Images of women healing ill or injured women, or of women healing themselves, have become one of the central tropes in contemporary African American women’s novels. Authors such as Gayl Jones, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, and Toni Morrison utilise the trope of healing to measure past and present oppressions of women of color and to discuss what can and what cannot be healed, forgotten and forgiven. Much focus is put on how healing could be accomplished. Some hurt, they say, is so distant that it cannot be reached; other hurt goes so deep that there may be no possibility of healing...some pain can only be healed through a reconnection to the African American community and culture (Gunilla T. Kester 114)

In Morrison’s reconceptualization of African American history, she attempts to visualise both the physical and psychological impact of the dehumanising process of slavery on the black Americans. According to Trudier Harris: “… ownership and possession are characteristics of slavery. They reflect the monetary exchange involved in that system of dehumanization as well as the psychological control usually attendant upon the physical imprisonment” (Harris, “Escaping Slavery” 330). Along with the right of ownership of slave bodies and labour, slave masters enjoyed the psychological advantage of convincing the slaves of the benefits to be derived from the institution of slavery and it is this that led to their eventual submission. These “mind-controlling tactics” took different forms including the destruction of family and linguistic groups in the plantation system. The slave masters took advantage of the loneliness of the slaves who were cut off from all links to their kith and kin. Slave masters did this to make their slaves totally dependent on their masters. They further kept on designing ways to “break” the slaves by innovative techniques of cruelty like whipping, “branding a letter on the face or back, cropping an ear or a finger, confining them or selling them “down the river”, which has connotations of horror that far outstripped any actual physical punishment” (Harris “Escaping
Slavery but Not Its Images” (330). These torture techniques were applied consistently to make the slave realize and accept that the masters possessed them both physically and mentally. White masters were capable of erasing, if not destroying, the history and memory of the slaves. As Elain Scarry claims:

What the process of torture does is to split the human being into two, to make emphatic the ever present but, except in the extremity of sickness and death, only latent distinction between a “me” and “my body”. The “self” or “me”, which is experienced on the one hand as more private, more essentially at the centre, and on the other hand as participating across the bridge of the body in the world is “embodied” in the voice, in language. The goal of the torturer is to make the one, the body, emphatically and crushingly present by destroying it, and to make the other, the voice, absent by destroying it” (48-49)

During the post slavery age, most slaves repressed their unspeakable memories of slavery in an attempt to disconnect themselves from their traumatic past. This repression and dissociation deprived the slaves from forming a true identity even after the attainment of liberty. Though physically free they remained mentally preoccupied by the horrors of slavery. The terrible impact of slavery never allowed the slave to form a complete identity, he turns into a fragmented “self that is no self” (Boudreau 462). These unspoken traumas had to be healed or recovered for the construction of the black identity.

In an article “Rediscovering Black History”, written on the occasion of the publication of The Black Book, Morrison speaks of the “complicated psychic power one has to exercise to resist devastation” (18). Morrison is here speaking not only of slavery but the lives of the blacks after slavery. One of the best remedial measures for the blacks to overcome the destructive terrors of slavery was their folk culture. For all marginalised groups their folk culture has always served as the means to resist mainstream ideology that annihilates all alternative sources of knowledge. It is the healing power of folk culture that has always helped black Americans to endure slavery. The African slaves survived physically and psychologically the trauma of slavery through a subtle way of self-assertion – by retaining some of their traditional practices. During slavery,
the older slaves who could no longer work and were given the task of looking after the children of slaves used to tell stories to them. These stories served to remind children born as slaves of their glorious past in Africa and helped them to disregard their present pains. They used to sing songs like blues and gospels to lessen their grief; used folk medicines to heal their wounds and get rid of devils that might harm them. These folk practices helped to strengthen their group solidarity as well as sustain their individuality. Even after slavery, folk culture continued to assist African Americans in their process of recovering from the trauma of the past. The ghosts of slavery could be overcome only through remembering the past instead of escaping from it. Arnold Rampersad describes the recovery of history as both a national and a personal necessity:

Admitting and exploring the reality of slavery is necessarily painful for black Americans, but only by doing can he or she begin to understand himself or herself and African and African-American culture in general. The normal piece of the evasion of the fact of slavery is intellectual and spiritual death. Only by grappling with the meaning and legacy of slavery can the imagination, recognizing finally the temporality of the institution, begin to transcend it (123).

Morrison in her novels “negotiates the legacy of slavery as a national trauma, and as an intensely personal trauma as well” (Krumholz, 80). Morrison delves into the stories of black folk to explore the resources of memory and imagination as tools of strength and healing. She uses folk rituals as a model for healing process—“rituals function as formal events in which symbolic representations—such as dance, song, story and other activities—are spiritually endowed with the power to shape the real relations in the world” (Krumholz, 80).

In her fifth novel *Beloved*, Morrison uses folk rituals of healing that are in sharp contrast with the dominant western traditions. The psychological recovery of the protagonist Sethe happens due to the ritual of healing in the form of her “rememory” and confrontation with the repressed past. Morrison depicts in the novel both the psychological and physical pain of Sethe to overcome the unspeakable horrors of slavery conceptualised in the form of the ghost of her dead daughter Beloved. She fails to confront her past shredded with the crime of
killing her own daughter to save her from slavery and the memory frequently haunts her in the form of a ghost since “anything dead coming back to life hurts” (Morrison, *Beloved* 42).

*Beloved* is the story of Sethe, a slave woman who escaped from slavery. Shortly after her escape, members from the plantation named Sweet Home in which she worked came to take her and her four children back to the plantation. In despair, Sethe kills her young daughter by cutting her throat, and attempts to murder her other children in order to prevent them from returning to slavery. The majority of the novel is about the visitation of the ghost of the daughter that she killed. The ghost returns in the form of a woman who would be the daughter’s age if she were alive at the time, approximately twenty years old. Throughout the rest of the novel Beloved begins to absorb all the attention and energy of those around her, especially her mother. This continues to the point where Sethe has lost her job and spent all her money buying things to please Beloved. Ultimately, at the call for help by Sethe’s living daughter Denver, the African American women in the community exorcise Beloved.

The ghost in *Beloved* is acknowledged as real from the very first moments of the narrative. Unlike the European writers Morrison is not giving any scientific explanation on the existence of the ghost. She makes the readers accept the reality of ghost by simply stating that Denver’s house is haunted, and the reader must either accept the apparitions or consider them as illogical. Morrison makes use of the African traditional belief in ghosts as real but at the same time raises questions regarding such realistic creation of ghost that challenges our ideas about madness and reality. Morrison attempts to justify the appearance of the ghost in *Beloved* as a necessity to begin the process of “rememory” so essential to both Denver and Sethe’s quest for selfhood, identity and ultimate survival. Morrison writes, “If we don’t keep in touch with the ancestors...we are in fact, lost” (*Beloved* 344). The “haunt” of the ghost in the novel is instrumental in personal and communal healing since it helped in the historical recovery and reconstruction of the self.
Morrison has an Ohio upbringing, and so she situates her narrative in that background. In an expansive canvas of Beloved, set in 1873 and the years prior to Emancipation, Morrison’s relates the unique black American experience of race, community and culture in relation to the larger American society. Her focus in the novel is not limited to Denver’s family but the entire black community, living or dead. The interplay of past and present, magic and realism reveals the rich cultural heritage of African American folklore behind the text. The appearance of the ghost in the opening pages of the novel is suggestive of Morrison’s concern to explore the black cultural values as an alternative way of thinking. It is in such a context Morrison asserts the reality of ghost at the beginning of the novel:

124 was spiteful. Full of baby’s venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims...So Sethe and the girl did what they could and what the house permitted...Together they waged a perfunctory battle against the outrageous behaviour of the place; against turned-over slop jars, smacks on the behind, and gusts of sour air” (3)

The poltergeist eventually appears physically as the nineteen year old Beloved whom Sethe killed herself. She is the embodiment of Sethe’s repressed guilt, the boys’ buried fear that their mother will again attempt to kill them, the black female community’s persistent pain and suppression, and a recreation of the spirits of the “sixty million and more”(dedication, Beloved) Black Africans who died in different circumstances during the middle passage. As Denver tells Paul D, Beloved is the ghost of her dead sister but at times she is “more” (266).

Beloved is the ghost stirring from the collective unconsciousness of the entire black community. She is also serving as the creation of Denver’s disturbed psyche. Although Sethe’s importance in the novel is unquestionable, Ashraf Rushdy argues that Denver is the “most important character in Morrison’s revisionist strategy...the site of hope in Morrison’s novel. She is the daughter of history”(571). Ultimately, Denver is integrated into what Virginia Hamilton calls the “hopescape” of her community(“On Being a Black Writer” 17), since through Denver, Morrison builds the connection of haunted personality of Sethe with the
community which is performing the “clearing” of the ghost of Beloved to make her free.

In creating a ghost like Beloved, Morrison seems to accord with Sigmund Freud’s premise that a recurrent experience of the uncanny or the supernatural is the result of repressed anxieties: “Spirits and demons are only projections of man’s own emotional impulses...It is, however, safe to assume that tendency [to witness supernatural phenomena] will be intensified when projection promises to bring with its advantage of mental relief” (Totem and Taboo 92). Denver experiences a form of relief because of the catalytic appearance of Beloved. But the work does not support Freud’s conception of such apparitions as symptoms of madness, paranoia, or hysteria, rather seems closer to Carl Gustav Jung’s psychological explanation of supernatural occurrences. Jung asserts that a person experiencing paranormal phenomena is, in effect, manifesting some link between the conscious and the unconscious, especially if memories of pain or trauma have been repressed and particularly if the subject is an adolescent and a female in “an acutely disturbed state” (Branden 58).

Jung further suggests that creating the apparition of poltergeist is an attempt by the psyche to erase its burden through a process of memory, of bringing to the light of consciousness of the unpleasant past. Thus the psychological event is explained as “synchronicity” since “there is an apparent simultaneity between the act of perceiving and the act of extrasensory perceived event” (Jaffe 187). In Complex/Archetype/Symbol, Jolande Jacobi clarifies the definition of Jungian “synchronicity” as:

The phenomena, sometimes interpreted as “miracles” and sometimes as “pure chance”, in which inner perceptions (forebodings, visions, dreams etc.) show a meaningful simultaneity with outward experiences, regardless of whether they are situated in the present, past or future—e.g. the phenomena designed as telepathy—no longer belong wholly to this “middle region“ of the conscious mind, but are manifestations of that “border zone” in which the conscious and unconscious realms touch or overlap, as occurs when the threshold of consciousness is lowered and unconscious contents penetrate spontaneously into the area of
consciousness. Thus, in a manner of speaking, they can be experienced and noted simultaneously, since the acausality and space-time relativity prevailing in the unconscious simultaneously enter and act upon the field of consciousness. What we have here is a linking of events which is not of a casual nature, but calls for a different principle of explanation” (62-63).

Beloved is such a synchronistic phenomenon, spirit who is situated at once within historical, temporal and spirit worlds. Furthermore, according to Jung, with synchronicity comes a therapeutic response to the repressed past; it is recognised and comprehended, and the subject may come to terms with these memories and himself. Furthermore, where Morrison diverges from Fraud’s theories but converges with Jung’s is in the acceptance of haunting as real. Fraud maintains that hallucinatory visions are associated with the animalistic phase in human development and are particularly prevalent among “primitive” people. As human beings continue through the religious and ultimately the scientific phases, such visions will no longer appear because individuals will have achieved maturity and “adjusted [themselves] to reality” (Totem and Taboo 90). In contrast, Jung views paranormal phenomena as “psychic facts”; synchronicity “does not interpret reality and the unreal as opposites but comprehends them as a unity; thus the synchronistic phenomenon remains what it is: a natural paradox” (Jaffe, 205). Seeing ghosts, therefore, is not necessarily an indication of an abnormal or disturbed state, but may simply be part of the healing process.

Alongwith, the Eurocentric reading of the supernatural phenomena, one is inclined to consider the African and African American cosmology and folklore that informs Morrison’s Beloved. In African Religions and Philosophy, John Mbiti writes: “the spiritual world of African people is very densely populated with spiritual beings, spirits and the living dead...the spiritual universe is a unit with the physical, and...these two intermingle and dovetail into each other so much that it is not easy, or even necessary, at times to draw the distinction or separate them” (75) Mbiti defines a living dead as “a person who is physically dead but alive in the memory of those who knew him in his life as well as being alive in the world of spirits. So long as the living-dead is thus remembered, he is
in the state of personal immorality” (25). When there is no longer anyone who
recalls him by name, the process of dying is completed. But, the living-dead do
not vanish out of existence; they now enter into the state of “collective
immortality”. This is the state of the spirits of the spirits who are no longer
formal members of the human families.

These folk beliefs related to spirits were carried to the New World by the
slaves on the slave ships to be reborn in the oral folktales and literature of the
African Americans: “…in the transplanted African community, among the most
the most important traditions was slaves’ strong conviction that the spirit world
was an integral part of the life force” (Stucky 43). Furthermore, as Geraldine
Smith-Wright asserts, the survival of the African beliefs about the supernatural
“is paradigmatic of Blacks’ survival in the Diaspora.... The ghost tale as it
evolved during and after slavery described, often metaphorically, creative ways
that Blacks coped with White oppression and also suggested codes of conduct to
strengthen the Black community” (145).

This idea of the spirit world as a source of strength and resistance closely
correlates with what Morrison has to say on the subject. In an interview with
Christina David, Morrison describes her use of the supernatural in Beloved:

My own use of enchantment simply comes because that’s the way the
world was for me and for the black people that I knew. In addition to the
very shrewd, down-to-earth, efficient way in which they did things and
survived things, there was this other knowledge or perception, always
discredited but nevertheless there, which informed their sensibilities and
clarified their activities. It formed a kind of cosmology that was
perceptive as well as enchanting, and so it seemed impossible for me to
write about black people and eliminate that simply because it was
unbelievable (415).

Morrison goes on to defend these spiritual forces as real even if too often
dismissed as magical and thus not empirically justifiable. She describes family
members who “had visitation...it not only made them for me the most interesting
people in the world...it was an enormous resource for the resolution of certain
kinds of problems” (Morrison, “Interview with Christina Davis” 416).
Morrison ensures Beloved’s physical as well as psychological presence by shaping her as the embodiment of the repressed traumatic memory of black community and at the same time she is a dead ancestor coming back to life. It is relevant to mention here that, in Morrison’s *Beloved*, African American cultural and political issues can be distinguished from the ways of characterisation. Through the characters Morrison attempts to reveal their personal and collective struggle to overcome all racist mistreatments they faced during slavery times. Micheal Ryan reveals that:

To read Morrison’s *Beloved* is necessarily to ask what it means to be black and African descended in a largely white America… It is to ask how the long story of mistreatment of one social group by another weighs upon the present. And it is to confront the ghosts of one’s culture, the ghost of the overseer, and the ghost of the slave as well as to remember what shouldn’t be forgotten (148).

Morrison wakes up those repressed ghosts that have been haunting African American society for so long. In the novel, the ghost of Sethe’s daughter is a metaphor for all those slaves who suffered with the atrocities of slavery. Morrison’s narrative structure in *Beloved* illustrates how she portrays the character Beloved in order to represent those thousands of slaves who were forgotten and their stories were neglected and erased from people’s minds. Morrison’s narrative voice points out:

Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she can be lost because no one looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don’t know her name? Although she has claim, she was not claimed…. They forgot her like a bad dream. After they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them …Remembering seemed unwise …So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep…They can touch it if they like, but they don’t, because they know things will never be the same if they do. (*Beloved*, Epilogue 323-324)

The way Morrison depicts Beloved’s presence throughout the novel as being sad, lonely and rebuked, and also the way Beloved’s actions showed how she craved
Sethe’s love and presence emphasize Beloved’s connection with the other dead slaves who had their stories abruptly interrupted and were deprived of the love of their mothers and families. Through the personal “disremembered and unaccounted for” histories of her characters, Morrison reveals how slaves were deprived of their mates, children, and family connections. For instance, Morrison’s narrative voice gives the testimony of how Baby Suggs’s family as well as other people she knew “had been hanged, rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized” (23). The novel exposes physical and psychological scars, lynching, murdering, and the humiliation of millions of people who were treated as commodity.

Morrison’s processes of remembering the African American past represents a possibility of redemption and healing of physical and psychological wounds. Morrison’s central characters have to rememorize and face their past in order to get maturity, release their personal and collective traumas, and transform their own present. In such a context, Beloved is an essential figure constructed by Morrison in order to bring to the surface all histories that have been interrupted or forgotten. She is a testimony of personal and collective slave stories that have survived mortality, being repeated over and over in order not to be forgotten, but remembered in a way of bearing witness about the brutality of Slavery era. Through Beloved’s presence, Morrison’s characters are constrained to remember and share their past experiences, traumas, and histories in a way that brings healing and transformation to their lives. Morrison emphasizes in the novel the necessity for the African Americans to confront, remember, and re-examine their historical past of slavery in order to get individual and collective healing through the mutual sharing of information.

In an interview to Gail Caldwell, Morrison points out that “the past, until you confront it, until you live through it, it keeps coming back in other forms. The shapes redesign themselves in other constellations, until you get a chance to play it over again” (Taylor-Guthrie 241). Morrison’s Beloved is a way of getting it over by remembering the past, confronting it, and bringing transformation to the present. According to Roland Walter: “the narrativization of deliberately forgotten traumatic events creates a space for possible healing as it provides a
consensual reality and collective memory through which fragments of personal memory can be assembled, reconstructed and displayed with a tacit assumption of validity” (243). Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, has to rememorize and narrate her painful traumas in order to transform and reconstruct her dismembered and fragile present. Just after retelling her horrible experiences from slavery she is able to release herself from such psychological wounds. Then she may instigate a healing process, not only for her, but also for her community that needed to accept her again.

As Morrison’s narrative shows, it is necessary to recover these traumatic, forgotten, and mutilated histories in order to remember and rearticulate the pieces of African Americans history which still remain maimed. Therefore, the act of remembering the African American’s past is also intimately connected to the act of rememorizing their individual and collective past. After putting the fragments of their collective history together, African Americans are able to relate and rearticulate their own personal histories. In these processes of remembering and retelling the African American experience of slavery, the ghost of Beloved is crucial to establish a connection between natural and supernatural, past and present, and also between the world of the living and the world of the ancestors. She represents the living memory of African American ancestors, and her presence functions as a healing force that compels the other characters to retell their stories. Through their remembrances or “rememories” (B 36) from the past, they can reshape and re-signify their fragmented identities, and reach a possibility of redemption and healing of their physical and psychological wounds.

Beloved’s return awakens all Sethe’s losses—the loss of her family, of her community life, and especially of her self-love. By trying to bury her past, Sethe loses the connection with her ancestors and with her collective identity. She feels exiled and homeless in her own house and neighbourhood. Therefore, Beloved represents a possibility of a reawakening of past experiences, and, through her voice, Morrison also creates an aesthetical and political engagement with the African American historical past. Beloved’s fragmented discourse is a powerful testimony of the past, which reflects not only her individual experience, but also recreates a connection with the world of her ancestors, which is
represented by the suffering of slaves during The Middle Passage. Beloved represents all those unnamed, disembodied and unvoiced slaves who died during The Middle Passage. In fragmented passages of the novel, the use of the personal pronoun “we” reinforces Beloved’s voice as a representation of the collective voice and memory of murdered slaves who were thrown into the water: “they are not crouching now we are they are floating on the water” (212).

Concerning Beloved’s role as an instrument of healing for her mother, it can benoticed, throughout the novel, how she induces Sethe to talk about her traumatic experiences from the past. Thus, the readers become aware of Sethe’s childhood as a slave, the lynching of her mother, the sufferings in Sweet Home and her escape from there, the dismembering of her family, among other painful remembrances. Her memories are painful and hurting, but they are, at the same time, necessary to her process of healing. Sethe’s past haunts her, but she becomes aware that it is impossible just to continue hiding, forgetting, or even avoiding it, because it is somehow “waiting for” (35) her. Later she is able to understand that her past is connected with her present as she says: “Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. Some things you forget. Other things you never do … Places, places are still there… Nothing ever dies … it is still there, waiting for you” (36). After recognizing the remarkable connection between her past and her frail present, Sethe involuntarily initiates a series of actions of healing and her fragmented rememory seems unconsciously enable her to transform and restore her present by questioning herself about what was valuable or not. By rememorizing her past, Sethe realized how slavery did not allow her to have her mother’s presence, and she found out how she still lacked her mother’s love and companionship. She also remembered how she was scared of not recognizing her own mother, because they were not allowed to talk to each other or even to see each other.

Through Sethe’s process of retelling her past stories, her displaced and fragmented identity and self could be restored and resignified. She might be able to reconnect herself with her collective identity that also needed to be restored. By bringing to the surface her traumas, she could rehabilitate herself and restart her life as part of the collective identity. Her isolation from her community and
her dislocated self were revealed in her fragmented narrative from her remembrances of her traumatic past. In an turbulent way, she remembers her most hurtful experiences from the past: her mother’s and her daughter’s death. Sethe’s disjointed voice, full of ruptures, reveals how unpleasant it is both to speak about the unspeakable and to remember a past that cannot be spoken:

Beloved, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don’t have to explain a thing. I don’t have time to explain before because it had to be done quick. Quick...but my love was tough and she back now. I knew she would be...I won’t never let her go. I’ll explain to her, even though I don’t have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn’t killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. When I explain she will understand, because she understands everything already. I’ll tend her as no mother ever tended a child (B 236).

Sethe’s remembrances about that horrendous past were so agonizing that they came in broken and disconnected parts in which the death of her mother was fused with her daughter’s. Indeed, Sethe’s real healing initiates with her reintegration into her community, at the end of the novel, because being part of a community again means that she was not alone anymore, as she felt after her mother’s and daughter’s deaths. The community ritual of rescuing her is a symbol of forgiveness.

Morrison brings in the community of Cincinnati, Ohio as the agency of physical healing of Sethe by ostracizing the ghost of Beloved from the grey and white house of 124, Bluestone Road. The community of women plays a significant role in throwing the ghost out from Sethe’s mind and home. However, the community was always already but Sethe failed to connect with them due to her guilt ridden trauma and struggled alone for almost nineteen years to get rid of the physical and psychological ghost. Once she kills her baby is jailed and then freed, all the while failing to ask the community to aid her, the community shuns her and her children. For her failure to seek the assistance of the community, of the village, is perceived as arrogance which cannot be and is not tolerated by the community as a whole and by women in particular. Sethe, for her part, believes
that the community will not help her even if she did ask which, of course, is erroneous. The healing of Sethe and her home takes place mostly as a result of the community of women’s actions in the novel, although Paul D. and Stamp Paid, representing the men of the community, also undergo and aid the healing process. But as in most of Morrison's novels, women take center stage within the community. The men, for the most part, remain nameless except for the two main ones, while readers get a bit closer to the female members of the community who encounter the people and happenings at 124 Bluestone. Since Sethe’s horrible deed occurred, no one has spoken to Sethe or to Denver. In fact, Denver never ventures farther than her front yard. It is Denver who is the victim of this seclusion, for she is starving for friendship and companionship. Although all shun the women of Bluestone, it is the women of the community whom Morrison allows to vent their feelings and beliefs. For one understands that if the women forgive Sethe, then the men will follow suit. The women control the action—they are empowered with the means to make or break this community. Before the community can be healed, however, someone must take the first step forward in this case the role falls to Denver as she is the only one in Sethe’s house who has the presence of mind and the strength of body to do so. She must overcome her great fear of the outside world and take what will be the greatest step of her life out of the front yard. The spirit of her grandmother, Baby Suggs, Holy, empowers Denver, for only when Baby Suggs appears to her and tells her there is no defense against the outside world but to know it and walk out into it anyway (Beloved 244). She understands that she is her mother's only hope of survival, so she ventures forth and accomplishes what her mother never did: she asks the community for help. She first approaches Lady Jones, who taught Denver before the murder of Beloved. She asks her if she might work for her in exchange for extra food. Upon hearing the request, Lady Jones, moved to pity and deep concern, gives her eggs and tea and tells Denver if they all need to eat until Sethe gets well “all you have to do is say so” (Beloved 248). Lady Jones’ words and actions “inaugurated her life in the world as a woman. The trail she followed to get to that sweet thorny place was made up of paper scraps containing the handwritten names of others” (Beloved 248). Denver becomes a woman,
according to Morrison, only when she allows herself to move forward and ask for the help of her community, her extended family. The scraps of paper refer to the names of the women in the community who began to leave food parcels in her front yard and who labelled the dishes so Denver would know where to return them. The gift of food and the subsequent return of the dishes serve as Denver’s rebirth into the community as she begins to make contact with women and thus allows her to become a woman herself. It is yet through another woman of the community that other women learn of Beloved’s presence in Sethe’s house. A woman named Janey, who works for people who once helped both Baby Suggs and Sethe, attains a job for Denver with the Bodwins. Denver tells Janey about Beloved and Janey informs the circle of women who gather to gossip, laugh, complain, and discuss with each other all sorts of life’s occurrences. With the news that the dead baby’s spirit has come back and is destroying Sethe, the women meet to discuss “and assess the situation. They fell into three groups: those that believed the worst; those that believed none of it; and those, like Ella, who thought it through” (*Beloved* 255). Ella is a woman who helped Sethe in the final lap of her escape, but who completely shunned her when Sethe failed to ask the community for help. A strong woman who has been through her own personal hell, she emerges as a pillar of strength and power and wisdom in light of Sethe’s situation. As the women discuss about Beloved and all that she might be and all that Sethe deserves for having killed her, Ella convinces the others that Sethe needs their help. After all, while she respects a ghost who haunts a house through “shaking stuff, crying, smashing and such” (257), she does not like the idea that a ghost would take bodily form and revisit the earth: “She didn’t mind a little communication between the two worlds, but this was an invasion” (*Beloved* 257).

The plan, then, which Ella devises, begins with prayer, as one of the other women suggests. However, Ella knows that it will take more than the individual prayers said individually to rid Sethe of this ghost. So at three in the afternoon on a Friday, thirty women begin to approach 124 Bluestone Road, slowly walking in groups of two or three with objects “Stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts. Others brought Christian faith—
as shield and sword. Most brought a little of both. They had no idea what they would do once they got there” (*Beloved* 257).

This passage is of particular importance and interest because Morrison mixes the old with the new; that is these African American women arm themselves in both ancient African customs and in what can be described as modern American religion. Furthermore, while they are walking toward 124 Bluestone, the narrator tells us that they have no idea what they are going to do once they get there. One may read here that they had no conscious idea of what their actions would be. However, upon arrival and upon seeing Beloved, they know instinctively what to do. Their subconscious knowledge of their ancient African roots takes control as Ella begins to holler over the quiet prayers and murmurings of the other women: “Instantly the kneelers and the standers joined her. They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like”. (*Beloved* 259) They all knew because they all originated from a common ancestor, as many African people believe. As such the community in *Beloved* is linked to its ancient common heritage, a heritage which includes the custom of chanting at funerals, of singing, and swaying while mourning the loss of a loved one. Newbell Puckett notes that “Mourning is an essential, and to be done well it must be spontaneously given in a sort of chant—really another case of spontaneous song” (90). He goes on to report that among Southern African Americans, it is always the women who are the mourners (Puckett 90). Linking his findings of the beliefs of the Southern African Americans to the significance in Africa of these beliefs, he found high degrees of similarities, namely that the more profound display of mourning was done by women (Puckett 90). The noise that the women of Sethe’s community produce serves to aid in the exorcism of Beloved, the evil spirit. For the combination of the women’s chants, songs, and prayers coupled with Sethe’s running away from Beloved, causes Beloved to return to the other world. The women, then, decide to heal the rift between themselves and Sethe, act upon that decision by helping to drive out Beloved and succeed in healing the entire community. Of course, Denver took the first step in the process by reaching out to her neighbours, but in
keeping with the ancient cosmology of African customs, her neighbours, her village, responded without hesitation. As a result Denver blossoms and she confidently walks out into the world with her head held high and claims a place for herself and for her community. She represents all of the hope of the new generation of African Americans, those who embody both individual strength and the strength found within their community. What the community does for Denver and what Denver does for the community creates a balance and restores harmony within their world. Community becomes successful in healing Sethe and enables her to move forward with the memories of the past but also with hope for the future.

Ultimately, Sethe’s complete psychological healing seems to occur because of an important process of the reconstruction and the acceptance of her self-love, as Paul D once affirmed to her: “You your best thing, Sethe. You are”(322). Sethe has to learn how to love herself, and accept herself as a person who needs to give and take love, as her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, had taught her and the other former slaves at the Clearing:

...we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they donot love your flesh. They despise it. They do not love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No moredo they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love you hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ’cause they don’t love that either. You got to love it, You!” (103).

Baby Suggs, holy, who after sixty years of enslavement had her freedom bought by her son Halle, Sethe’s husband. Baby Suggs discovered the meaning of a free life upon crossing the Ohio “that there was nothing like [freedom] in this world” (B 141). Baby Suggs newfound freedom had allowed her to discover her own heartbeat and to occupy her time at 124 “giving advice, passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fuititives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone” (137).
It is through Baby Suggs, holy Sethe is able to garner the exhilarating prospect of community. Baby Suggs leads Sethe to the ritual grounds of the clearing where she as the ritual princess, conducts the rite of cleansing that leads Sethe further to the catharsis she needs and allows her to transcend her liminality. The ritual ground of Clearing “offer the exhilarating prospect of community, protection, progress, learning and religion” (Stepto 391). In the clearing although Baby Suggs would command the children to laugh and man to dance but she would summon the women to “Cry...for the living and the dead. Just Cry” (B 102). At the end of the healing ritual, in which women would eventually stop crying and dance, Baby Suggs words were sacramental, for she “told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine” (102). Above all, she implored them to realize and accept of self-love as the only true value of rebirth for the African Americans.

In Beloved, Morrison is attempting to prepare the ground for Sethe’s spiritual rebirth by recovering her missing connection to the unspeakable past. The past returns in the form of Sethe’s dead daughter Beloved, who comes back from the “other side” (75) eager to join the broken parts of her history. She claims for her place and for the history to which she thinks she belongs. She reclaims her place in Sethe’s history and present life as she emphatically says to her sister Denver: “She is the one I need. You can go but she is the one I have to have... I belong here ” (89). Beloved represents the personal, social, and spiritual unease that involves the era of slavery, in which thousands of slaves were victims of those unspeakable times.

As the narrative suggests, Beloved’s presence symbolizes the past that haunts the present by not being fairly told and analyzed throughout the centuries. It has to be remembered and re-examined in order to be accommodated, otherwise it will continue as fragmented and disconnected rememories that cannot be controlled or forgotten. Thus, in Morrison’s narrative, African Americans’ collective rememories are made alive in Beloved’s broken and disconnected speech. By trying to forget and bury a painful past still alive, African Americans are forced to face the ghosts that will always come to reclaim their histories and
also to remind American society that there is past to be re-examined and restored in order to bring justice and healing of unspeakable wounds.

Much like the rituals of folk healing used in Beloved, Morrison makes references of physical healing, folk healers, and community caring systems in almost all the six selected novels. In The Bluest Eye, Morrison represents the nurturing role of the community in healing the physical pain of Aunt Jimmy. When Aunt Jimmy fell ill after a camp meeting during a rainstorm, her neighbour suggested to Jimmy: “Don’t eat no whites of eggs”, “Drink new milk”, “Chew on this root” (BE108). Jimmy refused to obey such advices and did not recover until M’Dear, the local healer was called in. M’Dear was “a competent and decisive diagnostician”, and generally invited only when the ordinary means of treatments (like—camomile tea, rubbing with liniment or reading the Bible etc.) fail to cure the illness. M’Dear detected that Jimmy had caught a cold in her womb and administered her to “drink pot liquor and nothing else” (BE 108). Jimmy was slowly recovering but one of her neighbours, Essie Foster brought her a peach cobbler. The old lady had taken a piece and the next morning Cholly found her dead. The community suspected that Jimmy died due to the peach cobbler as it was a violation of M’Dear’s prescription of only taking pot liquor and nothing else. The women believed M’Dear “infallible” and Jimmy’s death happened due the deviation from the advice. The alien nature of the peach cobbler interrupted the process of natural cure administered by M’Dear. The black community’s belief in M’Dear and the very description of her is also reflective of the significance of the local healers, conjurers or hoodoo doctors in historical folk communities. These folk healers usually have distinctive physical deformities that distinguish them from the rest of the community. Newbell Niles Puckett in his Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro (1926) writes, that many of the conjurers had one blue eye and one black eye, extremely dark skinned, crippled and lived outside the society. In The Bluest Eye, Morrison projects M’Dear as a “quiet woman who lived in a shack near the woods” (T.B.E, 108).

Cholly was expecting M’Dear to be a “shrivelled and hunched over” because he has heard that “she was very, very old.” M’Dear was taller than the preacher who accompanied her. She was over six feet tall: “Four big white knots
of hair gave power and authority to her soft black face. Standing straight as a poker, she seemed to need her hickory stick not for support but for communication” (108). According to Trudier Harris, in the realm of belief, the secular and the sacred come together and so the preacher’s accompaniment secures M’Dear’s authority—“M’Dear’s place in the community is as secure or more so, than the preacher’s; her practical status as midwife lends credence to, if not actual tolerance for, her other areas of expertise” (“Reconnecting Fragments”70). Morrison provides through M’Dear a contrast to the existence of Pecola, whose dissociation from the communal traditions deprives her from the bonds of caring, while M’Dear despite her seemingly outsider like status enjoys strong connection to the community.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison gives another example of an effective healer, root worker and midwife in the character of Pilate. Pilate’s performance of Milkman’s pre-birth rites prepares him for other rituals that will initiate him into becoming a mature, responsible and active member of his community. In her role as a spiritual midwife and of mothering in the African and African American sense, Pilate helps Milkman to reunite with the stories of his ancestors, to reconnect with his past and with his dead and living relatives, thus helping him to recover his spiritual dilemma. Her “othermothering” role is giving Milkman the psychological sustenance and she is more resourceful for him than the biological mother, Ruth.

Another Morrisonian female healer who resembles Pilate is Marie Therese Foucault, a descendent of one of the mythical blind horsemen and swamp woman in *Tar Baby*. Therese “demonstrates the power of interacting with the natural, non-human world, and the agency of spiritual return” (Zaiditu-Sellasie 46). Although her employer dismisses her as an illiterate washerwoman and indifferently calls her Mary, she steadily gains status in the novel through her connection with the protagonist, Son. Therese is the first to detect his presence on the island, having met him in a dream, she provides him physical nourishment by providing access to endless supply of chocolates. Along with, Son’s physical wants she is perceptive to his inner needs and gives the spiritual guidance that releases him from the entrapment of tar baby and provides the opportunity to
reinvent himself. Assisted by Therese, Son turns into an authentic black man, one of the island’s legendary blind horsemen, who gains the spiritual insight necessary to restore order to the natural world.

Morrison brings in the folk nurturing way of community othermothering in *Jazz* through the relationship between Violet Trace and Alice Manfred. Stanlie James emphasises the importance of the historic practice of “othermothering and community othermothering have been critical to the survival of Black communities in America” (51). Othermothering is functional in African American life as a survival mechanism to overcome the displacement of families and communities during slavery, migration and racism. Nurturing and care is generally associated with biological mothering, and in such a context every woman has the capacity of nurturance irrespective of her reproductive capability. In *Jazz*, Morrison employs the othermothering practice of nurturing and healing through the reciprocal mothering between two childless women, Violet and Alice. Alice helps Violet to heal her distorted sense of self arising from husband Joe Trace’s infidelity and his eventual murder of his teenaged beloved Dorcas. In a fit of rage and jealousy Violet also stabs the dead corpse of Dorcas in the funeral ground and the effect of this brutal act looms large in the Trace couple’s life and they end up being haunted by Dorcas’s memory. Violet reaches out Alice Manfred, the aunt of Dorcas, in an attempt to know the details of her dead rival and instead of being hostile to each other they develops a cordial relationship. While Violet motivates and manoeuvres Alice’s self-interrogation and self-discovery though Dorcas’s memory, Alice recognizes Violet’s broken spirit reflected in her worn clothes. As a professional needle woman, Alice works at putting up things together, stitching the fallen hems and loose seams, “Her stitches were invisible to the eye” (*J* 111). In mending Violet’s torn sleeve and coat lining, Alice helps to heal violet’s fractured sense of self. Their shared experience sews both their lives together exemplifying the healing effect of motherhood. K Zauditu-Sellasie maintains that Morrison is making use of the African folk idea of collective mothering to bring together two women who are not mothers: “A primary example of healers, motherhood has a valued place in the hierarchy of women’s power. The Yoruba lineage has conserved the ancestral
mother cult, one of the oldest and most persistent within the African spiritual universe. The mother is a collective term and refers to the special powers of women whether elderly, ancestral, or deified” (Zauditu-Sellasie 186). In her pairing of Violet and Alice, Morrison suggests that harmonious relationship between women may be an alternative way of constructing power and authority within women’s space.

Morrison’s women oriented approach of folk healing is countered in A Mercy, through the character of the blacksmith, a free black man having knowledge of folk medicine. He is serving as a catalyst in the development of the plot of the novel. He has cured Sorrow from the deadly disease of small pox, during his stay at Jacob Vaark’s place for constructing a fancy gate for his new building. He is invited again to the household of Jacob, when Rebekka becomes the victim of small pox. is the not his skill as a craftsman but the healing power that has made the women in the family after the death of Jacob Vaark to depend on him. Rebekka’s sickness is fetching danger to the security of the “three unmastered women” and “belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone” (56). Lina feared that the death of their mistress will make them more vulnerable as “female and illegal, they would be interpolers, squatters, it they stayed on after Mistress died, subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile” (56). Even Rebekka also realised in her illness that “the smithy’s value was without price when he cured Sorrow of whatever has struck her down” and in her deathbed prayed God to enable Florens to find out the blackman so that “he could repeat that miracle(95). His seconding coming was inevitable for the women in the Vaark house and they decidedly taken the decision to send Florens on the rescue mission to search for the “shape-shifting artist/healer”(Fultz182). They considered 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’s journey in search of the life sustaining medicine and also the folk healer proved to be the turning point of her life. She was capable of searching out her lover who even cured the mistress from small pox with his folk healing technique. Sorrow considers him as the saviour for curing her from the deadly disease. Morrison provides a glimpse of the process of healing:
The smithy touched her neck boils, then shouted. Sir poked his head out of the door frame and Florens came running. Mistress arrived and the smithy called for the vinegar. Lina went to fetch it, and when it came, he doused Sorrow’s boils and the skin of her face and arms, sending her into spasms of pains. While the women sucked air and Sir frowned, the blacksmith heated a knife and slit open one of the swellings. They watched in silence as he tipped Sorrow’s own blood drops between her lips” (123).

The reference to the healing power of the blacksmith is Morrison’s conscious effort to relate the discredited information about the ethno medicine and the secret doctors of the early African American community. The secret doctors were applying their knowledge of orally transmitted herbal medicines inherited from African ancestors for curing people of their own community. Wonda L. Fontenot refers to the secret black American folk medicinal practice in her work Secret Doctors: Ethnomedicine of African Americans as:

Early African-American secret doctors utilized their knowledge of herbal remedies in dealing with ailment. These remedies were based on the cause of the illness – be it natural or unnatural. Often medical ethics and basic philosophy of western medicine clashed with that of Africans’ whose beliefs were based on the supernatural. Enslaved Africans maintained their own Afrocentric beliefs and practices associated with certain ailments and they continued to engage the services of the secret doctors. Secret doctors hid their knowledge about medicine, they administered their own remedies which included herbal medication and/or amulets, and carried out other healing rituals behind closed doors (30).

The black folk doctors rendered their services particularly to the black people but there were instances of White people particularly the early European settlers who took help from them despite their scepticism regarding the treatment received from a black man. It is one enslaved African American named Onesimus who shared his knowledge with the eighteenth century theologian Cotton Mather about inoculation as a cure to smallpox; a practice that existed in Africa prior to the slave trade. This information proved to be of immense help as Mather used his
knowledge to prevent small pox, the most terrible epidemic which caused the death of almost half of the population of Boston. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, at the time of European settlement, small pox almost wiped out the Native American community and a large number of the English. It was Cotton Mather’s controversial campaign against small pox based on the Afrocentric idea of inoculating citizens with small traces of the disease that radically controlled the epidemic (Widmer,13). Morrison in *A Mercy* makes use of her profound knowledge of African American alternative medicinal practices through the instance of the blacksmith’s healing power that has saved the lives of both Sorrow and Rebekka from small pox. The indigenous techniques of health care were of immense help for the African migrants in the New England plantations, greatly affected by the calamity of the epidemic diseases. Morrison glorifies the rich ethnomedicinal heritage of the African American through the folk doctor cum blacksmith.

Morrison’s insistence on—the black healing practices, the realistic representation of the supernatural elements like ghost as real, othermothering, innovative rituals of healing practised by Baby Suggs in her *Clearing* and community caring system etc.—are suggestive of her literary strategy of centralising these discredited and unrecognised of black folk life. She is attempting to construct an alternative vision of black life by offering such folk rituals of healing as a survival mechanism for the black Americans to overcome the memories of the traumatic past, the pains of dislocation and displacement, the ravages of fractured family life as well as the dehumanising ethos of slavery.
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