

CHAPTER THREE
TROUBLESOME PAST AND UNRESOLVED
DESTINIES

The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual 'past', since our relation to it...is always-already 'after the break'. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. (Hall,Rutherford 226)

Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which...when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (Hall, Rutherford 225)

The aim of this chapter is to examine past trauma, memory, troublesome family relationships and often estrangement and despair in a number of Caribbean American novels by women. It will also try to see the problems of sexual conflict in their lives and how they come out as tortured souls, estranged from family and country.

Migration to a new land always leaves in the mind of the migrant a sense of homelessness and rootlessness. Together, these two elements create a deep feeling of social and cultural insecurity in them. Their desire to return or not return to the Caribbean, depends to some extent on their family ties and partly on their experience of discrimination in the U.S.A.

Pushing back into the recesses of memory facts and incidents from their past lives seem difficult to them. Some even are haunted by their gruesome pasts. Caribbean-American writers like Edwidge Danticat, Loida Maritza Perez, Michelle Cliff, Jamaica Kincaid etc. with enough lucidity explore such themes of traumatic cases. Most of their characters seem to suffer from the pangs of separation from their Caribbean homeland. In many novels, the characters carry haunting memories of their past in the Caribbean. Some troublesome and unforgettable incidents in the Caribbean force them to act in a schizophrenic way. A fractured psyche leads them to unhappiness and increased emotional and intellectual disturbance. Their inner turmoil becomes a burden that they cannot overcome, and as Goarzin suggests "the pain experienced by the subject is forcefully relocated into the subconscious" ("Articulating Trauma" 01). Their past is registered in their minds in such a way that they cannot rethink it or live with it peacefully. This has a lasting effect as it continues to trouble the Caribbean American till he /she finds some resolution through acceptance or deliberate excision.

This chapter moves from smaller or individual traumas to the notion of a collective trauma drawing in individuals and communities, as different levels and types of suffering and trauma are addressed. Sometimes different individuals are shown to be suffering from a similar experience. All the writers in this chapter examine the nature of women's suffering and show their traumatic aftereffects. Caruth and LaCapra's studies on trauma notwithstanding, the writers in this chapter show that there are other dimensions of injury and suffering. Racial profiling and discrimination even among other black people indicates for the Caribbean American a difference of status not based on colour or position. Rather, they are made to feel their outsider status because of their language and cultural difference through the more secure eyes of the 'sons of the soil.' Neglected in many spheres as women, black and inferior amongst the Whites and African Americans, the Caribbean Americans face many hardships throughout their lives.

Based on the above-stated facts the chapter tries to examine the predicament of the migrants along the following counters:

- Cultural and physical displacement following flight to a new place
- Problems of settlement and search for a community
- Partial acceptance and assimilation
- Overcoming Trauma and painful pasts

This chapter to make the above-mentioned contention clear takes the help of Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), Loida Maritza Perez's *Geographies of Home* (1999) and Esmeralda Santiago's *America's Dream* (1996).

It is seen that all the four novelists in their own way are trying to highlight the victim position of their characters in the Caribbean land and also in the United States. Though in some cases it is active victimization, in some others it is passive, where the character accepts or considers herself/himself to be a victim of the Caribbean or American society. The major characters—mostly women—are subjected to disdain and unpleasantness in their daily lives which in turn contributes to their sense of insecurity and alienation.

Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* narrates the life of Clare Savage and her family and their movement from Jamaica to the United States and from there, Clare's journey to England and then back to Jamaica. Here, Cliff tries to specifically focus on the life of the Savage family and the hardships they face in America. Be it Boy Savage, Clare's father or her mother, Kitty Savage or Clare herself, migration to a new country brings in a different set of problems pertaining to culture and space. A shift in the place of domicile does not help them to sort out the problems which triggered the move in the first place. Rather, Boy Savage has to take up a lowly job as truck driver for a laundry to support his family in America. Kitty Savage who had come to America under protest at her husband's insistence, has feelings of disquiet from the beginning. But Boy Savage was dominated by the urge to settle down in the United States with his family.

Claiming to be White (not biracial) with grandparents who had owned plantations, he tries to create a place for himself in New York but ends up as a laundry truck driver. Boy Savage tries convincing his family about their movement, and the need to "put the immediate past" behind them (*No Telephone* 54). For him it "was a new start in a new world. How could they not be thrilled by its prospect"? (ibid) Further, America was "[t]he greatest country in the world...since the Great Mother had turned socialist" (ibid). He assures his family that unlike the deaths and murders in Jamaica, they would live a peaceful and fearless life in America.

With very few prospects and innumerable problems from their arrival in New York, Boy Savage and his family of two daughters and a wife had to face tremendous mental and physical conflict within their own selves and with the new society. America was quite unwelcoming to them. Boy Savage grows different in temperament when he is refused entry into any inn in New York. He tries to bring in any link he could to prove himself White, in America:

Boy had no visible problem with declaring himself white. It was a practical matter, he told his wife. There was no one to say different...He told people he was descended from plantation owners—and this was true. Partly. With each fiction, his new self became more complete. His color fixed in those earlier centuries as if he had been birthed then. (62)

The more he tries “streamlining himself for America” the worse it gets for himself and his family (57). In the process of making himself American he distances himself from his wife who was totally against migration to America.

Kitty tries to argue that America has her own rules set for the Caribbean Blacks. She says that Americans “don’t understand Jamaicans....This not our country. Dem have dem own rules. The Black people here not from us. The white people here not from us” (61).

To Boy Savage, Kitty and Clare, home had different connotations and their ways of survival. To Boy Savage, America/New York can be converted to a home if they wished to accept their/ White way of life and accept colour-based subordination for life. He tries to make his daughters, Clare and Jennie feel at home in New York as he takes them on a tour of the city. They are taken “through the memorials and monuments,” as their father tries to educate “his daughters along the way” (60). He tries to assimilate with the rest of the Americans despite knowing the dark truth that the Whites do not accept coloured outsiders as far as possible.

Boy Savage accepts his job as laundry truck driver as mentioned above. For them, it was only the jobs at the laundry that was available. Being educated at colonial schools, Jesuit or otherwise did not seem to help them in any way in New York. Neither did their previous experience of selling Scotch whisky and registering names of tourists in the hotel log books help them. They were of no use in New York:

They were ill-equipped. There was also the problem of their accents. Even if their credentials were of the highest, their skin of the palest, their accents unsettled most employers. (74)

There was unwillingness on the part of the Whites to accept anything other than white. Each of the three characters in the novel plays an equally important role in their fight to assimilate with the Whites in America.

Kitty Savage, on the other hand was different from her husband. According to Kitty, her life was nobody’s business. Traumatized to the core of her heart from the day she left Jamaica, Kitty was unable to breathe in the American air. Under the directives of

her husband, she forced herself to mingle on American soil against her wishes. Along with Boy Savage, she too was given a job at the laundry office where Boy picks up nylon bags filled with dirty clothes and linen and delivers the carefully folded and tied laundry parcels and Kitty uses her office, as Mrs. White does the office work as a clerk.

Her discontent is so deep that she starts to act abnormally at her workplace without thinking of any danger it might lead to. Once “she drew a ballon from the upturned mouth of the benign lady and printed within: EVER TRY CLEANSING YOUR MIND OF HATRED? THINK OF IT” (78). No longer willing to put up with discrimination in America, Kitty voices her inner feelings through notes inserted in the clean laundry packets:

WE CAN CLEAN YOUR CLOTHES BUT NOT YOUR HEART. AMERICA IS CRUEL. CONSIDER KINDNESS FOR A CHANGE. (81)

Difficulties in assimilation with the White culture in America force her to do certain strange things. Her physical pain is reflected in her work at home and at her workplace. She desperately wanted to free herself from anything and everything White and American. With the cleaning of linen at her workplace, she was trying to change her hatred. She wanted to clean up her life in America.

The treatment people like her receive in America forces her to withdraw from anything American as she mulls over a possible return to Jamaica. What brings it to a head is her strange experience as she wanders through a graveyard in Brooklyn one day:

[S]he spied an ancient stone...marking the passage of Marcus...a man born in Jamaica, a slave to some family, who had been frozen to death crossing the water during the perilous winter in 1702. She passed her fingers over the letter cut into slate: FAITHFUL SERVANT. And she feared she would join him. (63)

Such markers in Brooklyn make her even more conscious of the hidden fears that might lead to her death or of her family amidst unfeeling White Americans. Kitty lived divided with her fears in America. Adjusting to the life there, was a misery to her. This strain became unbearable to Kitty with time and she could no longer hold herself back from her motherland, Jamaica. This sense of alienation and victimhood in America forces her to

return to Jamaica with Jennie, her younger daughter. Though Jamaica has people like Christopher who was unleashing terror and panic amongst the Jamaicans, Kitty feels it is the safest place to be, where she can be all herself. In America, “she was not at home with pretense” (75). She was forced to live life on other people’s terms including those imposed by her husband’s foolish attempts at assimilation. She feels that Jamaica is where she belongs, that her soul would find rest there.

Like Kitty, her elder daughter, Clare desires some sort of ‘restoration’:

There are many bits and pieces to her, for she is composed of fragments. In this journey, she hopes, is her restoration. She has travelled far. Courted escape. Stopped and started...She may interrupt her memory to concentrate on the instant, on the immediate and terrible need. (87)

Clare was unaware of her inner need to decipher or voice herself and was travelling and trying out different places and people to settle her mind. “She had escaped the island, nothing held her here” (88). She was travelling through Jamaica, New York, London and then again Jamaica, finally to rest. She finds answers to her life only at the end. Running after peace from place to place finally she overcomes her trauma only after she decides and arrives in Jamaica. To Paul, who was one of her acquaintances, “Jamaica was the world” (89). However, there was also the perception among others including Clare, that “it was one of the saddest pieces of the world” (ibid).

But Clare could only understand her nagging pain and her inability to work a way through it:

Clare thought not of these disintegrated people behind her, former members of a shattered little entity. She thought of her mother’s side, staunch to the island then, big fish in a little pod....Was their world about to come to an end?...No. Not according to them. (90)

If Clare has in mind the members of her family—her father married to an Italian- American in Brooklyn, and her sister Jennie who had become a drug addict in Bed- Stuy—she also thinks of the members of the privileged class in Jamaica who were losing their members through some incident/accident but were not willing to heed the warning signs. She is

aware of an undercurrent of unrest amongst sections of the black population and is strangely drawn to the struggle.

Above all, Clare has a deep urge to be one with her mother, to connect with her roots:

Not feeling much of anything, except a vague dread that she belongs nowhere. She fills her time. In schools, playgrounds, other people's beds. In pursuit of knowledge, grubs, and she thinks, life....She moves....The longing for tribe surfaces....She cannot shake it off. (91)

A mature Clare received or gained knowledge of this world in her own way. She went much ahead of colonial education by seeking her own historical understanding of her past. The fragments of knowledge or information she gathered were through searching for historiographical and archaeological elements or contexts:

"I have educated myself since my return. Spoken with the old people... leafed through the archives downtown...studied the conch knife" (193).

She has dug deep into the Jamaican life and their resistance to oppression. Considering her life, Clare has decided a different way to move back to her people. She was aware of imperialist hegemony and to counter or resist it, decides to acquire sufficient knowledge in Europe. Finally, she is ready to leave for her motherland although her arrival is crisis laden. She has to be hospitalized for infection in her womb and has to recover gradually. As her health improves, she is able to take stock of her situation and observe: "I'm not outside this history—it's a matter of recognition...memory...emotions" (194). Clare chooses her mother's land over America.

The very subject position of Clare is hybridized. Her personal and spiritual life brings her back to the place to which she actually belonged. And it is through that, the readers gain an insight into the situation of America and the Caribbean. Clare engages in a fight against dominant forces including patriarchy and commercialism to regain herself in Jamaica. By choosing a revolutionary path and depriving herself of all the things valued by a normal young woman in America, Clare Savage refuses to be constrained by American values and with pride accepts her Jamaican roots and identity.

Overcoming or enduring trauma is part of almost every migrant's experience. The

nature of trauma or suffering varies and the timeline of negotiating such events/memories is often prolonged. We see on one hand, how Kitty Savage returns to her homeland despite her inability to accept her husband's choice and stay in America. To her, self-fulfillment lies in being, an acclaimed Jamaican. With all its deprivations, Kitty wanted to be designated as one Jamaican and returned to Jamaica leaving her husband and Clare only to die there. New York despite being so different and rich from Jamaica could not suffice her with peace of mind. As Clare said, "My mother told me to help my people. At the moment this is the closest I can come" (196). Kitty tried to transfer this feeling of "motherland" to her daughter which she earned from her mother. She tries to develop in her daughter with this feeling for one's own motherland. As Clare said in one context of the novel, "My grandmother believed in using the land to feed people. My mother as well...communists, I guess (smile)" (189).

In Clare's case too, New York or England did not fulfill her thirst for life. She could overcome her lurking grief only by returning to Jamaica:

I returned to this island to mend...to bury...my mother...I returned to this island because there was nowhere else... I could live no longer in borrowed countries, on borrowed time. There is danger here—in sounding...seeming foolish. (193)

Her home and the history of her homeland are the only things to which she attaches herself. Overcoming the troubles—of their past or the problems of accommodation in New York—was possible to some extent in Jamaica. Clare acknowledges this as she mentions her growing to know the place with her mother:

I explored the country. First with my mother. She felt about this place...it was where she was alive, came alive, I think. She knew every bush...its danger and its cure. She should have stayed here. In America she was lost. (173)

She accepts much later that her mother could connect physically and spiritually with Jamaica. Kitty Savage's only way to live a life was possible in Jamaica. After travelling all over, Clare decides to emulate her mother's example of reconnecting with the land of her birth, Jamaica.

Clare accepts the need to change and decides not to conform to her father's

expectations of a “soft-spoken little sambo, creole, invisible neger, what have you, blending into the majority with ease” (152). She tries to reassess things in her mind: I do think my father is accountable...if we had not left she might well be alive...if he had listened to her fears...heeded her...we might have returned...to where we belonged. Home would not be something in my head. (153)

She began her life alone, keeping in mind what her mother said to her:

“I hope someday you make something of yourself, and someday help your people.”

A reminder, daughter—never forget who your people are. Your responsibilities lie beyond me, beyond yourself. There is a space between who you are and who you will become. Fill it. (103)

Clare here becomes a part of the collective trauma faced by the Jamaicans. Her return to her homeland and joining hands with the revolutionaries in Jamaica is her way of overcoming trauma.

In the shift from smaller and individual trauma to collective ones, Michelle Cliff speaks at large of all the migrants’ trauma which they faced at some point in their lives. Clare’s way of dealing with trauma was emblematic of one Cliff desired to see in the Caribbean. Clare was revolutionary, rejecting the boundaries imposed on her. Racism and sexism could not hold her back.

Detachment from the Caribbean traumatizes them and as such it's only the return that soothes their tormented soul. Recalling their past, even if it is dreary revives in them a spirit overwhelming. Post-subjectivity and its memory in the present awaken their original self to revolt against anything worse and thereby strengthen them. With time, Clare and her mother, Kitty understood the need to alternate oppression in Jamaica. By revisiting their motherhood both physically and psychologically, they are overcoming the trauma in their lives. Michelle Cliff by drawing such characters with fractured psyches is trying to build the stiffened and strong characters much needed to accomplish the undone in the Caribbean.

Even in the character of Christopher, known as De Watchman, Michelle Cliff tries to show another despairing soul. Christopher is a poor, homeless, lonely figure who loses

all control when he is not allowed space to bury his grandmother. His subsequent derangement may be seen as the tragic fallout of colonialism. He kills his employers brutally. What is presented as an individual case could be read as representative when Clare has forebodings about members of the landed class dying suddenly as if through stray accidents. It is obviously connected to the suppression of the poor and their turn to subaltern anger/activity. It may be seen as an attempt on the part of the peasants / downtrodden to crush the dominant 'oppressor' (Chaturvedi, *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, 91).

Harry/Harriet, the boy-girl's character is also one such as Clare. Michelle Cliff also uses here a transgender as a voice to shape Caribbean life. The child of a White father and a black maid raised in his father's house without any acknowledgement leads Harry/Harriet to raise his/her voice against the Whites and join hands with Clare. Harry/Harriet's character takes the novel to a different level of consciousness making it physical, emotional and political. It is Harriet who introduces Clare to the group of political activists whose abortive attempts to rewrite history has heavy fallout for a lot of them.

In the final section of the novel, Clare was seen distributing agricultural profits to the needy people of her community like her mother and grandmother did. She decides to live for her people. Clare's vision of life becomes clear when she thinks and decides:

She belongs in these hills... she knows this choice is irrevocable and she will never be the same. She is the woman who has reclaimed her grandmother's land. She is white. Black. Female. Lover. Beloved. Daughter. Traveler. Friend. Scholar. Terrorist. Former. She is not cool in the standoffish way. Not now. She has a coolness that she nurtures. How she became cool is her story. (91)

Her choice of settlement opens up to her possibilities in her original homeland. She is able to accept herself as a Caribbean black female and the multiple roles assigned to her by her people and the culture.

Marginalized in their minds, the characters gather the strength to deal with the imperialist mindsets and in their own possible ways try to preserve their culture and heritage. The absent presence of Clare's grandmother becomes a source of inspiration, power and wisdom here. This roots to which Kitty and Clare cling, bind all the Caribbeans

together and empowers them to foresee their future.

2

Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, her first novel, recounts the story of a girl named Sophie Caco in the first person narrative and her mother, Martine. The novel narrates the story of Sophie, a product of a violent rape in the cane fields of Haiti, experienced by her mother, Martine when the latter was sixteen. Both the mother-daughter duo suffers constantly as Martine continues to be traumatized by her past. They are unable to live in peace at New York and forget their past in Port-au-Prince. The story shifts between both places as it offers glimpses of life in America and the Caribbean. It also covers the experiences and memories of both Sophie and Martine as they struggle with the painful knowledge of Martine's trauma and Sophie's unwarranted entry into the world.

Danticat frames these two Caribbean American women in the light of despair and gloom which pervades till the end of their lives. Their inability to cope with their past makes them fragile and prone to fits of insanity which only hampers them all the more. Their sexuality and individual identity framing, affect them to the core. Mapping the graph of their lives only leads to further pain. Martine's character is disturbed throughout. If she is not suffering nightmares, she insists on testing Sophie's virginity everyday which is never free of pain and trauma. To Sophie, the virginity test that her mother made her undergo too tortures her soul. She says that "The testing and the rape. I live both every day" (*Breath, Eyes* 173). This is something Martine herself had suffered at one time but instead of convincing her about its ill effects, it becomes a form of intimidation between her and her daughter. The visual imagery of the rape experience remains at the bottom of the trauma shared by both Martine and Sophie. The incident stays with them through their memory disturbing every moment of their life. Seeing her mother shrieking in pain and fear every night, Sophie too internalizes this pain.

The way, both the mother-daughter fight with their past memories, with Martine's increasingly insane behaviour taking toll of the daughter, shows that life was not easy for them together as well as individually. They can feel at home neither in Haiti nor in New York. A mere shift in geographical boundaries does not help them. They needed to create an elsewhere where they can define themselves, but to no avail. Martine's past continues to rear itself and affect her present adversely. It appears that Martine is caught in a bind as

far as the past is concerned, and cannot move forward on a positive note.

Sophie, who was taken care of by her aunt until she was twelve years old when she was in Haiti decides to stay with her mother in New York and again returns to Haiti leaving her husband and mother only to heal herself. In Haiti, Sophie confronts herself with the flashback and imagines her mother's rape and her violator. Here, this violator/father can only have a far-stretched connection with that of a perpetrator of colonizer or patriarchal violence. The novel in a larger context helps connect her children with her motherland/homeland.

The alternative homes (Haiti and New York) serve in the context of the novel both as a relaxing element and also as a torturer. Danticat deliberately mixes pain and happiness in both places but it affects the mother-daughter more wherever they go. In the case of Martine, who was raped in Haiti, her attempt to run away from the memory of that violent past brings her to New York to begin a new life. But New York could not provide the healing she was hoping for: she has to face the past throughout her stay there in the form of fearful dreams. Later getting pregnant by her fiancé she commits suicide in New York. Sophie spent her early childhood in Haiti with her aunt, without her mother. But once in New York, she partakes in the pain of her mother and after her marriage, leaves New York for Haiti. Later when Martine sought her daughter near her, they both came back to New York only to have Martine giving in to the trauma and committing suicide. As such change of place failed to obliterate her deep memory of rape and the repercussions thereafter. The past and the present coincide and an entirely different level of trauma is experienced.

Physical distance could not help the psychological burden in their minds. Though both try in their own way to envisage a new way of life, it again takes them back to the position from which they wanted to break free. Living either in Haiti or America had been difficult for both the mother-daughter. Where Haiti is filled with dreadful images of rape and colonialism, America too had its ways of subduing the Blacks. This is where Martine always wants her daughter to take her place. Martine tries to instill confidence in Sophie to stay in New York amidst the Whites.

She insists that Sophie works hard, and makes something of her life:

“[N]o one is going to break your heart because you cannot read or write. You have a chance to become the kind of woman Atie and I have always wanted to be. If you make something of yourself in life, we will all succeed. You can raise our head” (41)

Because of her mental and physical problems throughout her life, Martine wanted Sophie to create a place for herself in America and to not forget that the Americans treated their people like animals in the twenties and made them work like slaves. She tells Sophie of her rape:

“The details are too much,” she said. “But it happened like this. A man grabbed me from the side of the road, pulled me into a cane field, and put you in my body.” (59)

On hearing this, Sophie “did not press to find out more. Part of me did not understand. Most of me did not want to” (ibid). Martine did not know this man. To her, it is Sophie who is a living picture of it:

“I never saw his face. He had it covered when he did this to me. But now when I look at your face I think it is true what they say. A child out of wedlock always looks like its father.” (ibid)

Immeasurable fear envelopes especially Martine who shrieks every night, in her dream and thrashes against the sheets, as if someone is trying to kill her and she wants to free herself. Martine even hesitates to go for the final funeral arrangements of her mother who was her guiding spirit.

Though it sounds strange for even herself, she only wants to stay in Haiti for not more than three or four days. She says, “There are ghosts there that I can’t face, things that are still very painful for me” (76). Martine informs Sophie that she tried beating her stomach to kill the child when she was pregnant with her and drank all kinds of herbs, quinine, and verbena, baby poisons without any success. This gruesome past of Martine disturbs the presence of both Martine and Sophie. Unable to cope with their lives either in Haiti or New York, this mother-daughter duo falls apart mentally, with Martine giving in to her tragic fears.

Sophie too had to deal with her mother's trauma apart from trying to accommodate herself in the American system. She stays beside her mother whenever she is home and waits for her to have a nightmare. But on finding Sophie beside her after she is thrashed out of the nightmare, Martine is all the more frightened. Though nowhere in the novel, does Martine hate or ill-treat Sophie, Sophie's presence revives her feelings about her past. Describing her mother's pain, Sophie says:

My father...was a stranger who, when my mother was eighteen years old, grabbed her on her way back from school. He dragged her into the cane fields, and pinned her down on the ground. He had a black bandanna over his face so she never saw anything but his hair...When he was done, he made her keep her face in the dirt, threatening to shoot her if she looked up.... (138)

Danticat makes a daughter describe the rape of her mother, and of which she was herself was the product. The intensity, pain, fear, as Sophie relives her mother's trauma is reflected in her voice as she narrates it. The depth of pain and courage to bear this truth makes Sophie a character who later tries to carry on the heritage of resilience left by her grandmother in the Caribbean.

The effect of this rape had been with Martine throughout her life causing her sleep disorders and an unforgettable pain and anguish:

For months she was afraid that he would creep out of the night and kill her in her sleep. She was terrified that he would come and tear out the child growing inside her. At night, she tore her sheets and bit off pieces of her own flesh when she had nightmares. (ibid)

That Martine could not erase the memory of the rape from her mind, contributes to her sleep disorders all her life. Even after Sophie's birth she lived with the memory of the rape. It remained with her till her last days. Sleeplessness and scary nightmares became her lifelong companion. However she tries to run away from it, it deepens all the more. Martine even dreaded seeing a psychiatrist thinking his treatment would bring her closer to her past reality. Often, at night she relives her rape as a young teenager which colours the rest of her life with fear, restlessness and immeasurable pain. It appears that Martine had become fixated on her trauma and allowed it to take hold of her imagination, feeding

into her body as well.

That apart, Martine acts as a connecting force between New York and Haiti. Sophie tries all possible ways to reclaim her mother and restore her inner peace. She returns to Haiti only for the purpose of healing from the trauma. The mother-daughter duo plays a crucial role in the novel thereby making and creating new definitions of home and motherland. The variations of the place seem jumbled up in the context of the experiences faced by Martine. For Martine, her erstwhile home no longer promises shelter although she is not averse to her daughter going there to her relatives. She looks upon New York as her home though it cannot free her of the demons she carries. For Sophie on the other hand, a return to her mother's land is a form of healing which comes after subsequent visits.

Even after her marriage to Joseph, Sophie cannot undo from her mind the pain and absence of her mother. As if, it is more than Joseph that she wanted to be beside her mother to nurse her and be by her side to always protect her from her nightmares:

“After Joseph and I got married, all through the first year I had suicidal thoughts. Some nights I woke up in a cold sweat wondering if my mother's anxiety was somehow hereditary or if it was something that I had “caught” from living with her.” (196)

Sophie cannot live apart from her mother and internalizes her mother's pain to the extent that they start haunting her sleep:

Her nightmares had somehow become my own, so much so that I would wake up some mornings wondering if we hadn't both spent the night dreaming about the same thing: a man with no face, pounding a life into a helpless young girl. (ibid)

Sophie has inherited her mother's pain, the nightmares, disturbed sleep etc. She has so much internalized it that Sophie felt like living it somewhere in her life. The cries, tearing apart, sweating, curling like a ball, shocks, and pain of rape enveloped Sophie. The living presence of the rape and its continuation in the form of nightmares have not only killed Martine every day, but also Sophie.

On the other hand, even after entering into a proper time-tested relationship with Marc, her fiancé, Martine is again catapulted into her past by the knowledge of her new

pregnancy. She again relives in mind and body, her adolescent rape and decides to terminate her 'unwanted' child in a gruesome way ending everything. It appears that Martine is consumed by the distant past because she is not able to move on. She allows herself to be obsessed with some things to the exclusion of others. Her bonding with a man to the extent of sustaining a relationship for four years, appears strange in the light of her overwhelming memories of her teenage rape. That she looks forward to marriage only to balk at a pregnancy, is indicative of the contradictions in her makeup. As a victim of abusive and intrusive parental disciplinary procedures, Martine would be expected to spare her own daughter such pain but she does exactly what her mother did. Her rape deepens that trauma and continues to tear her apart through nightmares and acts of violence which finally consume her as she kills herself and the child in her womb by stabbing herself seventeen times.

Sophie too carries some of this pain. She never wants her daughter to face those dreadful parts of life, sleeping with the ghost of the rapist or having scary nightmares. The hardest part for Sophie was accepting her husband. She had to undergo the ritual of imagining her mother being raped by the rapist (her father) to accept the relationship with her husband. By imagining the pain that her mother underwent, Sophie tries to make herself strong to feel like her mother and share her grief. Imagining the pain would help her not only to share but heal her mother's suffering.

Sophie wants to cleanse this rape from her mind. The act which has been with her through her mother since her birth takes its toll on both. Since her mother is the direct victim of the rape and can never erase that from her mind, Sophie for herself wants to clear that thought from her mind. She goes back to the place in Haiti, to the exact (probably, yes) cane fields as the grandmother narrated and explained to her. She visits the site of past trauma to come to some kind of acceptance of that gross reality as well as a sense of closure:

There were only a few men working in the cane fields. I ran through the field, attacking the cane. I took off my shoes and began to beat a cane stalk. I pounded it until it began to lean over. I pushed over the cane stalk. It snapped back, striking my shoulder. I pulled at it, yanking it from the ground. My palm was bleeding. (238)

A ritualistic going back and if only she could in bits clear or minimize the lingering pain

of her mother, Sophie would have been satisfied. Sophie yearns to lessen the pain of the mother, but to avail, it was not in her hands. Erasing anything of the past was impossible which has left a deep scar in her mother's mind and also hers.

Danticat, in an interview appended to the text by the publisher, mentions the case of Sophie's mother who inflicts on her the daily trauma of a virginity test:

Trauma victims often report feeling like they want to leave or that they leave their bodies while awful things are happening to them. Sophie feels like she not only leaves her body but that she takes her body elsewhere, which is why she sometimes has trouble remembering some things. That's what doubling is for her. (270)

This is one way of negotiating trauma by compartmentalizing it or by pushing it deep into the recesses of memory. Remembering is painful which is why African Americans as well as Caribbeans often try to look beyond their community's memories of the extreme experiences of slavery. Sophie's mother cannot forget her trauma completely and instead of allowing her to be resilient it pushes her into a level of obsessive behavior which takes the shape of a control mechanism on her daughter. This explains the behavior of Martine whose cruelty towards Sophie takes a tragic turn when she kills the child she herself was carrying in her womb (as a consequence of a steady relationship of several years).

Sophie on her visit to her grandmother's place arrives at a different meaning of life. Their grandmother tells them stories about some of the experiences the community, especially the women, had gone through in the past during colonial control. Her stories cannot be ignored as they are her version of their oral history being passed on to the following generations. She knew that like their story many continue and are left unsaid.

3

Loida Maritza Perez's *Geographies of Home* deals with a couple and their large family of fourteen children who migrated from the Dominican Republic to New York to escape Trujillo's cruel rule. The parents, Aurelia and Papito migrate to America to provide their children with a better life, but varied untoward experiences in America make things complicated and difficult for the family. Their expectations are left unfulfilled as no

amount of labour could lift them above the poverty level. Characters like Aurelia, Papito, Iliana, Marina, Rebecca feature prominently in the narrative. Perez portrays the traumatized family living in poverty and having to negotiate fresh traumas in America. Their life in New York has been one of hardship which has not allowed them to settle down. While some of the married children stay separately, others like Rebecca have to often seek shelter from her abusive husband in her parents' home.

Iliana leaves college to find her family shattered in all imaginable ways. She had to struggle to convince her parents that education would help her to rise above poverty. She faces racism in college but learns to live with it. Returning home Iliana finds the family in a state of chaos. Members were fighting madness, sickness, violence and crime. While the father manages to buy an old house for themselves which is better than the apartments they had lived in, the conflict and hardship in the family makes things difficult for all of them. The parents realize that their efforts or the strength of their faith do not bring in any improvement in their situation.

Marina, a rape victim who is mentally disturbed, sets the kitchen on fire, apart from assaults on her siblings. Rebecca, the eldest, who was rejected and brutalized by Pasion, her husband, does not take care of her children and even rejects her parent's help. Beatrice, another daughter has suddenly disappeared. One son sleeps with his brother's wife. Vicente has dropped graduate school and was left by his wife; Taco very rarely leaves his room. Iliana herself was dominated by her father and her uneven and unattractive looks are often noted in the family. All these, add to the turmoil the family faces amidst the background of racism and discrimination in Brooklyn. The prolonged troubles adversely affect the health of both the parents whose best efforts are never enough to improve their living conditions.

Aurelia's concern over her children in the alienated land leads to her physical deterioration. However, she is determined to pull through to look after those children who need her care:

Terrified to step outside and claustrophobic in the three-room apartment shared with Papito and their children, she had deteriorated to a skeletal eighty-one pounds.
(*Geographies* 24)

Despite their efforts to fit in, the clash of cultures and the logistic problems of income and space, ensure that the members have to put up with a lot of physical and at times psychological pressure. Aurelia “yearned not for a geographical site but for a frame of mind able to accommodate any place as home” (137). Aurelia is shocked that:

[O]ne of their children would try to burn it down. Not when it had kept them from the streets. Not when it was the only house in their adopted country which they had been able to call their own. (21)

She was hoping that it would be home for all of them, a place of shelter but also a place to bond— “to feel secure in the knowledge that never again would they be cramped into a three-room apartment like their first or be evicted as they had from their last” (ibid). Instead, their best efforts cannot produce a home which would be a safe harbour for every member. Although the parents hoped to return to the Dominican Republic, they never did that because they wanted to stay beside their children. They also knew that despite wanting to assimilate there would always be resistance from the Whites in America.

The meaning of home is totally unstable having to accommodate multiple disorders within it. It becomes a site of conflict as the various members battle their problems of gender, class, culture and race. The family faced alienation amongst its members and also from the rest of society. The parents seek shelter in their religion whereas the children who do not share their faith to that degree are left to flounder amongst the troubles that shadow them. Though in the novel Iliana never returns at any point to her ancestral land, the Dominican Republic, it is through her mother’s memory and telepathy she can connect with it. Aurelia keeps alive her memory of the land through Iliana thereby making the connection strong and passing on her feelings of what a home is.

The notion of their home and comfort was shattered in two ways when Marina set fire to the kitchen, in an attempt at suicide or large-scale destruction. Whatever it was, it meant the failure of the parents either way. In one sense, they were unable to lessen her grief from the rape and the fire was one of the attempts to kill herself. Her effort to burn the house would mean shattering the dreams of Aurelia and Papito as they had to watch their daughter going through different stages of insanity. Aurelia’s motherly concern for her children weighs heavy on her health. She is terrified to think of any adverse situation her children might have to encounter. Aurelia loses her zeal for life and blames herself

for leading her children in such a situation in America.

Aurelia's musings over her homeland grow strong when she is at a loss in America. She blames herself for the difference she brought into the lives of her children. Aurelia remembers her past quite often and recalls events, scents, flavours, textures etc. with detail:

As she delved into the past she was conscious of something missing in the present—something her mother...passed along to her but which she had misplaced and failed to pass on to her own children...And she was determined to discover what had caused the loss and to figure out how she had brought herself to the present moment. (23)

Aurelia considers it a failure on her part on being not able to pass on her knowledge that she received from her mother to her children. She was not able to bind her children with the common thread of being Caribbean. She blames herself and her husband for bringing their children to America, who now no longer want to go back to the Dominican Republic and consider it poor and inferior. Aurelia fights her way from her deathbed to stand beside her children in a country that she does not trust or understand.

Recalling her past in the Dominican Republic only strengthened and energized her which she could not feel while in America:

It wasn't that she romanticized the past or believed that things had been better long ago. She had been poor even in the Dominican Republic, but something had flourished from within which had enabled her to greet each day rather than cringe from it in dread.... (ibid)

The Dominican Republic was not all perfect for them, yet memories of it offered solace to them from the troubles and sense of alienation in America.

Rebecca, the eldest daughter is caught with three small children in an abusive marriage. She had thought that America could fulfill all their dreams. But to her utter dismay, she realizes on her arrival the dark reality of survival in America. The only advantage was that they were away from riots and military raids, but still, there was the fear of deportation. Whatever it was, Rebecca could fend for the needs of her children. After migrating to America she worked and saved enough money to send to her parents

and siblings and even succeeded in gaining green cards for everyone else. But after marriage, this same Rebecca was shattered. Though all of her children from Pasion are American-born, after leaving him she stayed with her parents. She was even beaten terribly during her stay with Pasion. Rebecca's adamancy amidst adversity appeared inexcusable to Iliana who did not expect to see her sister in such distress.

Rebecca as a girl in the Dominican Republic always took it for granted that her future would unfold as effortlessly and satisfyingly as it often had in dreams. She was raised by her grandmother from the age of two to eight and so always resented her parents' presence. All these led her to crave any isolated path, be it failure or success. But Rebecca had also worked hard to send money back home to enable her parents and some of the siblings to make their way to the United States. While she worked, she had been able to address her needs. Her marriage to a man foolishly pursuing the agrarian dream in a cooped space in New York along with his inability to provide for their bare needs once the children are born or even before that, adds to the misery. The husband, Pasion, would not allow his wife to work and chooses to hold on to his vanity while the family lives a life of squalor. When Iliana meets her sister, she is going through such a phase but is caught in a cell of her own making, refusing to accept anybody's constructive advice.

Rebecca bristles when her family offers advice or help. She is caught up with what she had done in the past and at the same time is incapable of handling the present:

They thought she was irresponsible, indifferent to her own fate and that of her children. Having forgotten the past, they compared themselves to her and came up better. But her own memory was longer. Had it not been for her, they would have still been picking mangoes to keep from starving. (71)

While that happens to be true, and Rebecca had done a lot for her parents and siblings, she appears to be completely out of depth in her care of her children and even herself. She feels that everybody is against her and tells her mother and Iliana, "If either of you tries to take my children, I'll follow you wherever you go and I'll kill you!" (ibid) Rebecca is caught in a bind both physical and psychological. She is overwhelmed by the lack of resources to take care of her children and herself and seems incapable of demanding better care from her abusive husband. From the conversation between other family members, we learn that before her marriage she was in another troublesome relationship with another

abusive partner. This shows that Rebecca despite being at one time, an able woman capable of providing for other family members has been reduced to an unkempt and careless individual, negligent as far as her children are concerned and fuelled by anger and misguided prejudice. It is not for nothing that her sisters think that there is something seriously wrong with her mind, allowing her to wallow in a sense of victimhood.

Iliana realizes the problem and tells her mother: “Mami, she has given up on herself...I saw her face. I watched her as she spoke” (72). Aurelia tries to rebuff her suggestion. However, Iliana persists even when she knows that her parent fails to understand:

It was almost as if she enjoyed talking about how Pasi3n beats her. As if—As if she grew stronger the more her descriptions caused you pain...I know it sounds crazy...but I saw it. That’s why I got so angry. And it’s not like I don’t care...But there’s nothing we can do. Not until she’s willing to help herself. (73)

Despite her mother’s biting question, “Did you read that in a textbook?” Iliana knows that her sister urgently needs professional help:

What Rebecca needed, Iliana decided then and there, was psychiatric help. Not because she allowed Pasi3n to beat her, but because he was not the only one who had. (ibid)

Her mother’s attitude makes Iliana feel guilty about her assessment of Rebecca’s problems although she is reminded of the generation gap and her parents’ old-fashioned approach to life. As she recalls, her mother had insisted on somebody escorting her daughters on dates with their boyfriends or suitors. Apart from the different cultural values, it is the rigid control mechanism that appears out of sorts in America.

Back home Iliana was shocked to see its deteriorating status. Every member was in some way or the other affected and Iliana was unable to sort out any. She rather yearns for her home back in the Dominican Republic. It was also from her mother’s imaginings that now she can feel solace which “transported her to the Dominican Republic where summer days were eternal, clouds evaporated in the scorching heat, and palm trees arched along beaches of fiery sand” (04). While she was away she always tried to connect the

Caribbean sun with their house in Brooklyn. But to her awe, on her return, she could not believe what she saw. A house, which she imagines being happy and satisfactory, now only looked dreadful, cluttered with both, people and things. Even the lamps and couches were still covered in plastics to retain their newness.

Iliana recalls the days of their struggle for food and the basics when she and the younger siblings had queued up in food lines to collect food packets and had often gone to bed hungry. They had “waited on line for the free meals distributed by the city...then hurried into other neighbourhoods to stand on other lines...until they had collected enough to feed their entire family” (70). She also recalls “the unheated apartment where she had slept weighted by blankets beside her sisters and had nonetheless felt the relentless cold seep into her bones” (ibid). While away from home, Iliana had forgotten some of their early struggle in New York. Seeing Rebecca’s pathetic condition, she is angry with the fact that her sister had allowed a man to force such degradation upon her and their children without doing anything about it. Hunger and struggle to live a decent life becomes a part of their survival in America. Apart from food, the other basic necessities of life were also in short supply for them in America.

Compared to the other members of the family, Iliana was the one who wanted to secure her position in America. She recalls incidents when she felt insecure as a teenager and it is then she decided to pursue education whereas her family thought that was the right age for her to get married and have a husband to provide for her needs. But Iliana was adamant enough to fight for herself and decides to leave the house. Though in the end with Vicente’s help, she convinced her parents and made them believe that it was rather worthy in America to educate oneself than to marry. Iliana was also troubled by the unheard stories of her parents’ lives and their continuous struggle to make things better. She could very well read from their eyes the burden of their lives and she wants to fight that.

Iliana was different from her other siblings. She left home with a broader prospect in mind. She dreamt of a bigger house, a personal space in the house with a bed of her own, clothes not handed down by her elders, more food to keep themselves happy. She understood the pain of their father and prayed he gets some rest and they be employed in the factory. But very soon, she understood that that would not suffice for them and it is then she resorted to making the best of herself by making school her escape and education her only tool. Yet throughout, Iliana had in her mind her parents and her siblings and she

never expected that she would face such dire conditions of her family once she comes back.

In college, Iliana has to face challenges of racism and gender which surprises her. At home some of her siblings comment on her looks and she believes that she is not attractive to boys. In college her only male friend Ed, is gay. However, she is mistaken as a drag queen as she walks along the pavement and that shocks her and disturbs her sense of self. Apart from her dark skin and Latina appearance, she does not think much about her looks. The rude and unwarranted taunt by the boys makes her aware that surface packaging is important and one cannot avoid the peculiarities of the male gaze laced with racism. Iliana is strong enough to weather such prejudice as she focuses on her studies. What the novelist, Perez, tries to show is the multiple layers to every person or idea or thing. If the concept of home is fluid and full of uncertainty, individuals can also be islands within a home and battle levels of complexity within themselves. This is true of their home despite the mother's efforts to hold it and them together.

Aurelia proves to be one who binds the family with her strength. She regrets leaving very many things from her own mother, but for the children, she can cross boundaries. Living a life filled with distress and disdain she had a tough journey in America nurturing fourteen children. Traversing from apartment to apartment for almost fifteen years until they bought the house which she calls home:

[S]he had dreamed, not of returning, but of going home. Of going home to a place not located on any map but preventing her from settling in any other. Only now did she understand that her soul had yearned not for a geographical site but for a frame of mind able to accommodate any place as home. (137)

Portrayed as a strong character, Aurelia is one such mother figure who was ready to accommodate even the grief of her worn-out daughter Marina who had tried to end her life many times. She considers herself responsible for Marina's fate and yet remains hopeful for a bright future for her. She has also no regrets towards Papito and entirely considers herself responsible for anything that happens in the family.

After a certain point in time, Papito wanted to leave his job, rent his house and go back to the Dominican Republic, even Aurelia fancied the same thing and they planned

to buy a piece of land, building a house on it having even guest rooms for their married daughters etc. But somewhere Aurelia knew that neither Marina nor Tico would agree to that and they cannot live apart from their children. Aurelia and Papito always had a plan to go back to the Dominican Republic once their children grow up and can lead their own life. Their coming to the United States was not for any personal choice but only for the better opportunities that they can provide to their children.

Aurelia's family to her was her strength. Surrounded by all her family members she feels strengthened to survive in the challenging American atmosphere:

Euphoric with these new found powers and surrounded by her many children and their offspring, she felt like a tree who had grown roots deep into the earth and could not be easily felled. This feeling of invincibility permeated her entire being, lending her a self-assurance she had previously not possessed and persuading her that she could from then on avert misfortune and keep her children safe. (265)

She emerges as a strong mother figure standing tall against all the problems America had to offer. She became resilient enough to 'persevere against all odds' (300). Aurelia said to her children, "It's true your mother went back," she admitted, valiantly rising above her own despair. "But this time will be different. This time she'll be changed when she returns..." (ibid). From despair, she rises into one who can travel the courses of American life and take her generation forward.

Enveloped with several familial ties, both multifaceted and problematic, *Geographies of Home* evolves from individual trauma to collective. The characters' fight on their personal level finally helps them develop as individuals of distinctness. Every character in their own way, be it Aurelia, Rebecca, Marina, Iliana or any other is different from the other and each had a different way of dealing with their individual traumas.

Esmeralda Santiago's *America's Dream* deals with the struggle of the title character America flanked by her mother and her rebellious fourteen year old daughter. It begins in a small island of Puerto Rico where these three women fight their demons. America works as a maid cum cleaner in the island's only tourist hotel to support her mother and daughter. Her mother Ester works in that same place two days a week and has a relationship with the hotel owner, the aging Don Irving. The second part of the novel deals with America's life

in New York as she tries to settle into her job as a housekeeper cum child minder, away from her abusive partner.

America becomes an unmarried mother at fifteen and since then she has been in an abusive relationship with her child's father, Correa. He provides some things for them and enjoys the benefits of a relationship without taking full responsibility and marrying her. America has allowed herself to be bullied, beaten and abused by her partner because she knows no better. Her partner has a wife and children on another island but he keeps America on a leash, not even allowing her to look at any man. In fact, he beats her on every available occasion out of anger, imagined jealousy and sense of superiority. America is twenty-nine years old when the novel opens and has to face the shock of her fourteen-year-old daughter's elopement with one of her classmates. To the outside world she presents a picture of a bright cheerful woman, making sure that she does not allow anyone to talk about herself. In the writer's words:

América is not like other women. She's not willing to talk about her life, to commiserate with other women about how tough it is. She goes around humming and singing like she's the happiest person in the world, even though everyone knows different. (*America's* 10).

The battering she receives leaves bruises and scars all over her body but when asked by well-meaning neighbours and friends, she tells them that she fell down the stairs or something to that effect. America's behaviour, guarding her privacy and not sharing her predicament with either family or friends is not uncommon among Caribbean/Latina migrants where patriarchy prevails. Women prefer to submit to male violence rather than fight it. For more than fourteen years, she has been putting up with Correa's violence and jealousy because she is afraid to even think of other options. Finally, with a lot of persuasion from her mother and her employers, she decides to take up the job in New York.

After her daughter's elopement, America is devastated that her hard work in order to ensure a better future for daughter has come to nothing:

She's exhausted. It's an exhaustion she feels at times like this, when the whole world seems to have collapsed beneath her feet, leaving her at the bottom of a hole with sides so steep she can't climb out. It's the exhaustion of having attempted and

failed so many times to crawl out. (13)

While she did not pursue her studies after the birth of her child, she was hoping her daughter, Rosalinda, would learn from her mistake and complete her school education at least. Instead she seems to have recklessly decided to take control of her own life by running away from the island. While Correa manages to find her and bring her back to her mother and grandmother, Rosalinda refuses to talk about her actions and rudely rebuffs any attempt at communication by her mother.

It is then that Ester, America's mother, suggests that they should consider sending Rosalinda to New York to stay with her sister Paulina who had made her home there after her marriage. Paulina and her family visited them periodically and sent them gifts on occasions. To America's reply that Rosalinda's father would never let her go, Ester tells her that he need not know. America's response, "Mami, he's her father. I can't send her away without telling him" is the best she can come up with (72). When Ester suggests that America could accompany her daughter to New York and take up similar work there, indicating that she break away from her life of abuse, America rears up in anger:

She stands up close to her mother, anger replacing fear. "My life is none of your business," she hisses, "and I wish you'd stay out of it." (73)

America can only repeat the same thing: "It's my life, stay out of it" (ibid). She can only direct her impotent anger at her mother, since she recognizes her weakness in the face of her mother's genuine concern. What she projects as self-sufficiency is a timid cowering before a male bully. Since, this is the treatment she has been putting up with for more than fourteen years, her mind appears incapable of thinking up some way to combat the violence coming her way. She allows her fear of Correa's violence to turn her mind to tame submission. She admits that her life is not really her own: "Correa rules every action I take, whether he's around or not" (ibid). Accepting advice from others, even her mother, makes it clear that she has not been able to handle the situation. America's position is a common case of victimhood with the victim unwilling to leave an abusive relationship.

America's relationship with her daughter is even less successful. Her daughter, on return, appears to have grown up and wants to keep to herself and not communicate with anybody. However much she tries to reach out to her daughter, the latter shuts her

out. When Rosalinda speaks to her father about going over to another island to stay with his aunt, America feels let down by everybody around her. For once, Correa understands his daughter's wish to make a new beginning and takes her to his aunt's place. In the meantime, as she prepares a meal for Correa, America thinks of various ways to poison him:

She wonders, as she rinses the rice, what would happen if she put rat poison in it....She wonders if any of Ester's herbs and spices are poisonous. But she imagines if they were, Ester would have used them on Correa by now. How many times, she asks herself...would I have to stab him before he bleeds to death? (97)

Although she does not do any of these things, as she serves Correa a normal meal which he enjoys, America continues to mull over the idea of killing him, "imagining the bloody mess and how hard it would be to clean up:

Maybe while he's sleeping I can bash his head in with a bat. Or I can set the bed on fire. I can set the whole room on fire, and he would suffocate in that windowless room....The thought of Correa gasping for air, his body in flames, sends shivers up and down her spine. (98)

She continues to run through the options:

I could push him off the Esperanza dock, she thinks. I could lace his coffee with sleeping pills. I could fix the brakes on his jeep. (ibid)

All these thoughts indicate that America was at least looking to be free of Correa's dominance. Although incapable of decisive action, negative or positive, she at least thinks of getting rid of him to achieve her freedom. She knows that she cannot handle him alive, his unhinged violence terrifies her. In her imagination at least, she looks to a life beyond Correa.

She admits to dreaming about a loving family with children, but Correa would not allow her to be anything other than his woman:

She shakes her head, chides herself for having such old-fashioned dreams....But I never wanted that, she argues with herself. All I ever wanted was a home and a

family, with a mother and a father and children. (113)

She accepts that through her adolescent indiscretion—eloping with Correa—she fell: “I fell and let Correa keep me down....I let him. I let him because he’s a man. No other reason” (119). America realizes that years of accepting the male order as the right order has trapped her within the patriarchal structure, controlled in her case by a violent man.

While that sums up her life on the island, in New York, where she starts working for a family she met on the island, America feels strangely liberated:

She chides herself for forgetting that her life now is the same life she brought with her. But it’s different, she argues with herself, it’s different. For the firsttime I can remember I’m in control. I couldn’t say that two weeks ago. (188)

Her aunt tells as much when she visits her in Brooklyn:

“You are in a situation...forgive me, I don’t want to offend, but...you’ve let your situation drag on much longer than it should have. It was about time you did something about it.” (202)

Despite her reservations about other people discussing her problems, America has to accept her aunt’s matter of fact attitude. In fact, all her relatives in New York, her uncle and cousins turn out to be warm and friendly people as they reach out to embrace her as one of them.

America’s work for the Levett’s allows her to meet other migrant working women when she takes the children to the park. She meets women from Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, from El Salvador, from Paraguay, currently working as child minders. They had all served in better positions in their own countries but were forced to come to the U.S.A. as undocumented migrants. Compared to them, America feels fortunate when they learn of her Puerto Rican origins and suggest that as a U.S. citizen, she could look for better things. Unlike her, their position as illegal migrants remained fraught with danger, uncertainty and trauma. Adela realizes that what she had taken for granted was something to be treasured:

“No, I’m Puerto Rican, but I’m a citizen. It means we don’t need permission to live

and work here.” Adela doesn’t understand the distinction, and until Adela started asking her questions about her legal status, América hadn’t given it much thought. “So your social is real?” “Yes, I got it when I was born.” (224)

America learns that her legal social security card is as valuable as the green card that people seek. Her exchanges with these women acquaint her with the trauma of their lives: “All of them have left behind children to come to the United States, where they care for other people’s children” (227). Some of them had not seen their children for several years and were saving money to smuggle them into the country across the border.

Exposure to racism at times, reminds America and her companions of their positions. An incident at the park when one of them tries to attend to a child who had fallen down makes them conscious of their difference in colour. The child’s mother reacts sharply and though some of them try to dismiss it as a mother’s concern over possible fractures in her child, “They fall silent again, thinking about the same thing. The woman panicked not at her daughter’s fall but at the sight of a darkskinned stranger bending over her....They saw the mistrust in the woman’s eyes, the resentment, the “why don’t you go back where you came from look.” (ibid). This minor incident draws attention to the plight of the migrants and the hostility they face in their everyday lives in the U.S.A.:

It’s a look that follows the empleadas everywhere they go. In stores clerks hover over them, expecting them to steal whatever they touch. On buses and trains people won’t sit next to them, as if sharing a seat were too intimate an association. On the street, people avoid looking at them, as if not seeing them will make them disappear. (ibid)

As they reflect on their situation, Mercedes who had been at the receiving end sums up the situation: “It’s like they need us...but they don’t want us” (ibid). The spectre of racism binds them together, as America herself had experienced that levelling look from strangers in the past.

America finds herself comparing this incident with the visitors to her island. They could not banish the islanders because they themselves were visitors:

She felt like part of the tropical landscape they came to experience, something to

be stared at with curiosity and forgotten the moment they returned home. But here, she says to herself, they can't forget us. We're everywhere, and they resent us for it. It's incomprehensible. If it weren't for us, none of these women would be able to work. (234)

That in brief, sums up the dilemma of these migrant workers. Puerto Ricans are accepted in the U.S.A. but are often clubbed together with the other Caribbeans because of their colour. Listening to the bleak accounts of their lives in their own countries, America realizes the difference. They are paid less and in cash which puts them at risk of being robbed. As Mercedes informs her "If I open a bank account...la migra will find me and send me back." They send most of what they earn home via courier services set up for that purpose (258). She has had a hard life cleaning up after other people but nothing can match the hardship undergone by the Caribbean migrants from various countries.

Looking back to her life on the island America decides to assert her independence once more. On the island, she had said without conviction that she wanted nobody to interfere in her life, in a weak denial of reality. In New York, when she decides to concentrate on her needs, her affirmation has a greater resonance. She says:

I want nothing to do with them....I'm going to worry about myself from now on, about what I want and what I need. I can't count on any of them. On anyone. I'm alone, and it's my life, and I'm not going to let them spoil it anymore. (237)

It is clear that it is not a snapping of ties but a timely reminder to stop worrying about other people, including her mother and daughter. As she recalls Correa, she tells herself: "So many things I didn't do because he said not to," blaming herself for allowing him to walk all over her. (253)

America's peace of mind is shattered when she learns that her daughter in a fit of pique has betrayed her address to her father. Correa soon starts ringing her and comes over to New York to fetch her home. When he realizes that America cannot jump at his command, as she is looking after two small children in their parents' absence, Correa breaks into the house and attacks her with a big kitchen knife. In the tussle she pushes him and falling he knocks his head against a concrete block. As she comes to consciousness in a hospital, she is told by her mother that Correa had died in that incident. Her worries

were over, she just needed to recover from her injuries.

Once she comes out of hospital she is joined by her repentant daughter in a small flat as they begin a new life together. She starts working in a hotel and is proud of the scars left on her by Correa. She had fought and survived.

This chapter shows how these various women characters have negotiated their trauma and troubles, fled/escaped from violent scenes to seek their self-respect elsewhere. Their futures remain uncertain in most cases as they struggle to survive dicing the law and their luck. The motif for migration in most of these cases was flight or a move to a better life which does not materialize the way they expect it to. Most of these people face racism and discrimination, apart from harassment from official agencies which does not quite succeed in crushing their spirits as they decide to make America their home. As they embrace the idea of success through hard work, their resilience and endurance stands out as yet another dimension of American grit. Their sense of family values and of community helps to consolidate the foundations of American life and society.