to be in the realms of their descendents; they feel the blood of their mothers still flowing in them/survivors of the diaspora. (186)

For the future, for the children she does not have Cypress creates four line works of embroidery- "blocks of minute figures and arrows and circles in different colors; which represent some of the notations of ***The Kushites Returned*** and also seem to symbolize Cypress's continuing potential as a dancer.

Jean Strandness (1987: 306) comments on the symbolic and archetypal significance of Cypress:

> Cypress manifests the archetype of Aphrodite, goddess of love beauty, sexual pleasure and marriage. Her home is always open and filled with wine, cocaine and lots of men. Initially, she represents that aspect of the goddess, who is giving herself to many men, really remains autonomous.

Cypress then moves from San Francisco to New York and becomes part of a "women being space", where she feels connected to women as she had never felt around any man. She meets Idrina who opens fully to love:

> Cypress hadn't known that she could be loved because she'd never let anyone marry close enough. Yet Idrina seemed to move right in and stay the dragons Cypress had spouting- 'don't touch me". Simply by looking at her. Holiding her. (97)

Cypress's next lover is a man, Leroy. Shange describes their love making as a sensual dance:

> …The original aboriginal dance of all time/challenge the contradiction of perfected pirouette with the sly knowing of hips that do right strength till the stars n sands of all our lands abandoned/mingle in the wet heat & grow warm/must be she the original aboriginal dancing girls. (140)

Eventually, Cypress and Leroy make plan to marry in her "mama's house".

Jean Strandness (1987: 305) elucidates the uniqueness of Cypress in her joyful sensual relationships and comments:

> In much of the nineteenth and twentieth century women's literature, women are depicted as restricted inhibited or frustrated by social standards and/or their own internal guilt, in their sexual fulfillment. Shange's character Cypress stands as a remarkable contrast. Her love relationships, in their duration, are all depicted as unselfconsciously sensual affirmative and joyful. She seems to represent the original meaning of the word *virgin*- a woman (*Gyn*) like a man (*vir*).

Anis Pratt throwing light on the archetype Aphrodite represented by Cypress comments that a virgin like Cypress is free to use her body at her will:

> Such a virgin retained at all times the rights to choose what to do with her body, whatever to roam at will or stay home, whatever to practice celibacy or engage in sexual activity. (Jean Strandness 1987: 305)

Cypress moves from being the lover of many a man, to being the lover of a man she will eventually marry. For Cypress, as a manifestation of the archetypal of Aphrodite, all phases of her sexual life are in character.

The Lunar Sphere Moves with the deepest sound-Cicero

Cypress begins her career when her mother sends her to New York to study dance. There she join a troupe of black dancers dedicated to "discovering the movements" of the colored people that had been lost" (136). Later, she lives in San Francisco-dancing, sleeping around, snorting cocaine, and dealing dope, when she needs money. Back in New York, she gives up drugs, joins a women's dance collective, has a brief affair

with one of the dancers, and finally falls in love with Leroy, a serious musician and old friend, who comes from "a long line of civil rights activist doctors and preachers" (186-87). To be one with Leroy is to join her life to one who is committed to finding and preserving" the blood of the culture, the songs folks sing, how the move, what they look at, the rhythms of their speech" (189) to dance is to cling:

> "to her body the body of a dancer; the chart of her recklessness, her last weapon, her perimeters: blood, muscle, and the will to simply change the world". (205)

In the end Cypress has a socially significant career as well as a satisfactory personal life: She plans to join a dance company called Soil & Soul that travels around the country raising:

> Money and morale…bail legal fees, stuff like that for the Civil Rights Movement" (210).

She intends to marry Leroy whose middle class-parents were killed by white gangsters but who is determined to nurture and create black culture and never to succumb to hatred and revenge.

Cypress's road to self discovery is also a rocky one. She wants most of all to be dancer yet she allows herself to lose sight of her goal by dabbling in alcohol, drugs and many sexual relationship. Cypress is determined to be a dancer. She studies in New York and travels with an African American troupe to San Francisco when she returns to New York, she dances herself into a new whirlwind of relationship that force her to accept herself as a woman and as an artist.

Although Cypress enjoys the company of many men it is her first love relationship with a woman Idrina that, derails her sense of self. She allows herself to fall in love even though she knew from the beginning that Idrina has a steady lover:

> Idrina knew some things that Cypress didn't know: loving is not the same as having. And Idrina loved Cyress, but not to have…… and Cypress didn't know that. (149)

When Idrina's lover returns from Holland, Cypress suffers a devastating blow. After much alcohol consumption she runs into her old friend Leroy and finds her focus on dance again. As she fulfills herself with her dancing she finds it viable to fulfill her need for love with Leroy and accepts him as a part of her life. By the novel's denouement she has agreed to marry Leroy.

Offended by the indiscriminate male homosexuality and overt insulting of women she encounters in the troupe with which she dances; Cypress aligns herself with a lesbian collective but discovers rather quickly that women can be as sexually exploitative as men. After a painful love-affair with another dancer Idriana, and her escape from Coline and Ixhell, "dangerous animals……..gnawing on her bones" (150) Cypress throws herself energetically with a musician Leroy. Her dancing becomes politically and culturally centered.

Cypress deals drugs, traverses New York city underground and above ground, from one end of Manhattan to the other; flows from heterosexuality to lesbianism and back again. At one point after the break with Idrina all her

clothes accept these on her back are in lockers on the 9th avenue side of the Bat port authority, so Arlene Elder (1992: 5) aptly comments:

> Cypress functions as Shange's picara, signifying on those slave forbearers like Ellen Crest and Sojourner Truth who also gave up their conventional female identities for a true/time in order greater sexual and communal security.

As a dancer, Cypress integrates music with her creative expression in movement. She surrounds herself with musicians, along with dancers and other artists, and interweavers music and movement into everything she does. Shange presents Cypress's life (her daily routine, interrelationship, dancing) as a series of performances

A comparison of Cypress performance with the Kushities Returned with the cast party that follows suggests the close relationship between life and performance. The Kushites performance juxtaposes a wide variety of music and dance styles from different continents and time period. New combines with the old, and the tradition is made a new as the spirit of African and the ancestors work to create a unified whole. The audience is compelled to respond, to become performance- "The audience doesn't exist; everybody is moving" (114).

Similar to Indigo's donning the classical violinist's pose, Cypress initially looks at European ballet as a dance model, but soon rejects it in favor of African dance traditions, which she finds to be a more viable vehicle for her own self-expression. Dancing with the Kushities Returned

she discovers ancient traditions and lost movements and finds herself in the civil right struggle of the 1960s:

> Her dance took on the essence of the struggle of colored an American to service their enslavement. She grew scornful of years clamoring for ballet and grew deep into her difference…….when she danced she was alive; when she danced she was free. (136)

On tour with The Kushites Returned, Cypress becomes disillusioned when the other women dancers are let go and she feels alienated by the misogyny of the men in the company. She leaves the troupe in the New York City and join on all women company, Azure Bosom. This experience allows her to enjoy the company of women and to get in touch with and celebrate her female body and sexuality. Through her relationship with one of her dancers Idrina, Cypress opens herself to love for the first time. Idrina helps her to navigate the city and negotiate the dance world, gets what she needs in order to grow as a dancer. At the same time Cypress is also profoundly hurt by Idrina when Idrina's longtime lover returns from Europe to replace her.

In mourning, Cypress stops dancing and spends long hours at local bars silent and drinking until one day she hears the familiar avant-garde melodies of her old pal from San Francisco, Leroy McCullough. His music picks her out of the gutter mourning and returns Cypress of her own creative "voice" as a dancer. At the end of the night Leroy carries a passed out Cypress back to his lofty apartment. The "energy between them is maddening" (157), and by morning they are lovers. Cypress and Leroy's

lovemaking is as creative and subversive as their music making dancing. This new love brings freedom and creates the energy, that Cypress needs to renew her life and her art. From lovemaking to dining out to talking long distance on the phone, Cypress's and Leroy's every interaction is intense, romantic and passion-filled.

Maria Johnson comments that as Indigo uses her fiddle, Cypress learns to use her body as a tool to empower herself and her people:

> Cypress clung to her body, the body of a dancer; the chart of her recklessness, her last weapon, her perimeters: blood, muscle and the will to simply change the world. (Saddi Simawe 2000:208)

Cypress doesn't stay at home but moves from place to place as she dances with Kushites Returned in San Francisco with Azura Bosom in New York City. She is learning the music of:

> articulating what women had never acknowledged: our bodies are not our destiny but all freeing energy. (141)

She uses energy to keep herself and the histories of her people alive.

The novel opens with the first of the three cycles represented by the precocious child Indigo who not only makes different kinds of dolls but converses with them, her mysterious vision opens and closes the novel. As a spiritual healer she knows music that she that she learnt from Aunt Haydee. Indigo is the innocent girl on the verge of her initiation into women hood. The beginning of the novel describes the mysterious and magical Indigo:

> Where there is a woman there magic…If there's a moon falling from her mouth, roses between her legs and tiaras of Spanish moss, this woman is a consort of the spirits. She is a woman who knows her magic, who can share or not share her powers. A woman with moon falling from her mouth.
>
> Indigo seldom spoke. There was moon in her mouth. Having a moon in her mouth. Having a moon in her mouth kept her laughing.
>
> Sitting among her dolls Indigo looked quite mad. (3)

The impression this paragraph gives is of the power of womanhood, perhaps because of the sharp imagery. Indigo is the youngest of the three daughters. Hilda thinks that there is too much "South in Indigo":

> These creatures (dolls) were still her companions, keeping pace with her changes, her moods and dreams as no one else could Indigo heard them talking to her in her sleep…her dolls were calling her as there was so much to do, Black people needed so many things. That's why Indigo didn't tell her mama what all she discussed with her friends. It had nothing to do with Jesus. Nothing at all… Mama murmured "something's got hold to my child. Swear. She's got too much South in her". (4)

Indigo made dolls over material of her mothers and Sassafrass's weaving. She colored/painted the dolls only in black. The color of the Negroes. She has dolls looking like the black people of different countries like Africa and Jamaica.

As a disciple of Aunt Haydee, Indigo believes in what her spiritual guide has to say. When her father died Indigo had decided it was the spirit of things that mattered. The humans come and go. Aunt Haydee said world fall apart. It indicates that there is a lot of South in her.

Sister Mary Louise Murray with no children in her house invites Indigo, but not Indigos doll friends. Indigo knows that Sister Mary Louise is in fact Christian woman. Sister Mary doesn't allow any dolls that can talk in her house. It is at Sister Mary's house that Indigo experiences her first menstruation, the sign of her reaching puberty and womanhood. A new woman. Shange describes this Indigo's initiation ceremony very vividly:

> Then Sister Mary Louise rose her thin body coated with Indigo's blood. She gently took off Indigo's clothes, dropped them in a pail of cold water. She bathed Indigo in a hot tub filled with rose petals: white, red, and yellow floating around a new woman. She made Indigo a garland of flowers and motioned for her to go into the back yard.
>
> "There is the garden, among God's other beauties, she should spend these first hours- Eve's curse threw us out of the garden. But likae I told you women tend to beauty and children. Now you can do both. Take your blessing and let your blood flow among the roses. Squat like you will when you give birth. Smile like you will when God chooses to give a woman's pleasure. Go now, like a say. Be not afraid of your nakedness, "said Mary Louis to Indigo.

> Then sister Mary Shut the door. Indigo sat bleeding among the roses, fragrance filled with grace. (19)

Coming of age is a new and innovative experience for Indigo and she makes her dolls to have the same experience also. She makes menstruation pads of velvet for each of her dolls.

Shange has such and entry of Indigo's first menstruation and initiation in the novel:

> A Flowing:
> When you first realize your blood as comes, smile an honest smile for you are about to have an intense union with your magic. This is a private time, a special time, for thinking and dreaming…Remember that you are, a river: your banks are red honey where the moon wanders (19- 20)

As sister Many Louis has celebrated Indigo's first menstruation ritual, she insists on her mother that the first period of all her fifteen dolls, for which she has made velvet menstruation pads, should be celebrated by her mother, with their best dresses and very favorite foods. She argues with her mother that as she had grown up, so have all her dolls. But on the contrary Hilda ask Indigo to put the dolls in the attic as she in really worried about Indigo who has recently reached puberty and womanhood but is still playing with her dolls like a small child. She is worried as to what will happens to her and how she will survive with her make-believe world of dolls in this racist and sexist America. Indigo very innocently and with pure mind tells Hilda that as she has become a

woman the boys could follow the trail of stars that fall from between her legs after to dark. Hilda is shocked with Indigo's innocence and reprimands her and makes her aware of white racism and black sexism in America. The mother and daughter converse:

> "Yeah, you were going to tell me that since I became a woman boys were gonna come round more often, 'acuse they could follow the trail of stars that fall from between my legs after dark".
> "What"?
> "The stars that falls from 'twin my legs can only be seen by boys who are pure of mind and strong of body".
> "Indigo, listen to me seriously. This is Charleston, South Carolina, Stars don't fall from little colored girls' legs. Little boys don't come chasing you for nothing good. White men roam these parts with evil in their blood, and every single thought, they have about colored woman is dangerous you have gotta stop living this make believe. Please do that for your mother". (21- 22)

Indigo is unable to understand the racial discrimination by the whites. She argues with her mother as to why she should bother about white folks when she and her dolls are not white and moreover she doesn't bother the whites. When she is told that it is whites who bother the blacks Indigo asserts to defend her mother at any cost from the whites. Indigo says:

> "…I love you so much, Mama. You are a grown colored woman. Some white man could just come hurt you any time he wants, too? Oh I could just kill 'em if they hurt you Mama. I would just kill anybody who hurt you". (22)

The mother hold the child tightly and whispers:

> "Well, then we'll both be careful and look after each mother won't we?"
> And Indigo nods her head. (23)

When Indigo is on her way to M. Lucas to bring Kotex, Uncle John, a friend of Aunt Haydee presents Indigo a fiddle. He tells her that it is her new "talking friend". As Indigo has her dolls to talk to, she refuses this gift, but Uncle John points out to Indigo the significance of the fiddle and music in the lives of black slaves. He elaborates:

> "Listen now, girl, I'm a tell ya some matters of the reality of the unreal.
> When then slaves was ourselves & we couldn't talk free, or walk free, who ya think be doin' our talkin for us?"
> ……..
> "Them whites what owned slaves took everything was ourselves & didn't keep it fo' they own selves Just threw it on away, ya yeah. Took the drum what they could but they could't take our feet. Took then language what we speak. Took off wit our spirits & left us wit they son. But the fiddle was the talkin' one. The fiddle be callin' our gods what left us/be givin back some devilment & hope in our bodies worn down & lonely over these fields & kitchens…..But the coloreds smart ya see……What ya think music is, whatchu think the blues be then them get happy church music is about but talkin' with the unreal what's mo' real than most folks ever gonna know". (26- 27)

She imitated the sounds of birds, insects, and thunder:

> If the fiddle talked, it also rumbled, cowed, rustled, screamed, sighed, sirened, giggled, stomped and sneered. (36)

Indigo annoys and irritates her mother and neighbors with her rough blues played on her fiddle. When the neighbors complain Hilda decide to train her with a tutor but Indigo refuses because:

> Indigo wanted to sound like the sparrows and wrens. She mimicked the jays & peckers. Conversing with gulls was easy 'cause they saw her daddy's soul every day. (36)

Once when she is threatened by two boys, the Greeche Captains, instead of running, she stands firm and chants:

> "Falcons come in this fiddle.
> Falcons come in this fiddle.
> Falcons come in this fiddle.
> Leopard come in this fiddle.
> Leopard come in this fiddle.
> I'm on the prey. (42)

She impresses them with her fiddle playing and so she is also enlisted as a Greeche Captain an given a new short name, 'Digo.' The trio go to restaurant run by Spat's brother Pretty Man. Annoyed by Indigo's shrill music Pretty man procures fiddle record by masters like Yehudi Mehunin so that she can imitate and improve her fiddle playing. But Indigo finds no meaning in imitating the masters but create her own style. Pretty Man's girl Mable doesn't like Indigo's fiddle playing as the attention of all the customers is centered on it. She snatches it so there is a quarrel between Pretty Man and Mable, she is beaten. Spat, Crunch and Indigo run away but Indigo tries to save Mable as she thinks that the colored has been hurt already. Mable is annoyed because Indigo has changed the seen of cockfight with her fiddle playing. She enchants the

cocks to stop fight and the people who are betting try to fight with each other with the blades.

Indigo carefully wraps the dolls in sheets of white cotton she has borrowed from her mothers weaving to be kept in attic. She tells her mothers that the dolls are not dead but they are just resting. Indigo further tells her mother:

> "Mama, I couldn't bear for them to grow up. I couldn't stand it, Mama. I just couldn't".
> "Mama, it's hard isn't it?"
> "What's hard, Indigo?"
> "Being a grown colored woman is hard, ain't it? Just like you to me. Just' cause I haveta grown up, my dolls don't haveta. I can save them. Mama just take them to the attic. Just you & me let's go do something very special" (52)

She rocks Indigo her baby in her arms pats and consoles her:

> I don't think that it's all that hard to be a full grown colored woman, Indigo" (52).
> Indigo is not ready to part with her dolls, she refuses them to be distributed amongst the children as Hilda suggests. She requests her mother:
> "…let them rest till I have a baby, or till Cypress or Sassafrass has a baby. Please Mama I want them to stay with the family". (53)

Indigo and Hilda put the dolls to rest in the attic and pray:

> "Jesus lover of my soul
> Hide me, oh my Savior
> Hide me till the storm waters roll
> While the tempest still is high" (54).

Hilda is satisfied with Indigo that she is not boycrazy like the other two girls, and she is making her own path and independent.

Indigo becomes a spiritual healer and midwife after the death of Aunt Haydee. When all the three sister return home Indigo works as a midwife when Sassafrass deliver Mitch's baby.

It is an intriguing idea, but it fails because as Susan Isaacs (1982:66) comments:

> Although the author tries to present Indigo as a wise, innocent a mystical power, a joyous embodiment of the black spirit, the rhetoric of her musings is earthbound radical feminist, predictable and silly…

And if Indigo's black magic is real if she can banish her mother's overbearing white employer by conjuring up a wind to blue the woman out of door, how can she and her people with such potent magic tolerate the evils the author catalogues so movingly. Susan Isaacs (1982: 16) further comments:

> ---If the magic is a metaphor, or Indigo's fantasy, or the author's evocation of African or black American folklore, it is not presented with enough clarity. The reader remains mildly fond of Indigo-people who talk to dolls can be enchanting but nonetheless befuddled about her role in the novel.

Jean Strandness (1987: 305) comments:

> Indigo manifests the classical archetype of Artemis; the Maiden. Artemis is virgin huntress and patroness of chastity. One-in-Herself, who never bounds with a man as a lover though she

> has male companions: the goddess of childbirth, of wild wings, of the moon.

Similarly Marjorie Pryse observers:

> Whenever we find interest in folklore in novels by black woman, we also find stages in the tradition emerging perception that women have the ability to reclaim their 'ancient powers'. (Jean Strandness 1987: 306)

In the Creole mythology of Voudoun, Indigo has the ability to evoke the transpersonal prerogative powers of guardian spirits or loa, using her psychic power Indigo turns the 'talkin' fiddle into an instrument of healing'.

Indigo becomes a midwife. Working as an apprentice under Aunt Haydee, a wise woman, she learns to give birth and cure women and children:

> At first Aunt Haydee only allowed Indigo to play her fiddle to soothe the women in labor, but soon the mothers, the children sought Indigo for relief from exclusive disquiet hungers of the soul. Aunt Haydee was no fool. She watched Indigo playing the fiddle one evening as the tide came in. It'd been a long time since a colored woman on Daufuskie moved the sea. Some say it was back in slavery time. Blue Sunday, that was her name 'cause she was born on Sunday & black as pitch'. (80)

Shange concludes her characterization of Indigo with this implied comparison to the legendary Blue Sunday. Blue Sunday was invincible and could be taken by no man; one man who tried lost a leg when she

turned into a crocodile. She was never seen again but women of color heard her sounds when they were in labor. When Indigo plays her fiddle for woman in childbirth, she manifests the spirits or loa, of Blue Sunday. Like the classical Greek Artemis, (with the bow and arrow), blues Sunday is fiercely virginal and the protectress of women in childbirth. Like Artemis, too, she is linked with the power of the moon to move the sea.

When Aunt Haydee dies, she goes "to Our Lord on a melody on Indigo or Blues Sunday know". Indigo keeps Aunt Haydee's ashes in "a funny bluish jar, Uncle John'd given her when she was small". Within the context of Creole Voudoun, this jar provides a place for Aunt Haydee's spirit of loa, whose power Indigo could continue to call forth. Since loa is not viewed as the spirit of an individual but as an ancestral spirit which can pass from generation to generation it is conceivable that Aunt Haydee's loa would transfer to Indigo that Indigo would then manifest the spirit of the wise woman who had been her mentor. Shange seem to signify this possibility when she says, "Indigo entered into Aunt Haydee's tabby hut just like she belonged there".

Jean Strandness (1987: 307) comments on the character of Indigo, having no precedent in literature:

> Outside the realm of fantasy literature, there is really no precedent for a character like Indigo in nineteenth century literature. Socially she is sexual related to neither man nor women. Psychologically, she would seem to have the characteristics of a strange, a social misfit– a witch even.

But Shange's affirmative valuation of Indigo's psychic powers noticeably stands against and transforms a long history of negative connotation associated with such talents. Indigo "reclaims her ancient power" as she manifests by the end of novel with the spirit loas of her mentor Aunt Haydee and the legendary Blue Sunday and the archetypal goddess, Artemis.

Absorbed in the folklore of Deufuskie Island and in practicing magic, Indigo help preserve the folk practices of her ancestors. It the end of the novel she works as a midwife when Sassafrass gives birth to a child.

The novel charts the development patterns of the three sisters but Indigo the youngest child possesses the most obvious power. She establishes herself with magic. "Where there is a woman, there is magic.(3) That is Indigo. She surrenders herself with dolls that are more than just toys-they are her companions as she converses with them.

Geta LeSeur (1992: 169) comments that Shange has blurred the line between reality and imagination to illustrate that Indigo's wisdom goes for beyond her years. Geta LeSeur (ibid.: 169) further comments that the folklore Shange uses to highlight cultural tenets in the works also acts as a stylistic means by which another level of the book can be analyzed. When she announces that she enjoyed the Schuylers party but like her fiddle better than the boys she met, her mother is pleased:

> There's not be one more boy-crazy, possessed-
> with romance child in her house. This last one

> made more sense out of the world than either of the other two." (64)

Cypress and Sassafrass each have special talents to focus on- but both of them allow men to play large roles in their development as women. Indigo is perhaps the strongest of the three sisters and her own story could make its own fascinating novel.

Serving as a kind of therapy and creating a since of community, Indigo's music makes her audience to revisit their past and connect with the struggle and triumphs of their ancestors as well as their peers. Maria Johnson comments on the ability of music as it plays an important role in the novel:

> Shange celebrates music's ability to transcend divisions in time (past-present-future), place and modality, to connect seemingly disparate worlds and contradictory feelings; to create art and freedom out of chaos. Writers like Shange envy Black musicians' ability to be "at one with their cultures and their historical subconscious" and emulate Black music's "unself-conscious sense of collective oneness" and "(even when anguished) grace." (Saadi Simawe 2006: 186)

The finest illustration of Indigo's supernatural powers however, come in her transformation of a cockfight-at Sneed's:

> Indigo felt a steely vengeance growing up in her spirit. Grown men laughing at dying animals. She felt birds however above her eyes. She moved the razors off the roosters. Put them in the palms of the onlookers. Let them know the havoc of pain…The cock stalked the ring quietly…The man round the

> ring leaped over one another flailing their razored palms at throats up & down backs backsides, ankles…The men slowly came back to themselves…Indigo was not malevolent. (44- 45)

Shange's story of Indigo's special powers works similarly, using an antirealistic mode and the dramatic flair of hyperbole Shange creates fantasies of Black women empowering themselves and giving their abusers their due.

Maria Johnson comments that in Shange's telling of Indigo's story, the key phrases keep coming black in varied from almost like refrain lines in a musical piece:

> …In different ways these lines-"the South in her" (4,8,14,28,29,41)," a woman with moon in her mouth" (3,14,29,45,40,50,69) and "the slaves who were ourselves" (26,27,28,36,46,49,224)- evoke Indigo's special powers and her strong spiritual connections with earth, with ancestors, and with her past. The phrases "the slaves who were ourselves" literally fuses past and present generations. (Saadi Simawe 2000: 188)

Because of the natural relationship between the cycle of the moon and women's fertility, the moon has long been a traditional symbol of woman's power. In Sassafrass, Cypress, & Indigo, the phrase "a woman with moon in her mouth" signifies Indigo's magical powers which come from her connection with the earth and sea.

Indigo's music and spiritual power provide a direct link to African American history, to folklore, and to the ancestors themselves. Sassafrass draws inspiration from blues and blues women from the past, but in Shange's words "Indigo was the folk" (224).

Hilda Effania is an adoring, no nonsense ambitious mother who wants only to see her children fulfilled, as long as their fulfillment occurs a upper middle-class setting (12).

Geta LeSeur (1992: 172-73) comments that Shange uses Hilda as a "catalyst, mixer and frame for story," But she definitely has her own story. One can ask some question, such as why are all the three daughters so creative? Why are they so steeped in the South and Southern Culture? How come they and she seem to function outside of the ordinary mundane with which we associate poor black women's lives? What qualifies her to mother such extraordinary women? Do we know her? Hilda Effania had prayed for a husband and got one. Hilda Effania made all the ordinary occasions like Christmas and the onset of menstruation and meals major and creative events for celebration. Hilda Effania essentially got on with life desperate single motherhood. Hilda Effania thinks, "she looked good for a widow with three most grown girls" (66). Hilda Effania writes nurturing and supportive rather than destructive letters to her daughters, no matter where they are.

Hilda is compassionate, creative, patient. She like Jane Brown, in ***Betsey Brown*** (1985) teaches her daughter and moulds them without seeming to take a proactive part in their lives. It is important,

though, that whatever Indigo, Sassafrass, and Cypress become they become because of what Hilda gave and exposed them to as children. Indigo, the last child, benefits from all who precede her-sisters, mother and the Greechies, the south and Africa. Hilda and Indigo are seen in special mother-daughter bonding ultimately Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo are wise women. Like their mother they find out how to live and how to express themselves in a nice/mean world.

Like, each child Indigo thinks that good will follow her, and that only boys who are "pure of heart, of mind, and strong of body" will come to her (22). When her mother snaps reality to her a feeling of pain and confusion can be felt. Geta LeSeur (1992: 174) comments that the reality of European slave trade and discrimination was brought to life with Hilda's only one following sentence:

> White men roam these part with evil in their blood and every single thought they have about a colored girl is dangerous." (22)

Hilda's letters reveal slow evolution. Her early letters are full of worry, anxiety and concern for her daughters choice of life styles.

Hilda has children grown into womanhood. She doesn't really grow until her daughters being their respective journeys. Afraid of the unknown she keeps to reel them back into her nest. She is proud of her accomplishments and hence grows with them by proxy.

Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo are forever linked to their mother through her letters, recipes and weaving through which she has a hold on them no matter how they are.

Hilda is spokeswoman of middle class Christian value. She is shown as a paradoxical figure embodying both the restricting, conservative elements of stereotypical "mothers," wisdom inspiration, and love. Her letters-sometime comic, often frustrating, occasionally infuriating appear into the text with her presence and her loving concern for her wandering girls. Hilda's urgings-that her daughters devote themselves to finding "Negro" doctors and lawyer to marry at first amuse, then irritate. Her notion about her daughter sex lives is comic them almost culpable: her squeamishness about appearance is funny and exasperating.

Adventure is the dominant characteristic of the slave narrative and it informs our belief that all knowledge requires risk. Yet Hilda Effania tries every stratagem she knows to get her girls settle down and accept her values of safety and security:

> "There's nothing so heartening as a good provider and companion. And you girls realize, by now, how hard and artist's life is. So let some nice men help you. Then all you have to worry about is your art" (117).

Although Hilda still thinks of the three as her children she knows that they have their own lives to lead, their own views on life:

> Wouldn't look simple keeping house full grown women aching to be part of the world, just so I wouldn't they quite so lonely. That's enough of that. You all have your "mends" to make with the world and so do I. That's the Lord's way. (175)

Of course she loves them to have them round:

> Spinning in the kitchen, while her girls did whatever they were going to do, was her most precious time. (55)
> "Yes, Alfred, I think I'm doing right by 'em. Sassafrass is that fine school with rich, with Effie in New York City. Imaging that? I'm sending Indigo out to Daufuskie with Aunt Haydee. Miz, Fitzhugh's promised me a tutor for her. She doesn't want the child involved in all this violence 'bout the white and the colored giving to school together, the integration. I know you what I mean, 'less up there's segregated too.
> "No, Alfred I'm not blaspheming. I just can't imagine another world. I'm trying top though. I want the girl to live the good life. Like what we planned. Nice husbands. Big houses. Children. Trips to Paris and London. Going to the opera. Knowing nice people for friend. Remember we used to say we were the most nicest, interesting folks we'd ever met? Well, don't want it to be that way for our girls. You know, I'm sort of scared being here by myself. I can always talk to you, though. Can't I? (72)

Hilda provides her daughters with glowing memories of comfort, beauty, and artistry the most powerful expression of which is the luxurious, Christmas she creates for them early in the book.

The novel does not romanticize or idealize the complicity of mother daughter relationship. It brings out the tranquility and tension, harmony and struggle. The last page of ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** speaks for itself:

> Hilda Effania couldn't think of enough to cook. She couldn't even clean anything ale in her

> house. She looked at portrait over the parlor fire place, a little embarrassed.
> "You know, Al, I did the best I could but I don't think they want what we wanted."
> "Now Sassafrass, This ain't nothin' but a baby. You think you the only one ever done this?" 'Indigo coached; push I say, don't act a fool!"
> "Mama did this three times. God is asking you for one time. One time make a free child" Cypress massaged.
> "Yes, darlin, 'm here. Was there every one time when you couldn't come home? Yes, darlin' I know this isn't the way you wanted. But sweetheart…" (225)

It's Hilda Effania's preservation of a safe home to which her daughters can always retain that allows them to risk the choices they make:

---"You come back to Charleston and find the rest of yourself. (smile)/Love, Mama" (220) (Virgule added).

Traditional skills of women shape Shange's text. They are skills passed on from mother to daughter and from Africa to America-cooking, mid-wifery, magic, dance. Cypress writes in a journal entry# 629 that express what it means to be black folks:

> that's way the white folks say it
> ain't got no form/
> what was the form/
> of slavery/what was the form of Jim Crow. (168)

Shange celebrates women and womanhood in her novel. The characters search for beauty in their blackness and reject the idea that beauty depends on the lightness of one's skin and on the blonde hair and blue eyes.

Hilda is content with what she has done for her daughters so she speaks to her husband Alfred.

> Whoever you are is all we & I swear for Jesus, you my child.'Mama was there. (225)

Geta LeSeur (1992: 176) comments of the closure of the book:

> The book closes at a point when the three sisters have achieved self awareness. They are at various stages of life. Cypress is about to be married, Sassafrass is about to have a baby. Indigo continues to move at her own pace. All strong women, talented have selected a path of life, magical and follow it.

Hilda serves alternately as a comically well intentioned but maddeningly conservative chorus commenting upon the array of options her daughters enjoy. By the end of the novel having met with varying degree of success the sisters find themselves find themselves home again.

Karla Holloway (1992: 130) comments:

> …The novel is a modern story of three sisters' coming-of-age outside their mother's house. However the internal irony is that none of them can spiritually leave their mother's presence (and the implicit symbolic presence of the more ancient cultural mothers.)

Melisa Walker (1991:155) observes that the novel is celebration of black women's courage:

> This novel is a celebration, and like Shange choreopoem ***for colored girls*** ……..it is an affirmation of black women's courage and ability to prevail under very different circumstances.

In the final scene all the three sister come home and unite with the mother. Sassafras is going to have a baby, Cypress is to marry Leroy but the novel glosses over the conflicts seen inevitable between private and public commitments. It is a novel with easy answers. Each woman talks her own route to complete womanhood; yet all achieve their definition of all this. For Indigo gives up her dolls and turns to music where she finds power. Her renaissance occurs when she turns to the community as a midwife. Cypress's road to growing is a different. She doesn't tell her mother about her female lover Idrina. Finally she decides to dance for Civil Rights Movement and raise money. Sassafrass leaves Mitch. Hilda has all her daughters back to the nest. Shange's poetic sensibilities lend lyricism to the book. Her characters have an inherent dignity. The novel closes at point when the three sisters have achieved self awareness.

Shange is known for her noneconventional use of English-unorthodox Capitalization, punctuation and spelling and use of African American idiom, dialect, slang and rhythms.

In the thematic sense the novel is postmodern and unconventional in its use of 'taboo' and trivial subjects. It departs from the traditional canonical European novel. What are consisted traditionally taboo and trivial subjects are celebrated in the novel.

The activities related to women and their bodies are considered unimportant and obscene. Shange uses recipes of different menus. Her text is interspersed with them. She uses epistolary forms, magic spells, drama

reviews, advertisements, dance, music, prose, menstruation, initiation, in womanhood, childbirth, magic, recipes, poetry. Indigo's first menstruation and initiation is celebrated like a ritual by Sister Mary Louise Murry like Christmas. And Indigo makes velvet menstruation pads for all her dolls and wants her mother to celebrate her dolls' coming-of-age. In the end Sassafrass's giving birth to a child is also celebrated in the same way with Indigo midwifing, and Cypress and Hilda supporting her. Indigo's putting the dolls to rest in the attic with a prayer is also a ritual Shanges use of these prohibited experiences in her novel makes it rooted in the canon of African American women's fiction and black feminist aesthetics.

Deborah Geis (1989: 364) argues:

> Ntozake Shanges first work of fiction, ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** is as free with its narrative modes-including recipes, spells, letter-as Joyce was in ***Ulysses***.

She compares the novel with James Joyee's ***Ulysses*** for its rich intricate narrative modes.

Ntozake Shange's comments in an interview with Neal Lester throw sufficient light on her style in the novel. It is also an adequate justification of her postmodern technique of pastiche and collage and colloquial Black dialect.

Karla Holloway (1992: 128-29) comments that the revision of in this text in intimate and feminine. The extensive metaphorical network plunge through the traditions of African and African-American cultures to (re) member the women's ways of knowing. The symbolic networks of

the novel travel across both dreams and memories. Poetry and magic exist. The novels woman centered ideology is expressed through the sentence, "where there is woman is magic"(3).

The first glimmer of the plurisigence in this text occurs in an opening narrative that introduces the reader to the character of Indigo as a child "of the South" (3). This lyrical explanation of her persona dissolves and is replaced by the first of several variation of recipes and instruction that appear and the narrative. The first, and italicized passage that details how to manage a "Moon Journey". Quickly returns to the regular type of the original text. The italics serve as the visual collocation for the series of instructions, recipes, dream sequence and memories that flow into the pages of Shange's novel. Since the distinctiveness of the italic type collects these bits and pieces some of the interpretive work is accomplished for the reader. Their usual appearance makes it evident that these gather worlds and their own voice to the story of the sisters and their mother.

Indigo's vision opens and closes the novel. Shange's keen ear for black American idioms, as recreated in their rhythms and nuance of the language of her characters inform her work with vitality and authenticity. Doris Grumbach (1982: 1) observes:

> Shanges is a mistress of the color, shape and singing, accurate imagery of (her characters) thought and their speech.

Grumbach argues that the poetic qualities in the novel reminds us of Jane Toomer's ***Cane***. Shange is a unique lyric singer whose voice is very

seldom high-pitched and raucous: always it is modulated into a poetic orchestrated sound that is not so much characteristic of fiction as it is a real quality of poetry.

Into her narrative pot-pouri she tosses all the elements of Southern black life: wonderful recipes, spells and potions (how to rid oneself of the scent of evil) prescription (how to care for open wounds when they hurt), letters (from Mama to her beloved but straying and erring daughters, full of calm reason and uncritical love, always daughters, full of calm reason and uncritical love, always advising accommodation to the hostility and blindness of the white world).

Susan Slocum Hinerfeld (1982: 2) calls ***Sassafrass Cypress & Indigo*** a "colloquial" novel. She comments:

> ***Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo*** is made on written spoken words, colloquial in both dialogue and narrative. Shange has a playwright's ear. The spoken word in her manna, and her dialogue is wondrous. This is crowded novel, filled with people and their sound, their slang; the provincial speech patterns of Carolinians who are mostly black and poor, the trade talk of black musicians, the assertive statement of black lesbians, the patter of true believers, the jargon of art and ballet the patois of illiterates, the varied and mixed tongues of people caught between idioms, between styles, between cultures and classes. Shanges, special genius is that voices arise form the babble: individual, eccentric and true…of all the voices Hilda's is sweetest, most consistent, clearly motivated, as she wants her daughters happiness. She offers love and good sense she is a black woman with a trade rooted

> in Charleston. She is homely, worldly and old fashioned.

Shange meets the problem of setting down dialect head-on: "…Who's that you got witcha?"…" I haveta grow up, my dolls don't haveta". her "and" is an amperstand: "Your & me."

The narrative breaks fro announcements and invitations, for a dream of Cypress and for Sassafrass poetry for Indigo's formula, for excruciating recitals of Cypress's reactions to dance to art.

Susan Slocum Hinerfeld (1982: 2) comments on the enriching postmodern aspect of the novel:

> What is unsettling about this book is a lack of synchrony of its part-and which is a characteristic of postmodernism-and the fact that the lack of synchrony may only reflect the black experiences in America.

Fragmentation and lack of synchrony which are the characteristics of postmodernism can only reflect and express the colourful ethos of lack experiences in America.

Susan Issacs (1982: 12) observers that the characterization in the novel is compelling:

> Shange's language is rich and economical and the three characters of young girls are compelling both as individuals and as personifications of black culture and the feminist spirit.

The pot-pourri of theatrical criticism etc-is an attempt to capture the essence and glory of the black culture using pastiche and collage.

While the imagery is potent and much of the language is compelling, Jean Strandness (1987: 303) considers the novels as a new metaphors for women's experience.

Barbara Goddard discusses the creation of new metaphors:

> The metaphorical systems encapsulate a group's heritage and trace its psychological, historical development. New metaphors are new phenomenon, calling forth, containing and stylizing over experiences. New metaphors simply cognitive development and provide ways of disrupting (existing) symbolic systems which the ideology is presented to the individual. (Jean Strandness: 1987: 303).

Jean Strandness argues that Shange by reclaiming the old and developing new metaphors for women experiences creates female characters who differ significantly from various female protagonists in nineteenth and twentieth century literature. Shange suggests new patterns and modalities for living and, in so downing, radically transform the reader's precipitations of what it may mean to be human.

While the structure of Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo may well be viewed as a circle of concentric rings, it can also be viewed as a textured weaving with various recurring strands/motifs-letters from Hilda Effania to her daughters, recipes for special occasion, images and rituals of transformations. The structure of the novel is suggestive of a weaving. Man Baner Maglin states about the growing body of the literature of matrilineage:

> Women are now consciously exploring the previously unconscious bonds that tied them to both their real as well as their historical mothers and grandmothers. In relation to this there is a growing body of literature of matrilineage; women are writing about their female heritage and their female future. (Jean Strandness 1987: 307)

Shange's ***Sassafrass Cypress & Indigo*** is a remarkable example. Each of the principal female character is strongly bonded to her natural mother and to the traditional women's profession (Sassafrass weaving; Cypress dancing, Indigo psychic healing). Strandness (1987: 303) elaborates:

> Each receives inspiration legendary women of the past: (Sassafrass-Billie Holiday, Mammie Smith, Josephine Baker, Cypress's maternal ancestors of black Nile dance: Indigo-Blue Sunday) Each manifests some aspect of the Triple Goddess of Oshun of Creole Voudoun mythology (Sassafrass-wrath, the ability to destroy her relationship with Mitch) in order to move forward: Cypress-Generous love the ability to relate intimately with other people; Indigo-virginity the ability to contain one's energy concentrate and focus it in order to transforms the world-the loa of things as they could be, not as they are each exemplifies the personality and life pattern of one of the archetypal classical goddesses (*Sassafrass-Persephone; Cypress Aphrodite, Indigo-Artemis*). Shange evokes the world of thee extraordinary sisters. (Emphasis in original).

Maria Johnson (2000: 198) comments that the novel is a "speakerly" text:

> Like Zora Neale Huston before her and contemporary writers, Shange manipulates written language to create a more "speakerly"

> text. In Shange's hands written language aspires to morality to performity.

Shanges uses words culled from female traditions, spells, recipes, letters, stories) and re-enters them in African American heritage. Shanges texts are interdisciplinary too, intermingling words, song dance, colour and sound, oral histories, recipes, letters between women and joy and rage.

Maria Johnson comments:

> Like a quilt of collage, ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** is assembled from a different materials of varying textures, shapes, fonts and sizes. In addition to prose, the novel includes Sassafrass and their mother Hilda's recipes and Indigo's remedies; letters from Hilda to her daughters Sassafrass's and Cypress's entries; Sassafrass's visitations from blueswomen; Mitch's buddy's musical revue; advertisements and reviews of Leroy's European concerts; a party invitation, banner various chants and song lyrics. Much like the cloth the Hilda and her daughters spin, the novel is woven together from these various threads. At the same time the novel is also weaving together of the three sister stories. At the beginning of the chapters and letters, Shanges uses three different leaf patterns that correspond to the plants for which the sisters are named. (Saadi Simawe 2000: 198)

As a story teller she relies on events usually absent from conventional narratives of Western Culture. So she begins the novel with a mystery, "If there is a moon…"

Arlene elder (1992: 2) comments on the theme of *Bildungsroman* in the novels:

> ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** signifies, in an illuminating way, a gender specific way, in an freedom" of the slave narrative and the rambling impulse of the Blues, both of which tropes can usefully be read as African-American complication of the universal "journey of the maturation motif. This Black women's *Bildungeseroman* is historically and culturally grounded in the book's, post Civil Rights setting.

Robert Stepto asserts that Afro-American culture like all cultures has its store of what Northrop Frye has called "Canonical stories" of what I call "pregeneric myths." Shared stories are myths that not only exist prior to literary form. The primary pregeneric myth from Afro-American is the quest for freedom and literacy.

For Shange it is the quest for identity as the two sisters Sassafrass and Cypress travel a field in search of identity and Indigo's journey is deep into South, a search for the traditional healing knowledge that shamans like Aunt Haydee, the conjurer can teach. All the three journeys are cyclic ending back in Hilda Effania's house. Yet all three embody the conventional maturation myths.

The important men in the story are absent and silent at the end: the father, Alfred, whom we have experienced mainly through Hilda Effania's one sided monologues to him, is dead. Mitch has had his cacophonous, phallic horn muted (Sassafrass fills it with honey, a symbols of women's anti-sexist art) and even on the much more likable Leroy is not on the scene.

Shange's novel charts geographic movement is from South to West to East (North) and back to the South again. Whereas in an earlier period the North promised a political liberty which was to carry with it person liberty, at this latter date roughly the 1960s. Sassafrass and Cypress cross the country, from Charleston, South Carolina, to Los Angeles, to San Francisco, to New York, and experience artistically and sexually.

Barbara Christian (1986: 187) comments that lesbianism works at four different levels: lesbian life, lesbian characters, lesbian language, and lesbian values.

One of the sisters, Cypress, has lesbian relationship. But Cypress's relationship with another women is part of a continuum of sexual experiences, for she also has satisfying sexual relationship with man and by the end of the novel marries one.

Shange gives as voluptuous details about community of Third World lesbian in New York City called Azure Bosom. Mostly dancers they delight in their bodies. In this description of some of them Shanges emphasis is on the word woman. Women dispel any confusion with the idea that lesbians are incomplete man.

Geta LeSeur (1992: 176) comments on the structure of the novel:

> …Ntozake Shange's first novel, ***Sassafrass, Cypress, & Indigo*** is a paradox because somehow this shaman of a writer manages to integrate tradition with rebellion, chaos with peace, reality with fantasy and poetry with life. Meanwhile music art and food which become

> literature. The result a lively/tranquil story that is painful/joyous magic.

Maria Johnson comments that in the novel the three sisters sing a "song of liberation":

> Ntozake Shange's tale of three sisters, ***Sassafrass, Cyress & Indigo*** celebrates the struggles and triumphs of African American women working to express themselves and realize potential in the face of adversity. As the three sister's stories unfold, a theme keeps coming back like the refrain of the blues-women's song- "You can't keep a good woman down." As an important strand in Shange's multimedia texture, music enacts struggle, communion, and liberation in then novel. In ***Sassafrass, Cypress, & Indigo*** music has orphic powers-it can liberate accepted orders; it is mystical, magical, inspirational, and revelatory it is the barometer and voice of truth. (Saadi Simawe 2000: 181)

Music functions and signifies in three sisters processes of self discovery in different ways. Indigo is a powerful spiritual figure, a visionary with supernatural connections with/whom music is a vehicle for self expression and spiritual rigorous liberation, and a tool she utilizes in healing and childbirth. Sassafrass is a weaver a cook and blocked writer who is inspired by visit from famous musicians of the past (Mammie Smith, Billie Holiday) and seduced and silenced by the music of her lover, Mitch. Cypress is a dancer whose movement is inspired by music and her lover who is musician, Leroy.

Maria Johnson comments:

> Like Walker, Morrison, and so many Black women writers, Shange views musicians as models for writers emulate with power and grace. Shange and other writers seek to recreate the performative and expressive qualities of music in their writing. (Saadi Simawe 2000: 198)

In Sassafras, Cypress & Indigo, uncle John teaches Indigo and Billie Holiday models for Sassafrass.

Shanges attention to visual aspects of literature on the page suggests inspiration of performitivity. She uses the visual realm to evoke aural aspects of performance in her writing. Shange comments:

> I like the idea that letters dance, not just words…I need some visual stimulation, so that reading becomes not just passive act…but demands rigorous participation. Furthermore, I think these are ways to accentuate very subtle ideas and emotions so that the reader is not control of the process…
> The spellings result form the way I hear the words…I hear my characters…Some times I'll hear very particular rhythms underneath whatever I'm typing the rhythm affects the structure of the piece….the structure is connected to the music I hear beneath the words (Claudia Tate: 1984:163-64).

Shanges strives to capture the emotional response of her audience or reader in her writing. The image of letters dancing would suggest that movement is key to making literature perform. In an interview with Claudia Tate Shange comments:

> I write to get at the part of people's emotional lives that they don't have control over, the part that can and will respond…I'm primary

> interested in evoking an emotional response…What I write is an offering of my self to the world…my work is an exploration of people's lives …there's something there to make you feel intensely. (ibid: 156,158,171)

Esther Cohen (1983: 56) Charts some of the limitations of the novel:

> We don't become emotionally involved with the women because they are shown more as exotic bits and pieces than evolving, real…people…her writing in not explanatory. She doesn't tell us why Sassafrass for instance, insists on staying with Mitch even though he is destructive. Why she is compelled suddenly to lead a spiritual life,…Nor does she explain why Cypress moves from women to men.

Melisa Walker charts four categories of activity that make up Civil Rights Movement-the slow, long-term work of organizing communities, fighting through courts, registering the votes; and finally achieving political power. Some actions are at the periphery-like giving or raising money, and participants in a demonstration.

The three novels studied in this dissertation having the implications of the Civil Rights Movement of 1960s to its denouement are as already seen-Toni Cade Bambara's ***The Salt Eaters*** which is richly embedded in the Civil Rights Movement; and Shange's ***Sassafrass Cypress & Indigo*** and ***Betsey Brown*** also have some of its overtones of peripheral participation in it. In ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** one character, Cypress almost incidentally helps raise funds for the movement. The novel is primarily set in the years of movement in

communities where civil rights activity never made national headline. ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** is set in Charleston, South Carolina. The novel features protagonists who enjoy middle-class privileges and are practically exempt from the indignities of racism. The novel is narrated in third person. The action of the novel is set in the 1960s. But for the people on the periphery of the movement, like the artists and performers of Sassafrass…raising money was all that was necessary to feel part of the action.

Most of the characters in the novel are absorbed their private lives and are largely removed from the public fray. The one character-Cypress who joins a dance troupe that happens to be raising money for the movement seems not to be motivated mainly by political action but by desire to please her boyfriend who is "from a long time of civil rights activist doctors and preachers "(186-187), but in the end he urges her to leave the troupe and marry him.

Instantly personal, characters are preoccupied with their relationship, their arts, and their feelings-with and without drugs.

Hilda Effania, a widow supports her family by weaving exquisite fabrics and making clothes for wealthy white clients. Dating of the novel seems casual and haphazard. The only specific dates in the novel are 1946, the year Hilda Effania and Alfred were married; reference to a 1959 car, and a song lyric that includes the words "circa 1963" (88). The girl's ages suggest that the events of the novel occur after 1963. To trace any further details leads to anachronism, for example, Cypress wants to join

a dance troupe to help "raise money……bail legal fees…….for the Civil Rights Movement."(210) She refers in the same part to the bombing of a church-suggesting Birmingham in 1963-and Rap Brown and the Panther Party, prominent only after 1966-also reference to the war, presumably Vietnam, and the moon, where "white people put flags and jumped up and down" (6). Which did not happen until 1960.

Melisa Walker (1991: 156) comments on the novels glossing over the historical reality:

> The novel slides over historical realities. Hilda makes enough to maintain a middle-class house hold and to buy luxuries for her children in a Southern city where such material success for a black woman was unlikely.

Hilda has some dreams:

> Hilda wished her husband Alfred could see the girls…..taking a ballet lesson from Cypress, while Sassafrass recited Dunbar. They were his children-hardhead, adventurous, dreamers. Hilda Effania had some dreams of her own. Not so much to change the world but to change her daughter lives. (57)

When she is alone, she talks to Alfred explaining how she is raising their children, justifying her ambitions. Hilda who must cater to the whims of frivolous white woman expects her daughters to be free from such obligations but does not consider that it might be necessary to change the world to make that possible. In fact, she talks to her dead husband and tells him that she "can't imagine other world" (72). Hilda does imagine however, a private happiness created as her girls find "Nice husbands.

Big houses. Children. Trips to Paris and London." (72)-in short rather the closed world of "black bourgeois" that would have been out of the reach of most Black woman with Southern origins struggling to succeed in the world of dance art, and poetry.

Far from longing for the antiseptic world of "nice" people that her mother write her about, Sassafrass looks for the "black revolution" or to the time when she and Mitch will have enough money to move to a "black artist's and craftsmen's commune…outside New Orleans…near a black nationalist settlement" (77). But her mother now objects to her daughter's plan to "take the white folks to court to get back land they've owned since before the war." Chides her for attacking "*the white folks in the middle of one of their war*" presumably Vietnam (131). But Sassafrass intention to become an activist have little basis in reality. Once in the commune, Sassafrass finds not so much a political goal but sexual indulgence pregnancy and something she thinks of as "spiritual redemption (273).

Sassafrass flirtation with black nationalism is never fulfilled in the novel, nor is the issue of separation resolved in the narrative. When she find that she is going to have baby fathered either by Mitch or by her guru Shangeo in a ritual celebration. She decides to return to her mother who is convinced that her children have gone wrong because "the world's crazy and trying to take the children with it" (220).

In the final scene the four women characters are united thorough the narrative and their mutual task of bringing a new baby into the world and for that movement, they function as one.

Melisa Walker (1991: 158) comments that all the four major characters in the novel are 'types' and not "three-dimensional":

> None of the four main female characters-mother and three daughters-seem to be a three dimensional women. They are types, or aspects of women's experience: together they form a human collage. By creating a novel without an authoritative narrative voice that makes judgments about the character, Shange entices her readers to judge, reach their conclusion about these women's choices.

We would conclude that Sassafrass is better off without the battering Mitch, that Cypress will be happier without drugs and married to Leroy and that Indigo's commitment to preserving the folk culture is to be honoured. But something missing with the happy ending of the novel. Melisa Walker (1991: 158) further comments:

> The novel has-happy-ever-after-sense of closure. It does not, however, resolve the public issues relating to drugs, politics and sex that the characters encounter. So the substance of this novel is finally overwhelmingly personal; yet slipped into the narrative are the nods through never integral to it-are nods to racism, civil rights, and activism.

Hilda Effania explains that her long dead husband went to sea because "there wasn't much work for a skilled Negro carpenter in Charleston" (190). Though she endures the patronage of white women Hilda is not

portrayed as a victim and she encourages her children not to fight racial injustice but to "Let it Lie" (190). Leroy's politic like his inherited wealth, are and added attraction to this man Cypress already loves. Although the novel implies that there is political significance to the character's work, in the end we know for more about their anatomy, sexual preference, tests in food, drug use and drinking habits than we do about their political or social values. Hence Melisa walker further (1991: 158) comments that in the novel larges public issues that continue to plague the black community are raised and finally dismissed from the narrative.

When ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** was published in 1982, the majority of the black women in America as there as they are today where living in poverty. Relatively few had the resources to give their children the privileges and luxuries that Hilda provides for their talented daughters.

Melisa Walker (1991:159) comments on the lacuna in the portrayal of racism and sexism in the novel:

> The fact that none of the characters specifically suffers from living in a racist society, while both Sassafrass and Cypress victimized by men, makes the text more at home in the feminist than race conscious domain.

Hilda Effania advises her daughter in one of her letters:

> "Whatever ideas you have that are important to you, write down…but right them so your enemies can't understand them right off" (110 ellipsis Shange's)

In both ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** and ***for colored girls*** ….Shange takes this advice, she can't use language as if it were already understood.

Like Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston, Shange achieves the expressive quality of the musical performance thorough her use of blue element in the language and structure of novel.

Like a blues piece, ***Sassafrass, Cypress*** & Indigo consists of a series of self-contained structural units (e. g. prose, poem, letters and recipes) in which units are repeated with variation and juxtaposed for express effect. The weaving of the three sisters' stories adds a theme and variation elements. There coming together in the "union" seems (Christmas, Sassafrass at Cypress's house in San Francisco, Sassafrass giving birth) sometimes suggests a call-and-response effect, as does the interplay between the sisters stories and their mother letters. Indigo's remedies also function as responses. The refrain lines in Indigos story explore issue of operation. The repeated phrases "the South in her", "the slaves who were oversees," and "a woman with a moon in her mouth" evoke similar responses "mascot images".

Juxtaposition is found in Indigo's "natural" playing with that imposed by Pretty Man. Generational difference is highlighted in the juxtaposition of mother's letters with her daughter's life experience.

Contrast in found in exposing in her description of the relationship between Sassafrass and Mitch as a mean of exposing sexism in black arts movement. It highlights sexism and double standards within the relationship.

This African American woman writers postmodern novel, which is a "radical black feminist *Kunstlerroman*" and "neo blues slaves song of liberation" offers an exquisite aesthetic experience when deciphered and decoded in the unconventional way.

B) *BETSEY BROWN* (1985): A BLACK FEMINIST BILDUNGSROMAN.

Ntozake Shange's preoccupations and obsessions with young adolescent and teenager black girls as protagonists in her fiction continues in her second novel bearing the name of the protagonist ***Betsey Brown*** (1985). The novel is an enchanting saga of Elizabeth-Betsy Brown a thirteen years old black girl, the oldest daughter in an affluent upper middle class Negro family. The novel unravels the uncanny but lovely playful, joyous and poignant world of Betsey and her family plagued with white racism in St. Louis, Missouri in 1959 on the backdrop of the court order of the Brown vs. Board of Education case of integration or desegregation of schools. This seamlessly woven story of an adolescent black girl qualifies the novel as a 'Black feminist *Bildungsroman*' as it charts Betsey's journey of her coming of age from innocence to the scathing experience of white racism.

Another aspect of the novel to be highlighted here is the autobiographical elements and overtones in the novel. Betsey Brown stands for Ntozake Shange as when she was a young school going girl. When Shange was eight, the family moved to St. Louis, Missouri, where

they lived for five years. There she was among the first black children to integrate the public school system. As later fictionalized in the novel ***Betsey Brown***, those experiences seemingly left a sense of anger and betrayal at being thrust out of the security of the black community into the known violence of the white world and their racism.

Shange has pledged her self to examine and exposing the state of African American female in the modern society in plays, poetry, prose and novel.

In ***Betsey Brown***, Ntozake Shange further pursues the societal states of the African American female with her second novel detailing a thirteen year old middle class black girl's difficult and frequently painful journey to adulthood. This *Bildungsroman* of sort occurs in the newly integrated St. Louis of the 1950 reflecting Shange's own struggles growing up in an affluent black household.

Shanges says shyly, "I would be lying if I said that Betsey Brown was't me." (Stella Dang 1985:74) Betsey's father like Shange's was a surgeon. In the Brown family the children play boisterous games, occasionally driving out frustrated housekeepers.

Evelyn White (1985: 357) highlights the autobiographical element in the novel with special emphasis on Dr. Greer's self conscious Africanizing rituals of the children in daily morning. ***Betsey Brown*** is an autobiographical work. There is much in this humorous and melodious novel that parallels Ntozake Shanges own upbringing in a prominent

black family during the 1950s…Betsey's father in a colorful ritual that includes dancing to the beating of Conga drum:

> When Jane entered the kitchen the line of children melted into hugs and kisses, good byes to Grandma and thanks to Daddy for the extra nickel for correctly answered questions at morning drill…Betsey's word had been psychopath. One time and she answered 'Mama's patients, niggah what ain't got nonsense'.

The children tease each other, quarrel, frolic some.

The novel was also unsuccessfully transferred to the New York Shakespeare Festival stage in 1983.

The novel is set on the background of very thin Civil Rights Movement that hadn't accelerated and gained a quantum leap till the 1960s.

The novel, woven into the masterful and complex portrait of a black family is the story of Betsey Brown's adolescent awakening to be grown and the responsibility of adulthood. In contrast to her mother's to her mother's and grand mother's stories Betsey's story becomes the magic melody that weaves together the magnificent song of the family.

The novel is beautiful tale of the Brown family, newly arrived to St. Louis, Missouri. The Browns are an upper middle class family and it consists of five children and three adults, servants apart. Betsey's father Dr. Greer Brown is a doctor and surgeon at a segregated black hospital her mother Jane is a psychiatric social worker and there is her maternal grandmother Vida. Betsey is the oldest child in the family followed by

Sharon, Allard, Margot and the adopted cousin Charlie. The novel portrays turbulence of white racism. But what is the most important thing is the emotional turmoil in Betsey's (the protagonist's) mind and life that the novel unravels. Sandi Russell elucidates that the novel is tenderly and beautifully written story of a girl growing up in the midst of Civil Rights Movement. She also asserts and reiterates that the narrative is somewhat autobiographical. As Shange experienced upheaval when bussing and integration laws came into existing during her childhood.

Sandi Russell (1992: 182) further comments:

> Shange captures the impatience of adolescent passions, as well as the stress of these time on a black family and community. Rarely has a novel about African-American middle class life been rendered so eloquently and lovingly.

To capture the raw adolescent passions basically of Betsey the protagonist is the major thrust of the novel and that is very well and masterfully rendered.

Angela M. Howard and Frances M. Kavenick (2000: 512) point out that Shange's sketching the women's untold stories is found in this novel like her other writing. The novel not only explores the white racism but human nature through the eyes of a thirteen year old Betsey Brown.

The Browns are a very highly remarkable and respectable and self esteemed family as Dr. Green Brown, Betsey's father who is a doctor and surgeon at a segregated black hospital, is very much proud of their African

roots, civilization and culture. He drills the children with African music daily in the morning. He quizzes them on African /African-American life and gives small coins as presets for current answers. He makes them sing songs of African origin in such a way he is instilling black pride and self esteem in the minds of his children. He makes them proud of their being black that is beautiful and helps them avoid the colour inferiority. He is black in complexion and has devoted all his entire life to the service of poor black people. When the two boys Charlie and Allard are arrested on the charge of riding and trespassing the ground of white Catholic girls school Jane is irritated with his calmness. She is agitated but he is calm as he says that he was attending one poor black Mr. Johnson at his home who could not come to the hospital. Jane and Vida both are irritated with him deep devotion for his people and neglecting his family and casting the children to the streets and winds. Dr. Greer makes the children sing the following song:

> The Negro race is a mighty one.
> The works of the Negro is never done.
> Muscle, brains, and courage galore
> …….
> We goin to show the world
> What can be done
> Cause the Negro race is a mighty one. (23)

Jane is irritated that Greer is neglecting the family and Vida thinks that Jane is also doing the same thing also. She says:

> "… I wish she (Jane) would quit that old job of social working and mind your chirren more" (19).

Grandma, Vida has very low opinion of both Jane and Greer. Vida is light-coloured women and has not suffered the slings of slavery. She is almost white and so she hates Jane's marrying a black person. So she has a very low opinion of Greer and she doesn't like his instilling African and African American values in the minds of the children. His drilling, quizzing, daily and playing musical instruments to the children by him are found nuisance by Vida. Betsey experiences this interracial racism at home so Greer has to pacify Vida, with small gifts. Grandma Vida's ideas about Greer are quite strange. But Greer is not to be dissuaded by what Vida, his mother-in-law thinks what he is doing. He knows that she disapproves of his actions:

> Greer paraded the children in the file past Grandma get their launches and the 35# he left in stacks for each of them. Then he began.
> "Betsey, what's most standard of blues form?"
> "Twelve-bar blue, Daddy."
> "Charlie who invented the banjo?"
> "African who called it a banjar, Uncle Greer."
> "Sharon, what is the name of the President Ghana?"
> "Um… Nkrumah, I thinks."
> "Thinking is not enough, a Negro has got to know." (25)

Greer asks questions to the children about Negro culture, life, politics in the world. He asked question about the Negroes or music or foreign places where coloured people ran countries all their own.

Grandma Vida is totally opposite to her son-in-law Greer. Mostly she talked of Frank, her long passed on husband, the Valentino of

Allendale and the hills their about. Vida Grumbles that Greer had done injustice in marrying Jane. And to her, Jane's decision to marry a dark black man like Greer was a mistake. But in Grandma's mind Jane had been blessed, cause each of the chirren was sprightly and handsome on a Greeche Scale, not them island ones but the Charlestonian who'd been light or white sing slavery. She was most white. Slaves and all that had nothing to do with her family until Jane insisted on bringing this Greer in the family and he keep making family.

Greer "Africanizes" the children and instils the race spirit in them. He even takes then to participate in a demonstration. When he announces his decision that he is talking all the children to participate in the demonstration Jane in angry as she doesn't want her children to be beaten by white racist police. She doesn't want her children to be the 'canon fodder'. Both of them argue:

> "The time has come for us to do something about our second-class citizenship and this separate but equal travesty we call all over lives. This Saturday we are all going to demonstrate at the racist paragon of southern gentility, the Chase Hotel." (156-57).

"… but none of my children is stepping out this door."

> "They're going. It's their struggle." (157)
> "I never in my life imagined that you thought you could use my children to fight colored folk's battle that colored haven't won yet! You are either crazy or besides yourself with fever."
> ……
> "You can take you foolish behind you godam well please, but not my babies."

> ……
> "It means the children are going to participate in the struggle of the people, your people too, by the way" (158).
> "Greer how can you risk over babies? Your are letting to let my babies face battalions of police and crowds of crackers? Greer they are children (159)
> "I can't be here with you to see my children mangled."
> ……
> The race needed something, but not her babies. (60)

But he took the children to the demonstration all right, but nobody was hurt. The police didn't even knock any heads.

This is the family's peripheral involvement in the Civil Rights Movement which had not reached at its peak in 1959.

Interspersed among this adult world at the backdrop is the main story of innocent dreamy and young world of energy, enthusiasm and frolic, playful Betsey Brown, an adolescent girl of thirteen year old and other children-her sisters and brother, cousin and her schoolmates. The emotional turmoil of this adolescent black girl-her coming of age makes the novel a new sub-genre of black feminist *Bildungsroman*. Her experience and her small cozy world is unique and is sometimes rocked and shaken by white racism in her day to day life in school with her school and classmates, teachers for whom Betsey a "black girl is invisible".

We experience and come to know the white racism that plagues the Negroes through the filter of Betsey, the protagonist of the novel. Betsey's world is an innocent girl's world.

Being the oldest child in the house she involves in all the playful tricks and tantrums with her sisters and brother and cousin and friends. But she is a thoughtful being quite of serious and tranquil nature. She is innocent in the sense that if she commits some mistake and it is pointed to her, she is ready to repent and apologize.

She has some special rendezvous in their specious "Victorian" house in which sometime the children arrange secret meetings in the cellar or underground floor. But Betsey's two special rendezvous for her musings and branches of the old oak tree near the house. Betsey perches there and sets her imagination play amok. She is hiding there for hours and nobody knows it.

The novel particularly depicts the deadly consequences of the court case, Brown vs The Board of Education, 1954 that led to the integration and desegregation of the schools. As a result Betsey's is bussed to an integrated white school where as her father Dr. Greer Brown who is a doctor and well-known surgeon works in a segregated black hospital. But law can't abolish the racism deeply embedded in the psyche of the whites.

When Betsey goes to the house of Susan Linda, her white school mate. The young adolescent girl explore their anatomies of coming of age. Like her first novel ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo, Betsey Brown***

also explores and celebrates female body, anatomy, and experiences and feelings. As has been already pointed out the black feminist aesthetics, and nothing is taboo to be explored and described and expressed regarding the female body or experience. May it be the celebration of Indigo's first menstruation and initiation into the strong and sturdy Black womanhood by Sister Mary Louise Murray or Indigo's presumption that with her puberty coincides with that of her dolls in Shange's first novel ***Sassafrass Cypress & Indigo***. Similarly, Betsey, Susan, Linda and other girls are amazed to see the physical and anatomical transformation taking place in their personalities. This anatomical exploration of the pubic hair at the "honey pot" bewilders them. But after some time Susan Linda quickly and sharply asks them after sometime to leave as her mother doesn't like any "niggahs" in the house. It shocks Betsey. Here we have the first and direct experience that Betsey has of white racism. Though the court has ordered integration the white racism shatters Betsey's delicate and fragile emotional world. Veejay, Betsey's another friend, who is also a Negro explains to Betsey the white racial prejudice. She says:

> "It's when white folks don't like Negroes. Didn't you her that gal call as niggahs. Now, that there is a bad word." (41)

Betsey thought that deep inside she know that Veejay was right. They should "boycott" Susan Linda for a while. That's what they were doing

at Montgomery boycotting the white folks till they came around. Papa read the news to her every night. (42)

Susan Linda's white racism sets Betsey on a trail of thought She hides her self in the branches of the tree and has all kinds of thoughts in her minds. Betsey has a special attachment to this tree.

> Betsey knew this was her tree where she could think all kinds thought and feel all kinds of feelings. (42)

This is Betsey's special "emotional and imaginary world."

Betsey is deeply touched and hurt with the white racist treatment of Linda. She thinks that segregation was better than desecration. She muses:

> The nice thing about segregation was that colored could be all together where the air and blossoms were their own, as clear as if it was impossible for white folks to put a veil over the sun.
> Betsey always felt better when Papa came home…….. sometimes he'd put the colored radio and listen to the blues (43).

The next scathing incident that scalds the Browns of white racism is that Charlie and Allard have been arrested by the police for trespassing on the ground of Catholic girls school. Moving around of the two Negro boys on the ground of a white Catholic girls school is racism and crime for which the two boys have been arrested but released as they are new in the city. So grandmother Vida is very angry with Jane and Greer for not upbringing the children properly. That is why they are misbehaving. She vents her anger on Jane.

Betsey is totally bewildered with all these happenings. She innocently asks her mother of there are some "special kind of nigra":

> "Mama, what kind a nigra is a special kind a nigra and aren't they supported to call as Negroes." "Yes, Betsey. And no, I don't know what kind of nigra is special kind of nigra. But you're right darling we are Negroes with a capital N" (47).

Jane hugged her daughter, hoping Betsey didn't know all she could do about the Negro problem was said at the table for dinner.

Even after the police arrested and released Allard and Charlie, Greer is silent which infuriates Jane, Greer's devotion to his medical service to the poor and needy black patients makes him to forget him from shouldering family problems.

The Browns employ a new black illiterate housemaid called Bernice Calhoul. Being a social worker and having esteem and self respect of being Negroes, it was against Jane's principle to could the Negro maid in the basement, but in a separate room. But Betsey with her innocent and childish tricks plans to make that housemaid to get out of house the next day with the help of all other children.

Betsey declares her plans to Allard and other children in the cellar, "Now Allard, we've got to figure out a way to get this woman out our house. "The plan is quite successful. When the parents leave the house and the children are in the care of the new housemaid, the children create such nuisance and annoy and nag her that she compelled to leave the house immediately. Betsey very proudly tells this victory to her Negro

girl friend Veejay at school. Instead of rejoicing, Veejay is sad and asks Betsey:

> "Betsey, you know what my Mama does for a living?"
> "No."
> "Well, she takes care of nasty white chirren who act up like y'all acted up this morning. She does so I could have clothes and food, Y'all act like white people always trying to make things hard on the colored."
> "Living on 'em and making a mess of things." (60)

Veejay turned to go anywhere away form Betsey. She'd known that Betsey was from over there where the first colored lived. Making the mess with white folks was expected … but with Negroes. (60)

Veejay's rebuke and reprimand opened Betsey's eyes. It makes her to realize her gross mistake. She wants to correct it. What makes Betsey noble and innocent is that "Betsey is not a vindictive child." (60) She plays childish tricks, annoying and irritating. Scolding Betsey sharply Veejay leaves angrily. A heavy glow comes over Betsey body. Shame. She is ashamed of her dead. She runs home but the housemaid has made by then. Instead of going back to school she decides to do penance indeed. She sits in the tree till her body aches.

St. Louis considered itself the only civilized city on the Mississippi after New Orleans of course… for even the colored avenues were without some token frenchified accent.

Betsey's school turned from white to black, in the past girls recited Byron or Shakespeare, now Dunbar or Hughes, Countee Cullen, Ma Rainy. Mrs. Mitchell, the teacher give Betsey the first prize, a bunch of red roses from her garden. The first place for a boy went to the one white boy in the class for "O Captain, My Captain", for elocution. Betsey sang "If We Must Die" by Claude McKay.

Growing up isn't easy for the 13-year old heroine of Ntozake Shange's second novel, ***Betsey Brown***:

> "Gosh, she wished her mother understood there was so much in the world to feel and see"(67)

Ntozake Shange (1987: 687) writes:

> "A girl had to get out of the house and into the thick of life the heat of it not knowing what all one could with whoever you happened to be."

To Betsey growing up means giving up her secret perch in the tree where she listens "for her city to sing to her so could respond." The children quarrel, dream, fall in love, and ask questions:

> "Why did she have to take three different buses to learn the same things with white children that she had been learning with the colored children?(110)

Betsey wonders:

> Why didn't the white children come to her school?…..why did the Negroes have to do everything the headway? Why weren't they good enough already?" (111)

Leaving home for an integrated school, bring the differences between black and white into sharp focus for all the children. Betsey says:

> "They weren't nearly as bad as I thought they would be. But they are not like as…they don't talk the same. It's almost like going to another country." (111)

And yet, Nancy Willard comments, despite the problems it confronts, this is a healing book and loving celebration of the difference that make as human as one character puts it "You are different and its not the colored of your skin either."

Court ordered desegregation forces Betsey to leave her neighbourhood school and enrol in a white one. The lengthy bus rides to and from the white school separate Betsey physically, emotionally and culturally from all that has been familiar. After missing outing with her neighbourhood friends because of late bus, Betsey takes out her frustration on the sidewalk.

Evelyn White (1985: 359) argues:

> Though Shanges writes candidly about racial and class conflicts, ***Betsey Brown*** is about the human emotions that unify people as well as political forces that divide it is a book of love loss fear, courage.

Geta LeSeur (1992: 177) comments on the general concerns of the novel:

> By virtue of age comparisons between Indigo and Betsey seems normal. They are the only two children that Shange has devoted extensive attention to in her works. ***Betsey Brown*** is about a black family but primarily focuses on the

> struggles of the oldest daughter. Both girls have an incredible ability to perceive situation and an uncanny grass of life for their young age.

Both the children are precocious having the incredible and uncanny ability and grasp to perceive the situation.

While explaining the psychological and emotional set up of Betsey Brown, Ntozake Shange observes in an interview with Brenda Lyons in ***The Massachusetts Review*** that Indigo is much more secure than Betsey who has to suffer much more turmoil:

> Indigo has knowing sense of what's possible and who she can be. We discover with Betsey what her possibilities are, which is different, I think from Indigo gives us permission to share what she already knows. (Brenda Loyns 1987: 689)

Betsey is dynamic, imaginative, thirteen year old, beginning to learn her black heritage. Her mother Jane, is of a lighter hue and absorbed by fashion, her father, Greer is of a darker hue and is trying to install black pride in these, four children and a nephew to his mother-in-law's dismay… Jane also herself clashes with her husband's desire to keep the family in touch with African roots. This creates great turmoil in Betsey, who is experiencing the trails and tribulations of her passage into womanhood amidst this household of conflict. She is also experiencing integration in the St. Louis School systems she attends. Because Betsey's friends are affluent, she has never experienced the black culture her father speak of nor does she understand the prejudices against blacks:

> Betsey didn't know yet that with folks could get away with things. Negro'd be killed for. That's what was wrong-with this integration talk (30).

Betsey is next left with helplessness and frustration when a whiter teacher robs her beloved author Paul Lawrence Dunbar of his merits:

> "This teacher tried to make me think that being colored meant you didn't write poems or books are anything ……. She doesn't believe that we're and American….." (183).

These conflicts often send Betsey to private hiding places on the stairs or up in a tree in order to reflect life. These secret places are pathways to her own discovery of self.

As a growing and coming of age girl Betsey feels that she is neglected in the family. She thinks that her mother doesn't pay sufficient attention to her and is always angry with whatever she doing. So Betsey adventures/ventures/elopes and reaches to Mrs. Maurren a beautician and hairdresser who also runs a brothel. Betsey innocently confesses that she has come for job and has left home as nobody cares for her there. Betsey's make belief world is shattered when she meets Regina there who is pregnant and is deserted by her lover. Betsey leaves this place and the police who find her wandering aimlessly bring her to the hospital where her father works.

Betsey has to suffer another sling of racism when in the integrated school when the teacher doesn't know/think Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown or Countee Cullen the notable African American writers as

Americans. The teacher doesn't consider these writers as Americans. It means that the Negroes are not considered Americans. They are denied their Americans or citizenship. Greer has filled Betsey's head with Bessie Smith, Josephine Baker or Toussaint L O'uverture's biographies, Billie Holiday as he energetically Africanizes the children daily.

Ntozake Shange's family had notable guests like W. E. B. DuBois on the list and the famous anecdote is that he put her to bed was history in late night feuds about the future of the Negro race. Everybody know what a crotchety old figure he was. But couldn't nobody but W. E. B. DuBois himself got the child to sleep.

The novel set in the black community of St. Louis in 1959, the year school integration disrupted every body's life. Written with astonishing lyrical beauty and dramatic intensity. Shanges story also traces the stress lines created in black females not only by racism and court ordered integration but also by the class conflict and cultural estrangement found within the black community.

Sherley Ann Williams (1985: 69) comments on the resurgence of black bourgeois in Black literature in the 1980s after a long gap since the Herlem Renaissanse. She comments on this phenomenon which has reappeared:

> With Harlem Renaissance (1917-1939) black bourgeois passed out of fashion as a literary topic. Writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes began to celebrate the rich verbal and musical culture of the black masses-Music and lore that the black middle class

> deplored as example of the backwardness of the lower classes and as the reminders of lower classes.

In Nella Larsen's works middle-class characters held contesting protagonists as middle class background. By the mid 1930s emphasis on the lives of average workday blacks in literature treated the black bourgeois as the object of the scorn for their shame of the slave past of the culture that spawned blues and Jazz and of physical features that linked them to America.

Sherley Ann Williams observes that after fifty years later novels by young black women writers have once again turned out attention to the black bourgeois. These novel-Gloriya Naylor's ***Lindon Hills***, Andera Lee's ***Sarah Phillips*** and Ntozake Shange's ***Betsey Brown*** add to the slim store of novels that focus on the childhood and adolescence of black female protagonists.

One of the implicit messages of ***Linden Hill*** and ***Sarah Phillips*** is that the only real black is poor black. Ntozake Shange however, in ***Betsey Brown*** depicts an affluence that is not compatible with black culture and community. Her protagonists has upper-class origins, that includes a surgeon/artist/activist father (a black music aficionado who takes her four kids to see Chunk Berry, and a "proud race" man who encourages their participation in civil rights demonstration) as well as fragile nerved mother (who works outside the home as a social worker in the black

community) and a colour struck grandmother (whose tastes for the lyric reverie Betsey has inherited.

In reviewing this work Nancy Willard (1985: 395) stated:

> Despite the problems it confronts (***Betsey Brown***) is a healing book and a loving celebration of the differences that make as human.

Shanges works document the struggles of modern African American woman to obtain and retain autonomy, while immersed in human relationship, particularly with men, but also in the community with other women.

Many praised ***Betsey Brown*** for its depiction of the black middle class, and Claudia Tate also noted several changes in Shanges writing:

> Most of Shange's characteristic elliptical spelling, innovative syntax and punctuation is absent from ***Betsey Brown***. Missing also is the caustic social victimization… ***Betsey Brown*** seems also to make Shange's movement from explicit to subtle expression of rage, from repudiating her girlhood past to embracing it, and from flip candor to more serious commentary. (***Contemporary Literary Criticism*** 74: 291)

One of the hallmarks of Shange's writing is her innovative use of language, the origins of which she traces back to the black literary tradition.

In a review article of ***Betsey Brown*** in ***Saturday Review*** Susan Schindehette (1985: 74) quite naturally praises the novel for its lively character, colourful dialogues, and lyricism:

> It would be wrong and unfair to describe Ntozake Shange's new work as a bad novel, for it has some wonderful trapping, lively character, colorful dialogues and a sense of time and place that ensure reader. ***Betsey Brown*** has lyricism and personality, and Shange certainly knows how to use words. White folks are "peckerwoods", the protagonist a young girl, takes a deep breath "cause the south may be full of ugly things but it not in the air. The air is flowers, leaves and spaces divine…"

And after climbing her favourite oak tree one night the same character thinks that:

> She would see all the stars and the moon as the sun rose, when there was that peculiar mingling of past and tomorrows, when the sun glanced across the sky to the moon hoverin over the telephone wires, and everyone else was ignorant of the powers of light and dark. (ibid.: 74)

Susan Schindehetts points the narrative flaw. While she finds the dialogues character, and Shange's prose alluring, "there is no glue to bind those elements into a flowing whole" (74) She concludes that ***Betsey Brown*** is not a novel at all but a play "masquerading as a novel" (74).

Susan Schindehette point out that the lacunae in the novel:

> But though the book which tells the story of an adolescent black girl in 1957 in St. Louis there is no glue to bind these elements into a flowing

> whole, Finally toward the end of the book, the reason become clear. This is not a novel after all. It's dramatist Shange's play.
> ……..
> But the real giveaway is the book's style: it's more an episodic mood piece, a sequence of scene's then it is a traditional novel with climax and denouement.
> Shanges work has merit, but it will be better when it's language is performed, its words spoken out loud-when it makes its way into the theatre and is called by its right name (ibid.: 74)

Nancy Willard (ibid.: 395) comments that the novel has no axe to grind. The characters confront plenty of problems and sometimes flee them… So Nancy Willard admires the micro and minute observation that Shange makes in the novel:

> Miss Shange is a superb story-teller who keeps her eye on what brings her character together rather then what separates them: courage and love, innocence and the loss of it, home and homelessness. Miss Shange understand backyard, houses, schools and churches. ***Betsey Brown*** rejoices in-but never sentimentalises-those places on earth where you are accepted, where you are comfortable with yourself…

Nancy Willard (ibid.: 395) further comments:

> This novel is more straightforward and less idiosyncratic than Miss Shange's first novel ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo***…the Characters are so fondly drawn that they can be recognized by their speech alone. Readers of Miss Shange's poetry already know that she has an extraordinary ear for the spoken word.

Carolyn Weaver (1985: 58) praises the texture of the novel in her review:

> Shange has a nice way of evoking the physical texture of her story (in ***Betsey Brown***)- the solidity and mystery of the Brown's old house, the viability of a run down urban neighborhood, a madam, cum-hairdresser's morning dishabille, her wig skew and her breasts tumbling out of her robe. Shange's dialogue is often sharps, funny and salty. She is working relatively neglected fictional territory here, and this lends ***Betsey Brown***, a freshness that the exhausted genre of novel of growing up can use.

Shange (1987: 691) comments the structure of her novel:

> In my fiction plot is not going forward. It undulates, flow of a river, to use a metaphor: women's novels are like breaking and men's like running.

Carolyn Waver (1985: 58) points out that the materials of the novel is in collapsed form. Shange does not dramatize her situation and characters so much as to explain them to use. Some conflicts are resolved as partly in hour in television drama: other are half sketched and abounded.

Melisa Walker comments that Ntozake Shange's ***Betsey Brown*** looks out at the suffering of others with the comfortable confidence of noblesse oblige. Walker (1991: 4-7) further comments:

> Ntozake Shange's ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** (1982) set during the sixties and ***Betsey Brown*** (1985) which takes place in St. Louis in 1959 both gloss over enduring conditions that have plagued the black community long after the praises of movement leaders had begun to ring hollow. And both affirm the quest for private fulfilment in ways consistent with 1980s pursuit

> of personal satisfaction to the exclusion of public commitments.

Melisa Walker (ibid.: 10) while comparing ***Betsey Brown*** with the fiction of Toni Morrison pinpoints that Shange's novel lacks richness of texture Toni Morison's works possess:

> The novel of Toni Morrison belong in the category of major American fiction and that Shange's ***Betsey Brown,*** though set in a particularly time and place –St. Louis in 1959-is a lesser novel, in part because it lacks the richness of texture created by the integration of substantive historical detail with in depth development of character.

Melisa Walker (ibid.: 129) while assessing and evaluating the involvement of the characters in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s to its denouement in the three novels studied in this dissertation-Toni Cade Bambara's ***The salt Eaters*** (1980), and Ntozake Shange's ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo,*** and ***Betsey Brown*** highlight that the actions in Bambara's novel are deeply embedded but in Shange's both the novels are peripheral regarding the involvement on Civil Rights Movement. These novels of Shange's being in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement lack the deeper and fuller involvement in it and they also fail to portray the conflict between the personal and public sphere like Bambara's protagonist Velma Henry. Like ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** the involvement of the characters in ***Betsey Brown*** is not central but peripheral. As seen already, In ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** one character, Cypress, almost incidentally helps raise funds for the

movement and similarly in ***Betsey Brown*** a family is thrown into turmoil over a school busing order and the father's surprising decision to take his children to a civil right demonstration.

Both the novel ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** and ***Betsey Brown*** are set primarily in the years of the movement in communities where civil right activities never made national headlines. ***Sassafrass, Cyperess & Indigo*** in Charleston, South Carolina and ***Betsey Brown*** in St. Louis, Missouri. The novels feature protagonists who enjoy middleclass privileges and are practically exempt from the indignities of racism.

The temporal indicators, ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** set in the sixties and ***Betsey Brown*** in 1959 are relatively lull between the movements crisis ears. But for the people on the periphery of the movement, like the artists and the performers in ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** or the privileged middleclass characters in ***Betsey Brown***, being for Civil Rights and occasionally raising money or attending a demonstration was all that was necessary to feel part of the action. Though the protagonist's father in ***Betsey Brown*** believes in the goals of the movement, there is nothing, in the novel to suggest that his civil rights activity is grounded in organization or that he expects do more than attend-albeit with his children into occasional demonstration. Melisa Walker (ibid.: 160) comments:

> Shange's ***Betsey Brown*** on the surface concerns the growth of the moral and social conscience of thirteen years old Betsey in the context of

> turbulent activity of her larger middle class household.

Although the narrative observes that Greer and Jane have both "been chastened since birth by the scorn and violence the race had know…… and brought up on lynching and riots……. (and) name calling and 'No Colored Allowed' they reach conflicting conclusion about how to deal with racism. Jane, afraid of white and hesitant to expose her children to than chooses to keep her world as colored as she could" (90). Like Hilda Effania in ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** she believes in protecting her private world, takes action to change the condition that allow racism to persist and actively works to alleviate the suffering of the economically disadvantaged.

While Jane has a cavalier, even heartless attitude about underprivileged blacks, Greer goes out of his away to come for the poor-making house calls and helping them find jobs twice in the novel, Jane fires domestic Servants Bernice and Carrie without any thought of them.

Bussing to the integrated white school across the city also causes trouble. Charlie comes home form school with torn clothes and bruises.

Another storm of racism plagues the family when Greer takes his children to the civil rights demonstration in spite of Jane's opposition to protest discrimination at the "racist paragon of southern gentility, the Chase Hotel. (175)

Afraid of the children safety, Jane accuses Greer of putting his public commitments before his private responsibilities. He, on the other

hand insists that it is time "to do some thing about… this separate but equal travesty" (156) and by teaching his children, that the struggle for civil right is their struggle, he is doing "what a man's supposed to do for his wife and children" (159). When Jane refuses to give in to her demands, Jane decides to leave him and the children: "I will let you know of I'm coming back, Just tell the children Mommy went away for a while" (160).

Greer, nevertheless, feels compelled to go through with his plans to teach his children about public responsibility:

> Greer felt the front door slam all the way in the kitchen. He sat down praying she'd understand and come back… He was taking his babies to a battle he wasn't sure he'd win. He was leading his children of his one free will to face what grown Negroes had already died for. (160)

The demonstration turns out to be peaceful. Greer thinks he did the right thing "A man had to stand for something." In the end Jane returns offering no information about where she has been.

But by 1959 there was very little progress in Civil Rights Movement. But while much this relatively short novel focuses on the private world of Jane and Greer it is finally Betsey's story. When her friend Veejay scolds Betsey for nagging and annoying her, she is ashamed of her self.

At the end of the novel Betsey is:

> Making decisions and discoveries about herself that would change the world. (207)

But nor are the place and the time rife for Betsey's spirit of reform. The year is 1959 and Betsey is in the seventh grade, much of the world of the Civil Rights Movement will take place in the next six years and will culminate in the Voting Rights Act, about the time Betsey reaches for eighteenth birthday. Similarly St. Louis saw very little civil right activity.

Instead of seeking a civil right office Betsey runs to a beauty shop and has her hair and nails done. After returning to her family, Betsey muses about the future:

> She'd just wanted to see the world. Marry a Negro man of renown. Change the world. Use white folks, segregated restaurant tables to dance and tear down all the "Colored Only" and "Colored Not Allowed" signs…She wanted to singing her a new hairstyle and have her Humphrey Bogart not able to keep his eyes off her, while she smuggled rifles for the resistance. (152)

Greer is committed to having a public and private life, Jane to strictly private one. She leaves him and comes back. There are no deaths and no injuries and nor residual hard feeling, conflicts are dissipated...nor are is fully ever tested.

By 1985 the work of the Civil Rights Movement had become history and the progress of the movement had been eroding.

Evelyn White (1985: 359) also makes an insightful observation about the nature of "black womanhood" that has been changed by ***Betsey Brown***. White comments:

> "Innocent" and "fragile" are words that are used all to rely to describe black women. Now, perhaps because of ***Betsey Brown*** these too will be used whenever there is mention of "the strong black women" as they should be.

While she was eight however the family moved from the security of the black community of St. Louis, Missouri. In her novel ***Betsey Brown*** Shange details her experience with this foreign environment where she was one of the first integrated children in the school system.

The novel is told in third person narrative, the dominant narrative voice remain that of Betsey. Sherly Ann Williams (1985: 1-72) points on of the difficulties of the novel its language:

> The characters and the narrator all think alike. The point is not cause nonstandard usage as such but the doubt that this usage sometimes casts on the credibility of the upper class character……the grandmother is a snobbish character…….Shange tries over and over again in the novel that she is able to approximate the rhythms and reproduce the idioms of vernacular black speech.

Sherley Ann Williams (1985: 72) critiques the disappoint portrayal of the black bourgeoisie in the novel. She comments:

> Shange has chosen to write about black middle class, but with the possible exception of the disappointing ***Betsey Brown*** does not revise the literary images of the black bourgeois.

Such is the innocent, playful and magical world of Betsey plagued by white racism.

C) *LILIANE: RESURRECTION OF THE DAUGHTER (1994):* A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A WOMAN OF COLOUR.

Ntozaka Shange is still found preoccupied with the recurrent themes of young, adolescent black artist girls as protagonists in her recent third novel having protagonist's name: ***Laliane: Resurrection of the Daughter*** (1994). The title of the novel its self bears some Biblical and mythological connotations and Shange is found doing some new experiments with the techniques, structure and language after her first postmodern novel ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo***. Not only in the sense of the techniques employed in it but, the novel also carries the theme of black feminist *Bildungsroman* It is a poignant and painful saga of coming of age of Liliane, a visual artist- a painter. Shange's interest is found continued in the adolescent artist black girls coming of age but in a new form –i.e. through a series dialogues between Liliane and her psychiatrist. Liliane is also postmodern pastiche or college like Shange's first novel ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** as the dialogues, conversation between Liliane and the psychiatrist are interspersed with the first person narration by her friends and lovers.

In this sense ***Liliane*** is not only a black feminist *Bildungsroman but Kunstlerroman* of such an adolescent black young girls who is also an artist- a visual artist – a painter. This novel also like Shange's first novel ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** is a radical black feminist *Kunstlerroman*

and charts the artist's spiritual as well as the physical growth of its protagonist, Liliane.

The novel is an enchanting tale of a black adolescent painter called Liliane from black affluent society In this sense this novel has some affinities with Shange's earlier second novel ***Betsey Brown***, as both the novels have black bourgeois as their backdrops. The novel is portrayed against the affluent upper middle class family as background of a black criminal court judge Mr. Parnell Lincoln.

Drawing Comparison with Shange's earlier two novels of black feminist *Bildungsroman* and *Kunstlerroman* and an affluent upper middle-class background, ***Liliane*** Shange's third novel is quite unique.

Liliane is an interesting, melodious but painful saga of Liliane Lincoln who is deeply affected by the loss of her dear and loved ones and is being treated by her psychiatrist. Her twelve psychiatric therapeutic sessions constitute the chapters *Room in the Dark* from I to XII, interspersed among them are the order chapters narrated by Liliane's friends and ex-lovers.

Deeply affected by the pangs and the throes, Liliane loses her mental balance. A sensuous visual artist /painter, a sensitive and emotional human being, Liliane cannot bear the slings of the white racism and black sexism in the American society.

Liliane belongs to a highly affluent, upper middle class Negro family who has to suffer the loss of her dear loved ones-like her mother and her friend Roxie.

These traumatic events deeply afflict Liliane's sensitive mind and life as an artist and cast her on the verge of insanity and losing the mental balance. She resorts to the psychiatric treatment. The novel unravel before us through the recurrent psychotherapeutic sessions between Liliane and the psychiatrist and the soliloquies and narratives revealed by Liliane's friends and lovers.

The psychotherapeutic sessions between Liliane and the psychiatrist are particularly poignant as it shows the anguish, agony and trauma in Liliane's mind, psyche and life. We find Liliane sometime co-operating sometimes in a peevish mood, not responding to the counselling of the psychiatrist, properly. These dialogues and conversation between Liliane and her psychiatrist reveals the disturbed condition of her mind that made her to lose its balance. If studied carefully Lilian's dialogues with the psychiatrist show that they sometime lack coherence and revel that she is on the verge of insanity. But there is sometimes sanity in her insanity, as she talks sense also, and so the psychiatrist is also sometimes dumbfounded shocked and amazed as to how to treat her.

Liliane shows and reveals the tragedy of white racism at its essence and black sexism at its roots. Both these evils shatters the beautiful dreams of the sensuous artist-Liliane's mind. These two evils of racism and sexism, that plague the life of not only of Liliane who is deeply shattered but resurrects like Jesus Christ, in the Biblical myth, but her other kith and kin, like her father and her friend Roxie. These two gross

events are –Liliane's mother deserts her father and Liliane as a child, loves a white man and elopes with him and Liliane's friend Roxie is killed by her husband Tony.

The first tragic event that shatters Liliane's emotional world, but which is kept hidden form her, is the elopement of her mother with white man. Liliane' friend Roxie asked Liliane if her mother is a communist, leftist. But for Liliane such a question of being a communist or not does not matter and slavery and Negro problems did exist before the terms and movements such as communism and leftist came into being.

The Licolns are a progressive and forward family everybody having individual freedom. Its so happens when Liliane's mother falls in love with a white man. When her father comes to know of it he warns her such a thing will shatter everything. The Parnells are respected in the society. But Lilian's mother doesn't care and elopes with her white lover, leaving the child Liliane, and Mr. Parnell behind. Mr. Parnell Lincoln tells his daughter Liliane that her mother has died in an accident of the ship in the sea and her body is not found. So there was no body, corpse for the burial but only flowers.

Liliane comes to know the truth when she is grown up, she is shocked. And perhaps this is one the shocking reasons that caused Liliane' mental derailment which is very difficult to recover.

Another shocking and traumatic incident that also severely shocks Liliane is the murder of her friend Roxie by her husband by Tony. They also have small child before whom the heinous crime is committed.

These two traumatic events are revealed to us in Liliane's twelve psychotherapeutic sessions with the psychiatrist. A sensitive emotional artist afflicted by the slings of racism and sexism she is whirled in the mental trauma and aberration.

Commenting on the first traumatic event of her mother's element with her white lover she bitterly comments that it is a sheer case of white racism. The whites have snatched away everything away from the black and now they have snatched her mother away from her. She has been brought up as an orphan and her father says that all have been done means that the lies were told for her betterment, so that she as a small child must not be shocked.

The second traumatic event is her friend Roxie's murder by her husband. A Negro man killing his wife-abusing maltreating her is the clear case of Black sexism that has orphaned Roxie's child.

Both these of racism and sexism that plague Lilian's sensitive and emotional world. Her twelve psychotherapeutic sessions with the psychiatrist reveal the agony and pain in her mind. These sessions are termed as 'Room in the Dark' which are very symbolic of Liliane's mind. With these psychological maladies Lialiane's mind has lost the light of wisdom and knowledge and it is a 'Room in the Dark' A room filled with darkness and ignorance, pain, suffering and malody.

In theses psychotherapeutic sessions Liliane says that these 'silences bother her' (2). And feels 'quiet when she hears music…..of for example…of B. B. King' (4). The psychiatrist asks that there is noise of the

ex-lovers in her head" (4) that disturbs her. She can't even breathe in silence. The silence is unbearable.

In the counselling sessions with the psychiatrist Liliane confesses how one of her lovers tried to kill her by suffocating. She still has those horrible memories of sexism and brutal abuse:

> Now whenever a melody ends I feel his fingers on my throat. Some of my hair in the back is caught in his fingers and he's shakin' me down from the Rviera as if nobody was around. People walked past. Went across the street to the park. And nobody said anything. Did anything. The traffic kept comin' car to New Jersey and cabs with medallion kept…I heard him screamin' "what do you think you are?" and… couldn' breathe…so I couldn't answer…"(7).

Liliane further answers the psychiatrist's question that she turns down ex-lovers in quiet:

> "Where lovers become assassins without warning. It's the noise. A horrible throbbin' roar."(8)

Liliane answer to her friend Roxie's question whether her mother Sunday Biliss Lincoln is a communist is a unique one:

> Roxie. The Civil War was our times. There are Negroes dying and fighting right now. We were dying and fighting before communists had for a name for themselves, my dear…"(34).

Liliane's mother had been to Cuba and met Fidel Castro.

Liliane's comments on black slavery are also full of insights:

> I never understand why white folks chained the slave stood the heat so well. God must have meant for us to pick cotton. I couldn't stand the heat." (37)

Liliane and her friend Roxie whose fathers are champions of civil rights comment:

> The lands that where once ours been eaten, up by no good white assessors, poor crops, and fatigue. My papa then Galveston to Montgomery adding the plight of Negroes forces to defend themselves in white men's courts. That's how Liliane and I were in one another's company. The race actually threw us together. Our fathers were champions of the Negro Civil Rights…" (38).

The novel set in Biloxi, Mississippi has the white racist atmosphere. A party is arranged for black fund raising by the black. It was said that Martin Luther King Jr., is coming for the Black fund raising in Biloxi, Mississippi. The novels set against the Civil Rights Movement. Sunday Bliss Lincoln appears so beautiful that she looks like "Aphrodite" and "Venus". The fascist and racist Ku Klux Klan arrive on the scene, scorch the front the house and others and threatening the blacks they go away. When the police officer comes and suggests the black to disperse, it is Liliane's courageous mother who promptly replies the officer that for the Negroes in Biloxie, the defence fund is more important. Quite naturally the officer is angry.

Liliane further explicates the white racism to the psychiatrist in a series of dialogues saying that her mothers eloped with her white lover:

> --White people got us so entangled up and wound round over selves we can't live without them or the idea white folks, we don't exist, like they don't matter, they kill us. Bang you dead, nigger. If we act decent, they treat us like fools, If we spend over lives eating them, we look as foolish and psychotic as they do to the rest of the world.
> --What did the white people do to you, Liliane'?
> --…How about slavery? How do you like that for the start?
> --I thought there might be something more current weighing on you mind…
> --What do you think about us being defined as chattel or being valuable or valueless in relation to the white folks? That's not too to far from slavery.
> --…it never crossed my mind that Mama'd run off with a white man (178-79).

The novel is Liliane's personal tragedy. Anais Nin compares Shange's novel ***Liliane*** with more celebrated contemporaries like Paule Marshall and Toni Morrison.

Certain features of the novel compel it to be turned as postmodern. As mentioned earlier it a pastiche or collage like her first novel ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** of Liliane's psychotherapeutic treatment sessions with the psychoanalyst interspersed with the other first person narration by her various friend and ex-lovers. This montage or collage is a characteristic of postmodernism found in the novel.

Schizophrenia or lunacy is another characteristic of postmodernism, according to Jacques Lacan, as already mentioned in the case of Toni Cade Bambara's novel ***The Salt Eaters.*** Liliane the protagonist of the novel is on

the verge of schizophrenia and has lost her mental balance and a receiving psychiatric counselling and treatment, sometimes growing more violent and not responding the treatment. This feature of schizophrenia, madness makes the novel postmodern.

Another very peculiar characteristic of postmodernism found in the novel is the polyphony of voices in it. There are multiple voices in the novel of Liliane's friends and ex-lovers that make the novel crowded with characters. Nearly a dozen of characters' voices collide against each other.

The book's narrative structure is vividly interspersed with prose-poetry, with terse dramatic dialogues, monologues. What's is to be appreciated as Liliane's qualities are her independence sensuality, intelligence, complex, idiosyncratic grappling with social and psychic form.

Liliane a visual artist is haunted by the suffering of people of coloured and her lost loved ones that make the novel multifaceted portrait a of a complex young woman and a multicultural generation with special burdens coming of age in America.

> Neal Laster (1986:4) comments:
> Ntozkae, Shange's Liliane is much more explicit about her various relationship than are other characters I have presented in the past. She goes all over the world and she is confronted with sexism.

Shange openly describes Liliane's relationship with her various lovers very vividly and explicitly. In an interview with Brenda Lyons, in the

Massachusetts Review Ntozake Shange charts her fictional trajectory from ***Betsey Brown*** to ***Liliane***:

> When I was writing ***Betsey Brown…*** I had to see world from a thirteen year-old girl's point of view… several months after I started the next novel, which is incredibly sexual. I guess Liliane the protagonist is an existential feminist… sprung up from Zeus' a head ***Liliane*** is related to the Bible and Minerva.

Down Seaman calls ***Liliane*** and novel with personality (3) but insists that "Shanges is still a more potent poet and playwright then novelist" (3). Janet Ingraham Compares the novel favourable with the works of Paule Marshall and Toni Morrison. Valerie Shangers (1995:381) acknowledging some dazzling pace of the novel concludes that it is a pleasure "to hear Ntozake Shange singing in so many different tempos" and that the novel is "a dense, ambitions, worthy song."

In ***Liliane*** Shange merges the rhetorical style first presented in ***Sassafrass, Cypress*** & ***Indigo*** and the themes and concerns facing African American daughters in the society further explored in ***Betsy Brown*** with her own preoccupation with the role of art in the lives of African American females. The title character is Liliane Lincoln an artist who searches for more self-awareness and security through revelatory conversations with her friend her lovers and her psychoanalyst. Though albeit she expresses herself through artworks filled with sexual and feminine images she is unable at the novels inception to understand a society where "men are abusive and can't stand to hear the music" (8) in

the African American female artists. The array of voice present within this novel sings a song of survival for this African American female. The novel itself reads an improvisational jazz tune with non-linear narrative dream sequences and multiple voices circulating through the text. Though less complex and more rendered than the intricate textual tapestry of ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*** or the autobiographical and historically compelling ***Betsey Brown*** Shanges third novel clearly relishes African American art forms and adds yet another instrument to the author's symbolic exploration of the varied lives of modern African American females.

In all these three novel Shange clearly relishes and power of the written word, since language is for this author, African American females a most powerful tool. In an interview with Neale Lester, Shange comments:

> It is very scary to me as a woman that we are denied and defiled in language … so for me the challenge was to kill of these things and to trip (language) and try it and use it in ways "they're" not expecting but in ways what people speaking the language I speak would receive and feel a sense of joy in "language is liberator".
> Though not in the way that George Washington Carver thought an education would free you … Judy Graham talks about murdering the "King's English." That is a wonderful idea because in murdering the "King's English" we free ourselves. (1990:6)

Using language in original and powerful novels, Shanges sings, "song of liberation", for the African American woman.

The Biblical overtones that the novel carries and bears are related to the life of Jesus Christ who is believed to have resurrected after crucification or the rising of the dead at the Last Judgment. The mental aberration of Liliane is actual death to her, from which the psychiatrist has been trying to bring back to normal life. This survival is the resurrection of Liliane to live again a sensitive, emotional life after psychological disorder.

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BLACK FEMINIST VISION

The present study is undertaken to highlight the ramifications of the classic and multiple jeopardy of race, gender, class and sexual preferences and multiple consciousness in the lives of black women. The aim of this study is to assess the quest of black women as triply oppressed in the fiction of Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara and Ntozake Shange and to evaluate their places in the canon of African American women's fiction.

The feminist episteme, as a liberating theory critiques the patriarchal hegemony that subjugates, enslaves, subordinates and enchains women in various shackles. As feminism not only emancipates women but asserts their identity and dignity as true human beings. The black women's liberation process become more entangled because of the above mentioned oppressions.

This study brings to light the fact that African American women fiction is deeply embedded in history since the Negroes were brought as slaves from their native African countries and were dehumanized as beasts and women moreover as slave breeders. The Negro men were slaves but the Negro women were slaves of slaves. This depersonalization of the black was on the three fronts-economical, political and ideological. Because of capitalist white economy they were exploited, they had no political rights and had no dignity and identity as true human beings. Numerous and various atrocities were inflicted and

perpetrated on them as branding, raping, lynching, and auctioning as beasts. This commodification, and objectification transformed them into zombies. This is a collective saga of inhuman black slavery.

As mentioned above black women were caught in the geometric oppression and they were the 'Other of the Other'. The stereotypes and images created of black women were negative along with passing and assimilation. Black women writers created the black feminist aesthetics by questioning the patriarchal order. This creation of black feminist aesthetics became possible because of black feminist consciousness. An awakening that one is oppressed because one is black and female is black feminist consciousness. Black women writers create such consciousness and make black women aware to end such an oppression.

While exploring the quest for black womanhood in the fiction of Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara; and Ntozake Shange an effort is made to delineate their thematic and stylistic innovative contributions to the canon of African American women's fiction. The trajectory of this canon is mapped and these three writer are assessed, evaluated and criticized in their right perspectives.

This critical approach brought certain comparative, distinctive aspects and features that were highlighted. The white American novelists and black men novelists have depicted the black women as certain stereotypes such as Mammy, mulatto, sapphire and jezebel. Theirs was an outsiders portrayal of the black women jaundiced, biased and not factual. The Black women novelist project themselves from an insiders

point of view. They have valiantly attempted to place the predicament of their race and gender in its historical experiences.

However some of the earlier women novelists also have depicted the black women as mulattoes who pass for white. Hence they lack the very sense of genuine and authentic black female identity. Merely being black and writing for black women does not make their protagonist black feminists. It must expose sexism and the patriarchal power structure and celebrate the black women's intellectual capabilities and the revolutionary black feminist vision. The black feminist work should explore the struggle of black women victims or rebels who have faced a patriarchal institutions and inequalities by sexism and racism.

Most of the fiction of the African American women of the second phase during the Harlem Renaissance continue the mulatto heroines as protagonists and strive to pass as white. The protagonists of ***Three Is Confusion, The Chinaberry Tree, Comedy: American Style*** by Jessie Fauset; and ***Quicksand, and Passing*** by Nella Larsen focus this theme of passing for personal attainment scaling the high social and economic ladder so that they are not identified with the black race. So the result is tragic. Hence the heroines such as Joanne Marshall in ***There Is Confusion***, Lawrentine Strange in The ***Chinaberry Tree***, Angela Murray in ***Plum Bun*** Olivia Carry ***The Comedy : American Style*** Helga Crane from ***Quicksand***, and Claire Kendry and Urne Redfield from ***Passing*** are young, dynamic and want to improve their socio-economic and cultural lot.

Lutie Johnson, the protagonist of Ann Petry's ***The Street*** and Henritta Coffin are young mothers but provides of the family. Though the protagonists from ***Our Nig*** to ***Passing*** are depicted as helpless black victims, it is Janie the protagonist of Zora Neale Hurston's novel ***Their Eyes Were Watching God*** who satisfies and fulfills her integrated self and totality.

This study focuses on the triumvirate of black women novelist namely Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara and Ntozake Shange. With their innovative thematic concerns and techniques these have achieved unique places in the fictional canon of African American women and thereby enriched it. Gayl Jones with her special interest in the 'abnormal psychology' of black women exposes the racism and sexism in her two novels. ***Corregidora*** and ***Eva's Man***. Both her novels are debatable, controversial for the negative stereotypes of the black men and women and she is severely criticized for it. She is interested in the psychology of her characters. That is her landscape where she depicts the abuse inflicted on black women by black and white men.

Corregidora, very painful and traumatic saga of the four generations of Corregidora women, is narrated by Ursa Corregidora, a blues singer and the representative of fourth generation. Located against the horrible atrocities that the Portuguese whoremonger Corregidora inflicted upon his slaves, the mission of these women is to make generations when all the slavery record is destroyed at the time of abolition of slavery. Ursa's agony is that she doesn't and can't make 'generations' as she has been kicked in

her pregnancy by her husband Mutt. A hysterectomy follows and the womb is removed. Ursa's agony is poured in her blues singing on the note of which Ursa and Mutt reunite in the end after twenty two years. Gayl Jones second novel ***Eva's Man*** is equally thrilling like her first novel it is also a blues novel. And moreover a black female *Bildungsroman*. Brought up in the black society and having experienced molestation and sexual abuse since childhood Eva Medina Canada, poisons, kills, and castrates her lover Davis Carter who represents for her all the women abusers who maltreated her, as he confined, imprisoned and raped her. This leads her to the psychiatric prison but she doesn't open her mouth. Jones was severely criticized for her portrayal of negative stereotypes of black men and black women as whores and rapists, but she defended that it is a fiction and not the representation of the black society. Jones sprinkles lesbianism. Jones's heroines are not defeated but find their way, struggle, go ahead. This is one of the indication of black women as "sturdy black bridges".

Toni Cade Bambara's only novel ***The Salt Eaters*** belong to the phase of black feminists fiction writing where the protagonists are activists. The protagonist in this novel, Velma Henry, a civil rights activist attempted double suicide by slitting open her veins of wrists and thrusting her head in the oven due to the personal and other problems related to the Civil Rights Movement. Her lost will to live is restored by the 'fabled healer' Minnie Ransom who is successful at the end when Velma "Resurrects". For Bambara 'Salvation is the issue' she writes to save our lives, people's lives. Hence the protagonist in her novel is also a

civil right activist, and the entire novel is set against this movement. This delineation of Velma through lost fifth in life is healed by Minnie is intricate. Minnie represents the African heritage-root worker, a spiritual healer, representing sturdy metaphor who brings Velma back to life from the throes of death and makes strong like her to face life bravely for the society.

The novel is a postmodern one. Constructed of highly complex plot structure of flashback and flashforwards it defies the linear structure and has a caravan of characters, each of whom sets off on his/her memory lane. It encompasses a vast array of subjects so it makes the novel a labyrinth and abstract to understand because of the use of postmodernism in it. Even schizophrenia the element of postmodernism is revealed in the novel.

The third African American women novelist studied is Ntozake Shange. Her vision is quite radical. A poet, dramatist and novelist she has three novels to her credit namely : ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo, Betsey Brown***, and ***Liliance : Resurrection of the Daughter***. With Shange there is a revival of the portrayal of black bourgeois after a long gap up time since Harlem Renaissance. All he novels are set against the black middle class society. And the major theme, of all her novels are *Buildingsroman* and *Kunstlerroman*. Her novels are the exploration of adolescent protagonists.

Her first novel ***Sassafrassa Cypress & Indigo*** is a black radical feminist *Kunstlerroman* as it maps the spiritual and artistic and physical

growth of the three adolescent black artist sisters after whom the novel is named, ***Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo***. Sassfrass, a weaver like her mother and a poet, Cypress a classical ballet dancer, and Indigo a spiritual healer and midwife. The novel delineates the quest of these protagonists towards their goals, and Hilda acts with the love and functions as a chorus in the novel.

They achieve their goals in the end come black-and unite with their mother where Sassafrass delivers her baby and Indigo serves as midwife.

What is poetic and postmodern about the novel is the use of-a pastiche or a collage of letters recipes, dreams, spells, journal entries, rituals etc. What is considered unimportant and 'trivial' is thought important in feminism by Shange. These things are feminist. The theme of mobility and explicit portrayal of lesbianism are also the demarking themes of the novel. The novels of the early eighties portray a character's mobility, moving from one place to another as they are not confirmed to one place as in the past. All three protagonist move to different places to achieve their goals. Similarly there is overt exploration of lesbianism between cypress and Idrina. The novel also makes a passing reference to the civil rights movement against which it is set. The novel depicts adventurous black women.

Shange's second novel ***Betsey Brown*** is a black feminist *Bildungsroman* in which we see the white racist world through the eyes of a thirteen years old black adolescent girl Betsey. Coming from a upper middle class family, Besey portrays her teenage life against the backdrop

of integration. The playful novel reveals the darker aspect of white racism that plagues the black. Her adventure, playful frolic tricks sometimes make her thinks seriously.

Shange's next novel ***Liliane*** is against a black feminist *Kunstlerroman* constructed in the postmodernist mode. The novel depicts Liliane Lincoln a visual artist coming from a upper middle class family whose world is shattered by racism. The fury of person when Liliane was a small child, her world with her lovers friends make the novel readable due to her dialogues with her psychiatrist. Hence Shange's women are caught in the turmoil but find their ways and face life.

To sum up, like most of the African American women novelists, Jones, Bambara and Shange have placed black women in the background of the historical experience. They have tried to highlight the issues pertaining their colour, or race and gender.

Taken as a whole Jones, Bambara and Shange trace the diverse experience of black women in hostile environment of racism, sexism and class oppression. These three novelists try to unfold unique identity and dignity of the black women and to subvert the age old patriarchy. So these three novelists explore black feminine sensibilities and sturdy images of black women and possess a unique black feminist vision.

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Authored by,
Dr.Sandu Paigavan,

Published by,
Dr. Pramod Ambadasrao Pawar
Editor-in-Chief,
Epitome : International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (ISSN : 2395-6968)
"Aashna", Gut No. 145, Plot No. 63-64, Row House No. 2,
Behind Chate School, Alok Nagar,Satara Parisar,
Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar - 431005, MS, India Mob. 08888951510
Email : epitomejournals@gmail.com / drpramodambadasraopawar@gmail.com

ISSN 2395-6968

Quest for Black Womanhood in the Fiction of Gayle Jones Toni Cade Bambara and Ntozake Shange