CHAPTER-IV
USE OF THE FOLK IN IDENTITY FORMATION

A necessary element of life, culture is the medium through which humans exercise their humanity and express and affirm their view of reality. For members of the African diaspora, culture surpassed its role to provide self-definition and sustain the group ethos; it became a way to physically survive. As a site of cosmic connection, identity, meaning and value were made and remade in order to resist. Through the tenacious practice of culture, Africans endured in America.

(K.Zaiditu-Selassie, African Spiritual tradition in the Novels of Toni Morrison 1)

In the history of human civilization the “forced transfer” of the Africans is the “defining event of the modern world” (Morrison, “Home” 10). The process of capturing the Africans to be enslaved in America and their survival despite all odds is itself a significant act of resistance in human history. Along with enslavement, the Europeans strategically attempted to wipe out the traditions of the Africans by offering white substitutes to their language and culture. Among the scholars working on the African American past in America, a group of sociologists like Gunnar Myrdal, Patrick Moynihan, E.F. Frazier etc. have documented the process of complete erasure of African heritage for the African Americans, where only a few “scrapes of memories which form only an insignificant part of the growing body of traditions in Negro families” and which “are what remains of the African heritage”(Frazier, 21). Another sociologist E.B.Reuter further affirms Frazier’s argument by saying—“The...Negro people were brought to America in small consignments from many parts of the African continent and over a long period of time. In the course of capture, importation and enslavement they lost every vestige of African culture”(799). On the other hand, a group of anthropologists, particularly Melville Herskovits demonstrates that there is a continuum of African traditions among Africans even in the New World. Herskovits’s study debunks the racist myth regarding the complete disconnection of the slaves in America from their African cultural roots. Herskovits emphasises the survival of the Africans in America through a process
of acculturation despite the fact that during the earliest days of slavery, slave owners sought to exercise control over their slaves by attempting to strip them of their African culture. The physical isolation and societal marginalization of the African slaves and, later, of their free progeny, actually facilitated the process of “retention, reinterpretation and syncretism” of significant elements of traditional culture among themselves in the New World—“Retention is the continuity of some African interpretation of phenomena, reinterpretation is the explanation of white cultural patterns according to African principles, and syncretism is the amalgamation of the African and American cultural patterns and sign systems” (Bell, The Contemporary African American Novel 62).

This process of acculturation began since 1619 when the first group of twenty black captives from heterogeneous African tribes were brought to Jamestown, Virginia. The acculturation of the slaves began to develop with the earliest interactions of the black captives in slave coffles and during the Middle Passage, before they reached North America. During slavery, the black slaves from Africa transformed themselves to African Americans with mixed cultural identities through this complex process of acculturation. The retention of folk cultures has helped the Black Americans immensely to survive the oppression and tyranny of slavery. However, the existence of black culture in any form had been consistently denied in the racist discourse. Timothy B. Powell, throws light on the negation of black cultural identity over the years as: “In the time of slavery the black logos (the reasoning, the logic, the Word of the black American culture) necessarily had to remain hidden in the semantic shadows of the Master’s language. Sadly, for a long time after the Emancipation Proclamation, the black self is still confined to the shadows, the black logos to nuance”. It has been the consistent struggle of the African American critics, academicians and novelists to “de-centre the white logos, to create a universe of critical and fictional meanings where blackness will no longer connote absence, negation, and evil but will come to stand instead for affirmation, presence and good”( Powell 46).

Black critics like Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. have pointed out that “black logos” existed in the oral texts like spirituals, blues, folklore and other folk practices of the African Americans. It was the responsibility of the
African American writers to bring these elements of black life to the fore to affirm their identity. The attempt of the black writers was “to bring black meanings out of the semantic shadows of the Master’s language and to affirm these meanings in a medium which can truly be called a black text” (Powell, 47). This quest for identity formation has been an unavoidable engagement of almost all Black American writers. Toni Morrison has attained accomplishment in the act of self-assertion of the blacks by the realistic representation of the ethos of black culture in her novels. This chapter is an attempt to trace Morrison’s literary strategy of representing folk culture as a way to assert black identity in three of her novels—The Bluest Eye, Song of Solomon and A Mercy respectively.

Folk culture plays a pivotal role in Morrison’s fictional narrative as the resource for identity formation of the directionless, disintegrated black characters in the changing situations of America. Keith E. Byerman in his study Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction, throws light on one of the significant characteristics of Morrison’s novels:

Her novels are quest tales in which key characters search for the hidden sign capable of giving them strength and identity. In a significant twist, those who find what they seek become the most thoroughly victimized, while those who are turned in their searches toward some other goal (which is usually an absence rather than the originally desired presence) are most often triumphant. The changed pursuit is in the direction of some black folk value, such as true community, true family name, or authentic black history. The revision of goals makes possible a loosening of the control of logocentrism so as to achieve a black selfhood that negates the control (185).

Morrison in her novels offers folk culture as an alternative mode of thinking that denounces the impact of the hegemonic culture, attempting to control black American life. The mainstream culture had devised systems of societal and psychological restrictions that had traumatised the lives of blacks in general and African American women in particular. In Morrison’s novels, victims of such situations either surrender as completely devastated souls or survive by imbibing
the folk culture. Byerman further elucidates on this specific role of folklore in literature:

...folklore serves in literature as the antithesis of closed, oppressive systems. Closed systems may be political, economic, cultural, religious, racial, sexual, aesthetic or philosophical; they may be black or white, male or female, psychological and physical. They seek to suppress individuality, community, imagination, voice freedom, or even life itself by imposing a homogeneous order on a heterogeneous reality. The fiction usually establishes the reality of the order, frequently through its effects on the central character, and then offers an alternative through some aspects of the folk culture” (Byerman, Fingerling the Jagged Grain 3)

This has been the strategy of the use of folk culture in Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, Song of Solomon and A Mercy. The following discussion on the novels will further highlight how Morrison uses folk culture as a way of identity formation in her novels. Moreover, these works of fiction fully illustrate how Morrison’s idea of “home” is crucially related to the folk cultural roots of African American people. Morrison negotiates the quest for identity by African American characters through reclamation of their roots in the form of folk community and their cultural practices.

Her exploration of folk culture is not only restricted to black life alone but also takes into account the lives of the marginalised sections of other races. The unrecognized alternative aspects of life visible through folk beliefs, rituals and the less complicated communal life styles of the rural folk serve as life-sustaining forces for the characters of these novels. The major characters—Pecola, Milkman and Florens are mentally disturbed or psychologically devastated in their struggle against the hegemonic systems of class, race and gender. Amidst such a conflicting situation they strive for their identity formation and social recognition and end up either being accepted or rejected by the society.

The Bluest Eye is Toni Morrison’s initial effort at fiction writing and an ambitious project. It is an inspiring creation of an African American woman writing about the identity and experiences of being a woman of color and
necessarily the racial and gender issues are prioritised in the novel. The novel originated from a conversation of Morrison with one of her black school friends who desired to have blue eyes—“she said she wanted blue eyes. I looked around to picture her with them and was violently repelled by what I imagined she would look like if she had her wish. The sorrow in her voice seemed to call for sympathy, and I faked it for her, but, astonished by the desecration she proposed, I “got mad” at her instead” (The Bluest Eye, Foreword). Morrison’s novel is an attempt to project the psychological devastation of Pecola Breedlove, an adolescent black girl and her futile effort to search for love and acceptance in a white controlled world that despises and denies black cultural identity. In her first novel, Morrison is attempting to explicate the tragic effects of the imposition of a white, middle-class American idea of beauty on a young black American girl during the early 1940s. The novel was published during the peak of Black Arts Movement, in the late 1960s and early 1970s and received considerable attention from the critical circle. The Bluest Eye is assessed as the milestone in African American literature with its sensitive portrayal of African American female identity and at the same time providing a critique of the internalization of racism born out of the imposed American cultural definition of beauty.

However, The Bluest Eye is not only limited to the description of the destructive effects of inter and intra racial prejudice on the development of identity of an adolescent black girl. Trudier Harris claims The Bluest Eye to be “the story of Afro-American folk culture in process”. Harris further emphasises that “folk culture persists through fortunes and misfortunes of the characters” and it serves to unite them into kinship with each other (Harris, “Reconnecting Fragments” 68). The setting of Lorain, Ohio is of an authentic black community during the 1940s. Their traditional beliefs provided the members of the black community the energy to endure during times of distress. In The Bluest Eye, Morrison’s use of folk culture does not provide a coherent structure to the novel. However, the fragments of Afro-American folk tradition embedded within the novel are illustrative of the heritage of African Americans.

Lorain, Ohio is “just a shade north of south”, but it still offers a convincing picture of the North, which is believed to be a freer place for black
people than the South. Pauline Breedlove, came from Kentucky, which only “a couple of hundred mile away” (Harris 68) from the suburb Lorain, Ohio, and she hopes to lead a better life than her life in the South. The reality of the North was however, no better than their life in South. These southern migrants felt the need to lead a life in North that could meet the expectations of their relatives and friends in the South. Trudier Harris provides an insight to the popular belief regarding the North—“tales circulated about how wonderful things could be “up north”. Then, too, the myth was reinforced in those blacks who tamed the concrete jungle, acquired good jobs, and sent their children to school well clothed. In time they formed a middle class, separated from the hordes of their still migrating sisters and brothers”(Harris, “Reconnecting Fragments” 68).

Morrison projects a comparative view of the lifestyle of the Northern black migrants through the parallel reference of the life of a model white family as presented in the Dick and Jane primer. The novel begins with the three versions of the Dick and Jane reader prescribed in the public schools during the 1940s. Morrison’s use of these three versions of the descriptions of the primer symbolically represents the three separate spheres of livelihood existing in the northern suburb. According to Phyllis R. Klotman—

Morrison uses this technique to juxtapose the fictions of the white educational process with the realities of life for many black children. The ironic duality of the school/home experience is illuminated through the ingenious structure of the novel. The “Dick and Jane” referent effectively introduces the fictional milieu of Morrison’s characters; it is one with which we are familiar....It is the world of the first grade basic reader—middle-class, secure, suburban and white, replete with dog, cat, non-working mother and leisure-time father....This first version of the stimulated-reader quotation is clear, straight, rendered in “Standard English”—correct and white. The second, while it repeats the message exactly, assumes a different visual appearance on the page which is less clear yet still comprehensible although written without proper capital and punctuation....The third, the wording of which is likewise unaltered, is completely run together, one long collection of consonants and vowels seeming to signify nothing....”(314).
Morrison offers three versions of identical lifestyles of people living in Lorain, Ohio. The first one is distinctive like the clear lines of the primer, the “alien white world” of the Fisher family who live apart from the black community. The second version is representative of the lifestyle of the MacTeers, a lower middle class but loving family which is trying desperately to survive the poverty and Northern form of racism in Lorain, Ohio by following the black cultural traditions. The third version is applicable to the life of the Breedloves. Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, who were living according to the myth of the North for a short time as they initially, possessed both money and house. Eventually their life turned miserable because of Cholly’s drinking which forced them to stay in a storefront house. Pauline also refrains from her passion for imitating the white heroines after losing a tooth, becomes careless and ugly. Initially, she was optimistic regarding the fulfilment of promises of the North but ultimately she lost hope and she “gives up beliefs that have tied her to historical black communities as well as prevailing folk traditions” (Harris, “Reconnecting” 68). Pauline’s illusion of Northern reality became injurious for the entire family. Her failure to live a life according to the expectations of the ‘myth of North’, led towards her preference for whiteness over the black, as illustrated in her adoration for “little pink-and-yellow” Fisher girl over her own daughter Pecola. Her complete avoidance of folk culture associated with black life, further deprived her daughter from connecting to the roots.

In her novels Morrison uses ancestors and community to assist the disintegrated characters to reconnect to their folk roots. Their connection to their roots makes them grounded and strong enough to form a positive identity. In The Bluest Eye, Pecola’s disconnection with her community occurs because of her mother’s withdrawal from the black community life. The community has a powerful impact on Morrison’s personal life too. Her sense of self is strengthened by the cohesiveness of the black community of Lorain, Ohio, where she had spent her childhood. Morrison terms such a community as “neighbourhood”, as she tells Robert Stepto:
And there is the life-giving, very, very strong sustenance of that people got from the neighbourhood. One lives, really, not so much in your house as do outside of it, within the “compounds”, within the village, or whatever it is. And legal responsibilities, all the responsibilities that agencies now have, were the responsibilities of the neighbourhood. So that people were taken care of, or locked up or whatever. If they were sick, other people took care of them; if they needed something to eat, other people took care of them; if they were mad, other people provided a small space for them, or related to their madness or tried to find out the limits of their madness (“Intimate Things in Place” 379)

Unlike Morrison’s idea of neighbourhood, the community of Lorain, Ohio in *The Bluest Eye* is defined by the dominant cultural code as exemplified in the primer. In this novel the critical relationship between individual and community life is represented through the image of house described in the Dick and Jane Primer: “Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy” (*B.E.* 1). These lines are repetitively used in the next two paragraphs and they take the form of unpunctuated stream of language without order, suggestive of the disorderliness and chaos of the real life underneath the myth of a blissful and nurturing home.

The black community of Lorain, Ohio, sets a standard of living for themselves so that they can ascertain their presence according to the norms of a Eurocentric culture. The African-American community has set some specific rules for the members “to consolidate their weaknesses so that they can ascertain their minority existence”. They have learnt to deal with their “peripheral existence” by imposing some folk regulatory practices like the “outdoor” which also provided them racial solidarity. Every possibility of excess was controlled by the threat of being outdoors – “If somebody ate too much, he could end up outdoors. If somebody used too much coal, he could end up outdoors. People could gamble themselves outdoors, drink themselves outdoors” (11). However, there is a difference between being “put out” and being “put outdoors”. If someone is put out he can go to an alternative location, but for an outdoor “there
is no place to go”. The fear of being ‘outdoors” is “the real terror of life”, a terrifying anxiety of being without a fixed shelter “if you are outdoors, there is no place to go…. Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact” (BE 12).

The fear of being homeless and an unsettled life pervades Morrison’s fiction. Pecola becomes a homeless wanderer due to her drunken father’s misbehaviour that disturbed the family life of the Breedloves—“that old Dog Breedlove had burned up his house, gone upside his wife’s head and everybody, as a result, was outdoors” (BE 11). In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is “constantly outdoors, unable to integrate herself into the community, always left on the peripheries, literally moving from house to house searching for a fixed place of comfort and security” (Conner 53). The house provides black people with much needed shelter and saved them from the evil of being outdoors—

Knowing that there was such a thing as outdoors bred in us a hunger for property, for ownership. The firm possession a yard, a porch, a grape arber. Propertied black people spent all their energies, all their love, on their nests. Like frenzied, desperate birds, they over decorated everything, fussed and fidgeted over their hard-won homes; canned, jellied, and preserved all summer to fill the cupboards and selves; they painted, picked and poked at every corner of their houses. And there houses loomed like hothouse sunflower among the rows of weeds that were the rented house. Renting black cast furtive glances at these owned yards and porches, and made firmer commitments to buy themselves some nice little old place (BE 12).

This desire for owning a house is also a process of identity formation and also a desire of controlling the excess, the ‘funkiness’ of black people’s lives “dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of wide range of human emotions” (68). The black man searches for a woman like Geraldine who controlled the excess of her character because only that kind of a woman can make the house comfortable. But their hope for a heavenly abode soon turns into a place no better than prison cell as: “what they do not know is that this plain brown girl will build her nest stick by stick, make it her own inviolable world,
and stand guard over its every plant, weed, and doily, even against him” (69). The passion for the extreme orderliness of the homemaker like Pauline makes the house a jail—“The house is simultaneously a respite and a jail; like the community, for which it stands as synecdoche, the house seems to promise rest and comfort, but it provides neither, especially for Pecola” (Conner 54). Morrison represents Geraldine like characters as “status quo personified; she embodies the community’s strictly codified caste system” (Bjork 40). People like Geraldine who loves to maintain intra racial hierarchy makes the black community in *The Bluest Eye*, emblematic of the dominant white society and its standards and boundaries are also set by the white standard of living. In such a neighbourhood, individuals like the Breedloves are unwanted and so considered as “outdoors” and left alone to live on the fringes of the society.

The failure of the Breedloves to live by the standard of the community cuts them off from the roots and turns them into identity less split personalities. Unlike Morrison’s experience of a nurturing neighbourhood, this community of Lorain, Ohio is dismissive and self-centred enough to cater for the mental support needed by disillusioned Pecola. According to Mark C. Conner, in *The Bluest Eye* “Pecola Breedlove forms a peculiarly unstable core for the book. Pecola has no specific place, and she floats on the peripheries of the community she longs to enter” (Conner 52). The community of Lorain, Ohio’s commodified value system forces Pecola for self-loathing and leads her towards gradual disintegration from the society. Patrice Bryce Bjork in *The Novels of Toni Morrison: The Search for Self and Place Within the Community* holds the community of Lorain, Ohio, responsible for the disillusionment of Pecola—

The community, too, must share the blame for Pecola’s diminishment. She has throughout been made a scapegoat by a neighbourhood of people who themselves live their own unnatural lives under the gaze of the dominant culture. Pecola’s silent, sacrificial presence, then, holds a symbolic function for them: Trapped as we-objects, they find comfort in Pecola’s dissolution...Contrasting themselves with Pecola, they embolden their own worth; deny the incongruity and inauthenticity of their own lives. Pecola’s madness serves to perpetuate one community’s own illusions (53).
Morrison is offering the folk heritage of the blacks as an effective way to resist the standard set by such a community trying desperately to be a White prototype. The family of Claudia MacTeer represents a contrast to the disintegrated nature of Pecola’s family by adhering to many folk beliefs and superstitions common to historical communities. For example, Claudia remembers her mother’s treatment for cold when she was a child: “she rubs the Vicks salve in my chest, I am rigid with pain. She takes two fingers’ full of it at a time and massages my chest until I am faint … she scoops out a little of the salve on her forefinger and puts it my mouth, telling me to swallow. A hot flannel is wrapped about my neck and chest. I am covered up with heavy quilts and ordered to sweet” (BE 6). All these practices are designed to increase sweating, which was believed to be effective remedy of fever. In a society where doctors were rare to be found, they had to depend on home remedies and folk healing practices. Wrapping is considered to be preventive medicine by the black folks to ward off cold. They also used to wear roots held on by flannel carried underneath their dresses. In *The Bluest Eye*, there is a reference of Cholly’s aunt, Jimmy wearing a asafoetida bag “around her neck” and other women in the community “wrapped their heads in rags, and their breasts is flannel” (110). Morrison projects this kind of folk belief in natural cures as being a part of life of the blacks even in a Northern suburb like Lorain, Ohio, where they do not forget their traditional practices. The MacTeers’ retained their self-esteem by following black folk tradition and it also helped the girls of the family Frieda and especially Claudia to survive the inter and intra racial exploitations. Unlike the Breedloves, the MacTeers are not ashamed of their blackness but carry their distinctive identity and culture with pride. Morrison’s reference to such specifics of folk culture is apparently not important for the development of the story of *The Bluest Eye* but through such small instances the novelist highlights how people in such folk communities cared for each other. The major characters of *The Bluest Eye* are deprived of caring and so they drift away from the social bonding and turn into social misfits like—Cholly who abuses his own daughter; Pauline who refuses to mother her own child and Pecola, the pathetic victim of parental and social rejection. But unlike them the MacTeer family or Aunts Jimmy’s companions
maintain the nurturing tradition of their community and it has a positive impact on their behaviour. Even Cholly used to lead a balanced life until the death of his Aunt Jimmy, who was taking good care of him. Morrison emphasizes on the community caring practices through the example of treatment provided to Aunt Jimmy during her illness. The companions of Aunt Jimmy treated her like family members, fetched the local healer M’Dear, served food, and took care of Cholly. They shared “various miseries they had had, their cure or abatement what had help”. They were concerned about ailing Jimmy’s recovery and talked about “what could have been done to prevent the misery from taking hold and M’Dear’s infallibility” (BE 107). Despite such care and concern, Aunt Jimmy died and after her death the women of her community took the responsibility of Cholly and performed the funeral rites of the “maiden lady”. The ladies “cleaned the house, aired everybody out, and notified everybody and stitched together what looked like a white wedding dress for Aunt Jimmy, when she met Jesus” (BE 108). They even made a dress for Cholly to wear during Aunt Jimmy’s funeral. Some of the ladies served him food, the husband of one of them cut his hair, his clothes were laid and hot water was provided. Cholly was allowed to sleep and some of them carried him to the bed. The community of South made all possible efforts to sustain orphan Cholly both physically and mentally after the death of his only guardian.

Pecola has never experienced such parental and community caring in her life except the temporary refuge at the MacTeer house but that too is not effective enough to mitigate her alienation and disillusionment. Pecola’s helplessness leads her towards fraudulent characters like Soaphead Church, from whom she wishes for the bluest eye. In The Bluest Eye, Morrison’s racial politics is quite evident in the negative portrayal of another “gypsy” fortune teller or root doctor figure, Soaphead Church. Morrison makes it clear through the narrator Claudia MacTeer’s that though Church may reside within their black community he is not a part of it. Claudia instinctively realises that Church despises blackness and adheres to a white value system that excludes him. Micah Elihue Whitecomb or Soaphead Church is a “cinnamon eyed West Indian with lightly browned skin” is a self-claimed spiritualist and Psychic Reader. Unlike M’Dear, the “decisive
diagnostician” of Aunt Jimmy’s southern community, Soaphead Church’s “business was dread. People came to him in dread, whispered in dread, wept and pleaded in dread. And dread was what he counselled” (BE 136). Church is accused of child molestation and the black community of Lorain, Ohio is aware of it but people in distress are deceived by his false promises. Pecola, “living on the fringes of” the black community of Lorain, Ohio, sees Soaphead Church as an outsider like herself and visits him hoping for some magic in the form of his supernatural powers. During her first visit Pecola is made to realise that Church despises blackness much like her own dislike of her blackness. Morrison twists the root doctor or psychic reader into “a self-loathing, obsessive-compulsive child molester in order to underscore the dangerous nature of the only alternative sources of knowledge and succour available to children like Pecola, whose families and communities are not looking out for their wellbeing” (Moses, 619). The deceitful Church gives Pecola false promise to make her eyes blue if she will feed the old and dirty dog of his old landlady Bertha Reese. He assured Pecola that if the sleeping dog changes his behaviour after eating the food, her wish for blue eyes will definitely be fulfilled. Of course, the dog convulses and dies leaving Pecola with the overwhelming illusion of having the blue eyes. But in fact, Church has indirectly fulfilled his secret desire of killing the dog by using Pecola as the agent to perform the cruel act and thus, Soaphead further “seals her fate by permanently separating her from any meaningful connection within the community. Imprisoned now behind her illusion of blue eyes, Pecola escapes into schizophrenia and silence” (Bjork 53). The dishonesty of Micah Elihue Whitecomb, the hypocritical misanthropic man of mulatto origin is revealed through his letter of confession to God where he defends “his own act of appropriation”. In the letter, Soaphead arrogantly assumes the role of God since He forgot how and when to be God. He further claims in his letter: “I gave her those blue eyes she wanted. Not for pleasure, and not for money. I did what You did not, could not, would not do: I looked at that ugly little black girl, and loved her. I played You. And it was a very good show” (BE 144). Soaphead exploits Pecola to give some definitive meaning to his own life and thus to ascertain his own identity. Morrison skilfully draws the contrasts between the reliability and
selfless service of the southern black folk healers like M’Dear against the pretentions and selfish nature of peripheral white figure like Whitecomb.

In one way, the madness of Pecola becomes a recourse to escape from the communal rejection and personal self-loathing. As Bjork contends “Pecola, in her madness, has triumphed over her condition; the community, by contrast, remains in a static state of denial and dissonance”. However, through Pecola’s sacrificial position, Morrison unravels another positive dimension in the novel. Within the same community of Lorain, Ohio, Pecola’s sympathetic friend Claudia survives due to her strong folk cultural background to tell her and Pecola’s story as “she has testified to the unnaturalness of black life; and as a consequence, she recognises in retrospect that she and the community has failed Pecola”(Bjork 54). Claudia’s realisation as a child that “it’s much, much, much too late” (164) to rescue Pecola from her alienation and madness, inserts in her a desire for self-affirmation. Claudia’s sorrowful recognition of the personal and communal failure is a point of departure from the hegemonic white standard of living in search of an alternative that will be useful for authenticating herself. In The Bluest Eye, folk culture serves as the alternative frame of reference that enables Claudia to form an enduring identity.

Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon (1977) is a juxtaposition of classical myth and folklore that is deeply rooted in African American history and folk culture. Unfortunately, much of the criticism of Song of Solomon has tended to focus more on classical myth in a strict literary sense and less on the profound folk cultural context on which her writing is based. Susan L. Blake says in her article “Folklore and Community in Song of Solomon” that the title of Morrison’s third novel is derived from a well-known Gullah folktale that describes a group of African slaves in the New World rise up one day from the field where they are working and fly back to Africa (Blake, 77). Milkman Dead, the protagonist of Song of Solomon, is searching for his freedom and identity, but not in the traditional way available for African Americans as generally described in Black American literature. He does not pursue freedom by travelling to North while fleeing slavery or share-cropping in the cruel South. Morrison reverses this piece of African American folk belief by forcing Milkman search for his identity while
travelling from North to South on “a type of Odyssean journey” (Blake, 12). Born in the North, and heir to the material advantages provided by his rich father Macon Dead, Milkman must find meaning for his life by reversing the pattern, by going South, back into the territory of his ancestors. There is also a reversal in his expectations on that soil. Initially he goes searching for gold in the South, unlike the general tendency of blacks who came North in hope of improving their financial condition. South is definitely not the land of riches for those seeking their fortune. It is the land of slavery, where several generations of Africans are tied to unrewarding hard labour. So, the South can have only intangible instead of tangible wealth in the form of historical heritage. Milkman ultimately returns to the South for things that he can carry away only in his mind, in his conception of self, in his contact with his communal and familial history and his satisfaction in knowing and being who he is. Morrison initially portrays Milkman Dead, as a modern black urban young man alienated from himself and estranged from his family, his community, and his historical and cultural roots. Milkman is mentally enslaved and spiritually dead, but with the help of his eccentric aunt, Pilate, and his best friend, Guitar Bains, he embarks on a physical and spiritual journey that enables him to reconnect with his past and realize his self-worth.

In the novel Morrison depicts the historical heritage of the African Americans as the backbone of their culture. Morrison herself heard the story of the people who could fly from her maternal grandparents. She drew on the Afro-American legends about Africans who could fly and who used this marvellous and magical ability to escape from slavery in America as a context in *Song of Solomon*. Stories about Africans who either flew or jumped off slave ships as well as those who saw the horrors of slavery when they landed in America, and in their anguish sought to fly back to Africa are very popular among the Afro-Americans. In *Song of Solomon* the main feature of Morrison’s narration is her use of folk culture in the forms of superstitions, children’s games, songs, rituals etc. Morrison recognizes that folklore can more directly convey the truth than relying on the analytical descriptions based on Western logic and traditions. She wanted to utilize the black folklore, especially the magic and superstitious part of it, in her texts because black people believe in magic and it is part of their
heritage. This is the reason for using flying as the central metaphor in *Song of Solomon*. Throughout the novel Morrison questions the imposed values and perceptions of the dominant culture. As an alternative, Morrison tries to offer a cultural knowledge and belief situated in black American's African traditions and heritage. Morrison's essay *Rootedness: Ancestors as Foundation* explicates the relevance of past history and ancestral heritage in rebuilding the present of black culture. In her works she validates that past is something that cannot be erased from a black man’s/woman’s world. But the black cultural past often lies hidden under the influence of dominant culture. Once this submerged culture gains proper exposure it thrives and flourishes conjoining in the recreation of a cultural present situated in the past. Thus the Deads too, though they are alienated from the black community because of the alien values they hold on to, cannot escape from the influence of their ancestral values and traditions. This is further explicated by the journey taken on by Macon Dead Jr. (Milkman) as he travels to Virginia in this quest for an ancestral identity, which in turn helps him to identify himself with the black community in which he lives. He develops a mature sense of familial obligations and discovers an informed knowledge of familial and folk history and a profound comprehension of folk wisdom. His experience at Shalimar, Virginia, brings a complete change in Milkman and he passes on to a real black sensibility which had remained obscured by the Western sensibility that he had adopted from his father. He had always considered himself too good for others of his community. His perception receives a hard blow at Shalimar when the people around view him with hostility because he was an arrogant, urbanite Black who looked down upon the black men and made them feel worthless.

Milkman expected, in vain, that in his ancestral place he would be loved and respected by all just because at his hometown Danville, he was the object of hero worship. But soon he finds that his sense of superiority over the people at Shalimar has earned him only contempt and abhorrence: “In his hometown his name spelled dread and grudging respect. But here, in his ‘home’, he was unknown, unloved, and damn near killed. These were some of the unsung niggers in the world” (*Song of Solomon*, 273). But during the course of an initiatory trial-
by-fire in Shalimar in which black male elders invite the bourgeois urbanite on a
hunting trek that is long and arduous, and then leave him all alone to defend
himself in the dark forest, a new knowledge of self and culture appears in front of
him. Left to himself in the dark forest filled with wild animals, Milkman tries to
analyse the treatment he has received since his arrival, and also the ways he has
mistreated others. He considers those people to be savages “Suspicious, Hot-
tempered, Eager to find fault and despise any outsider, Touchy, devious, jealous,
traitorous and evil. He had done nothing to receive their contempt” (Song of
Solomon, 279). But gradually Milkman recognizes the necessity of abandoning
such immature perspectives.

It is the blues song sung by the children at Shalimar, while playing the
Song of Solomon that brings about the total change in Milkman. It moves his
mind to an uncomfortable state. The feeling of hatred he nurtured until then
towards his parents and sisters gradually dissolves. When he listened to the song
carefully, it rings a bell in his ears. He discovers that the blues song the children
were singing were about his own ancestors — his great grandfather, great
grandmother, grandfather and grandmother. The song was about how Solomon,
his great grandfather tried to fly back to Africa taking his son Jake along with
him. But he dropped the boy in the course of his flying, near the porch of the
house where Heddy, mother of Sing whom Jake later married, found him and
brought him up. Milkman could identify all the names figured in the song to be of
his ancestors — Solomon called Shalimar by Heddy, Jake, Ryna who is Jake’s
mother, and Heddy the foster mother of Jake. These names reminds him of a
number of places like Solomon’s Leap, Ryna’s Gulch, the little village Shalimar,
Not Doctor Street called so by African Americans in memory of his maternal
grandfather because he was the first colored man of consequence in that city. The
knowledge of his tribal and ancestral history thrills him. He is excited over the
discovery that his great grandfather, Solomon, was a flying African and he had
flown back to Africa. This information that he belonged to this tribe of flying
Africans fills him with a sense of pride. The self-alienated man who had left his
hometown in search of gold and later on deviated from his goal and searches for
an identity and ultimately discovers a whole history of his tribe, of his ancestors
who had their roots in Africa. He develops a sense of community and also a strong black identity. He now discerns the significance of many of the actions of Aunt Pilate — the song of Sugarman often sung by her, collection of rocks from the places she had lived in and why Pilate hung her name as an earring. All these contribute to the re-creation of an identity with a black Afro-centric lineage in Milkman. Just as Shalimar surrendered to the air in order to ride it, Milkman too finally undertakes this expedition to fly back to his homeland. Thus Morrison is reinforcing the fact that the roots of Afro-Americans lie in African heritage and culture embedded in South and self affirmation on the part of an African American person is possible only through his proper knowledge of the folk cultural heritage.

In *Song of Solomon*, apart from the plot, another significant use of folk elements is that of names and naming. The epigraph of the novel is significant as it refers to the process of naming of the ancestors:

> “The fathers may soar
And the children may know their names”

Indeed, it is the complicated nexus of names that problematizes the identity theme that runs throughout the novel. As Morrison explains: “The name thing is a very, very strong theme in the book....the absence of a name given at all, the odd names and the slave names, the whole business, the feeling of anonymity, the feeling of orphanage”(Stepo,226). Naming is first introduced into the text in two rather elaborate explanation of how “Not Doctor Street” got its name. The Main Avenue came to be called as “Doctor Street” when the first “Coloured” doctor moved in there. Likewise called the Charity hospital at the northern end as No Mercy instead of Mercy Hospital. Thus the name is recognition of history and affirmation of that segment of the community that gives it validity through continued use. But when the post office refuses to recognize the name and keeps all mail addressed to Doctor Street in the Dead Letter Office, the power of the name begins to fade. Finally, the city legislators see to it that the name is never used in any official capacity by posting public notices that proclaim that the street will always be known as Main Avenue and not Doctor Street. Inherent in the
process of Mains Avenue becoming Not Doctor Street and Mercy hospital becoming No Mercy Hospital is a critique of the established order as well as an expression of freedom from that order. Therefore, the process of naming, unnaming and renaming is an ironic assertion of authority, recognition of plurality of meaning and a statement of self-affirmation. Macon Dead, Milkman and Pilate are all names that provide links in the narrative of the past that Milkman must decipher if he is to learn his identity.

The ancestral title ‘Dead’ happens to be a literal slip of the pen handed to Milkman’s grandfather on a piece of paper. This episode of misnaming occurred when a drunken Yankee soldier at the Freedmen’s Bureau inadvertently wrote the birthplace and the whereabouts of Milkman’s grandfather in the spaces for his first and last name. Because this early ancestor of Milkman was incapable of reading and writing, the misname was recorded as his official name. Ironically, he did not attempt to correct the error because his wife convinced him that the new name “would wipe out the past” (*Song of Solomon*, 54).

Milkman’s nickname also has an extraordinary origin. Like the name of his grandfather, Macon Dead, his name is also a misname imposed by someone with no concern about the consequences. It is also a name laden with family history, embarrassment and shame which Milkman never fully understands. His name is first a direct connection to his mother Ruth. Even up to his fourth year, Macon III has to satisfy his mother’s secret indulgence by allowing her to nurse him at her breasts. Ruth’s pleasure goes awry and these afternoon rituals are, confirmed as "strange and wrong" (*Song of Solomon*, 14), when Freddie, the janitor and neighbourhood gossip, discovers her in the act of nursing Milkman. Even though Macon refuses to acknowledge his son's nickname, it sticks because of the persistence of the community’s continued word-of-mouth use. Thus Morrison's elaborate telling of the mythic dimensions of Milkman's birth, name and childhood gives the narrative a fairy tale quality.

Pilate plays an integral role in Milkman's birth. She is described as one who literally wears her name, it was chosen in accordance with the African-American old tradition of selecting a newborn baby's name from the Bible
(Morrison, “The Language” 375). Her father, who could not read or write, selected the name his finger pointed to first. Even though the midwife Circe, tried to advise him against the "Christ-killing Pilate" (SoS 19), he persisted, partially out of confusion and melancholy over his wife's death at child birth. At the age of twelve, Pilate removed the paper that bore her name from the Bible, folded it up, and placed it in a tiny brass box which she wears as an earring. The fact that she wears her name suggests the value she places on her identity over her possessions—a quality that distinguishes her from her brother Macon.

Milkman’s introduction to his family and community happens due his aunt Pilate. Though Macon warns Milkman to stay away from the eccentric old herbalist, Shaman, conjure woman and bootlegger; she nevertheless remains his teacher and spiritual guide. Pilate embodies folk cultural value and the mythic impulse as one. Morrison represents Pilate’s character as a perfect amalgamation of both black and white folk culture—as a griot and the Demeter. Living in a darkened house surrounded by trees, practising witchcraft and healing and making wine, she is very much rooted in the landscape. The opinion of women in the community that she is “something that God never made” (SoS 144) coupled with her claim to have often spoken to the dead give her a mythical, other worldly quality. Recognizing that many in her community regard her as a freak because she has no navel, she decides that it would be best if she throws away every assumption she had learned and begin again at zero. It is apt that Pilate is the story teller who will guide Milkman to the true story of his ancestors, for, like him, she is in the community accepted by it, but not really a part of it.

Marilyn Sanders Mobley describes Pilate as a Demeter figure like the Greek goddess of harvest (Mobley, 114). Pilate presides over her own backwoods corner of the world, possesses mystical powers and engages in the arts of root working and herbal healing. She assumes a maternal role by “mothering” Milkman with spiritual nurturance and by offering him haven from his “dead” household. Just as the Greek goddess Demeter is believed to mediate between earth and underworld, Pilate meditates between this world and the next, engaging in the life-giving arts of herbal medicine, on the one hand and communicating with and carrying the bones of her deceased father on the other. Pilate also works
in the novel as the ancestor who preserves of the African American folk cultural heritage. She is depicted as a conjuress, one commonly found folk element in Morrison’s novels. Pilate’s first appearance in the novel is as one of numerous witnesses at Robert Smith’s spectacular jump from Mercy Hospital. She is oddly dressed in a navy cap and a multicoloured quilt. Even during this earliest action in the plot, Pilate is interpreting events. While Smith stands poised on the roof of the hospital, clothed as a shaman in magical costume with his makeshift wings, Pilate’s voice is heard singing. The song floats antiphonally smooth against the moans of Ruth prior to child birth and the coarse sound of other spectators. The Robert Smith spectacle serves as the mechanism for introducing the conjurative powers of Pilate. A moment before Smith’s jump, and using the image of flight, she foretold the time of Ruth’s delivery:

“A little bird’ll be here with the morning”...The women were looking deep into each other’s eyes when a loud roar went up from the crowd...a kind of wavy oo sound. Mr. Smith has lost his balance for a second, and was trying gallantly to hold on to a triangle of wood that jutted from the copula. Immediately the singing woman began again:

O Sugarman done fly / O Sugarman done gone.....

Mr. Smith...heard the music, and leaped on into the air (Song of Solomon 9)

In addition to her seeing into the future, Pilate is also confirming with her work the rightness of Smith’s flight. For he had tried to hold onto the copula before her song reached into his ears, a suggestion that her power to activate the flight was all that was needed at that moment. Later on, the birth of the novel’s hero the next day of the flight begins an interplay of present and past actions which define Pilate’s significance to the plot as a conjuress and more significantly as the supernatural aid in Milkman’s heroic quests. Thus some supernatural elements are associated with Pilate’s character to give it a folk dimension along with the mythical one. In the narrative within the Song of Solomon, Morrison consciously draws on the motif of flying that is endemic to the African American folk and literary tradition. She has stated that “people who could fly....was always part of the folk love of my life; flying was one of our
gifts” (Leclair 241). The song upon which she bases her novel is a variant of the Gullah Folktale in which all individual rather than a group takes flight. Morrison here uses her “mythopoeic license” (Mobley, 129). Though the tale focuses on the, flight of one, the narration of it serves a cultural function for the community.

Milkman’s self-realization becomes complete when he discovers the his ancestral root with the help of Pilate and connects the past with the present, to see him in context. In his great-grandfather, however, he sees not just an ancestor but a hero. As he exclaims to Sweet: “He could fly! You hear me? My great granddaddy could fly! Goddam!” (328). Empowered by the story of his heritage and the attendant self-knowledge, he finally returns home. But his return is brief and purposeful. He returns home to share his story with Pilate and to take her back to the South to give her father a proper burial. Milkman’s story helps her to revise her misinformation and to celebrate the past she has already shared with him. As they ride back to Shalimar, the utter contentment she feels is reflected in the words, “Peace circled her” (334) which both describe and foreshadow the fateful outcome of her return.

As Pilate lies dying in his arms, Milkman sings the Song of Solomon to her. Having learned the story of his past, his family and himself, he can sing in affirmation of his reconnection with her, his spiritual mother and griot, whose song contained a story he could really use. Contrary to what Macon believed, Pilate had given him something he could use in this world. When she dies, two birds circle over her, and Milkman realizes that he loved her because she had taught him that “without ever leaving the ground she could fly” (SoS 336). Thus Morrison enables the male protagonist of the Song of Solomon to assert his identity with the help of Pilate, the ancestor who inherits folk knowledge of her black forefathers.

Morrison’s ninth novel A Mercy (2008), is emblematic of the heterogeneity of cultures in colonial New England during seventeenth century. Interestingly, each of the characters presented in the novel are from different origin and background trying to live together in the form of an incongruous family. They are all disintegrated human beings drifting away from their roots.
The story narrates their process of cultural integration and self definition in an untamed, perilous, and unfavourable yet strikingly new and resourceful land. Significantly, the novel is published in 2008, in a post racial America during the “age of Barak Obama”, where Morrison attempts to throw light upon the germination of racism in a pre racial American setting. Unlike most of Morrison’s earlier novels, *A Mercy* is not about biracial or bicultural struggle of America but it is a complex reading of the multiracial/multicultural conflict of the Pre-national era. Morrison reevaluates history of the colonial period to explore the inherent heterogeneity of America during this period which later on reduced to a binary system of black and white contradiction undermining the other components. During this colonial period, slavery was not a matter of colour or race but it was a by product of capitalism and money based economy. Morrison reveals in *A Mercy* “how development of a culture based on marketplace values corrupts and undermines the human value of all race, classes, genders and sexualities” (Babb, 147). In a National Public Radio (NPR) interview with Lynn Neary on the occasion of the release of *A Mercy*, Morrison shared her purpose of writing the novel:

I wanted to separate race from slavery, to see what it was like, what it might have been like to be a slave, but [...] without being raced. Because I could not believe that that was the natural state of people who were [...] born and people who came here...that it had to be *constructed*, planted, institutionalized. So I moved as far back as I was able, when what we now call America fluid, *ad hoc*, a place where countries from all over the world were grabbing at land, resources, and all sorts of people were coming (“Morrison Discusses”)

Despite Morrison’s attempt to “remove race from slavery,” race does end up playing an unavoidable and significant role in *A Mercy*. Morrison also articulates why race plays so heavily in a novel set in a pre racial background in another NPR interview with Michele Norris: “The only difference between African slaves and European or British slaves was that the latter could run away and melt into the population. But if you were black, you were noticeable.” Thus, African slaves and European slaves are different in an important and rather transparent way.
However, in *A Mercy* Morrison’s handles the issue of racism not only from the perspective of black-white relationship but goes beyond it. Morrison attempts to highlight the complexities of primitive America by drawing an intricate spectrum of multiracial characters—Portuguese, Dutch, English, Native American, African and mixed race characters. In the novel, Morrison reaches back to a little known past of America before slavery that was defined explicitly by cultural multiplicity. Morrison reconstructs that history through the unique narratives of four women, each representing a different race and form of servitude—a Native-American indentured servant, an English “mail-order bride”, an African slave, and a domestic help having mixed racial background. Morrison emphasizes each woman’s individual struggle for selfhood, identity and recognition while also highlights a collective struggle for belonging as “outlaw” women. As Morrison illustrates in all of her novels that feature the outlaw woman figure, belonging and community are not only key to self-definition and self-creation, but also necessary for survival in a fiercely sexist and racist society.

The story of the novel revolves round the character of an orphaned black girl and her quest for identity formation. Florens is an American born slave of an African mother who belongs to a Portuguese plantation owner Mr.Ortega of Jubilo, Virginia. The slave mother referred as ‘minha mae’, hands over her daughter to an Anglo-Dutch trader, Jacob Vaark as a partial repayment of debt that her master had owed to Vaark. She considers Vaark as the probable protector of her adolescent daughter from the cruelties of her master D’Ortega. The mother wants her daughter who was “hurrying up” (M 160) her breasts and nurtured a passion for the cast-of shoes of her mistress to be protected from “ the lips of an old married couple”(AM 160).Minha mae can assess Vaark as different from the lascivious Portuguese plantation owner—“I thought, in another way. His country far from here. There was no animal in his heart”( M 161).So, the act of letting her eight years old daughter to go with Vaark during his visit to D’Ortega’s house is an act of God’s mercy for minha mae. But for Florens, her mother’s abrupt decision to prefer her over her brother to be sent with Vaark is an act of motherly rejection resulting in the obsessive desire for love all throughout her life. Eight years old Florens is taken from her family at Virginia to begin a new life in
Jacob’s northern settlement of Milton, somewhere near New York. On Jacob’s part, though he is initially reluctant to get involved in slave trade, but his generous act of accepting Florens is somehow a kind of entrapment in the nasty business of human trafficking. Jacob is motivated by his self interest while accepting Florens and considers her as an inferior replacement of their dead children particularly the four years old daughter Petrician, who was fatally injured in the head when a mare kicked her. He thought probably his wife “Rebekka would welcome a child around the place. This one here, swimming in horrible shoes, appeared to be about the same age as Petrician, and if she got kicked in the head by a mare, the loss would not rock Rebekka so” \( (M \ 30) \). But more than his self interest, at the sight of Florens, Jacob is reminded of his own childhood spent in an orphanage and out of sympathy he has decided to take her. Florens ends up being a part of Jacob’s household where besides the Vaark couple their work force, a motley collection of social misfits stayed together. The other two female domestic helps already present in Vaark’s house along with wife Rebekka are also abandoned people given shelter by Jacob. Their Native American servant Lina was a Plague survivor who has lost her entire family during the spread of this epidemic. Later on, her Native American village was burnt down by the European colonizers and she has stayed for a long time at the custody of the Presbyterians and they sold her to Jacob. The “mongrelized” girl Sorrow, a mixed race character, is an enigmatic personality who was rescued from the shipwreck by a sawyer and when she became pregnant handed her to Jacob for serving in his farm. There are two white male indentured servants named Willard and Scully who share a homosexual relationship. All these characters are bereft of their roots and strive for individual identity in this new world. Each of them possess distinctive experiences and world views but their struggle for survival in this new atmosphere make them united and dependent on each other. Their racial and class differences temporarily take a back seat as they focus on building a community to live in. The people in the house, particularly the women face the trials of the harsh environment but still accompany Jacob in his attempt to make a way for himself in the unfavourable landscape of America during seventeenth century.
Morrison provides a twist to the apparently harmonious community of these multiracial characters by illustrating Jacob’s transformation after his journey to D’Ortega’s Maryland plantation. Initially, she attempts to introduce Jacob as an epitome of ‘Innocent Adam’, a new American man in a brave new world, the modest, hardworking, and sensitive trader who later on transformed to be a cruel money grabber by following D’Ortega’s footsteps which he despised initially. Despite all his moral abhorrence, Vaark’s meeting with D’Ortega proves to be “the catalyst for his participation in the slave trade” (Wardi 24). He has observed and craved for D’Ortega’s luxurious and pompous lifestyle in his dream world. He wants to build “a grand house of many rooms rising on a hill above the fog” (35) similar to D’Ortega’s while he possesses two already. He plans of earning more money to complete his project from his investment in rum and sugar production in Barbados. Vaark justifies his dependence on slave trade for sugar production in comparison to D’Ortega as “there was a profound difference between the intimacy of slave bodies at Jubilo and a remote labour force in Barbados. Right? Right?” (M 35). The honest trader is lured by the capitalistic vision and turned no better than D’Ortega in his tyranny and lavishness. Morrison represents the duality of the nature of the self made white European settler. Vaark’s initial inhibition to get involved with slave trade is justified by himself in his later life for profit making and fulfilling his desire to “keep him more on the land”(41). This act of construction of the third house proves to be worthless and fatal for the inheritor less Vaark couple as he dies before its completion.

After the death of the Vaark, the widow Rebekka and the three “unmastered women” feel insecure in their “small, tight family” as they are “female and illegal...subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction and exile” (M 56). For Florens who was initially abandoned by her mother only to be sheltered in Vaark house also proved to be a temporary state of affair. She is passionately attracted towards a free black man, known by his profession of blacksmith who has constructed the new iron gate with kissing cobras for Vaark’s grand mansion. The character of the blacksmith, a free black man, is serving as a catalyst in the development of the plot. He has cured Sorrow from the deadly disease of small pox, during his visit to Jacob’s house for constructing the fancy gate. He is invited again to the household, when Rebekka becomes the victim of
small pox. Meanwhile, Jacob died an untimely death due to the same disease and when Rebekka too falls ill, the group of “unmastered women” felt that the “smithy’s value was without price” (95) and sent Florens to search for the blacksmith. They consider the blacksmith’s folk medicine as the only way to save Rebekka and her survival is a necessity for them to exist in this ruthless world. Florens undergoes a rescue mission in search of the folk medicine and her lover as well. Florens’s journey in search of the life sustaining medicine and also the folk healer proves to be the turning point of her life.

In *A Mercy*, Morrison’s emphasis of folk culture is basically reflected through the Native Indian Character Lina and the blacksmith as a folk healer. The novelist makes use of these two characters to provide an alternative view of life against the mainstream ideology endorsed by the Vaarks. Lina and blacksmith’s folk identity plays pivotal role in the process of the principal narrator’s self realisation. Unlike the other novels where an elderly black woman plays the role of the culture bearer, in *A Mercy*, Morrison allows a Native Indian character to play the role. The native Indian orphan Lina provides a sharp contrast to Jacob’s vainglorious and materialist pursuit of life. Lina is portrayed as a saintly savage bearing witness to the uprootment and exploitation of the Native American tribes in their own land which is no longer their own. Morrison relates with Lina a few folksy characteristics and portrays her as a nature worshipper who practises “hermit skills” and “cawed with birds, chatted with plants, spoke to squirrels, sang to the cow and opened her mouth to the rain” (*M* 47). Due to her loss of Native American family lineage at an early stage of her life she fails to maintain a strictly ethnic culture but creates a hybrid form of culture by mixing up her folk knowledge with the Christian ideas learnt from the Prebyterians. She is the perfect representation of American citizens in the strict sense of the term, a hybrid identity. Her process of acculturation enables her to survive in the difficult setting of colonial America:

...she decided to fortify herself by piecing together scraps of what her mother had taught her before dying in agony. Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things. Found, in other words, a way to be in the world (*M* 46)
Lina is skilled enough to help Vaark in cultivation and poultry farming due to her ancestral folk knowledge. Before the arrival of Rebekka, Lina and Jacob worked together in the farm though neither of them is good at farming in an unpredictable and unfavourable weather of New England. Still Lina is recollecting the farming techniques adopted by her Native American ancestors and applying them with Vaark. She teaches Vaark how to dry the fish, to anticipate spawning and to protect corps from night creatures. Most of the times Jacob follows her but sometimes he wants to experiment with a new stuff. Once he ignores her suggestion and uses alewives as fertilizer but the smell attracted foragers that tear up the tender vegetables. He also avoided her suggestion to plant squash among the corns as the “vines kept weeds away”. He knew that Lina’s folk knowledge was helpful but avoided it because “he did not like the look of disorder” (M 48). Vaark’s preference for orderliness over Lina’s ecological knowledge is suggestive of the exploitative nature of European colonizers to grab and control the land of the new world.

Moreover, Lina resists the “patriarchal [and racist] outlook of the world personified by Vaark”—an outlook that could have certainly disrupted her own “self-invention” (Gallego-Duran 108). She survives despite the unspeakable horrors of her past as well as the dehumanizing traumas of colonization, by constructing a self in the face of destruction, and by insisting on life. Lina is also the only person, capable of guessing Vaark’s probable downfall due to his exploitation of nature. She is intimately connected with nature and land and when Jacob takes the decision of cutting down as many as fifty trees for construction of the new house, her folk wisdom instinctively alerts her: “killing trees in that number, without asking their permission, of course his efforts would stir up malfortune (M 44). Lina’s ominous anticipation proves to be correct as Jacob dies during the final stage of the construction. Lina dislikes the pompousness of Jacob in building a “monument to himself” (42), and feels proud of the collectivism of her tribe where “everyone had anything and no one had everything” (58).

Unlike other novels, in A Mercy, Morrison is found to foreground the life and culture of the Native Americans who were marginalised in their own place due to the hegemonic culture. Their untold history of exploitation, or more
appropriately uprootment is carefully synthesized through the character of Lina within the novel. Lina endorses the folk values of early American life on the verge of colonial modernity. Morrison reveals through Lina the servile and integrationist nature of the Native Indians which is responsible for the complete loss of their authentic identity. Native Americans “were regarded as fair game for exploitation, conquest, and ultimate dispossession of their territorial and political independence by competing European powers in quest of expanding their empires in the New World” (Williams 13).

Morrison also throws light on the Native Indian way of servitude and self-definition through the character of Lina which provides a contrast to the blacksmith’s Africanist presence as the “ostensible Other”(Fultz 131). Both Lina and blacksmith have oppositional impact in the process of self-realization of the black slave girl Florens. Lina compensates the maternal rejection of Florens with her motherly care and warns her against the fatal attraction to the blacksmith. But, Florens refuses to listen to her as she is totally overpowered by her “bleating desire beyond sense, without conscience” to have the blacksmith, who is “too shiny, way too tall, both arrogant and skilled”(58). Lina realized the destructive impact of the free blackman on Florens as “she refused to see that she hankered after a man that had not troubled to tell her good buy”(59).

In *A Mercy*, Morrison highlights the characteristic opposition between the two resources of folk knowledge serving as alternative way of thinking available in front of Florens to assist her in self-realization. The blacksmith is the representation of the free black spirit, self-reliant and attractive. On the other hand, Lina despite having the indigenous knowledge to survive in the wilderness of New World, fails to be self-reliant and ends up being serviceable to the Europeans. Morrison skilfully brings out the pathos of her situation: both Lina and beech trees have lived for years on Vaark’s property, but, as she realizes, “You [beech tree] and I, this land is our home . . . but unlike you I am exile here” (*M* 57). Lina is an exile in her home; she is homeless in her own homeland. A great injustice is perpetrated against her when she is uprooted from her native culture and transplanted into a foreign one. Her consequent loss of identity is complete since we never know what her real name is and she cannot remember it.
Besides race prejudices and skin color, poverty keeps the female servants in *A Mercy*, low in status. Lina is penniless and therefore must serve others in order to derive some sustenance. Whether or not Rebekka treats Lina well, the latter must mutely keep serving the former; although in the very beginning, the two acquire a dislike for each other, they soon become good companions on a lonely farm; but later, after the widow Rebekka becomes a religious zealot and mistreats Lina, she can neither say nor do anything about it. Lina’s secured position in the Vaark house is reduced to “much more of an Other” (Valkeakari 121) after the master’s death.

After Jacob’s demise, the tiny women’s community begins to fall apart, mostly because of “the era’s rigid gender roles: the New World being very little, if any, less patriarchal than the Old, the women’s group cannot exist as an independent unit once the male head of the household is gone” (Valkiakari 120). During Rebekka’s struggle with smallpox, Lina’s musings on her own, Sorrow, and Florens’s shared predicament speak to the consequences of the era’s gender arrangement for women and girls, especially for those in bondage or servitude:

> Don’t die, Miss. Don’t. Herself, Sorrow, a newborn and maybe Florens—three unmastered women and an infant out here, alone, belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone. None of them could inherit; none was attached to a church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters, if they stayed on after Mistress died, subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile. (58)

The insecure life of the three women after the death of the master reveals the helpless plight of women in colonial America who can never shape the world rather the world shapes them. On the other hand, Morrison provides a sharp contrast to the vulnerability of the women through the character of the free black man, a dignified personality capable of making others envy by his self-sufficiency. The white indentured servants Willard and Scully are surprised to see him to be “paid for his work” (148) by their master. Willard’s displeasure with the blacksmith is eventually reduced by his behaviour. The black man defied the social hierarchy and started calling Willard as Mr. Bond that promptly helped to elevate the social position of an indentured white servant with a sense of self.
respect. Lina despises him for something she never seen an African do “he looked directly at mistress”(43). She also criticises Vaark due to his failure to maintain his racial hierarchy in his relationship with a black man because he “behaves as though the blackman was his brother” (58). Lina learnt from the experience of staying with the Europeans “that for them only children and loved ones could be looked in the eye; for all others it was disrespect or threat”(43). Though Vaark and Rebekka were generous enough and pleased with his work to take note of his nonchalant behaviour but “Lina alone saw the peril, but there was no one to complaint to” (58). Lina feels insecure as her motherly possessiveness over Florens is challenged by the presence of the blackman as the love sick girl is obsessively drawn by the fatal attraction of him. Lina alert from her own experience about the uncertainty of the passionate affair of Florence with the blacksmith: “Men have two hungers. The beak that grooms also bites” (103). Lina felt the threatening effect of the blackman’s entry into Vaark house even after his physical departure. She attempted to enlighten Florens about the ruinous effect of her obsession towards “a man that had not troubled to tell her goodbye”(59). For Sorrow, the mongrelized servant, the blackman “seemed complete, unaware of his effect”(123). Thus, without giving the black man the scope to voice his version of story, Morrison leaves room for the readers to speculate and muse over the blackman’s ethereal existence within the narrative framework. His display of folk knowledge and disturbing presence in Vaark house that challenges the order of the house and paves the way for the remaining sequence of the story.

The blacksmith has tremendous influence Florens’s self realization as she undergoes a complete psychological transformation in the course of her journey to meet him. During the course of her journey Florens becomes conscious of her own identity which is still defined by others. Florens comes across the reality of her worthless existence as a female black slave in front of others including her black lover which later on has terrible impact on her personality—“Florens’s desire for the blacksmith offers the opportunity for transformation of the self as separate from a sub/ob/ject other than herself” (Fultz 139). Lina was “the only one alert to the breakdown the disruption, the shattering a free black man would cause” (71). As the wise voice of reason, Lina could foresee that the blacksmith
is just as blind to Florens as the evangelical villagers whom she came across during her journey. These people notice but do not see or recognize her as human. Florens becomes aware of her status as something other than human for the first time when she knocks on the door of Mrs. Ealing, a green-eyed, white-skinned, evangelical woman. Mrs. Ealing narrows her eyes and asks if she is “of this earth or elsewhere?” (125). Morrison brings in white Mrs. Ealing who initially mistakes Florens for a demon but she eventually agrees to give her shelter for the night. However, Florens is again mistaken for evil when Mrs. Ealing’s visitors are frightened so much by Florens’s blackness that “one of the women covers her eyes saying God help us. The little girl wails and rocks back and forth…One woman speaks saying I have never seen a human this black…It is true says another. The Black Man is among us” (131). Because of her black skin, Florens is misrecognized over and over again as an evil demon that needs to be hunted and killed. Not even Rebekka Vaark’s letter of permission to travel fully convinces them that she is human. The letter by Rebekka is meant to justify not just Florens’s right to passage but whatever she might need to continue her travels. Significantly, the letter does not identify Florens by name but referring as “the female person into whose hands [the letter] has been placed. Florens’s very identity was in question and so the villagers who visited widow Earling’s house to enquire her own daughter Jane’s suspicious wandering eye, instead started scrutinising Florens’s body: “Without touching they tell me to what to do. To show them my teeth, my tongue…They look under my arms, between my legs. They circle me, lean down to inspect my feet. Naked under their examination I watch for what is in their eyes. No hate is there or scare or disgust but they are looking at me my body across distances without recognition. Swine look at me with more connection when they raise their heads from the trough” (133). These witch hunters at Widow Ealing’s house can notice Florens because of her black skin, but do not see or understand her as human. As Shirley Ann Stave argues, this refusal to “acknowledge their commonality” and to “see Florens’s ability to speak their language, even to read, as evidence of a shared humanity, the witch hunters must render Florens invisible and alien to maintain their own delusion of superiority” (Stave 146). Thus, this racist white gaze reduces Florens’s black
female body to little more than a thing to be ciphered ironically revealing each part of her, examining every fine detail, but never actually seeing or recognizing. Eventually the suspected victim of witch hunt, the wayward eyed daughter Jane saves Florens from the wrath of the free separatists. Jane’s merciful act of saving her makes Florens realise the meaning of freedom. Jane tells Florens that her neighbours “look at you, and forget about me”, as she is leading Florens to the stream that leads to the hemlet of her lover. By the time Florens finds the blacksmith, then, she is eager to reconstruct her disillusioned self through the strength of her love. At first, in the blacksmith’s house, Florens expects that she will be both seen and loved: “here I am not the one to throw out…No one screams at the sight of me. With you my body is pleasure is safe is belonging. I can never not have you have me” (161). Florens’s feelings of belonging are, however, disrupted by the blacksmith’s newly adopted son who strikes in Florens’s a sense of fear and jealousy. Florens once again faces the fear of abandonment and nonrecognition and dreams that she has no reflection: “I make me go nearer, lean over, clutching the grass for balance. Grass that is glossy, long and wet. Right away I take fright when I see my face is not there. Where my face should be is nothing. I put a finger in and watch the water circle. I put my mouth close enough to drink or kiss but I am not even a shadow there. Where is it hiding? Why is it?” (M 162). Much has been written about this particular scene in *A Mercy* and scholars have interpreted it many different ways. For Wardi, Florens clutches “the grass for balance” because she longs for a sense of home and belonging. As Wardi argues, however, Florens is “destabilized by her nonappearance” because she “cannot be at home in seventeenth century America” (26). Wardi maintains that Florens’s dream “reinforces her perpetual state of displacement, foreshadowing her expulsion from the blacksmith’s home” (26). Perhaps the simplest interpretation is that the absence of her reflection symbolizes her “lack of self and identity” (Vega-Gonzalez 126). While both these scholars offer salient analyses, Florens’s nightmare of erasure in the surface of the water seems also to speak to the ways in which she has internalized her repeated failure to be recognized and seen through the eyes of others. Morrison
suggests here that looking into the mirror for self-affirmation is no better than looking into the eyes of others.

Florens’s internalized invisibility makes it difficult for Florens to recognize and distinguish herself from Malaik’s corn-husk doll: “His fingers cling to the doll. I think that must be where his power is. I take it away and place it on a shelf too high for him to reach...The doll is not on the shelf. It is abandon in a corner like a precious child no person wants. Or no. Maybe the doll is sitting there hiding. Hiding from me. Afraid” (M 164). As in the dream, Florens fails to recognize herself and even in reality her disillusionment leads her to consider herself as Malaik’s doll. At first, Florens sees the self that was abandoned by her mother, but then she sees the doll as the reflection of her that previously was hiding from her in her nightmare. This psychological break with reality causes Florens to lose her temper with Malaik, who gets severely injured at her hand just as the blacksmith returns from curing Rebekka. Furious, the blacksmith tells Florens to leave “because you are a slave...you have become one...Your head is empty and your body is wild... Own yourself, woman, and leave us be” (166). In this dialogue between Florens and the blacksmith, Florens is forced, for the first time, to face a definition of her that does not include him. Instead, the blacksmith defines her as a “slave,” “wild,” and “empty” (166). Florens, however, resolves to never again “[live] the dying inside. No not again. Not ever. Feathers lifting. I unfold. The claws scratch and scratch until the hammer is in my hand” (167). In this significant shift in the narrative, Florens essentially rejects the version of herself defined by the blacksmith, who hates and rebukes her. According to Cantiello: “when the blacksmith rejects her, he frames her enslavement as her own doing: she has become a slave to him, to her impulses” (172) and considers her “head is empty and [her]body is wild”(M 141). Morrison is using the character the free black man to represent the status of the free blacks in the colonies during in the mid 1600s. The blacksmith’s place in the text and his condemnation of Florens “subvert[s] the logic of racial slavery” (Berlin 38). Morrison is distancing the free black man from the black woman slave in an attempt to separate race from slavery. In the 1690s being black cannot be interpreted as being a slave. The black man was conscious of his position and
threatened by Florens’s passionate love which might be resulted in his enslavement. He is not considerate enough to understand the cause of Florens’s violent behaviour “Identifying her as ontologically depraved rather than trying to understand her vices as vices of human being who has been politically and economically oppressed, the blacksmith, a freed black man defines Florens, an enslaved black woman, as an absolute negative, a nobody of “no consequence in [his] world” (Karanvata 736).

Blacksmith’s rejection finally closes all possibilities of love and belonging for Florens and she accepts her condition by arousing her unrecognised self. She no longer relies upon the image of her in blacksmith’s eyes or the reflective surface of the water, Morrison suggests that she’s ready to begin her project of self-making. Here, Florens figuratively unfolds her wings and grasps the hammer, claiming both her freedom and agency. Florens immortalizes her newfound agency by carving it into the walls of a room in Vaark’s withered grand mansion: “There is no more room is this room. These words cover the floor…I am holding light in one hand and carving letter with the other. My arms ache but I have need to tell you this…Maybe one day you will [learn to read], if so, come to this farm again…and come inside this talking room in daylight” (188). According to Wardi, Florens’s act of inscription “can be read as an awareness of the power of dominant imperial discourse to shape reality, and she maps her own narrative onto the piece of power. Realizing that she has no legitimate claim to place, she not only inserts herself onto the home by occupying it but she marks it has her own. She writes herself and her belonging into being” (34). By inscribing her story on the wall, Florens not only claims a home, but she also establishes her black female subjectivity through the most purely self-referential act of autobiography. Long since analyzed as a space and act of liberation, particularly for women and people of color, autobiography gives “voice and words to personal history and maps the intersection of personal and public spheres of meaning” (Smith and Watson 28). In her final act of self definition, Florens’s refuses to claim a single identity: “See? You are correct. A minha mae too. I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Here me? Slave. Free. I last”
In this evocative and subversive proclamation, Florens embraces her multitudes. In doing so, she embraces her complexity as a black female subject no longer shaped and defined by some dehumanizing external forces. The blacksmith thus works as a catalyst to accelerate the process of Florens’s self realization and eventual liberation: “what his contradictory presence ultimately posits is freedom, as both a positive and negative force”(Carlacio 182). His dismissal allows her to determine her prerogative of freedom and put her story next to his: “You say you see slaves freer than free men. One is a lion in the skin of an ass. The other is an ass in the skin of a lion. That is the withering inside that enslaves and opens the door for what is wild”(M 158). Ultimately, Florens’s journey to find the blacksmith ends up as a journey to find herself.

The quest for identity theme runs through the other three selected novels of Morrison—*Tar Baby, Beloved* and *Jazz* respectively but unlike the above discussed novels the folk cultural heritage is not that functional in the process of identity formation of the characters in these three novels. In *Beloved* the lost identity of Sethe is recovered through rememory and both physical and psychological healing of the ghosts of past which are too terrible to relate. *Jazz* is a novel where the black migrant couple Joe and Violet Trace attempt to form their identity in Harlem during the violent period of the great urban migration. Except the spirit of jazz inherent in the fictional narrative there is less folkloric references to which the Trace couple could be related. The spirit of the age and the city resembles the rhythm of jazz music, high pitched and played in faster tempo. The Trace couple gets struck by the violent, chaotic and boisterous spirit of the jazz age and that converted them into morally disintegrated and psychologically disturbed human beings. The repressed memories of Joe and Violet’s disturbed past in South further heightens their disillusionment thus instigating them to commit crimes. However, they become successful in asserting their identity by staying within the same urban surrounding that negates their identity instead of going back to their folk roots. In *Tar Baby* though Jadine is confused about her identity but she is a powerful creation of Morrison who rejects her folk based black identity in favour of her adoptive white culture. Through Jadine Morrison attempts to bring into light the cultural confusion of
modern urban blacks regarding the choice of the Afrocentric folk culture over the Eurocentric urban culture. Jadine’s decision to move back to her European background instead of living a folk life with Son and his black community is a revolutionary decision on the part of a black woman. Morrison projects it at Jadine’s personal decision but at the same time she is justifying her choice.
Notes:

1 Some of the studies that have discussed Song of Solomon from a mythic perspective include de Weever, “Toni Morrison’s Use of Fairy Tale”; Harris, “Myth as Structure”, 69-76; Wilfred D. Samuels, “Liminality and the Search for Self in Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon”, Minority Voices, V (1981), 59-68; Gerry Brenner, “Song of Solomon: Rejecting Rank’s Monomyth and Feminism,” in Critical Essays on Toni Morrison, ed. Nellie McKay(Boston,1988), 114-125 etc.

2 Keith Byerman argues in Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black fiction as “names have a concrete history; they kept alive the complex, painful, disorderly, creative reality of human experience that dominant logocentric structures seek to oppress. They register the hidden expressions of life in defiance of the controlling word. They are also liberating and magical”.

3 Griot is African tribal storyteller. The griot's role was to preserve the genealogies and oral traditions of the tribe. Griots were usually among the oldest men. In places where written language is the prerogative of the few, the place of the griot as cultural guardian is still maintained. In Senegal, for example, the griot—without resorting to fantasy—recites poems or tells stories of warriors, drawing on his own sources of inspiration. Whereas, in Greek religion, Demeter is a consort of Zeus and the goddess of agriculture, especially grain. In addition to appearing as a goddess of agriculture, Demeter was sometimes worshiped as a divinity of the Underworld and as a goddess of health, birth, and marriage. (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2009 Ready Reference. Chicago : Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2009.)
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