INTRODUCTION

Working in tandem, black folklorists and authors could document, recover and indeed create a black folk tradition as an alternative to dominant cultural representations that often concealed and distorted African American culture and history; in their courageous hands, black folk tradition would be an emboldened David to confront the Goliath of White cultural imperialism and social and political dominion.

(Shirley Moody-Turner, 3)

Representation of African American folk culture has been a constant determinant of the identity politics of black American writers. Writers have used folk materials not only to add color to the narrative, as generally done by mainstream American writers, but, to create their own literary aesthetics. Folk culture also provided the black American writers “access to their racial history, not only as a content of struggles for freedom, literacy, and dignity, but also as a form of dialectical experience, practice, and belief” (Byerman 3). Therefore, any examination of folk culture in African American literature must take into account the historical context of the African encounter with European colonial forces.

The onset of the perennial conflict between African Americans and white Americans can be traced back to the time when Africans were enslaved and forcibly taken to the New World. This forced migration of the Africans not only dislocated them from their homes but also attempted to totally segregate them from their cultural roots. The dehumanising customs of slavery also constructed a negative image of the Africans as being savage and lacking in culture. The powerful Europeans refused, or were unable to accept a culture that did not have anything in common with theirs. Since their arrival in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619, these people of African descent have been “on the move, seeking a place within American geographic and cultural space. But they were denied such space because of their African heritage and later their Southern slave pasts were repudiated by larger culture” (Atkinson and Page 97). African Americans
accepted this rejection from the dominant society by embracing their diverse ethnic sub cultures that resulted in their cultural cohesion. They have recreated their traditional materials as a means of survival as well as chosen separation from the mainstream culture. As the representatives of African American community, it was a necessity for Black writers to interrogate and challenge the perverted image of blackness constructed in the hegemonic discourse through their rich cultural heritage. In such a context, the representation of folk culture in early African American literature was an attempt to subvert the White hegemonic construction of black life and culture in America.

Even after the historical phases of emancipation, migration and integration, African Americans have had to negotiate their relationships with their cultural past in the slave South and their separate African cultural traditions which they had managed to retain. During the early part of twentieth century, African Americans faced a crucial moment of disintegration from their folk roots due to the great urban migration from South to North. Urban black Americans have lost their connection to the oral traditions of the South, like folktales and folksongs which for them were the sources of strength and agency of healing. Moreover, the rich folk music of the blacks no longer remained their own since it was taken over by the Whites. This second phase of cultural dislocation has deprived the African Americans from the nurturing role of Southern folk life; this has created a void in their lives leading to disillusionment.

Twentieth century African American writers including Toni Morrison have felt the urgency to fill up the void in black life by reclaiming the oral traditions through their narrative. Morrison claims:

For a long time, the art form that was healing for Black people was music. That music is no longer exclusively ours; we don't have exclusive rights to it. Other people sing it and play it; it is the mode of contemporary music everywhere. So another form has to take that place, and it seems to me that the novel is needed by African-Americans now in a way that it was not needed before—and it is following along the lines of the function of novels everywhere. We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and
tell their children those classical, mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new information has got to get out, and there are several ways to do. One is in the novel (“Rootedness” 340).

Black American writers and particularly the novelists have created a narrative mode which is based on the call-and-response structure of black folk songs and rituals that relates performer with the audience. Corresponding to the structural pattern these writers thematically addressed the issues related to their experience of living as African American with polarities like—“individual and community, oppression and freedom, black and white, silence and voice, trickster and tricked, order and chaos” (Byerman 3). For an African American writer, it is very crucial to address such polarities since African American identity and culture have emerged in the context of the dominant white social structure. In this social structure the black and white relationship can be negotiated on the basis of their common history and neither can be properly understood in isolation from the other. The dilemma of double consciousness is an inevitable reality of African American existence, as pointed out by Du Bois: “One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being asunder” (*The Souls of Black Folk* 5). The literary works of African American writers represent the dilemmatic existence of black Americans by combining both Euro-American and African elements and recreating them anew. As a matter of fact, it is impossible for any scholarly work to take an absolute stand on the nature of influence on African American writing as either Africanist or Euro-American.

Toni Morrison claims that she is a representative of African American culture but her work goes beyond the self-imposed boundaries of culture. Morrison’s personal conception of African American identity is also based on DuBois’s concept of bicultural heritage. As she claims: “So much of what is true about Afro-Americans is not only the African but the American—we are very much that and if you want to separate them out. We are a brand new human being in this country” (“Interview with Christina Davis” 414). She also attempts to maintain a cultural stasis in her novels by using elements of both African
American oral and literary tradition and Euro-American literary tradition. The problematic critical positioning of Morrison makes it difficult to determine the nature of her work. As Linden Peach maintains:

Toni Morrison is an African American author whose works have their origin in the tense interface between a number of cultures, we are forced to question the origins of some of our assumptions about the novel as an art form. Whether our understanding of what constitutes a novel comes from reading of Euro-American or African American or African fiction will determine the kind of preconceptions we bring to her works. (Peach 1).

The aim of this study is to scrutinize Morrison’s novels not from an African or Euro-American, but an African American perspective. Morrison follows African American literary tradition by combining the symbolic virtues of modernism, the politics of the Black Aesthetic and a rich lyricism. Black aesthetics insist on fostering the cultural consciousness of the black people through artistic representation of their traditional elements. Black aesthetics also emphasises on oral literature as the “repositories of authentic black communal consciousness”. The priority of black aesthetics is “to recover an alternative cultural tradition that survived the middle passage and the ensuing history of slavery and political oppression” (Payne and Barbara 81). As a black writer who started writing during the 1970s Morrison’s work represents black aesthetic ideology. But she is against the black aesthetic tendency towards “sloganeering” (Holloway and Demetrakopoulos 11). She also despises the dogmatism of black aesthetics regarding the positive representation of blackness that discourages literary exploration of intra-racial differences and prefers an overt generalization of black identity. She maintains a separation from black aesthetic ideals by foregrounding the intra-racial conflicts within black community as well as representing a biracial or multiracial rather than an autonomous black world in her fiction. Despite Morrison’s personal reservation regarding some of the ideologies of black aesthetics, she is found to relate with the sentiments of black aesthetics by representing African American traditional values in the form of folk culture in her works.
Morrison’s constant emphasis on the African American traditional values embedded in the rural South needs to be explored. Such an exploration of Morrison’s novels demands a biographical frame of reference as her interest in the African American folk culture springs from personal experience. However, it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that the modern European critical apparatus avoids “speculative and mechanistic reading” (Peach 2) of a literary work on the basis of an author’s biography and confusing assumptions of authorial intention. This trend of European criticism emphasises on the closed reading of the text rather than the contexts and considers the text to be autotelic. On the other hand, Black literary criticism has been apprehensive of such reservations of Euro-American critical practice (like structuralism, new criticism) which demands the separation of the literary text from the author. The major reason of such reluctance on the part of African American criticism to dissociate the text with the social, political or autobiographical contexts is that literature would lose its social function. For African American people their writing has been an important medium to represent the social contexts, to expose the harsh realities of racism and social injustice and above all to reclaim an identity. So, it is necessary for any form of critical orientation on African American literary work to consider not only the text but also the literary contexts to arrive at some kind of conclusion. The necessity for considering the contexts leads us to explore the specific socio-political and biographical details that have aroused Morrison’s desire to represent folk culture as the ethos of black American life. This dissertation, therefore, will focus on delineating different features of Morrison’s representation of folk culture that are all born out of her distinctive cultural experience.

Morrison’s early life provided the fertile ground on which her later creativity was firmly rooted. The extended family of her parents and grandparents had a tremendous formative impact upon her imagination. They were skilled storytellers and musicians. Her parents used to tell her ghost stories while her grandmother played the numbers by decoding dream symbols. She was born on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio as Chloe Antony Wofford, the second of four children of George Wofford and Ramah Willis Wofford Southerners who migrated to Lorain, Ohio in search of jobs. Her maternal grandparents John
Solomon and Ardelia Willis had come North from Alabama via Kentucky where her grandfather had worked in coal mines, to get away from poverty and racism. Grandfather, John was a musician and grandmother Ardelia’s magic book and the ghost stories acquainted Morrison with black lore. Morrison’s father, who came from Georgia, had experienced the racial violence of that state. Morrison’s parents were not optimistic about the ability of whites to overcome their racism yet they believed in neighbourhood and community life. Lorain was a steel town, multiracial and poor; but Morrison experienced a harmonious life and an economically co-operative neighbourhood during her early years.

The biographical details of Morrison’s life make it clear that her childhood experience and the community life in Lorain, Ohio served as the creative impetus for literary works. She recalls the historical significance of Ohio in an interview with Claudia Tate:

Ohio is an interesting and complex state. It has both a southern and northern disposition. The Ohio River has historically represented freedom... The northern part of the state had underground railway stations and a history of black people escaping into Canada, but the southern part of the state is as much Kentucky as there is, complete with cross burnings. Ohio is a curious juxtaposition of what was ideal in this country and what was base. (Tate “Interview with Toni Morrison” 119)

It is her Ohio experience that plays a crucial role in forming Morrison’s perception of black identity in a white world. Although there were no black ghettos in Lorain, Morrison declares that it was in Ohio that she first experienced racism. Lorain, however, provided the black migrants a space where class mattered more than race. Morrison’s individual perception of Lorain, Ohio is reflected in her novels.

Morrison’s novels are not only concerned about white racism but also take into consideration the intra racial conflicts engendered in the emergent hierarchical structure in black society. Morrison, in her novels often depicts the lives of the black people who have raised their social status by appropriating white values. Morrison herself is a fine example of such social advancement among the blacks. She is popular and successful as a writer and a scholar. The
ever increasing interest and critical works on her writing all over the world is evidence of her popularity regardless of her race. The award of the Noble Prize for literature indisputably situates Morrison as an important figure in American / World literary history. However, recognition and accolades have been part of her literary career since the beginning. In 1975, she had received the National Book Award nomination. In 1978, National Book Critics’ Circle Award was received for *Song of Solomon*. Richard Wright’s *Native Son* was the only other African American novel chosen as a main selection of the ‘Book - of - the - Month Club’ before *Song of Solomon*. In 1988, *Beloved* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. In 1993, Morrison received the Nobel Prize for literature as the first African American woman writer and she has been writing uninterruptedly over the years and till date she has published eleven novels including the latest *God Help the Child* (2015).

Apart from her fictional works, she has entered the world of literary criticism with the Tanner Lecture on Human Values at the University of Michigan where her presentation was entitled “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American literature” delivered on October seventh, 1988. With this lecture she made her mark in the field of literary criticism. Her Tanner Lecture has now been enlarged and published as, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* in 1992. In deciding to talk and write about literary criticism, Morrison joins Amiri Baraka, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright and Sterling Brown, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. etc – a community of Black scholars who have revised and remade critical history. Moreover, she has achieved professional status as a university teacher with the Schweitzer Chair at the State University of New York, Albany and later she was honoured by the Robert F. Goheen Chair, Council of Humanities Princeton University. Despite such recognition from the mainstream, she cannot be accused of imitating white cultural values. Morrison does not try to avoid the reality of the peripheral existence of blacks in a white dominated society, at the same time she never sought social integration with whites by giving up a black way of life. Therefore, in her novels white characters occupy a marginal space as she has always given precedence in her work to the concerns of the Black people. Morrison also avoids
artificiality in the representation of “the world of black people” (Tate 118) and attempts to address even the unspeakable and harsh realities of black life:

In the Third World Cosmology as I perceive it, reality is not already constituted by my literary predecessors in Western culture. If my work is to comfort a reality unlike that received reality of the West, it must centralize and animate information discredited by the West – discredited not because it is not true or useful or even of some racial value but because it is information held by discredited people, information dismissed as “lore” as gossip or “magic” or “sentiment” (Morrison, “Memory, Creation and Writing” 388)

This vital “information” of black life is often dismissed as irrational modes of behaviour in the European discourse. Toni Morrison as a contemporary African American writer has attempted to recreate the discredited information as being central to African American life and culture. In her novels, along with other structural materials, African American folk culture is embedded in different forms like—folk tales, folk characters, myths, folk songs, rituals, folk medicines, superstitions, folk beliefs, gossip, riddles etc. Such an emphasis on folk culture has prompted an interest in marking the ways of representation of folk cultural materials in Morrison’s fiction.

Morrison’s use of traditional African American materials has always attracted the attention of scholars. Since the beginning of Morrison’s literary career, critics have examined her representation of the black culture from three different perspectives—Euro-American, African and African American. Keeping in mind the huge quantity and wide variety of such critical works a selective literature review in chronological sequence should be of some help in establishing the necessity of this research project:

After Morrison published her first two novels Bluest Eye (1970) and Sula (1973), she started receiving attention from the critics and reviewers but these early reviews were mere favourable comments rather than scholarly interpretations. Some of the earliest reviewers and scholars were—Haskel Frankel, Jerry Bryant, Joan Biscoff, Sarah Blackburn, Jacqueline De Weever etc. It is quite obvious that in such early reviews of Morrison’s novels a Euro
American subject position is taken for granted to ascertain her universality. This approach undermined the author’s intended concern regarding the representation of the ethos of black life.

Against the backdrop of the white Euro American early responses towards her works, the first critical analyses of Morrison by black scholars appeared not in an academic journal, but in the winter issue of a colourful and glossy paper magazine, *First World* (Winter, 1977)\(^2\). In this magazine, Philip Royster addresses *The Bluest Eye* and Odette C. Martin writes on *Sula*. Their attempts to situate the author alongside W.E.B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, Gayl Johnson, Henry Louis Gates Jr. etc. necessarily leads Morrison to be viewed first and foremost as an African-American author. Royster and Martin both convey a strong sense of admiration for Morrison’s work, even while they make careful criticisms of her novels. To some extent, they were influenced by Morrison’s opinion in a 1974 interview published in *The Black Creation Annual*, that black critics must be unafraid to voice criticism of works by Black writers: “I say you must always tell the truth. And I tell you that we are not weak people and we can stand it. I can take it” (Morrison, “Conversation with Alice Childress and Toni Morrison” 6). Morrison argues in this interview that honest criticism is necessary to create significant black art.

The critical attention paid to Morrison gradually increased in the early 1980s; this increase was due to the emergence of black feminist discourse and the recognition received by the *Song of Solomon* in 1977. Barbara Christian’s substantial chapter “The Contemporary Fables of Toni Morrison” in her highly acclaimed book *Black Feminist Criticism* (1985), is an initial attempt to observe Morrison’s work from a feminist viewpoint. She illuminates the extent to which the community acts as “hindrances” Morrison’s first two novels and also emphasizes the aural qualities of Morrison’s writing, the use of “language as tonality and as dance” to what she calls “our society’s sound” (Christian 67). Among the different scholarly articles on *Song of Solomon* that appeared during the early 1980s, one of the most significant is Cynthia A. Davis’s study “Self, Society and Myth in the Novels of Toni Morrison”. Davis observes that in Morrison’s novels black characters exist in a world defined by its blackness and
by the “surrounding white society that both violates and denies it” (323). The dominant white race intrudes into the lives of black people and consumes their realities through — “a consistent pattern of misnaming” (323). Morrison’s literary power enables her to explore the reality and perception of black life. Davis says that the reason why Morrison avoids placing white characters alongside black ones is because — “blacks are visible to white culture only insofar as they fit its frame of reference and serve its needs. Thus they are consistently reduced and reified; losing their independent reality” (324). Davis is of the view that, by doing so Morrison shifts the reader’s attention to the black community. Susan Willis’s well-known essay “Eruptions of Funk: Historicising Toni Morrison” also appeared in 1982 and addressed all of the first four novels. Willis argues that in Morrison’s novels “sexuality converses with history and functions as a register for the experience of change i.e. historical transition” (308). She is the first critic who emphasises specifically the problem at the centre of Morrison’s writing “to maintain an Afro-American cultural heritage once the relationship to the black rural South has been stretched thin over distance and generations” (309) due to the historical phase of Migration. She also maintains that in Morrison’s novels the northern migrants try to maintain their communal attachment in the black “neighbourhoods” that “came into being as annexes of the towns that had never before had a sizable black population” (309).

Toni Morrison was taken seriously by the academic circle from 1985 onwards, with the publication of *Toni Morrison: Explorations in Literary Criticism* (1985) by Bessie Jones and Audrey L. Vinson. They read Morrison’s works as — “metaphors of escape which visually and aurally transport characters out of the confines of reality into freeing ideals” (1). The writers discover many ways in which these metaphors of escape are revealed: through imagery, the supernatural, the rhetorical devices such as point of view, negations and ambivalence. Using the grotesque “meta-realism”, say the critics, Morrison reflects the abnormalities, absurdities, and bizarre circumstances in which blacks live in oppressive America. The critics say that — “by reversing fairy tale motifs; Morrison creates the horror tale of the psychological dilemma of blacks in a white racist culture” (34).
The seminal critical work on the biracial and bicultural heritage in Morrison’s work appeared in 1987 titled *New Dimensions of Spirituality: A Biracial and Bicultural Reading of the Novels of Toni Morrison*, by Karla Holloway and Stephanie Demetrakopoulos. These two critics are in some ways ahead of their awareness of “how Morrison’s novels draw us deeper into the relationships of a global culture” (Holloway, 4). Karla Holloway and Stephanie Demetrakopoulos find that — “Morrison’s literary roots go far back into ancient African mythology...her work pulls from many cultures and genres” (159). The critics also observe that “female bonding”, a unique subject in literary history is emphasized deeply as— “a form of healthy self-affirmation” (162). The critics highlighted Morrison’s unique portrayal of the black American woman who endures lifelong misfortune to ensure the survival of her family. The “heroism and survival” (163) of black mothers, is attributed to their belief in “the African value of mothering” (162). For these critics, the presence of the ancestor is central to Morrison’s novels. The older black women serve as sources of spiritual strength to the younger generation. The older women are — “magical because of their will to survive, because of their embodiment of the mythology and wisdom of Africa” (Holloway 159). The appearance in 1988 of *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, edited by Nellie McKay was a landmark in Toni Morrison scholarship. It collects reviews with twelve essays, nine of which were written specifically for this volume. McKay’s introduction argues for an “essence of ancient, authentic blackness” in Morrison’s work, based on its affinity with black music (1). Several of her contributors, such as Trudier Harris and Michael Awkward, went on to publish later on their own monographs about African-American women’s writing. Another significant work of this time is Elliot Butler-Evans’s *Race, Gender, Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker* (1987). The critic here explores “the relationship between two conflicting discourses—one an inscription of race, the other focused on gender—within the fictional narratives”(60) of the three renown Afro-American women writers. Butler-Evans is also concerned with the aesthetics of Morrison’s narratives and their symbolic value in representing the African-American culture. The critic is of the view that Morrison’s fiction evokes African American folklore
and mythology, and attempts to valorise Black oral traditions. A monograph on Toni Morrison by Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems appeared in 1990. They have tried to establish Morrison as canonical African American writer who has “not only participated in the evolving canon of black American literature but has done much to influence, expand, and solidify the place created by its vanguard, including Phyllis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison” (ix). It is a detailed analysis of some of the major themes of Morrison’s first five novels—quest for identity formation, authentic existence through self creation, folklore as the matrix of cultural affirmation, meaning through rememory etc.

By the end of the 1980s, most of the lines of inquiry into Morrison’s work like—race, gender, feminism, Africanism, Euro-American influence, classicism, double consciousness, protest literature etc. are established, and most of the issues generated divisions of critical opinions. The issues of – the comparative importance of African American (African) or European influences on her work; or to what extent she should be positioned as a black women writer are already the focus of academic discussions. Harold Bloom’s series of criticism, *Modern Critical Views: Toni Morrison*, appearing in 1990, republishes many of the important essays on Morrison written in the previous decade as well as her own essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken”. The inclusion of her work as a subject of a book of the famous series indicates the increasing acknowledgement she received from the custodians of the dominant American canon.

The year 1991 showed an increasing interest on Toni Morrison. Five significant books entirely on Morrison have been published during 1991 to 1993. Several factors may be contributing in this abrupt interest in Morrison’s works. First, Morrison won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for her fifth novel *Beloved* in 1988 and subsequently awarded Nobel Prize in 1993. Secondly, the publication of *Beloved* in 1987, Morrison’s corpus of work reached a satisfactory number of five novels, quite a sufficient one to carry out a critical study. It is very exciting to consider the critical politics playing out on Morrison in these five monographs. MalinLaVor Walther in “And All of The Interests are Vested”: *Canon Building in*
Recent Morrison Criticism, explores on the contexts of the early stage of criticism on Toni Morrison as:

Critical essays on Morrison have generally placed her within the one of four contexts: race, gender, comparative African/Western literature, or “universal” paradigms. Critics of African American literature have demonstrated Morrison’s aesthetic and thematic use of black cultural traditions; feminist critics have focused on how gender shapes Morrison's texts; comparativists have delineated Morrison’s debts to-and revisions of-writers such as Faulkner, Joyce, Woolf and Shakespeare; “universalists” (for lack of a better term) have delineated patterns such as Christian myth or archetypal psychology in Morrison's texts” (782).

Walther considers that these approaches are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive enough to include all possibilities, even when critics have blended the together, one approach usually remains primary. The abundance of critical works on Morrison has made it easy to overlook the “critical jockeying” of these approaches. Each school claims Morrison as a practitioner of its contemporary theories; each school wants to approach Morrison according to their own frame of reference. The “critical manoeuvring” over Morrison is reflective of the negotiations inherent in the process of positioning what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has termed as “loose cannons” in today’s “culture wars” in his collection of essays, Loose Cannons: Notes on the Culture Wars (Walther, 782). Morrison herself makes clear her stand on the political process of canon building. In Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature she writes—“Canon building is Empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature, and range[,]...is the clash of cultures. And all of the interests are vested” (8).

The African American canon of Morrison studies that aims at foregrounding “aesthetic and thematic use of black cultural tradition” is further enriched by a few more studies after 1990. These post 1990 publications emphasised specifically on some pertinent issues of black life like—quest for identity, black aesthetics, community life and folk heritage—
Barbara Hill Rigney’s *The Voices of Toni Morrison* (1991) is a much more overtly politicised study which places Morrison’s fiction within the context of black feminist aesthetic and defines her aesthetics on the basis of contemporary feminism and African American critical theory. Rigney argues that Morrison represents an exemption from “phallocratic law” (1) and her language defy the confines of western ideology and patriarchal expressions.

Another important work published in 1991 was Trudier Harris’s *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*. This book can serve as a source for any kind of study on the use of folklore by Toni Morrison. It is an extensive study of Morrison's skill in representing folkloric forms. According to Harris, Morrison blurs the barrier between literature and folklore by her skilful use of folkloric materials. Harris calls for a revaluation of the existing definition of folklore by asking the question “Can a literary text ‘create’ materials that will subsequently enter the oral tradition and be passed down by word of mouth as original folk creation?”(8). Harris insists on Morrison’s application of the traditional European strategies in her fiction and “reconceptualising’ them to create new folkloric forms. For Harris the essence of Morrison’s newly created structure is reversal. Harris’ study briefly examines the history of folklore in African American literature and discusses the first five novels of Toni Morrison in chronological sequence. She reads Morrison’s novels as a series of reversals and subversions of European folk forms. According to Harris, *The Bluest Eye* is the inversion of “The Ugly Duckling” fable. On the other hand, *Song of Solomon* reverses the Odyssean journey and *Tar Baby* is the subversion of the fairy tale like “Snow White” and “Sleeping Beauty”. Harris also observes that the traditional ghost story is subverted through *Beloved*. Harris’s study effectively imposes European folkloric frameworks on each of Morrison’s novels. However, Harris is least interested in acknowledging that Morrison uses inversion, subversion and reversal as devices to replace Euro-American world views by an African and African-American folkloric paradigms. Despite being a limited study of only five novels, Harris’s book is undoubtedly a pioneering effort in scrutinizing Morrison’s novels from the folkloric point of view.
Published in the same year Marilyn Sander Mobley’s, *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison* (1991), shares Harris’s emphasis on folkloric patterns in the fiction of Toni Morrison. Mobley’s study pairs Morrison with Sarah Orne Jewett, a white American woman writer typically discussed as a nineteenth-century New England writer inspired by the “local-color” movement. Despite the seemingly incongruous pairing of these two writers working on separate genres of fiction, Mobley’s power of argument convincingly justifies the efficacy of such a combination. While *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings* canonizes both Jewett and Morrison in American literature, it does so by means of a framework influenced by race, gender, and regional culture. As Mobley comments in her introduction, “I do not seek to submerge the respective narrative intentions of these authors into a neutralizing discourse of universality. To do so would be to minimize the very cultural specificity that each writer attempts to affirm in her fiction” (25). Mobley’s discussion of Morrison’s work draws on scholarship in literary folklore, myth criticism, African American literary theory and criticism, narrative theory, and feminist criticism.

Another significant work that examines the African American aspects in Morrison’s work is Patrick Bryce Bjork in *The Novels of Toni Morrison: The Search For Self and Place Within the Community* (1992). Bjork observes that Morrison’s fiction stresses “communal consciousness” (14). Her black community, “instead of defining itself in relation to external ideology or to the dominant group, emphasizes its own past, its own forms” (14). Bjork says that Morrison does not merely point to the all-pervading presence of fear, frustration and fury in her community, she also “wishes to expose the psychic causes for the social distortions within a black community” (38). The critic notes that most of Morrison’s characters are unable to realise their true selves because they have been perverted in some way by their connection with the community. The critic observes that Morrison’s fiction demonstrates that the black community is a “multiple, refractory space within each self which, as it dispossesses and nurtures, deceives and instructs, assails and comforts, serves as the ultimate touchstone in the search for self and place” (Bjork,114). Bjork brings out the
contradiction inherent in the lives of Morrison’s characters who acknowledge that their search for identity will succeed only if they return to the black community.

Denise Heinze in *The Dilemma of Double Consciousness: Toni Morrison’s Novels* (1993) studies Morrison’s novels through W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness to trace Morrison’s doubly conscious negotiation of black and white ideas about beauty, family and society. Heinze defines the concept as “a state of affairs in which an individual is both representative of and immersed in two distinct ways of life” (5) — as an American and a black. The critic finds that Morrison, having witnessed the corruption of human values in the dominant society, attacks one American ideal after another in her novels. Heinze observes that Morrison does not directly denounce the dominant culture. Without directly denouncing white society, she illustrates the demise of blacks who have adopted the corrupting influence of the white community (9). For Heinze, Morrison is a “mythbasher” (3) who effectively debunks the culture of domesticity and true womanhood.

Another important work of this time, *Toni Morrison’s World of Fiction* (1993) by Karen Carmean is of the view that Morrison’s fictions are not autobiographical rather she skilfully uses the memories of her childhood in representing an ethnic community of her own in her fictions. The critics argue about the characters in Toni Morrison’s novels as: “Whatever their final make-up, Morrison tries to create her characters in such a way that the reader can see how they are perceived in their world and how at the same time these characters see things through their own eyes” (12). According to Carmean, Morrison never tries to provide some kind of revolutionary solution, instead her works depict the unique culture black women have carefully preserved amidst the hostile atmosphere of racist America.

A significant anthology of critical works on *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* appeared in 1993 edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K.A. Appiah. It is a compilation of almost all major reviews, interviews and critical essays on Morrison that are scattered in different journals and books starting from 1970. Gates and Appiah’s book is obviously an all inclusive edited
volume covering almost all aspects of Morrison criticism. It is interesting to note that in the preface of the book the editors attempted to make a connection of the “magic realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez” to Morrison’s work. Gates and Appiah also highlighted Morrison’s use of distinctive black cultural materials in her fictional prose and consider that she has evolved “a register of representation” through the black cultural materials that could be thought of as “magical naturalism”.

After 1993 also this growth in Toni Morrison scholarship remains consistent through a series of monographs published in almost every subsequent year. Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin in their 1994 publication A World of Difference: An Inter-Cultural Study of Toni Morrison’s Novels, contend that Morrison’s consciousness as a novelist comes out of both the Western and Afro-centric traditions and this unique combination makes Morrison, the only American writer to have “achieved the feat of distancing and demystifying the dominant culture and at the same time creating and remotivating her culture” (171). These critics observe that Morrison places herself on the divide between two communities, tracing the origins, the evolution, and the consequences of the racial fracture in American society. Harding and Martin rightly observe that Morrison’s concern in her novels “centres round the black people and their community because her creative imagination centres on the position of a community buffeted in the tug of war between two cultures” (171). The critics contend that Morrison warns of two dangers that have always plagued and are still threatening the black community— “first, the danger of destruction, the constant risk, instigated in slavery times and extended in more insidious forms in contemporary society, of being exposed to violence because one does not conform to the norm of majority criteria; and, second, the danger of ideological acculturation attending the unmitigated hegemony of the dominant group” (113).

Harding and Martin find that Morrison denounces the destructive power of the unjust and massive presence of the dominant culture. Morrison’s characters redefine their existence by attaining individual adaptability and cultural awareness against the backdrop of the oppressive and homogenising dominant culture.
In 1993, Morrison’s fiction was discussed in a special double issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*. Many of the essays from that issue are collected in Nancy J. Petersons *Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches* (1997). Other useful essay collection include: *Toni Morrison* (1998), edited by Linden Peach, in Macmillan’s New Casebooks series and *Toni Morrison’s Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*, edited by David L. Middleton (2000). There are also essay collections on *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. The various collected essays offer thoughtful analysis of the fiction and are representative of the different approaches, issues, and questions shaping Morrison’s reception. Of the many monographs available: *Toni Morrison* (1995), by Linden Peach, a part of Macmillan’s modern novelists series and Jill L. Matus’s *Toni Morrison* (1998) are accessible introductions to her works.

The 1998 publication *Toni Morrison: A Critical Companion* by Missy Dehn Kubitschek is an investigation of the complexities of the novels of Morrison. In this book Kubitschek includes almost every aspects related to Morrison that has emerged in research during the past decades like–politics in art, African world view and cosmology, racism and women’s movement, African–American literary tradition, individualism and community, Call-and-response and various other cultural and theoretical issues.

By the end of the decade, the striking diversity characterising the critical engagement with Morrison’s fiction was truly manifested. The 1990s seems to be the most happening period for Morrison as well as the scholarship associated with her works. Critics from America, and abroad both black and white, male and female attempted to throw light on almost every aspect of her body of work and revealed newer aspects of Morrison studies thereby establishing herself as an enviably reputed figure in world literature.

At the end of the twentieth century, the critical debate about the aesthetics-versus-politics question regarding Toni Morrison’s writing, found some sort of a solution in an important collection *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable* (2000) edited by Marc C. Conner. It is an attempt to find connection between openly political and ideological critiques and others that
attempt to explore the rich complexity of her poetic prose. The different contributors to the volume explore how Morrison’s culturally rooted works ‘talk back’ to the Western aesthetic tradition. However, despite its emphasis on Morrison’s training in the classics, and her many debts to many Western, “non-African-American authors”, most of the essays in the volume incorporate the Western aesthetic tradition without undervaluing Morrison’s engagement with the vernacular. The first essay of the book by Barbara Johnson sets the tone for the rest of the volume in her analysis of “the profoundly political nature of the inescapability of the aesthetic” (11). The essays within the book address a range of aesthetic elements in Morrison’s entire body of work and demonstrate the inevitability of these elements from her political project.

A second major publication of the year 2000 is John Duvall’s study *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison: Modernist Authenticity and Postmodern Blackness*. Duvall positions Morrison as “a historical figure in her own right” and interprets the novels in terms of the formation of her own identity: “One can trace Morrison’s personal and professional implications in the things she critiques” (3). His argument that Morrison’s “central motivating opposition” is “the tension between identity as a biological essence and identity as a social construction” (9) and that the author combines “a modernist concern with authenticity” with “postmodern fictional practices” (17). He discusses the relationship between *The Bluest Eye* and Ellison and between *Song of Solomon* and Faulkner and includes an interesting chapter on rape in *Tar Baby*.

*The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia* (2003) edited by Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, is a voluminous collection which covers some of the postmodern concerns in her novels. The editor declares in her introduction that her purpose is “not to document Morrison’s work exhaustively, but instead to catalog and interpret for readers some of her most important themes, characters, and places” (Beaulier ix). By this measure alone, the volume is undeniably successful in providing of essential background knowledge for Morrison’s work. However, the book claims that the best way to approach Morrison is through participatory reading of the original texts and to read Morrison on Morrison.
Harold Bloom’s edited volumes published in 2007 on *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* investigate these two novels from a postmodern perspective. The books highlight some of the contemporary aspects of Morrison which have not been discussed hitherto by critics. In Bloom’s series, the critical enquiries pertaining to the art of Morrison have highlighted multidimensional aspects of the novelist which the readers find necessary for a better understanding of the novelist.

Rebecca Ferguson’s wide-ranging study, *Rewriting Black Identities: Transition and Exchange in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (2007), analyses “the multiplicity of African American identities” in the successive historical period configured by Morrison (11). Ferguson’s book attempts to highlight the novelist’s interest in both “transitional eras” and “the interconnected lives of individuals”(18). The critic incorporates a wide range of critical resources—from psychoanalytical theory to intertextuality, which is making the book almost a near comprehensive overview of Morrison’s work.

A critical landmark in the study of African presence in Morrison’s writing during the last decade is Therese E. Higgins’s work *Religiosity, Cosmology and Folklore: The African Influence in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (2001). It is an attempt to explore the Afrocentric religious belief systems and cosmology represented as “ancient properties” and found to be restored by the women in Morrison’s fictional communities. Another significant work on the African influence is *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa* by La Vinia Delois Jennings (2008). Jennings specifies in her argument that “rich, guiding African traditional cosmology are at the core of Morrison’s fiction”(4). Jennings provides a detailed analysis of Morrison’s engagement with belief systems and structures that centre on Kongo’s cosmogram ‘Yowa’ and Dahomy’s ‘Vodun’, survived in the U.S. as ‘Voudou’. The other relevant works on the similar subject during this period are—Tracey Walter’s *African Literature and the Classicist Tradition: Black Women Writers from Wheatley to Morrison* (2007) and K. Zauditu-Selassie’s *African Spiritual Tradition in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (2009). Tessa Roynon’s *Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition* (2013), is a fresh insight on Morrison’s engagement with ‘black classicism’. Roynon argues that
Morrison in her works strategically engages with the confrontations of African and Classical tradition. Along with the evolution of ‘Black classicism’ as a critical field, interest in Morrison’s allusiveness to the classical tradition continued to develop in this decade. An earlier engagement on this topic is the critical collection *Toni Morrison and the Bible: Contested Intertextualities* (2006), edited by Shirley A. Stave. As Stave writes, these essays “interrogate and dissect Morrison’s use of the Bible, question her theological positioning, and even contest her range of source material” (1).

In recent years too, the popularity of Morrison among the critics is not declining but flourishing with the addition of newer perspectives in reading her work. The institute of canon formation have continued to adorn and celebrate her works. Some of the authoritatively significant works on her are published in recent years. *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison* edited by Justin Tally, appeared in 2007. An important monograph on Toni Morrison by Pelagia Goulimari, published by Routledge appeared in 2011. This book is a systematic survey of Morrison’s literary career as a novelist, critic and public figure (from 1977 to present) and it also offers detailed analysis of her nine novels including *A Mercy*. In 2011, the monumental *Cambridge History of the American Novel* edited by Leonard Cassuto, dedicates its sixty fourth chapter by Michael Hill on “Toni Morrison and the Post-Civil Rights American Novel”. Hill situates Morrison as the best among her African-American contemporaries in delineating the transition to the richness of African-American literary production since 1970. Hill claims that Morrison “stands as barely disputed champ of the African American Novel” (1065). Another landmark of Toni Morrison criticism in recent years is the special issue of *MELUS—Toni Morrison: New Directions* (36.2), edited by Kathryn Nicol and Jennifer Terry—which was published in 2011, Summer Issue. The essays within the volume are politically attuned and diverse in both subject matter and approach. They are testimony to all that scholarship on Morrison can and should be. A fitting work to end the survey of the interesting field of Toni Morrison scholarship is *The Cambridge Introduction to Toni Morrison*, (2013) by Tessa Roynon. This beneficial book can undoubtedly serve
as an all inclusive summing up of the entire corpus of work by Toni Morrison along with the history of critical studies on her writing till date.

The critical enquiries pertaining to the art of Morrison have highlighted multidimensional aspects of the novelist which the readers of Morrison find pertinent and necessary for better understanding of the novelist. But keeping in mind the profusion of such critical materials, only those works that specifically dealt with the African American aspect of Morrison’s works are incorporated in this literature review to draw a useful critical line of enquiry from 1970s to date. While most of the critics have focused their enquiries on the African-American characters and the process of their identity formation, some have dealt with the female characters in Morrison’s novels. There is the group of comparativists who have compared Morrison to other novelists; some critics have investigated the logic of slavery and the historical perspective in her novels. A few have taken Morrison from the postmodern perspective and talked about the role of memory and African-American literary canon. However, while some of them are interested in the black classicist tradition and its impact on Morrison and at the same time a minority group attempted their hands on tracing out the impact of folk tradition on her work. Though both classicist and folkloric elements capture equal importance on Morrison’s work yet surprisingly enough, there is a dearth of criticism that deals with Morrison’s representation of folk culture in her novels, in comparison to the several serious full length publications on the Classicist tradition and Toni Morrison in recent years. Most critics have either ignored this important concern of the author or have dealt with it only tangentially. There are however, critics like Trudier Harris and Marilyn Sander Mobley who take up the analysis of this vital concern of the author. Harris examines the role and significance of folk culture in Morrison’s novels, but only partially. That the present study endeavors to answer the question of representation of folk culture in Morrisonian canon, is because there is no full length study on this important aspect of her art except *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (1991) by Trudier Harris.
Before embarking into the field of Toni Morrison’s literary use of folklore it is necessary to formulate an approach to study the politics of representation of folk culture in Toni Morrison’s novels. As the nature of this study demands an interdisciplinary kind of critical approach to observe the use of folklore in literature, it is inevitable to make a connection between folklore studies and literary studies. It is interesting to note that till the 1950s, the scholars working on the literary representation of folklore were more concerned with the dichotomy between folklore and literature than its use. Many American scholars including Richard M. Dorson, Daniel Hoffman, Alan Dundes etc. dealt with the issue of how folklore should/can be used in literature. During the 1954 American Folklore Society symposium on folklore and literature, R.M. Dorson asserted that in approaching folklore as it appeared in literature, folklorists should give priority in establishing the fact that the authors had drawn the folklore directly from the oral tradition. He considered that not until “we can prove that authors have directly dipped into the flowing stream of folk tradition” are we “in a position to discuss whether or not this folklore contributes to a given literary work in any important way” (193). Accordingly, this early group of scholars led by Dorson considered that it is the job of the properly trained folklorists and not of literary scholars to identify, document and explicate folklore from literature. Trudier Harris comments on the pioneering attempt of scholarship on folklore in literature as:

Initial approaches emphasised the isolation of items of folklore within literary texts and the location of parallels for them in collections of previously published folklore. This identification-and-interpretation approach was predicated upon the assumption that an author merely lifts items of folklore from oral cultures and places them in a text” (Fiction and Folklore 8).

The job of the scholar was to identify the items as folklore from the literary text, and then to detect its original source in order to validate their historical authenticity. The scholar used to provide context for the ways the modifications of the original sources are made by the author within the literary text. However, Dorson’s text centred approach made the literary scholars move away from folklore studies.
During the 1970s, several scholars made serious efforts to raise the standard of discussion on folklore in literature and attempted to theorise about the requirements for studying these two different genres together. Most importantly, it was Alan Dundes, who presented in his 1965 essay, “The Study of Folklore in Literature and Culture: Identification and Interpretation,” his “identification and interpretation” model. This model revised the text-centred approach and served as a pioneer to a new context-centred approach. Dundes addressed both folklorists and literary scholars in suggesting that folklorists move beyond simply identifying folkloric items either in the field or as compiled from literary sources, and that literary scholars pay closer attention to the role and significance of folklore as it appears and functions within literary texts. Dundes argued that folklorists’ emphasis on identification and documentation caused the folklorists to stop before “asking any of the really important questions about his material” (137). According to Dundes, identification of folkloric material was to serve, not as an end in itself, but instead as a means to interpretation. He also asserted that literary criticism was hampered by the lack of identification of folkloric material, contending that “naive analysis can result from inadequate or inaccurate identification” (137). Dundes’s call for attention to the functions of folklore within specific cultural or literary contexts was enthusiastically taken up and expanded by the proponents of the context-centred, process-oriented approach to folklore studies. Alan Dundes, Roger Abrahams, Dan Ben-Amos, Kenneth Goldstein, Dennish Tedlock etc. had made a conscious effort to break away from the static text oriented approaches. As Americo Paredes and Richard Bauman states in the introduction Toward New Perspective in Folklore(1972) that the basic concern of the context centred approach is: “...a full scale and highly self-conscious reorientation from the traditional focus upon folklore as ‘item’—the things of folklore—to a conceptualization of folklore as ‘event’—the doing of folklore”. (Baumen xi). The emergence of this “sophisticated circle of youthful academic folklorists” paved a new way in the study of folk culture. Text and annotations were overpowered by close analysis of group dynamics, psychological and cultural relationships. Field work became a more elaborate enterprise than the “securing of verbatim texts” (Folklore and Folklife 47).
context based or process oriented approach is quite beneficial for the reading the use of folklore in literary texts or more particularly the function of folklore in fiction. This approach has helped to establish a more congenial relationship between folklore and literary studies.

The process oriented approach was developing a growing interest in folklore studies to situate a text (literary, folkloric or otherwise) within contextual framework, but it too had received criticism for restoring some of the same notion of authenticity that characterised the text-centred approach. Critics like Regina Bendix had raised questions regarding this method: “the dissolution of genre boundaries, the shift to observing action and enactment, and the acknowledging of the universality of expressive culture, each could have signified an end to the authenticity quest...Yet such insights remained unverbalised”. Bendix further argues on the authenticity question and observes that these folklorists are searching for new ways to capture the folkloric process and more interested in representing the authenticity embodied in the folklore performance. Bendix criticises them by saying: “If any individual could be the member of numerous, shifting folk groups, then authenticity could no longer be the rare property of isolated groups. If expressive culture lived in the fleeting moment of enactment, then authenticity should have been recognised as experiential, rather than static and lasting” (Bendix, In search of Authenticity, 198). Bendix suggested in place of the context centred approach a more comprehensive one to study folk culture and literature that could be attentive to the politics of cultural representation. Since the 1990s, folklore studies took a new turn towards a self-reflexive orientation characterised by its consciousness to the “politics of cultural representation”. In 1993 special Issue of Western Folklore, the editors Amy Shuman and Charles Briggs made clear their stand on the politics of folklore, “…folklore is always already (in Derrida’s term) a politics of culture. In shifting the foundations of folklore methodology from text to contextual production, or performance, folklorists opened up the question of the role of folklore in modern world”(112). Shuman and Briggs also raised question regarding the justification of documenting the past, as people are no longer
interested in the collection of texts for the sake of preservation of lost cultures so necessarily the paradigm of folk cultural studies should be altered:

“We not only shifted our focus from the text to the performance, we also widened the scope of our discipline from the study of a narrowly defined “folk” to any practice of “traditionalizing” or, even more broadly, using artistic communication in everyday life. In broadening the scope of our study, we also asked ourselves to become responsible for our discipline. In what could be called a postmodern move, we began to articulate the conceptual problems inherent in our representations of authentic, traditional, folk culture” (113)

This kind of attention to the politics of cultural representation has forced folklore studies to re-evaluate its own disciplinary roots. Folklorists have continued to work against the “uncritical antiquarian efforts to preserve the past”, which used to be the original motive of folklore studies (Shuman and Briggs 109). Such an approach not only point towards the problems of how folklore gets represented, but also whose folklore gets represented and who gets the opportunity to exercise authority for representing folklore.In moving toward this end, a number of revisionist histories of folklore studies have considered how “particular groups got excluded and others essentialized” (Shuman and Briggs 109) in the study of folklore. Significant revisionist historical works on the development of folklore studies in the United States, such as Simon Bronner’s American Folklore Studies and Rosemary Levy Zumwalt’s American Folklore still continue to ignore and undermine the important contributions of African American folklorists in their surveys. Thus, conversations about the politics of cultural representation continue to be about how African American “folk” are perceived and represented by non-African Americans. By presenting African Americans as always the folk, but never the folklorists, both traditional and revisionist histories of folklore studies continue to perpetuate the idea.

In such a conflicting critical scenario the vernacular theorists appeared just in between 1980s to 1990s. The vernacular theories, articulated mostly in Henry Louis Gates’ “signifying monkey” and Houston A. Baker’s “blues matrix” and “spirit work” can be related to the identification and interpretation models
because the vernacular theories proposed by Gates and Baker make use of the folk materials and figures of folk expression as interpretive tools for theorizing and analyzing African American literary texts. In *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the Racial Self* (1987) for example, Gates states that “signification is a theory of reading that arises from Afro-American culture” (235). Gates draws on the folkloric expertise of Alan Dundes and Roger Abrahams in constructing his definition of signifying, and then creates legitimacy for his interpretive model by tracing the ancestral roots of signifying all the way back to the trickster/signifying figure of Esu-Elegbara from Yoruba mythology. He then offers complex and textured readings of how texts within the African American literary tradition respond and signify each other while challenging Western assumptions about black culture (Gates, *Figures in Black*, 235-239). On the other hand, in his 1984 work, *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, Houston A. Baker suggests that the ideology and techniques of the blues offers an ideal model through which to explicate African American literature. In 1991 Baker defines an additional theoretical model rooted in the folk form of conjuration. Conjure, he argues, offered a productive way to understand the work performed by literary texts, and black women’s writing in particular, which utilized the trope of conjure as a way to create a space where old ideas can be removed, new ideas created, and healing, or what Baker refers to as “spirit work,” take place. Moreover, Marjorie Pryse’s “Introduction” to the 1984 collection, *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition* employs a characteristic practice of vernacular theory by utilizing a folk form as the basis for literary interpretation. In her introduction, Pryse locates the “magic” of black folk life as the potential source for creativity in black women’s writings. In reading Hurston’s fiction, for example, she suggests that conjure provides a link between the “primitive” authority of black folk life and “literary power” (Pryse 11).

In *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, and again in *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches*, Bernard Bell attempts to account for the criticisms of vernacular models; specifically the assumption that one folk form could provide an adequate
approach to the diverse body of African American literature and the assertion that African American literature is more influenced by black vernacular culture than Western literary tradition. In revising the vernacular models, Bell draws on a broader range of folk cultural forms than Gates, Baker or Pryse, examining hoodoo, conjuring, magic, dance, field hollers, work songs, folktales, ritual and myth. He openly recognizes the "bicultural hybridity" in both the form of the African American novel and in the theorizing about it—"the African American novel as a socially symbolic act that formally encodes and wryly illumines five fundamental biracial, bicultural residually oral forms of African American literature: oratory, myth, legend, tale and song" (Bell, 388). In other words, Bell recognizes the influences of Western literary and theoretical traditions on African American literature and criticism. Other critics such as Joyce Ann Joyce, Sandra Adell and J. Martin Favor have variously challenged the vernacular theorists' reliance on Eurocentric models, the practical applications of their theories and their participation in the essentialist constructions of an "authentic" black identity. Joyce, for instance, advocates for a vernacular theory that is rooted in Afrocentric, rather than Eurocentric models. Joyce identifies Gates and Baker as "black post-structuralists" who have adopted "a linguistic system and an accompanying world view" from poststructuralist and postmodernist paradigms that alienate them from the communities about which they write. She suggests that "rather than accepting the Euro-American criteria of art, the African-American writer/critic must look within, to self and community, for inspiration needed to shape a characteristically Black art" (Joyce 335-44). Despite such criticism on vernacular theory model, it can be found that the representations of the folk by these authors and intellectuals were always engaged with the dominant cultural representations of black folklore and the black folk, and their texts often critique the dominant cultural representations that constructed the folk as an exclusively Southern, rural phenomenon (Moody 31).

In order to study folklore in Morrison’s literary texts, among these four critical approaches neither one is felt to be inclusive or self-sufficient. The methodology I employ to study the representation of folk culture in Toni Morrison’s novels, draws on the approaches discussed above, realizing that no
one of these paradigms can sufficiently account for the many and varied manifestations of folklore as it appears in Morrison’s works. The text-centred approach, for example, allows me to identify the use of authentic folkloric materials as they might have circulated in oral tradition and practice and to consider the possible significance of literary variations done by Morrison on these traditional folkloric items. The context-centred, process-oriented approach focuses attention on the event, rather than the item of folklore, thereby highlighting the function of folklore within the text as a participatory process with its subsequent effects. Additionally, the vernacular theories, even with all their “well-publicized faults”, pay attention to black folk culture as providing interpretive strategies for exploring the texts in which these elements of black folk culture appear. The methodology I employ draws on these earlier approaches, while remaining attentive to the ways the folk and folklore are constructed and represented in response to the specific set of social, historical, cultural and ideological circumstances. This rather eclectic methodology allows me to move beyond the “linear trajectory” model of reading folklore in Toni Morrison’s novels to an approach that can recognize and begin to account for the politics of representation of folklore across historical time periods. It also forces me to look critically at the role that representation of folklore has played in Morrison’s novels in creating its multilayered narrative.

The interdisciplinary subject position of this research work has made it necessary to consider Toni Morrison’s use of folklore both from literary and a folkloristic point of view. This study is thus not an attempt to see Morrison’s works only from the literary point of view but also to explore the cultural politics inherent in the process of representation of folklore. Both literary and socio-cultural aspects of the use of folklore in Morrison’s novels are taken into consideration within the limited purview of the thesis. It is with this perspective that the present study aims to investigate the novels of Toni Morrison and proposes to bring to light various categories of folk culture represented therein. This dissertation will focus on delineating different features of Morrison’s representation of folk culture that are all born out of her unique cultural experience. Although there is scope to explore folk cultural elements in each of
the eleven novels of Morrison but keeping in view with the limited scope of the thesis I have chosen only six of them—*The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992) and *A Mercy* (2008). These six novels I have chosen are seminal in exploring folk cultural elements used by the author.

The contexts for the production of her books which is based on the larger history of African American men and women are vital in determining her politics of representation. Her novels are the depiction of African American experience that extends into the entire human experience. The quest for self definition by the African American characters is a common motif of Morrison’s novels. Each of these six novels is based on a specific period of the African American history beginning with the seventeenth century to the contemporary period. Though each of them explore diverse themes and use different modes of narration there is one common distinctive thread that runs through all these novels – Morrison’s insistence on a community life as the ultimate resort for the disillusioned, morally disintegrated, alienated, fragile, almost paranormal characters. Morrison convincingly portrays the inherent conflict that Blacks face when they attempt to define themselves in a hostile world. Should they cling to their Afro centric folk culture or should they adopt the Eurocentric urban culture? In these selected novels, Morrison insists that a community life and the values of African American culture can help the Black people to create a positive identity. Thematically, she is representing folk culture as identity marker and healing agent for the African American individual as well as community. On the other hand, structurally, she is making use of folk culture as narrative device in the forms of storytelling and ‘word-of-the-mouth’ presentation. The folksongs like blues and jazz are playing a significant role in her novels in creating a black aesthetic. Thematically, she is representing folk culture as identity marker and healing agent for the African American individual as well as community. On the other hand, structurally, she is making use of folk culture as narrative device in the forms of storytelling and ‘word-of-the-mouth’ presentation. The folksongs like blues and jazz are playing a significant role in her novels in creating a black aesthetic. Both thematically and structurally Black folk culture is thus serving as
the focal point of Morrison’s literary work. These aspects of Morrison’s representation of folk culture are discussed systematically in the six chapters of the novels—

The first chapter is an attempt to define “folk culture”, the key term of the research project. It is also an attempt to clarify my stand in choosing this term over such connotative variants like “folklore” or “folk life”. This chapter further elucidates the importance of folk culture in American as well as African American life. It also highlights the impact of folk culture in American literature and the development of a folklore based literary tradition in black American writing. My attempt in this chapter is to situate Morrison in this folk based African American literary tradition. This study is essential to highlight the similarities and differences of Morrison with other black American writers regarding the ways of representation of folklore in novels.

The second chapter of the thesis is an attempt to introduce the other defining term of the thesis, “representation” as well as “politics of representation”. It explores the politics behind the literary representation of folk culture by Toni Morrison. It is also an attempt to negotiate Morrison’s problematic critical positioning as the representative black American writer vs. the universally acknowledged America’s leading voice of letters.

The fourth chapter is focused on foregrounding Morrison’s use of folktales as the basis of the narrative structure of her novels like *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*. It is also an attempt to understand how Morrison’s narrative offers a revised version of the folktale. The other objective of this chapter is to explore the oral quality of Morrison’s narrative. In her novels Morrison is found to use the call and response technique that yields in participatory reading on the part of the readers. This chapter is an analysis of the different word-of-the-mouth kind of details that are inserted in her novels through gossip and storytelling; blues and jazz songs.

The Fifth Chapter is on the use of the folk in identity formation. It is a study of Morrison’s fictional representation of black folk culture as the identity marker for black individual as well as community life. I am trying to establish
here that in Morrison’s novels ancestors and community serves as the folk roots of black American people. The quest for self affirmation of the identity less, paranormal characters in her novels becomes complete by connecting to the folk roots. This chapter further explicates how Morrison represents the failure of some of the fictional characters in asserting their identity due to their lack of connection to the folk roots.

The sixth chapter is on the use of the folk in healing. It tries to analyse and understand the importance of folk culture in Morrison’s novels as the healing agent for African Americans. Folk culture is represented in Morrison’s novel and particularly in Beloved as the mechanism of healing the unspeakable trauma of slavery and the ghosts of the past. This chapter also emphasises the references of the use of folk medicines for physical healing in Morrison’s novels.

The concluding chapter of the thesis recapitulates the research findings of the study on the representation of folk culture in the six selected novels of Toni Morrison. This work finally attempts to establish that the use of folk culture is a vital and inevitable component of Morrison’s fictional work. This study therefore tries to establish that it is only when Morrison’s representation of African American folk culture and heritage is taken into account that her fiction can be understood and valued.
Notes:

1 Du Bois’s idea of ‘double consciousness’ requires that African-American writing be approached in a similar doubled manner, one that is in coherence with both the specifically African as well as the western or Euro-American features of the writing. Only such a double vision is capable of perceiving, and interpreting, the manner in which the text moves between the two traditions.

2 Black World was a publication started by a group of black intellectuals. The editors Hoyt W. Fuller and Carole A. Parks stated on the inside cover of the inaugural issue of January/February 1977 about their ideology that they wanted to focus on the socio-political concerns of black Americans. They also wanted to emphasize black culture to give attention to the strength, beauty and creativity of black Americans. Among the early supporters of Black World were such luminaries as Maya Angelou, Houston A. Baker Jr., June Jordan, Darwin T. Turner etc. Despite their efforts, Black World, which began as a bimonthly publication in January 1977, was publishing as a quarterly by the end of 1977, and ceased publishing in 1981.


4 A group of scholars attempted to differ from Dorson’s text centred approach of studying folklore into literature. Along with the works of Alan Dundes, some of the important works of this group include: Daniel R. Barnes—“Toward the Establishment of Principles for Study of Folklore in Literature” ; David H. Stanley’s “The Personal Narrative and Personal Novel: Folklore as Frame and Structure for Literature” [both published in Southern Folklore Quarterly 43 (1979)]; K.D. Stahl’s “Studying Folklore in American Literature”, in Handbook of American Folklore (1983), edited by Richard M. Dorson (422-33). In this article Stahl elaborates the problems inherent in the study of folklore in literature. She offers seven oppositional features of oral versus written media to illustrate the differences between folklore and literature. In another article “A Schema for the Study of Literary Simulations of Folkloric Phenomena” [Published in Southern Folklore Quarterly 43, 1979(17-37)], the writer Neit R. Grobman
illustrates the literary works in which various simulations appear and also offers a critical estimate of earlier approaches to folklore in literature. Grobman provides an outline for further study on the basis of his knowledge of folklore.

Esu-Elegbara is the divine trickster figure of Yoruba mythology. Henry Louis Gates defines it as:

“This curious figure is called Esu-Elegbara in Nigeria and Legba among the Fon in Benin. His new world figurations include Exu in Brazil, Echu-Elegua in Cuba, Papa Legba (pronounced as La-Bas) in the pantheon of the Ioa of Vaudou of Haiti, and Papa La Bas in the Ioa of Hoodoo in the United States. Because I see these individual tricksters as related parts of a larger, unified figure, I shall refer to them collectively as Esu, or as Esu-Elegbara....These trickster figures, all aspects or topoi of Esu, are fundamental divine terms of mediation: as tricksters they are mediators, and their mediations are tricks”(The Signifying Monkey 6).
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