CHAPTER-VI

CONCLUSION

I was interested in working out the mystery of a piece of lore, a folktale, which is also about safety and danger and the skills needed to secure the one and recognize and avoid the other. I was not of course, interested in retelling the tale, I suppose that is an idea to pursue, but it is certainly not interesting enough to engage me...the exploration of the Tar Baby tale was like stroking a pet to see what the anatomy was like but not to disturb or distort its mystery. Folklore may have begun as allegory for natural or social phenomena; it may have been employed as a retreat from contemporary issues in art, but folklore can also contain myths that reactivate themselves endlessly through providers - the people who repeat, reshape, reconstitute, and reinterpret them.

(Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken”159)

Morrison claims that the representation of folklore in her novels is not limited to the exploration of the explicit contexts of folklore but it is an attempt to reinterpret the mysteries or the hidden contexts associated with them. She has elaborated her four years of ground work on the Tar Baby folktale before writing down the novel on that theme. She has revised the story but at the same time retained its allusiveness. A folktale thus gets interpreted in every telling and newer dimensions are added to it by each new provider. This fluid nature of folklore enables the provider to make use of it according to his/her need. Such kind of representation of folklore becomes an overtly political process where meanings or contexts become subjective. In such a context, Folk culture has been serving as a political strategy for the African Americans to assert their distinctive identity. It is an alternative way of thinking and viewing the world and a collective approach on the part of the black Americans to obtain independence. Moreover, folk culture played an important role in the life of the African Americans as healing and cohesive agent to overcome the age old woes of middle passage and slavery. The oral folk traditions of the African American community has been serving as the readily available alternative strategy to resist the
dominating and homogenising approach of Western culture. The hegemonic power structure has refused to acknowledge the inherited folk traditions of the black people as a part of the rational human behaviour and discredited them as lore, superstition, magic or as supernaturalism. It was a political strategy on the part of the black American writers to reclaim the essence of black life and the effectiveness of the oral tradition through literary representation of folk culture.

Morrison’s expertise in representing such discredited knowledge as the ethos of her own culture establishes herself as an essentially Black writer writing about “the world of black people”. (Morrison, *Black Women Writers at Work*, 118). But, one significant thing to be noticed during Morrison’s evolution as a writer is that she transcends herself-defined identification as an essentialist African American writer to the position of a globally popular and critically acclaimed writer. Despite her consistent claim to be a black American woman writer writing for her community, Morrison’s ever increasing reputation as the leading voice of American letters makes it inevitable to consider her works from a wider perspective rather than being only African American. In her 1973 review of *Sula*, Sara Blackburn attempted to highlight Morrison’s talent:

Toni Morrison is far too talented to remain only a marvellous recorder of the black side of provincial American life. If she is to maintain the large and serious audience she deserves, she is going to have to address a riskier contemporary reality than this beautiful but nevertheless distanced novel. And if she does this, it seems to me that she might easily transcend that early and unintentionally limiting classification “black woman writer” and take her place among the most serious, important and talented novelists now working”(8).

Though this remark is biased and ignores Morrison’s motive of representing her race as her priority of writing, but at the same time it is an initial assessment of the potentials of a black women writer with an effort to situate her within the western canon. Blackburn is criticised by writers like Alice Walker and Barbara Smith for misinterpreting Morrison’s subjective engagement with her race as a limitation of her creativity. Alice Walker wrote a letter to *New York Times* condemning Blackburn’s view asking whether Morrison should get out of her
writing about the black women only to secure a respectable literary position, “Is Ms. Morrison to ‘transcend’ herself?” (258). On the other hand, Barbara Smith considered Blackburn’s review as racist because it assessed Morrison as too talented to confine herself with mere black folk and therefore “must obviously focus her efforts upon chronicling the doings of white men” (7). But what Walker and Smith ignored in their rather prejudiced criticism is that Blackburn was neither asking Morrison to “transcend herself” nor to engage in the historical recording of the achievements of white man but suggested that she change the perspective of writing to justify her talent. Blackburn’s suggestion to Morrison is that she should focus her efforts on representing the “riskier contemporary realities” rather than chronicling the obscure details of “black side of provincial American life” of distant past. It is now been forty two years since the publication of Blackburn’s review, and within this time period, Morrison has literally achieved everything that any writer can desire – eleven novels and a huge bulk of critical works and recognition, rewards, popularity, and critical acclaim that addressed to her writings. Despite being criticised during the initial stage of career for the limitation of her writing, Morrison never compromised with her motive of literary creation, as she herself claims:

When I first began to write, my work was much criticised—even despised I think—because I was not writing happy stories, about people who were able to pull it all together in spite of difficulties, about people who had risen to a certain status. [...] If the critics felt that they could force me to write “positive images”, then clearly they assumed I was writing for white people. It was a demand that I create an image for the “other” as opposed to my making an intimate and direct account to the people in the book and to black people” (Morrison, “A Bench” 38).

Morrison’s refusal to “compromise her values in service of white hegemony” (Carlacio xvi) has established her as a powerful writer engaged in “critiquing the racial stereotypes of White supremacy” (McCarthy 247). Critics and readers alike have now come to appreciate Morrison’s refusal to “cater to the diminished expectations of the readers” (Morrison, “Unspeakable” 24) and for providing an alternative mode of thinking. Morrison’s alternative mode of thinking is difficult
enough to follow as she “consistently succeeds in questioning our assumptions, challenging the ways in which we view characters and cultures, and reminding us of the inherent dangers in taking absolute positions on anything in life” (Harris 185). In such a context, folk culture undoubtedly serves as an apt frame of reference to explore how Toni Morrison’s novels resists the stereotypical white male centred ideology of folklore through this alternative approach.

Keeping in mind that Morrison’s novels provides a counter narrative that “subverts the power of the master narrative” (Middleton 306) here in this study my attempt was to explore the ways of representation of folk elements that is associated with the life of the Black Americans/Americans in the rural South as well as Northern suburbs depicted in Morrison’s six selected novels. Though *The Bluest Eye* is set in a Northern suburb, yet the southern migrant characters in the novel cannot adapt to the harsh realities of modern urban life. Memories of their past life spent in the rural South constantly haunt them. In *Song of Solomon* the rich urban protagonist goes back to South in search of his ancestral past that helps him to connect to his cultural roots. *Beloved* is an attempt to delineate the traumatic experience of “middle passage”, set in a post Civil War Situation in Cincinnati during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Both *Tar Baby* and *Jazz* are urban centric novels where Morrison provides a revised version of the tar baby tale as well as explores the spirit of Jazz Age. On the other hand, *A Mercy* historicises the formative stage of America where colonial culture was taking shape in the New England plantations. In these six novels Morrison depicts the struggle for identity formation by the black people in rural south and northern suburbs during different historical periods. The raw sentiments of rural life in South and the folk culture over the years—from colonial to modern age—are reflected in Morrison’s these six novels. In *Reclaiming Community in Contemporary African American Fiction*, Philip Page attributes the rural South as “the site of the birth of African American culture, the locale of one’s ancestors, and therefore the source of one’s collective and individual identity”(7). The selected novels of Morrison for this study are reflective of different cultural manifestations of the rural folks in America like – the use of Black Oral English,
storytelling, folk medicines, folk beliefs and practices and the portrayal of authentic folk characters.

Morrison’s cultural awareness and political knowledge enables her to craft a body of work addressing the issues of racial conflict and ethnic diversity in a skilful way against the backdrop of a post racial and post ethnic America. Morrison’s novels are often an attempt to historicise the realities of black life and culture instead of contextualising them in a contemporary scenario. However, she is not the single black American author to use historical narrative as a mode of writing. There have been always a fascination for “historical narrative as long as blacks have been writing fiction” (Byerman, *Remembering the Past* 1). But what makes the difference is that she attempts to “reconstruct the history” or a “revision of history” in her novels in order to explore the unspoken and hidden realities of black life. In *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction* (2005), Keith Byerman situates Morrison among the group of contemporary black novelists like Ernest Gains, Charles Johnson and Gloria Nylor who have chosen to (re)construct the past rather than tell stories of the present. In this choice, they can be differentiated from earlier generations of African American writers—“the black arts movement, the protest/modernist generation (Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison), and the Harlem Renaissance” (1). According to Byerman, the reason behind the “present time orientation” among earlier writers due to their perception that black writing should be entirely motivated by the idea of “advancing the race”. Among those writers who attempted to write with a different perspective like—Jean Toomer, and Ralph Ellison, were subjected to severe criticism for being “insufficiently black”; even though there works too reflected current issues of black community. The issue of racial identity was given utmost priority in the writings of early African American novelists in the forms of “protest, group assertion, or amelioration” . In such a context, if anyone attempts to deviate from the traditional African American pattern of writing, his effort is considered as escapist, wasteful and even deceitful. So, “fictionalization of the past was useful only to the extent that it identified sources of present problems or enhanced the image of race” (Byerman 1). However, to carry forward such a legacy of race concerned literature seems to be no longer a valid idea for the contemporary
black American writers as America is going through a phase of crucial socio-cultural transformation since 1960s resulting in the formation of a colorblind “postethnic American” atmosphere. These new developments in American socio-cultural situation call for a paradigmatic change in earlier perception of racial and ethnic relationships too. In such a context, blacks are also experiencing exposure in every field of American life like other races, or more appropriately, they are now at the peak of their achievement in all aspects—politics, education, business and economics, art and culture. As a matter of fact, it is quite irrelevant for the contemporary black writers to drag on the old perception of race concerned writing as many blacks even deliberately attempt to forget their painful past or left it to the deliberations of the white writers. Still a group of writers like Toni Morrison, Gloria Nylor, Charles Johnson etc. follow the tradition of race concerned writing and they have been making conscious efforts to go to their roots and reconnect the present with the past. These writers were emerging at the crucial juncture of the 1960s, a significant period of African American history—civil war, black power movement, Vietnam war, ghettoization and the emergence of black middle class were the great happenings of the period. As long as they establish themselves as writers during the 1970s and 1980s, they had experienced the “institutionalization and commodification of black experience....as well as the economic decline of black working class, police brutality, and the development of a full-blown drug culture and black-on-black crime” (Byerman 2). These writers choose history as a narrative mode to represent the diverse experiences of their past and present in America. They are attempting to connect the experiences of the changing time in an indirect and metaphorical way as necessitated by the “racial formation” that is shaping the cultural discourse of the contemporary period. As Byerman claims that these contemporary black American authors are:

...neither unaware of nor disengaged from current issues, as the nonfictional writings of many of clearly demonstrate. They speak in other venues of violence, family dynamics, the criminal justice system, gender issues, and economic and political debates, as these affect black life. But in their fiction, they do not use the stories of the past to comment directly on immediate problems or to a positive racial image (Byerman 2)
Morrison is also not trying to escape from addressing current issues despite the remote historical settings of almost all of her novels. History is being represented in the fictional narrative of Toni Morrison as a medium of understanding and revision of African American past from a non-western perspective. Morrison attempts to re-tell history through the fictional characters—men, women, and children—and “her novels in many respects, are archives of four centuries of Africans and their decadents in America” (Fultz 127). Morrison’s endeavour is to emphasize on those issues of the African American people that were left unrepresented or misrepresented in the mainstream history over the years. As a highly educated scholar and professional editor, Morrison is skilled enough to search for the details of historiographic resources that have ever caught her attention like—the story of Margaret Garner for Beloved; the reference of white slavery in colonial America in Don Jordan and Michael Walsh’s White Cargo: The Forgotten History of Britain’s White Slaves in America for A Mercy etc. Morrison emphasizes untold or neglected details of the interior lives of her ancestors and calls this process of exploration of past as “literary archaeology” (Morrison, The Site for Memory, 92). She also uses her own recollection and depends on other’s memory and fictionalizes the stories accordingly by adding colours of her imagination to unveil the intricate details of “proceedings too terrible to relate” (The Site for Memory 91). Morrison’s archaeological exploration or revision of history is a strategy used by her to explore the root cause of social evils faced by the black people over the ages. While historicising the struggles of black people Morrison never fails to address the origins of the current problems of black life in America that lies embedded in the past. Thus, Morrison’s literary strategy calls for an excavation of the past in order to go into the unrepresented details of the interior life of her ancestors. It is in such a context Morrison makes use of folklore as an unavoidable component of her literary agenda. The burden and legacy of African American literary tradition makes Morrison write on racial matters that has political interpolation but at the same time Morrison is influenced by her thirty years of engagement with the Euro American literary tradition. However, Morrison maintains a kind of racial solidarity by centralising the traditional African American folk values in her fictional works. She negotiates her relationship with dominant literary tradition by appropriating the modern European literary technique much like the powerful black voice on the white page.
Notes:


3Hollinger, David A. *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*. New York: Basic Books, 1995. In his Book Hollinger argues for replacing the pluralist model of multiculturalism that is based on the idea of group rights with a cosmopolitan model that recognizes the reality of shifting group boundaries and multiple identities. By using the term postethnic America, Hollinger suggests the universalist promise of America that calls for a new form of nationalism. Postethnic denotes a concept by which we can both maintain and transcend our heritage. The ‘ethnic’ part recognizes that there is some diversity and allows you to choose to identify with it. The ‘post’ part makes one to recognize that the ethnic identities are not solid. Hollinger says, to avoid balkanization, we need to have culturally neutral “civic nations”.
WORKS CITED:


