

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION



Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* are all African American novels that deal with the difficulties faced by female protagonists in the development of their sense of self. Since these protagonists rarely experience the nurturing relationship with their biological mothers, they are not equipped with the ability to cope with their terrible life experiences and become victims of racism and/or sexism. They display psychological symptoms which are apparent in their difficulty to narrate their stories, their problems with sexuality and relationships with others and their struggle to develop their sense of self in order to achieve their self-esteem. In order to free themselves from their painful experiences and move toward a better future, these female protagonists require help from their surrogate mothers and other maternal figures.

From these three novels, I would like to make a final conclusion. To begin with, the writers present black mothers, especially the protagonists' mothers, as the ones who undergo harsh life experiences which contribute to their psychological problems and their inability to develop their healthy sense of self. These symptoms prevent the mothers from being the role models for their daughters and negatively affect the daughters' lives. However, it does not mean that all women who experience terrible situations are unable to develop a sense of self. The surrogate mothers in *The Color Purple* and *Beloved* are the examples of the characters who can reconcile with the problems in their lives and develop their sense of self. Their painful pasts, in turn, become beneficial for them in their role as surrogate mothers. With these experiences,

the surrogate mothers are able to understand their daughters' suffering and apply them to help the daughters overcome the problems in their lives.

These novels also highlight the problematic nature of the maternal narratives. The writers propose that the narratives which are the incomplete history or horrific experiences may traumatize the descendants and eventually help the descendants free themselves from their trauma. In addition, the act of narrating is necessary both for the narrators and their descendants. According to Brogan, the act of narrating enables the narrators to confront their past, painful or otherwise. It also helps them learn how to associate their painful past with other events in their lives and where to posit it in their life history (74). Powell suggests that narrating stories can help the narrators free themselves since it is an act of sharing which contributes to diffuse pain and unburden the weight of memory when it becomes unbearable (147). In the case of the audiences, listening to ancestors' narratives is valuable since it helps them reconnect with their own roots. These narratives provide the information which is crucial to the descendants' understanding of who they are and where they come from (Allen 269). To avoid the risk of traumatizing the daughters, the narrators should offer their versions of history as a way to avoid creating a gap within the narratives but leave open the spaces for the audiences' interpretations, doubts and variations. These spaces can help prevent the audiences from being obsessed with the family narratives they have inherited from their previous generations.

Moreover, revisiting the past refers to revisiting the actual place where the traumatic experiences happened or revisiting the past within the memory or through an act of narrating. While this actual and/or psychological journey renders the protagonists traumatized, the act can have positive effects on them. During the revisiting, they can establish ties with their roots and develop their own sense of

identity. Moreover, they are able to confront their past and ultimately make sense out of their own lives.

Another point that could be made from these three African American novels is that the biological mothers who are unable to perform their maternal role for their children need help from surrogate mothers. Walker and Morrison agree on the importance of surrogate mothers to help the children deal with problems in their lives. In an interview with Paula Giddings, Walker points out, "I [Walker] don't think you can do anything without help. In order to see the back of your head you need a mirror to look into" (Piffer and Stusser 56). Like Walker, Morrison also underscores the importance of the surrogate mothers. In an interview with Marsha Darling, Morrison discusses how Sethe can cope with her problems and states clearly that Sethe needs some help from the women she regards as her surrogate mothers: "Sethe makes it, she tough, but some things are beyond endurance and you need some help. So she has some finally from the women and then from Paul D" (Taylor-Guthrie 250). These surrogate mothers have the admirable qualities that can help the daughters deal with the problems in their lives and develop their sense of self. Themselves victims of brutal treatments, the surrogate mothers are able to extend empathy and serve as a role model for their daughters. Another required quality is independence. They are presented as independent and adhere themselves to personal beliefs that do not belong to the white world. They encourage their daughters to liberate themselves from the confinement of conventional thoughts of the mainstream.

These three novels end with the family reunions and/or restoration of relationships between the protagonists and their male counterparts, calling attention to ties among family members. Apart from these gestures towards reconciliation, the works studied also emphasize the protagonists' abilities to accommodate their past,

present and future. They no longer try to forget or suppress their haunting experiences but they are able to confront, re-evaluate their past and accept it as a part of their lives. Only then can the protagonists embrace the present and can demonstrate their potential to move towards a better future.