Chapter Four

Explosion of the repressed

We are rooted in language, wedded, have our being in words. Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves—to reconcile, to renew. Our words are not without meaning. They are an action—a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle.

(Hooks 28)

Much has been written about the situation of the black people ever since the turn of the century. The experience has been traumatic and complicated by political, social, ethnic and economic oppressions. The black-power movement of the sixties and seventies wielded the weapons of protest. Black writers like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Zora Neale Hurston chronicled sagas of protest. But Toni Morrison does not merely do so. Conscious as she is of the dilemmas of the black people, her novels reflect the tension between protest and transcendence, between suffering and strength, and between collective and individual identity. She graphically presents the trauma of black life. In fact, she universalizes oppression – where blacks torment blacks, whites oppress blacks, women are against women, parents torture their children etc., The picture of black life that emerges from her novels is indeed harrowing.

Toni Morrison’s novels are talking books that ‘speak’ – speak the experiences of African Americans. In order to hear protest in the voices of the people, we sometimes must be readers of ambivalence in the literary and not just attendants to the commands of plain speech. Voice of protest in our present world is the normative voice of humanity, it is the voice of the majority, it is the voice that is persistent, and it is the voice that cannot
be contained. When protest speaks in subtle language it speaks a world of the unspeakable. To be precise, within the unspeakable, there resides an unending human commitment to seek genuine social change.

It is important for us to celebrate Toni Morrison’s works as explosion of the repressed Blacks which is the main focus of this chapter. This chapter analyses how through her writings, she has voiced her protest against all the unjust systems holding African Americans down, silencing them to submission.

Toni Morrison’s works reveal the fact that African Americans continue to be subjugated and pushed to the margins. She vociferously fights back and tries to regain for her race, the voice and identity which they lost long ago. She gives voice to the marginalized race of American society. She gets her protest registered through her manner of fictionalizing the experiences of her race. Her fiction seeks to liberate her fellow beings placed on the margins both in the domestic sphere and on the social front.

African American Literature is an expression of rebellion against the injustice meted out to the Black race by the American society. It delineates the wretchedness and miseries which are a part of the African Americans’ life and experiences. It is a marginal literature that exposes the marginalized human experiences, pains and pleasures. Usually, the themes of Morrison’s works are the hopes and aspirations of the exploited and the explosion of the repressed blacks.

The previous chapter examined how Morrison’s novels artistically portray the sorrows, tribulations, shackles, ridicule and poverty endured by the oppressed Blacks. It also uncovered and discovered all possible sites of oppression and repression. This chapter attempts to analyse the works of Morrison as tools of protest and revolt against
unjust and inhuman systems imposed on the repressed Blacks. Anyone whose right is denied has the right to protest. We find in the works of Morrison how the oppressed and exploited Blacks try to explode against all the unjust systems.

Postcolonial theory, as Bhaskar A. Shukla points out, is “built around the concept of resistance, of resistance as subversion, or opposition or mimicry” (40). As a postcolonial novelist, Morrison employs this theme of resistance in her works as a way of protest against the inhuman systems. Down the ages, in all climes and countries, even in the realms beyond man (i.e. mythologically) protest exists, and, is justified. However, situation of protest and modes of protest may vary from place to place. In the hands of a creative writer like Morrison, protest is an effective tool to generate change. It is an appropriate medium to highlight the plight of the exploited. Thus, the writer becomes the voice of millions of marginalized communities all over the world. The language of protest forms resistance literature which is a “counter hegemonic discourse” (Mohammed 281). Wole Soyinka calls it “race retrieval” which involves “the conscious activity of recovering which has been hidden, lost, repressed, denigrated, or indeed simply denied by ourselves” (San Juan 209).

African American Literature is protest literature. The existing stereotypes and the institutional subjugation of blacks in its hues are protested through literature. Toni Morrison, in most of her works, protests the denial of justice and equality on the basis of race, caste and sex. Her works are one with protest literature or liberation literature seeking to create an awareness and to enlighten and encourage the oppressed for immediate action and resistance. The resistance and explosion is negative but it is
positive again. The destruction is for new creation. There is protest but there is no malice. In fact, the protest is not against individuals but against institutions.

As a woman writer belonging to oppressed community, Morrison has a conspicuous oneness with Blacks who suffer under patriarchal oppression. Through her writings, she urges the underprivileged Blacks that the time has come to break the shackles of racism, casteism and sexism. *Beloved* depicts the racial and caste discrimination prevalent in the American society. Morrison exposes the cost of being Black and more particularly the ordeals of being a woman. Her novels portray the inner urge of the Black to reach the pinnacle of genuine self.

This chapter aims at examining how the African Americans, from a state of despair, have slowly begun to resist their oppression and are in pursuit of selfhood. An attempt has been made to show how Morrison’s characters, especially women characters, fighting against odds are successful in establishing their individuality.

*Beloved* is a troubling novel because of the trauma of injustice and oppression contained within it: however, the resilience of the human spirit also occupies the text through Morrison’s powerful rendering of characters such as Sethe and Paul D. The love they share allows them to become self-defining and allows their bodies to become agents of resistance rather than bodies that contain the inscriptions of the commodification that is slavery. In this novel, Morrison explores issues of slavery, including its effects on both the perpetrators and victims. The resistance to the trauma of slavery includes physical resistance such as escapes and uprising that exemplify the way in which bodies are agents. In this novel, resistance is also psychological and involves Sethe and Paul D’s repression of a traumatic past and their struggle against the relentless power of memory.
Resistance also operates as both individual and collective alliances and solidarity. Throughout the novel, Morrison presents powerful, resilient individuals, yet she also asserts the power of the community.

At Sweet Home, Paul D and the other slaves create a tight-knit community, a struggling collective. After the escape is unsuccessful, however, each slave who survives must embark on a solitary journey. Paul D is sold to Brandywine and attempts to murder him although he “… didn’t know exactly what prompted him to try--other than Halle, Sixo, Paul A, Paul F and Mister” (BD 106). Paul D’s assertion illustrates that the community of Sweet Home men still provide him with the will and strength to resist his enslavement despite the fact that they are no longer together. Also, the slave owners attempted to break the wills of the slaves by torturing and murdering their loved ones in front of them, yet in Paul D’s case, the lynching of Sixo and the disappearance of his other friends only inspire him to escape slavery and even kill the perpetrators: this violence is an impulse not seen in Paul D until after his attempt to escape.

Society is not likely to change unless there is awareness and resistance on the part of the victimised. This is a slow process and Morrison vividly captures the growing dissent and simmering anger. Morrison’s Sethe in Beloved desires to protest and resist the atrocities committed on the blacks. Sethe repudiates the existing order of subjugation and humiliation under the white patriarchy. Devoid of reason and finer feelings and being warped mentally by racial and sexual prejudice, the whites are unable to understand or sympathise with the Black Americans. Probably, Morrison’s most moving scene is the one in which a mother takes a hard decision to save her children from slavery by destroying them. In Beloved the school teacher along with a nephew, a slave catcher and
a sheriff shows up to reclaim his lost property. When they step in what they see is terrible, “a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She “… swung the baby toward the wall planks” (BD 149).

Sethe possesses the tiger spirit and she cannot be easily cowed down. Sethe is determined to kill all her children rather than allow them to suffer the horrors of a devastating and degrading institution called slavery. Paul D wonders that the Sweet Home girl, Sethe can so effectively tear down the walls of social convention and prescription by taking a decision as crucial as killing her own child. Sethe has come a long way from a state of passive existence to one of active resistance.

It is clear that Morrison’s Sethe has strong faith in life after death. She says, without the slightest hesitation or doubt several times: “My plan was to take us all to the other side” (BD 203). Indubitably Sethe believes that death is not an ultimate end of life. If she cannot keep her children away from the school teacher by running away to a free state she will take them to a place where he will not be able to follow them. That somewhat is the next world or ‘other side’ where the school teacher will never be able to get them. This echoes Maya Angelou’s well known autobiography Can a Caged Bird Sing? where she presents Black motherhood and the relationship that African American women experience with one another and with Black children. Values specifically attributed to Black mothers include the belief that there is a promised land beyond this life of bondage and oppression. One has within oneself the natural resourcefulness to find strength in apparent weakness, joy in sorrow, and hope in times of despair.
Sethe who earlier frees herself from the iniquitous system of slavery denies to yield her daughter to the monstrosity of the racists later. Though she redeems herself from the clutches of racial votaries, she is constantly in the prison of Beloved’s ghost which continuously haunts her. The victims of racism, more than external threats have to face resistance from within their communities.

The Black girl Beloved’s redemption is unique as she gets ultimate redemption from the destructive and suppressive forces. In fact, Sethe says, “… it’s my job to know what is and keep them away from what I know is terrible” (BD 165). This expresses the belief that what is not known is a better choice than what is known which is terrible. She, therefore, prefers the unknown that has the possibility of goodness over the known options that offer little ray of hope for the future.

Unless oppressed communities are aware of their worth, the struggle for justice and equality is likely to become meaningless. In the African American stereotype, Blackness signifies absence of beauty. The reason behind Baby Sugg’s children being used as a commodity in the slave trader’s game is of course because of their colour. Morrison weaves into the text of Beloved a vague but thoughtful and provocative pun. Baby Sugg’s fascination with colour comes as a result of her suffering a life of deprivation, like her room, that is absent of colour. She is “so starved for colour. There wasn’t any except for two orange squares in a quilt that made the absence shout” (BD 38). For Baby Suggs colour comes to denote richness of life. Yet, ironically, the Black woman’s suffering and turmoil is due to the colour of her skin.

Black American society is obsessed with Anglophilia. The Blacks consequently view their own colour with contempt and resentment. This reminds us of Pecola’s
discovery of ugliness in *The Bluest Eye*. Pecola imagines ugliness in her eyes and beauty in the blue eyes of the whites. The imminent danger lurking within the marginalized communities is that they fail to see their inherent worth. In spite of such failings on the part of these communities, there are some characters who rise above these weaknesses and show that they are in no way inferior to those who dominate them. Morrison demolishes the discourse of racial supremacy and opts to mitigate and redeem psychic damage. Baby Suggs stresses the importance of her own colour. Baby Suggs gives a clarion call to the blacks to love their skin and flesh. She considers the black flesh lovable and precious, which others view with animosity and utter hatred. The self-respect and individuality that are focused in this novel *Beloved* is of certain help in pursuing wholeness.

Morrison’s *Beloved* brings the idea that an individual’s personal growth and development cannot be achieved in isolation from the society. She exhorts the Black Americans to believe in the integration and the wholeness of community. Identity is constructed not within the narrow confines of the hegemonic nuclear family but in relation to the whole community. As Joan Reverie, an object relation theorist, puts it:

> There is no such thing as a single human being, pure and simple, unmixed with other human beings. Each personality is a world in himself, a company of many. That self … is a composite structure which has been and is being … built up since the day of our birth out of countless never-ending influences and exchanges between ourselves and others. (qtd. in Fitzgerald 122-123)
In the novel *Beloved*, Baby Suggs facilitates the community in forging its members’ identities. When she attains freedom she discovers what it means to identify one’s own hands, heartbeat and person. Baby Suggs considers it to be her responsibility to foster the selfhood which racism has denied to each of the ex-slaves. She insists on a collective act of self-appreciation, in which all those damaged by dehumanization and hatred can learn to love their own selves. Baby Suggs states:

“Here” she said, “in this here place,” we flesh; flesh that weeps laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. … You got to love it, you! … This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. (*BD* 88)

Like Baby Suggs, the narrator of Bama’s *Sangati* invites the Dalit woman to reach beyond the bounds of wedded life. She urges the community to pull down the barriers of caste and sex first. The suppressed voices are called upon to exult and give expression to their genuine feelings: “We must be strong. We show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence” (*Sangati* 59).

Morrison’s Denver in *Beloved* is immature in the commencement of the novel. But a resolute Denver is presented in Part Three of the novel where she realizes that it is not her mother to be afraid of, but Beloved. She takes her first step outside the precincts of her house which is also her first step towards maturity. Denver enters the community in search of food and work in order to support her mother who has been incapacitated by the demanding return of her murdered daughter. It is not her esteem of motherhood which turns the community against Sethe, but her arrogance and self-sufficiency, “… trying to
do it all alone with her nose in the air” (*BD* 254). The town itself, which had grown slothful in its community spirit, reawakens to receive Denver and to rescue Sethe.

The marginalized Black community has to recognize and honour its own institutions by entering into useful mutual relations. The desire to be viewed as a human being is deeply rooted in Blacks. They are ready to protest, uphold their rights and establish their identities. The Dalit writer Bama, who voices her protest against the atrocities committed on Dalits, professes in her novel *Sangati,*

> It is we who must uphold our rights, we must stand up for ourselves and declare that we too are human beings like everyone else. If we believe that someone else is going to come and uplift us, then we are doomed to remain where we are, forever. (*Sangati* 66)

In the quest for wholeness it is of vital importance that one comes to terms with one’s past. The message is clear that “through the power of the human spirit one can wean the best out of bleakness, doubleness, horror, poverty and violence and emerge newer and more whole” (Koshi 169). Baby Suggs and Sethe, the ex-slaves are tremendously courageous and vehemently protest against violence, subordination and inhumanity. Baby Suggs encourages the Black Americans to love their heart above all the other parts because, “this is the prize” (*BD* 89). Paul D assures Sethe that “we got more yesterday than anybody, we need some kind of tomorrow” (*BD* 273). He further boosts up her spirits: “You, your best thing, Sethe. You are” (*BD* 273). The essence of revolution is not the struggle for bread but the struggle for human dignity, equality and justice.
Morrison’s novels are not about victims only, but also about rebels. Her characters like Pilate Dead, Eva Peace, Violet Trace and a host of others are embodiments of courage and resilience. They managed to survive in a very hostile country that decimated the slave community completely. Morrison takes upon herself the responsibility of creating black literary archives to preserve for future generations what the past was like. With a creative vengeance she weaves story after story delineating one rich multifaceted dimension of black resilience and resistance. She herself testifies to this:

My attempt, although I never say any of this, until I’m done, is to deal with something that is nagging me, but, when I think about it in a large sense, I use the phrase ‘bear witness’ to explain what my work is for. I have this creepy sensation… something is about to be lost and will never be retrieved …. Our past … if we women, if we black women, if we Third-World women in America don’t know it, then, it is not known to anybody at all …. And somebody has to tell. (qtd. in Carmean 17)

Morrison through her novels, works to illuminate violent history and to provide a voice for the otherwise voiceless. Many of her characters are strong-willed African American women who struggle within cultural traditions of gender inequality, negotiating or sometimes protesting the intricacies of environment that seek to deny them any sense of their own identity. Sethe in Beloved struggles to resurrect her fully human self.
When asked in an interview whether she believes in upward mobility for black people, Morrison responded:

Of course, absolutely. But I’m not going to give up one drop of melanin in order to get there. I’m not going to erase my race or my gender to get there. I want all of it; I deserve all of it. And we all do. I don’t want to be blended, bleached out in order to participate in this country. (Dowling 56)

What is interesting to note in her response is the fact that although she had been asked about black people’s progress, Morrison answers in terms of both race and gender. In the Morrison scheme of things, a person cannot be fully human if either is denied.

In the face of Beloved’s escalating malevolence and her mother’s submissiveness, Denver is forced to step outside the world of 124. Filled with the sense of duty, purpose, and courage, she enters a series of lessons with Miss Bodwin and considers attending Oberlin College some day. Her last conversation with Paul D underscores her newfound maturity. She presents herself with more civility and sincerity than in the past and asserts that she now has her own opinion.

Although Beloved vanishes at the end of the book, she is never really gone—her dress and her story, forgotten by the town but preserved by the novel remain. Beloved represents a destructive and painful past, but she also signals the possibility of a brighter future. She gives the people of 124 and eventually the entire community, a chance to engage with the memories they have suppressed. Through confrontation, the community can reclaim and learn from its forgotten and ignored memories.

The community helps Sethe to put her derailed life once more on the track. And a new chapter opens up in her life, having given the past a decent burial. The spirit of
caring community gently and lovingly enveloping the impermeable 124 is a proof of a black people’s wealth of love. How community steps in when a family is hunted like a dog is a testament of caring for the survival of its own community. Some of the neighbours leave food quietly and unobtrusively for the women of 124, who are on the brink of starvation. The symbolic stump becomes a source for strengthening the womanist discourse:

Two days later Denver stood on the porch and noticed something lying on the tree stump at the edge of the yard. She went to look and found a sack of white beans. Another time a plate of cold rabbit meat. One morning a basket of eggs sat there. As she lifted it, a slip of paper fluttered down. She picked it up and looked at it. “M. Lucille Williams” was written in big crooked letters. *(BD 248-49)*

It was a slur on the black community to have any of its members suffer from any want or suffer the adversities of life all by oneself. Its philosophy was always to assuage and to affirm its members. In Morrison’s novels, the community thus occupies a very important place, so much so that, it acquires the status of a character. For the black men and women, to be isolated from the community was to be cut off from the flow of life. Morrison affirms the value of community when she says, “… there was this life-giving, very, very strong sustenance that people got from the neighborhood” *(qtd. in Mori 103)*.

Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* exposes the devastating effects of racism on the psyche of African Americans. This novel is a study of a people relegated to a class of marginal status by virtue of their race. Racism serves as the source of this marginality. Whiteness is equated with beauty and culture and blackness with ugliness. The marginal
too try to live by the values, which the whites have created forgetting the fact that they too had their own culture and sense of beauty.

*The Bluest Eye* throws light on how and why the mind is filled with knowledge about race and racism, and how they have been depressed by their consciousness. Everything around them weighed down both their body and mind and as a result their life became miserable. In this novel it is “this deliberate perpetuation by the larger society of a physical Anglo-Saxon standard of female beauty as a measurement of self-worth” (McKay 172) that plays havoc in the life of several characters. Rejected by the whites, they are constantly threatened by self-disgust and self-rejection which leads to disintegration. Yet, in the novel, there are some who protest to retain a sense of identity in the face of such sources of disintegration.

There are two families in the novel, the Breedloves and the MacTeers and Morrison presents the absolute disintegration of one and the gradual growth and education into maturity of the child of the other family. If some blacks are unable to cope with their situation, there are some, who are stronger and are able to preserve a sense of identity. There is a close analysis of the process of disintegration in the Breedlove family and the contrast with the less highlighted presence of the quiet strength of the MacTeers, suggesting the reasons behind their disintegration.

The black person in America, the novel suggests, has to consciously struggle against the cruelty of the racist society. But just as the disintegration of the Breedlove family and Pecola, so also the strength, integrity and stability of the MacTeer family was also threatened by the presence of white standards of value. Claudia and Frieda deal with their situation very differently and grow into awareness and maturity.
The novel lays its emphasis on the totally different family set up in which Claudia and Frieda get nurturing care and rough but sustaining love. The MacTeer family is also poor and black, but it offers a stable home where children are looked after and are even offered gifts at Christmas. Claudia gets dolls for Christmas, dolls that are produced by the mass-culture industry and are made according to the white ideals for beauty, and she does not, unlike Pecola, hanker after the possession of white beauty traits. She is free to take out her anger on this beauty ideal that is impossible for her to reach:

I destroyed white baby dolls. But the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulse to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. To discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What made people look at them and say ‘Awwwww’, but not for me? (BE 15)

The novel suggests that possibly Claudia is able to deal with her feelings of anger and revulsion because she gets the chance to take them out on the dolls that are offered to her by her caring family. In wanting to dismantle the white baby dolls rather than herself (as Pecola wished to do), Claudia becomes a figure of resistance within this novel. Sometimes resistance is hard to see; other times it is obvious. Cholly, Pauline or Pecola are unable to deal with their hidden feelings because as children they were not given this chance. Cared for, and looked after, Claudia has not internationalized the rejection from the racist society, and so she can grow up into adulthood retaining her sense of self, and an objective vision of the world around her. What is sure is that although the effects of racism are horrible and crippling, the power of survival in oppressed communities has
maintained traditions and continuity throughout a history that has been committed to their society.

Claudia feels loved by her family, yet she also feels rejected by society in general because of her blackness. She is too young to accept without question what everyone else seems to assume that little black girls are somehow lesser beings because of their blackness. She hates white baby dolls and the little white girls (including Shirley Temple) on whom they are modelled. She would like to tear both apart to find their secret: what is it that makes all adults, black and white, prize little white girls so much and little black girls so little? Claudia and her sister Frieda seem to be the only people who believe that Pecola’s baby deserves to live and be loved.

The black characters in the novel *The Bluest Eye* are marginals who strive to initiate themselves into the American society dominated by the racist whites. At the same time, these marginals try to hold on to the views of their own beauty and cultural worth. In Pauline we see an attempt of a black woman to alienate herself from her own community. She is a black woman struggling against social and economic hostilities stacked against her. But in spite of the limitations set by her family, society and race, she endeavours to live by female American standards. A self-conscious rebel thus is seen in Pauline.

Claudia MacTeer, a nine-year-old black girl, tells the story of Pecola Breedlove. As a child narrator, she presents critical moments in Pecola’s life and as a reflective adult she looks back at particular events and signs. Psychologically and emotionally healthy, sturdy, loyal, and compassionate, Claudia and her sister function as dramatic counterparts
to Pecola Breedlove. Both girls befriend Pecola and are apparently the only characters that can feel sorrow or pity for her.

Frieda MacTeer, Claudia’s sister is the more knowledgeable, more mature, and more sophisticated sibling. A woman-child, Frieda is the quintessential elder sister who makes most of the decisions about action and activities she and Claudia undertake. She is also more judicious, knowing when to fight for the protection of another child and what to do when her own rights are about to be violated. Both Frieda and Claudia remain supportive and loyal to Pecola despite her misfortunes.

Most of the African American community in this novel believe in the traditional values of beauty because they are too “corrupted by the values of the white culture” (Otten 9) to believe otherwise. This is shown when Frieda and Claudia’s mother buy white dolls for Christmas for their daughters. The dolls are supposed to be a big, loving present, but the dolls only bring out hatred in Claudia. Claudia makes derogatory comments about the white dolls and destroys them by taking their legs, arms, and heads off and cutting their hair. The child is frustrated because she does not see dolls that look like her or anyone else that she knows, and does not understand why. Claudia’s frustration turns to anger and destruction because she cannot get an answer to why there are no African American dolls. Her actions represent a healthy respect for her own identity that results in a symbolic dismantling of the dominant ideology. As an adult, however, Claudia tells the reader, “But the dismembering of the dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulse to little white girls” (BE 15). The traditional values of beauty are not only self-destructive to those like Pecola and Frieda who can never meet the ideals of the myth, but are also very
destructive because they sometimes create violent tendencies toward those hapless blondes who do meet the ideals just through the accidents of birth.

Claudia’s rejection of the traditional values is presented through her dismantling of the dolls. Claudia’s destruction of the blonde hair and blue-eyed dolls is an example of the narrative destruction of the traditional values of beauty in American culture. Commercialism in America excluded African Americans until late in the twentieth century, but the ideals of beauty portrayed in *The Bluest Eye* are still persuasive, and Morrison is anxious to show how self-destructive belief in these ideals can be. Pecola is completely destroyed by the beliefs and values of the traditional culture. According to the narrator, “the damage was total” (*BE* 158) in Pecola. Claudia, however, is a survivor of the traditional culture’s beliefs and values because she refuses to surrender to them as an adult and even as a child.

Pecola’s victimization represents the effects on African Americans by the traditional American values of beauty. Morrison exposes and demystifies the traditional fairy tales and myths by using a mythic structure of her own to express the effects of the traditional values of beauty on African Americans. The narrator states:

> They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly … they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, “You are ugly people”. They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. (*BE* 28)
Because Morrison cannot delineate the exact development of the norms of beauty in her novel, she uses the mythic structure to underscore the idea that African Americans have been compliant in allowing the dominant culture to define beauty in a way that excludes them. This alternate myth gently reminds African Americans that some time in the misty past they acquiesced to the blonde-haired, blue-eyed, Roman model of beauty, thus forcing them to despise themselves. Morrison’s depiction of Claudia shows a different path is possible. It is possible to reject those standards of beauty. Choice is possible. Claudia’s horror at transferring her hatred of the dolls to the actual little white girls is a warning that the rejection of the traditional standards of beauty can lead to undeserved racial violence, but Claudia’s characterization represents the natural, healthy respect one has for one’s own identity. She is the primary character who rejects the mythic acquiescence of her forefathers. Claudia’s actions suggest that the historical moment has come for African Americans to free themselves from the ugly myth and create a beauty myth of their own.

In their struggle for existence and recognition, black Americans developed a body of attitudes, sentiments and beliefs which served to unify their group, but also isolated them from the larger American society. This consciousness gave them an understanding of their predicament and of the social order in which they had their place. Black writer of the Harlem Renaissance isolated those elements that gave them a distinct racial character. It was Richard Wright who first pointed out that black and white America was engaged in a war over the nature of reality.

The self-hatred of the Blacks also possessed an undercurrent of anger and injustice that eventually led to the Civil Rights Movement. The African American literary
tradition shows the struggle confronted by the black writers to earn a place for them in literature dominated by the whites. The black women felt their need to break their invisibility by challenging patriarchy thereby creating a space for them. The liberation of the Hebrew slaves in the Exodus story in the Bible is also the story of the struggles of the African Americans in America. As in the Exodus story the true liberation for the black race can be achieved only through the cry of the affected and oppressed people. In *Sula*, Morrison introduces her protagonist Sula as a revolutionary representative of the Blacks who resist and explode now and then. Sula declares her need to make herself and not any one else when confronted with the issue of marriage. Sula had characteristic outspokenness and disregard for the objections of the community about her behaviour.

Writing represents an act of resistance in Morrison’s life. Imposed definitions must be fought. The need to survive is stronger than the fear of surrendering. *Sula* offers a view of female psychological development that defies traditional male-centred interpretations of female development and calls out for an expansion of the women-centred paradigm. Morrison presents the black woman Sula as an individual struggling towards the attainment of freedom and selfhood. Morrison creates an entirely self-contained and women-centred universe in the novel. Her concentration is purely on the black women under varied circumstances. There is something inside the women of Morrison that makes them different from other people. They are neither like the men nor the white women. They are free to think and act as they wish. They do not lament over the impossibility. Disappointments are not new and they encounter them with a smile. In *Sula*, Morrison takes on an apparently simple theme, the friendship of two black girls. One is Nel Wright who follows the pattern of the life society which has been laid out for
her and the other is Sula Peace who tries to create her own pattern, to achieve her own self. This novel is not only about Nel Wright and Sula Peace; it is most emphatically about the culture that spawns them. Through the characters Nel and Sula, Morrison weaves a fable about the relationship between conformity and experiment, survival and creativity. This novel emphasizes the myriad forms of woman’s behaviour that the community incorporates, even as it dramatizes the beginnings of Nel and Sula’s friendship. In using these two different families, Morrison dramatizes the levels of this community’s tolerance in relation to women, its spiritual richness and poverty.

Nel’s mother Helene Wright was raised by her grandmother Cecile under the strict conventions of religion. She raises her daughter Nel under the same strict rules that governed her own childhood. She illustrates the problem inherent in excessive order. Morrison suggests that much order breeds repression because it stifles an individual’s personality.

The contrast between Sula’s and Nel’s upbringing is startling. Nel’s household is bound by the social standards that define the conventional meaning of ‘family’. Sula’s household is built on an unconventional family structure. Her household is vibrant, active and subject to constant change. Sula is born in a family where the women reign supreme. Eva Peace, Sula’s grandmother is an archetypal ‘great mother’. She nourishes and protects her family by providing sustenance and life. Her role as a great mother places Eva in a situation that requires her to sacrifice. The survival of Eva is the story of courage and determination. She can originate and sustain life, perhaps at a great loss. Abandoned by her husband BoyBoy and without any job she struggles to feed her three starving
children. Sensing futility, she leaves them with a neighbour and disappears. She is arrogant and independent. She is strong by virtue of her will:

Two days later she left all of her children with Mrs. Suggs, saying she would be back the next day. Eighteen months later she swept down from a wagon with two crutches, a new black pocket book and one leg. First she reclaimed her children, next she gave the surprised Mrs. Suggs a ten-dollar bill, later she started building house on Carpenter’s Road, sixty feet from BoyBoy’s one-room cabin, which she rented out. (Sula 35)

Eva, as the mother, is willing to save her children at all costs. She allows her leg to be severed by a locomotive in order to collect damages from the railroad company. She converts her body into a dismembered instrument of defiance and finance. Her bold act of self-mutilation represents her independence and her manipulation of corporate capitalism. Her experience changes her from a passive victim to an active manipulator. This strength is nurtured and sustained by her hatred for BoyBoy, the unfaithful father of her three children; a hatred that she says keeps her alive and happy.

She takes her misery as a challenge. She builds from a scratch when her husband BoyBoy abandoned her. She loved her children enough to stay alive and keep them alive. She is referred to as “the creator and sovereign of the enormous house” (30). It is she who embraces the three Deweys, the orphaned children who stand outside the conventional community. They find protection in her unorthodox home. She directs the lives of her children, friends, strays and a constant stream of boarders. And it is Eva Peace who alone provides a place for the dying, half-white drunkard Tar Baby. She offers a haven for those ostracized and defenseless in the community.
To Eva, life is an experience to be lived. As a result, she learns that conflicts are often resolved but are rarely solved. She does as she pleases. She also embodies the dark side of the role, the role of a ‘terrible mother’. Eva, like Eve, is both the taker of life and giver of life. She is, in other words, capable of destroying that to which she has given life. She sacrifices herself and she also sacrifices her son when it is necessary. She is ready to kill her son when she knows that he cannot be a man again. She acts in her usual decisive manner; she burns him to death. Her explanation to Hannah for her actions reverberates with the hidden power inherent in the act of creativity, the power to destroy:

One night it wouldn’t be no dream. It’d be true and I would have done it, would have let him if I’d ’ve had the room but a big man can’t be a baby all wrapped up inside his mamma no more; he suffocate. I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn’t and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man. (Sula 71-72)

Like the primeval Earth Mother Goddess, feared and worshipped by man, like the goddess of antiquity, older even than the biblical Eve, Eva both gives life and takes it away. She performs a ritual killing inspired by love-ritual of sacrifice by fire. The same Eva recklessly jumps out of the glass window to save her daughter Hannah whose dress has caught fire.

Thus Eva Peace became the preserver and destroyer of the family. Hannah, Sula’s mother never bothers to remarry after being left a widow. She gives Sula an unconventional image of womanhood and motherhood through her ‘sooty’ life style. She
simply refuses to live without the support of a man and remains independent in herself. After her husband Reku’s death, she takes a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands of her friends and neighbours. For her “sleeping with some one implied for her a measure of trust and commitment” (Sula 43). So she becomes, as Morrison puts it, ‘a day light lover’ (Sula 44). She has no concerns for the norms or roles prescribed by society. She does not want to be a wife, a lover or a prostitute. She does not feel the need to be possessed by someone. She simply “loved maleness for its own sake” (Sula 41). Her relationship to her daughter is almost one of uninterestedness. She says that she loves Sula but doesn’t like her.

Both Eva and Hannah conform to convention by marrying and raising families. Thus Eva and Hannah act as role models to Sula. Theirs is a woman centered universe and the values that rule their house are the ones that are particularly beneficial to women. They live in a world they have created. Morrison’s characters struggle for their liberation. Her three women household, comprising Sula’s grandmother, Eva Peace; her mother Hannah Peace; and Sula herself represent a challenge to traditional living arrangements and the economics of capitalism. Toni Morrison has depicted her mother-figures as human beings, according to their own abiding strengths and weaknesses, respond to the role of motherhood and relate to their children. By dramatizing significant events in the lives of diverse characters such as Helene Wright, Eva Peace and Hannah Peace, the novel outlines the precise perimeters of the Bottom’s tolerance in relation to woman’s behaviour.

Sula sets herself on a mission -- the mission, which she defines thus: “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (Sula 85). As a result, she takes
relentless efforts to make herself, and to attain and appreciate her unified black female self. Sula’s first action upon her return to the Bottom is to battle with her grandmother and to banish her to an old folk’s home. She dismisses herself from the ties and codes that bind the people in Bottom. She is in quest of her selfhood; she is therefore prepared to defy the rules, codes and customs, which bring constraints on her life and behaviour. Consequently, her rebelliousness manifests itself in several ways. Unlike other Medallion women, including Eva and Hannah, she refuses to marry and raise a family.

Sula and her grandmother clash on the issue that will emphasize her difference in a community that believes it needs consistency to survive. Sula wants to make herself rather than others. In a scorching dialogue between Sula and her grandmother, the perfection of judgement upon Eva comes full circle. Eva assaul ts Sula with the question:

“When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It’ll settle you”. “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself.”

“Selfish, Ain’t no woman got no business floatin’ around without no man”. (Sula 92)

Their ensuing argument illustrates deeply opposed ideologies, with Eva maintaining a traditional view of Sula in need of a husband and babies to ‘settle’ her and Sula vigorously asserting her right to make herself and not be made by others. Sula’s total disregard for the conventional values of society shocks everyone and she is regarded as an evil force. Yet paradoxically, hers is an evil force, which generates virtues in others:

Their conviction of Sula’s evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to
cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes
and in general band together against the devil in their midst. (Sula 117)

All things have their use and her community to validate and enrich its own
existence uses even Sula’s evil nature. She is distinctly different, because she is
consciously seeking to make herself rather than others. She is totally unconcerned about
what others think; in other words, she does not care.

Morrison’s exploration of the female voice struggling toward maturity and
authenticity climaxes in Sula and Nel’s discussion at Sula’s deathbed. There they
confront the limitations of their respective moral visions. In her final speech in the novel,
Sula questions the community’s insistence on its own goodness and its designation of
anything that falls outside its ken as evil. She does this most specifically in relation to
their view of woman, which she proclaims is entirely to the community’s use without any
concern for the women who must live it.

Morrison explores the impact of the community on the individual’s quest for self,
the rebellion against a legacy of submission. Sula, who in her search for experience and
total freedom, becomes the embodiment of both the potential of black womanhood and
also its antithesis, the target of every hatred, the outrageous scapegoat of her community.
Nel, in contrast, renounces her secret dreams of flying away from her birthplace for a
conventional role as a wife and a mother and becomes a balanced pillar of her
community.

Black women are victims of American society and society will have to be turned
upside down before they receive love and respect. But when that day comes, there will be
one black woman who already knows what love is, even if it is only self-love, and that
woman is Sula. For her, love is synonymous with freedom. For Nel, love means security. In fact, she marries Jude not out of love but because they have a common need for security.

*Sula* teaches us a lesson about the integral relationship between the destructive limits imposed on the black woman and the inversions of truth in this society. Here Morrison makes an exposition of the sufferings of the different women characters and makes it clear that patient and passive acceptance of one’s sorrows could never help one to emerge out of one’s sufferings. Morrison’s prescription is that one should interact with the natural world and thus be emancipated. Emancipation would have been a catastrophic social crisis for the ex-slave, but the modern African American woman, with her strength of mind and ability can transcend such conditions. Individuality is important for women who can manage everything with their own courage and intelligence. Economic independence ensures women to face critical situation and to fight against the exploitation of women, and they can insist it on to their children. Empowerment in all forms saves women from their present pathetic plight that has been forged and fostered by conventions, traditions and patriarchy.

In *Sula* one thus sees the stoical Negro tradition transforming pain into poetry and misery into music. This is clearly true of Sula and Eva who seem to protest against the treatment meted out to the women and aspire to establish their own identity. It is true, that, like many of the African American writers, she does not disseminate a protest sensibility of a suppressed class of the Blacks, but it is also very true that she tries to vitiate the agony of suppression to have born of an alienated, or the exiled living. What Morrison wants to show to the world as a hidden handful of dust is the black women’s
revolt against aestheticism. If Sula has “no one but herself and it is through the solitude
that she crafts herself into women” (Holloway 68), the indication is that the floods of
inferiority should outburst into a free and socially negative life-style.

Sula’s decisiveness to revolt and to come up with the ways of her emotions is the
outcome of a situation, which is irreconcilable and incorrigible. The first reason in a form
of a principle put forward by Morrison is the loss of values with the impact of slavery.
Morrison’s characters, for instance Sula, show that the dehumanized condition of slavery
is the first lesson of wretchedness, which comes as a transpiring force of inferiority,
humiliation and destitution. Sula’s revolt against herself is a challenge to the concept of
marriage which in her opinion is devoid of love, because the latter itself is a counterfeit
of complexion and not value. The general consensus among the so-called African
American women is that marriage is a need of the male, who would steer its wheels to his
comforts. Sula is an individualistic character who happens to be pragmatic about
marriage.

Morrison portrays Sula as a rebellious woman. If Sula were not an individualistic
character, she must have been either a nationalist, or a freedom fighter. But she is neither
of the two, because the pangs of slavery have taught not only Sula but the whole African
American race to be rebellious. Sula exercises her individualism from beginning to end.
Wrong she could be but fighting her individualism in tense isolation and arid atmosphere,
she has lived together a sacrificial mode in which right and wrong, vice and virtue, and
good and bad, do not really mean. Sula, in this regard, can be held as Saint Joan of the
Cross, who has a philosophy to give, but no emotion to live. Woman as a creature, and
woman as a gender, are two opposed realities, which converge into a consciousness at the
later span of life. Sula is a transcendent female character who is able to defy death. “When creating Sula, I had in mind a woman of force”, Morrison says in an interview and continues…“In fact what she left behind is more powerful after she is dead than when she is alive” (Parker 254). Sula becomes the “new world woman” of Morrison’s vision. In *Sula* Morrison introduces the trope of the howl, a form of speaking in tongues and a linguistic disruption that serves as the precondition for Sula’s entry into language. This sound allows Sula’s expression of her subjectivity as a Black female, just as Morrison demands that women of colour appropriate that howl and transform it into words, into a language that will free them materially, emotionally and intellectually.

As the Black writers of the tradition of the 60’s and the 70’s gauge the element of protest as the basic design to their writing, Toni Morrison, contrarily, chooses to transcend it to a higher degree of thinking, whether it is the race or sexuality. The easy compatibles of Sula and Nel forge the growth of the individual from protest to transcendence. Sula is a rebel and so she represents protest by denying the institutions of society, family and the self. She makes her own frames, her own regulations and decries either governance or dominance by any other body or system. When Sula, “believes that she can create an identity for herself and that she exists beyond the community and social expectations” (*Sula* 130), the seeds of reaction and protest start sprouting. If Sula feels no obligations to please anymore unless she in turn gains pleasure, despite her non-conformist behaviour, she would have come as a first rate protest creature under writers like Judith Wright. As Shakespeare is said to have mishandled Hamlet, so far as the mother’s identity is concerned, Toni Morrison objects to the contemporary Black writers to leave the element of protest in their characters unresolved. She places an alternate
identity for comparison and resolution. In spite of being close friends, both Sula and Nel stand poles apart in their approach to racism, sexuality and individualism. Nel adores the traditional values and claims happiness. In her opinion, racism and sexuality are matters of society, and not of the individual.

Morrison summarizes the protest element and nature by showing the difference between the black experience, which is “dogmatic and political”, and the African American experience, which is, “merely axiomatic and comprehensive” (Coke 210). The technique of finding a solution to the points of racism and sexuality, through a sublimation of the inferior to the superior, the individual to the universal and the sensible to super-sensible is the grand style once adopted by John Milton and James Joyce. Toni Morrison, through the comparables of the ‘protest’ and the solution, depicts the engulfment of racism and social attitudes of the legacy of a culture which is neither white nor black, but a reconciliated reality.

Morrison is not a political feminist. While she certainly does not advocate submission to patriarchy, she is not interested, she says, in attacking men or devising ways to exchange dominance. Morrison reveals most of the stories of her novels through the eyes of black women and says that in large measure her work involves an exploration of “the evolution of self in black women,” (Interview with Toni Morrison) but she does not embrace the kind of radical political feminism associated with the women’s movement of the 1970s. As a cultural feminist she celebrates the strengths of black women despite the racism and sexism levelled against them. Morrison takes the stereotypes under which black women and black men have suffered, dusts them off, and
develops characters who triumphantly and heroically wear those stereotypes, revealing the essence of the strengths that have been caricatured by ignorance and racism.

Toni Morrison, the champion of Black women, has come out with her own Black feminist theory of “Womanism” in African American feminist parlance. Most of the women in the works of Morrison emerge victorious breaking domestic, social, religious, political and sexual shackles which so far have been like millstones weighing on them. They have transformed themselves from passive, battered, voiceless females into self-confident, assertive, modern women who compete with men in all spheres. They have marched ahead from reassurance to assertion and from being victims to victors and this victory is the ultimate goal of African American Womanism.

The basic womanist dictum is that women must build up a culture of freedom, eventhough the price may be quite exacting. Lena and Corinthians in *Song of Solomon* are juxtaposed with each other in order to show that there are possibilities and escape routes for the oppressed women to shake off their oppression. Corinthians’ audacity to throw away her yoke which has the sanction of a strong patriarchal culture, per se, is a source of feminine inscription.

Of the two sisters, it is Corinthians who steers clear of oppression and forges ahead designing a new life while Lena gets bogged down by obstacles. It is convincing to watch Corinthians using her oppression as a springboard for a fresh and new take off:

At one point post office workers were even being considered suitable for Lena and Corinthians, but that was long after they had reached thirty-five, and after Ruth came to terms with the savage fact that her daughters were not going to marry doctors. It was a shock to them all, which they
managed to withstand by not accepting a more complete truth: that they probably were not going to marry anybody. Magdalene called Lena seemed resigned to her life, but when Corinthians woke up one day to find herself a forty-two-year-old maker of rose petals, she suffered a severe depression which lasted until she made up her mind to get out of the house. (SS 189)

Corinthians’ discontentment with making lifeless roses emboldens her to look for work outside her home. She takes off from then onwards:

Amanuensis. That was the word she chose, and since it was straight out of the nineteenth century, her mother approved, relishing the blank stares she received when she told her lady guests what position her daughter had acquired with the State Poet Laureate. “She’s Michael-Mary Graham’s amanuensis.” … It was a lie, of course, even as the simpler word “secretary” was a lie, but Ruth repeated it with confidence because she believed it was true. She did not know then, and never found out, that Corinthians was Miss Graham’s maid. (SS 187)

Having a career helps women acquire freedom. It ensures economic independence and offers a window to life outside the confines of home. That an intelligent adult should spend her life, merely doing domestic chores is an aberration in itself. Corinthians’ encounter with Porter (SS) and the consequent love affair against all odds clearly validate this fact. There is a creative dimension and grace in the way she gives a new direction to her enclosed life.
And her ability to take the plunge is indeed praiseworthy:

She was First Corinthians Dead, daughter of a wealthy property owner and the elegant Ruth Foster, granddaughter of the magnificent and worshipped Dr. Foster, who had been the second man in the city to have a two-horse carriage, and a woman who had turned heads on every deck of the *Queen Mary* and had Frenchmen salivating all over Paris. Corinthians Dead, who had held herself pure all these years (well, almost all, and almost pure), was now banging on the car-door window of a yardman. But she would bang forever to escape the velvet. The red velvet that had flown all over the snow that day when she and Lena and her mother had walked past the hospital on their way to the department store. (*SS* 197-98)

The new life she makes for herself is so fulfilling that a fresh sense of self emerges from a living cocoon. An inner inexplicable source of feminine strength enables Corinthians to escape the suffocating male dominated ambience. She recalls how her father just loved to display them as young girls. “First he displayed us, then he splayed us. All our lives were like that: he would parade us like virgins through Babylon, then humiliate us like whores in Babylon” (*SS* 216). Her accomplishments, against the backdrop of a languishing family which provided her with no role models, are outstanding from a womanist perspective. But she is sore that she has not come across any inspiring and mature woman who could enthuse her in throwing away her shackles:

She stared through the windshield. A grown-up woman? She tried to think of some. Her mother? Lena? The dean of women at Bryn Mawr? Michael-Mary? The ladies who visited her mother and ate cake? Somehow
none of them fit. She didn’t know any grown-up women. Every woman she knew was a doll baby. Did he mean like the women who rode on the bus? The other maids, who were not hiding what they were? Or the black women who walked the streets at night? (SS 196)

The fact that Porter could not find a grown up woman with a sense of independence and emotional balance shows the intensity of women’s oppression which kept them infantile and immature. While on the one hand, men have a deep felt need to oppress women and see them very submissive and subordinate, yet on the other, they prefer women with a sense of identity and sense of self worth, because they in turn stand to benefit by it. That men are compelled to look for women with inner sources of strength portrays graphically that in the absence of liberated women, men’s lives are missing out the better part of life. Women’s oppression impinges on both genders. Hence it is in the interests of both the sexes that male domination is brought to a screeching halt.

Desertion is one of the most distressing yet one of the most dominant motifs in Toni Morrison’s novels. In general, men desert women very easily. Either psychological desertion or physical desertion or both haunt the women like a spectre. Physical desertion always implies psychological desertion but it is imperative to note that the women whose men walk out on them cope with life far better than those women who continue to suffer silently from psychological desertion. The effects of psychological desertion are less obvious but more insidious. It is a silent killer chipping away one’s self gradually but surely.

It is easier for Morrison’s women characters to carve out a new life from bits and pieces once they are free from the clutches of their men. The resilience in her surfaces
easily and she begins to define herself. She begins to own her life in a new way, though she has to face formidable odds. These women become lively, buoyant, resilient and explode in the end.

Viewed from this dimension, her women characters fall into four major categories which may, for purposes of academic convenience, be grouped as “Mary Jane Candy” Women (BE 38), “My Daddy’s Daughters” Women (SS 74), “Riverboat Pilot” Women (SS 19), and “Quilt Making” Women.

“Mary Jane Candy” women basically lack a sense of self. These characters look for love and approval outside themselves. Lacking a sense of identity, they look for identification with other persons or things. To buy love, they would go to any lengths. White values eat away their black roots. Without taproots they remain as infantile women and get ‘pecked’ away into madness and oblivion. Pecola (BE), Hagar (SS) and Jadine (TB) belong to the “Mary Jane Candy” type. They are the most oppressed characters in Morrison’s canon.

I am “My Daddy’s Daughter” type women have a strong need to possess the affection of the parent of the opposite sex. In Tar baby and Song of Solomon both the mothers turn to their offspring for sexual gratification. Morrison’s novels illustrate the fact that “my daddy’s daughter” type of women are very easily overpowered and oppressed by their husbands who themselves suffer from the fixation fever. These ruthlessly suppressed women find it difficult to break the shackles that bind them for a lifetime.

The “Riverboat pilot” women have a great degree of spiritual energy and inner dynamism. This enables them to face the flash floods of life with equanimity and
composure. They do not allow life’s experiences to escape their awareness. This consequently grounds them in wisdom and sensitivity. They are generally wide-eyed. They readily reach out to those who are trapped in the swirling currents and treacherous whirlpools of life. They thus become “river boat pilots” guiding the destinies of the people in and around them.

It is not wonder, then, that Pilate Dead’s (SS) hateful brother Macon Dead finds his sister’s poorly furnished home “an inn, a safe harbor” (SS 135). This is because she embodies the safety of an inn and that of a harbour. What stands out very special about them is their strong sense of self. They display an exceptional degree of resilience and buoyancy in the face of crisis. When their men take off, they do not easily ‘latch’ on to other men. They display a great amount of endurance. Hence “Mama can go for months without food. Like a lizard” (SS 48).

Pilate Dead has suffered many losses such as the death of her mother, the murder of her father, the emotional distancing of her brother and the desertion of her lovers because of the absence of a navel, which in itself is a metaphor for absence, isolation and exclusion. It debars her from conjugal bliss. The only memorable relationship she could cherish was with the island man, whose name even does not figure in the novel, which proves how ‘abbreviated’ it was. It only goes to show how little maleness Pilate Dead had. She cannot forget her island man at all: “No place was like the island ever again. Having had one long relationship with a man, she sought another, but no man was like that island man ever again either” (SS 148).

Pilate Dead’s resiliency surfaces as she learns to bounce over the sharp bends of life. She learns to live without a man. She is puzzled as to why men should shun her
because of her disfigurement, when men “fucked” (SS 148) all kinds of people and even animals and plants. She does not allow worry to corrupt her: “After a while, she stopped worrying about her stomach, and stopped trying to hide it” (SS 148).

In the case of Pilate Dead, the consequences of her desertion had far reaching consequences. Henceforth she was to put up with enforced continence. Even healthy and emotionally fulfilling interactions were denied to her. Her isolation was complete:

It isolated her. Already without family, she was further isolated from her people, for, except for the relative bliss on the island, every other resource was denied her: partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion. (SS 148)

According to Toni Morrison, marital partnership, friendship, and communal fellowship are essential ingredients for leading a fulfilled life. In spite of being deprived of the very basic and essential social interactions, Pilate Dead zooms from zero. She converts her liabilities into sources of strength, negatives into positives, challenges into opportunities and handicaps into happiness. The emergence of Pilate Dead, thus, into a colourful personality is as miraculous as her own miraculous birth.

As the novelist Toni Morrison rightly observes, Pilate Dead “invented” herself, which means she invented her life – a new life out of diminishment, a new perspective from a skewed outlook and a new paradigm from set ways of thinking and acting. Pilate Dead teaches that desertion, displacement, derision and destitution need not disfigure the beauty of life. Pilate is a shining example of self-invention or “self-creation” right from birth.
Eva Peace (*Sula*) manifests the “riverboat” like quality in piloting her own broken life. It is quite significant that until her husband BoyBoy (*Sula*) walked out of her marriage, Eva Peace was leading a very routine life. But once he leaves her, she begins to take her life in her hand and remakes it. She becomes her own pilot. She leaves her children to the care of her neighbours and disappears for eighteen long months. Her tenacity and valiant character help her to steer through the troubled waters of life. Since her children are her priced possession she does not recoil from making any sacrifice:

When he left in November, Eva had $1.65, five eggs, three beets and no idea of what or how to feel. The children needed her; she needed money, and needed to get on with her life. But the demands of feeding her three children were so acute she had to postpone her anger for two years until she had both the time and the energy for it. She was confused and desperately hungry. (*Sula* 32)

It is the hallmark of resilient women to bounce back buoyantly. Reduced to absolute straits, Eva does not give in to despair. She sorts out her major problems one by one. She needs to make money, so she has to find someone to care for her children, which manages, thanks to good neighbourliness. In order to meet her needs, she gets her leg chopped off in a make believe accident, which enables her to claim insurance money:

Eighteen months later she swept down from a wagon with two crutches, a new black pocket book, and one leg. First she reclaimed her children, next she gave the surprised Mrs.Suggs a ten-dollar bill, later she started building a house on Carpenter’s Road, sixty feet from Boy Boy’s one-room cabin, which she rented out. (*Sula* 34-35)
Strikingly, Morrison attracts the attention of the readers to the fact that Eva Peace builds her spacious house very near to that of BoyBoy’s one-room cabin. And the fact that she rents it out shows her spirited nature. Eva’s broken marriage and desertion become sources of reconstruction. Eva Peace is a prototype of Eva the great mother, the originator of all life:

Eva (Eve) provides the ideal, for she is the archetypal “Great Mother.” She is the numinous woman who embodies the feminine principal and, consequently, fulfills rather than mocks her name, as Edelberg suggests. (Samuels 38)

The “empty spaces” created by BoyBoy’s absence become ‘emptied spaces’ for her children. She is like the pelican. She also symbolizes Christ who offered his body and blood for humanity. Eva Peace blends in her both the feminine and the masculine--the yin and yang. “In oriental philosophy the yin and yang represent the male and female principles which come together to form the whole. Both men and women partake of the opposite principle” (qtd. in Strong 76).

Yet another victim of desertion is Ryna (SS). Her story is the grimmest of all. Solomon’s ‘flying’ back to Africa leaves Ryna as a forlorn and deserted woman with twenty-one kids in tow. She screamed helplessly at this unbearable loss. Her grief deranged her. Even after time is enveloped by mist, her screams could be heard in the ravine which they called Ryna’s Gulch. She would rather go crazy than ‘latch’ on to another man.
Susan Byrd briefs Milkman about his great grandmother Ryna’s pangs of separation:

And there’s a ravine near here they call Ryna’s Gulch, and sometimes you can hear this funny sound by it that the wind makes. People say it’s the wife, Solomon’s wife, crying. Her name was Ryna. They say she screamed and screamed, lost her mind completely. You don’t hear about women like that anymore, but there used to be more—the kind of woman who couldn’t live without a particular man. And when the man left, they lost their minds, or died or something. Love, I guess. But I always thought it was trying to take care of children by themselves, you know what I mean?” (SS 323)

Ryna’s depression leading to her craziness is a measure of the love she held in her heart for Solomon and for their offspring. Though broken, she becomes part of her family history which is preserved in the song. The first pages of history are stained with the screams of a woman who only knew how to love:

Jake the only son of Solomon

Come booba yalle, come booba tambee

Whirled about and touched the sun

Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

.................................

Black lady fell down on the ground

Threw her body all around

Come konka yalle, come konka tambee (SS 303)
Ryna consequently contributes her share of story – her story with Solomon’s story. Her wild screams are an essential part of the history of the blacks. It is a story of pain, grief and “dead losses”. When her story is inserted into his, the imbalances of history are corrected. Her screams depict the blackness of the “seething hell of American slavery” (qtd. in Rushdy 574). Her wails thus become an instrument for securing a voice in the discriminated history written by men.

Guitar and Railroad Tommy (Song of Solomon) are spokesmen for the oppression and violence created against African Americans by the traditional white ruling class culture. Railroad Tommy told Guitar and Milkman about things they are not going to have because they are African Americans. He states: “He is not going to have a drink, a good job, money, a good woman, a fancy house, or hope because of their skin color” (SS 60). Guitar knew what Railroad Tommy was talking about, but Milkman had not encountered these situations because of his grandfather and father’s economic success. Guitar states: “The cards are stacked against us and just trying to stay in the game, stay alive and in the game, makes us do funny things” (SS 87). This is a reference to the American Dream not being accessible to all. Another statement by Guitar relates to the attitude of the white ruling class in the southern states rather than the northern states. Guitar confirms: “No. A man cannot live there [Montgomery, Alabama]” (SS 104). Alabama was a state consumed by racism and hatred of people with different skin colours during the 1930s to 1960s. During this period, many civil rights activities and retaliation to them from white supremacist groups were taking place all over the country, especially in Alabama.
Guitar makes several references to the African Americans being oppressed by the traditional American culture’s ideals and values. Guitar knows that he will not get anywhere in life if he plays by the rules; therefore, he steps outside of law and order to emphasize his beliefs. Guitar states, “Well, if a man don’t have a chance, then he has to take a chance” (SS 161). This statement reflects Guitar’s beliefs; he wants to change the traditional American culture’s ideal and values.

Guitar is not silent about discussing any political and social issues that he feels oppress the African American culture. Guitar is even willing to commit murder for his convictions. He is involved with seven men in the ‘Seven Days’ cult, which takes vengeance against white violence. Guitar states, “It’s [killing white people] necessary; it’s got to be done. To keep the ratio the same” (SS 155). They debate Guitar’s reasons for being involved with this group and committing murder. Morrison uses Guitar’s character to contrast with Milkman because Guitar is outspoken about the oppression of the African Americans and Milkman is not. Their responses are different. Guitar takes others’ lives; Milkman sacrifices his own. Milkman rejects random violence against whites; Guitar defends it as their only tool. But Milkman is killed by that violence, suggesting that Morrison is against race hatred because it will turn back against its own community.

The knowledge of modern psychology and sociology has enabled us to know that the influence of external society on the human psyche is unavoidable. Toni Morrison’s novels have examined this socio-psychic interaction with reference to black reality in America. The wounded black psyche under white duress is perhaps the strongest theme of Morrison’s novels. Her novels clearly depict the way their wounded psyche reacts and
resists in its various forms. Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* goes mad; Cholly rapes his daughter; Guitar in *Song of Solomon* takes to terrorism; Sethe kills her own daughter; Paul D in *Beloved* tries to achieve black solidarity; and Milkman in *Song of Solomon* makes a long journey in search of his identity. The protest of these people seems to be the manifestation of their wounded psyche which is the result of the black predicament in white-dominated American society.

The wounded psyche affects human behaviour in different ways. In some people it causes insanity, destructiveness and anarchy, while in some it breeds sanity, balance and constructive behaviour. Whether it breeds negative or positive behaviour in persons depends on the specific temperament of the person on whom it works. In the behaviour of people like Pecola, Cholly, Guitar, Sethe and Beloved, the wounded psyche appears in the form of insanity, anarchy and destructiveness. But it breeds sanity, balance and constructive conduct in people like Son, Milkman and Paul D. Thus black people who undergo psychological torment respond either negatively or positively.

Morrison’s novels demonstrate the socio-psychic interaction in the lives of black people in America. She does not want to give clear solutions for the problems of black people. She shows us the various responses of black people to their specific situation in America. She admits:

> I don’t want to give my readers something to swallow. I want to give them something to feel and think about, and I hope that I set it up in such a way that it is a legitimate thing, and a valuable thing. (Mc Kay 421)
The nature of her work is further explained:

Classical music satisfies and closes. Black music does not do that. Jazz always keeps you on the edge. There is no final chord. And it agitates you. Spirituals agitate you, no matter what they are saying about how it is all going to be. There is something underneath them that is incomplete. There is always something else that you want from the music. I want my books to be like that. (McKay 429)

As Jazz always leaves our mind agitated, Morrison’s work also keeps us emotionally agitated, by showing us the psychological turmoil and its effects on the behaviour of black people.

During the Middle Passage, the black people fought back the system of slavery physically by committing suicide at the last minute. Suicide is regarded as a resistant strategy. Despite the number of self-inflicted deaths in Morrison’s novels and the fact that she wrote her master’s thesis on alienation and suicide in William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf, there has been little critical attention given to the repetition of self-destruction in her own works. In Beloved, a woman jumps overboard during the Middle Passage; in Jazz, Violet’s mother, Rose Dear, climbs into a well and drowns herself; in Sula, the shell-shocked veteran Shadrack institutes National Suicide Day on 3rd January 1920; on the opening page of Song of Solomon, Robert Smith leaps from the top of Mercy Hospital; in The Bluest Eye, Pecola Breedlove wills self-disappearance through a longing to possess the eyes of another face “Please God…Please make me disappear” (59). These bodies do not tell a history of capitulation to dominant powers but comprise one part of a larger multivalent narrative of black survival in North America.
In Morrison’s works suicide operates on a revolutionary level, as a political form of protest and resistance. Acts of self-destruction in Morrison’s novels occupy a penultimate position, coming just before the end of the story. Resistance to the word ‘suicide’ generally proceeds from a reluctance to identify oneself or one’s community with victimization, powerlessness, hopelessness. Sometimes suicide does signify precisely these realities; it can also indict a brutal, dehumanizing culture that makes life unbearable. “Suicide is now the third leading cause of death among young black men; it is eighth in the nation overall” (West 24).

In Revolutionary Suicide, Newton rethinks suicide in political terms: “If the Black Panthers symbolize the suicidal trend among Blacks, then the whole Third World is suicidal, because the Third World fully intends to resist and overcome the ruling class of the United States” (5). Revolutionary suicide is aligned with black power rather than powerlessness. It is the severe repercussions of black resistance, risking one’s life in order to confront oppressive forces:

The concept of revolutionary suicide is not defeatist or fatalistic. On the contrary, it conveys an awareness of reality in combination with the possibility of hope—reality because the revolutionary must always be prepared to face death, and hope because it symbolizes a resolute determination to bring about change. Above all, it demands that the revolutionary see his death and his life as one piece. (Newton 6)

The revolutionary through his suicide longs for another shore. This “longing for another shore” characterizes Morrison’s use of suicide, resonating most powerfully with Beloved’s desire to cross over to the other side, to “join” with the woman whose face she
has lost. Morrison has referred to the loss of African lives during the Atlantic crossing as a “whole nation that is under the sea,” (qtd. in Furman 80) and she dedicated Beloved to this other nation, the “sixty million and more” (“The Pain of Being Black”—Morrison’s interview with Bonnie Angelo). Beloved wants to follow the woman who has killed herself, and Sethe allows herself to be consumed by Beloved, unwilling to be an accomplice (again) in her death. Both characters have faced death, personally and through another, and their refusal to forget constitutes revolutionary suicide. They risk safety and life, knowing the alternative means an intolerable existence.

Sula opens with loss, with the sacrifice of a place to suburban capitalist enterprise. Written during the U.S. American war against Viet Nam, Sula mourns the disappearance of a neighbourhood and the deaths of “Peace”. The novel returns to the impacts of World War I on black Americans, 400,000 of whom served in a segregated army (Hunt 448). Between 1917 and 1923, there were 363 lynchings in the United States, reaching a peak in 1919 when large numbers of veterans returned to the country (Barrett 29). This is also the year that introduces Shadrack, whose name revives the revolutionary figure in the Book of Daniel (3:19). When the “handsome but ravaged” veteran makes his way back to Medallion, Ohio, he experiences a radical break between inside and outside, now and then.

National Suicide Day merges into the Bottom calendar; the people “absorbed it into their thoughts, into their language, into their lives” (Christian Fixing 7). The narrator ironically explains, “Except for World War II, nothing ever interfered with the celebration of National Suicide Day” (Sula 7). Shadrack’s annual holiday encourages people to avoid death’s random blows and free themselves of fear, to control death and
resist disorder by killing themselves. It is not until 1941, the novel’s penultimate chapter, that the ritual ends in actual deaths.

Shadrack’s previously solo performance ends with people crushed and drowned in the New River Road tunnel. Designed to preempt death and, as Alan Wolfe writes in a different context, to “undo the end of history itself” (222), Suicide Day leads not to glorified, individual deaths but to a political protest in which identity is collective: The bodies of the indistinguishable Deweys are never found, and no one knows who went first. For those people in the Bottom who “did not believe that death was accidental—life might be, but death was deliberate” (Sula 90)—the march toward the tunnel advances with a fatal intention. By the sequent January 3, Shadrack’s National Suicide Day will be replaced by an international one. Shadrack’s holiday hints at a transformative and revolutionary ethics, a configuration of love and belonging that is more explicitly developed in Song of Solomon.

On the first page of Song of Solomon, an insurance agent leaps from the top of Mercy Hospital. Robert Smith had left this note on his door:

At 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday the 18th of February, 1931, I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings. Please forgive me. I loved you all.

(signed) Robert Smith,
Ins. Agent (SS 3)

The narrator reports that Mr. Smith did not “draw as big a crowd as Lindbergh had,” since no one read his note until a few hours before the event. The only people able to witness the performance on a Wednesday afternoon were “the unemployed, the self-
employed, and the very young” (SS 4). *Song of Solomon* begins with multiple acts of reading suicide, with characters trying to discern meaning from ambiguous signs. Smith’s written intent—“to fly away on my own wings” (SS 3) —may be fatal, visionary, or spiritual.

The narrator summarizes the feelings of the community at the time: “Jumping from the roof of Mercy was the most interesting thing he had done” (SS 8). It turns out that Smith, a member of the Seven Days, had a more interesting life than the neighbours realized. The Seven Days, a secret attempt to counter the violence of whites against blacks, was founded in 1920 (the same year as the first Suicide Day).

Hospital Tommy, one of the founders of the society, details for Guitar the white privilege that permeates the Armed Forces as well as U.S. culture: “…you not going to have no ship under your command to sail on, no train to run, and you can join the 332nd if you want to and shoot down a thousand German planes all by yourself and land in Hitler’s backyard and whip him with your own hands, but you never going to have four stars on your shirt front, or even three”(SS 60).

Hospital Tommy further assures Guitar that you will never have “‘your own special toilet,’” (SS 60) and you will never “‘walk into a bank and tell the bank man you want such and such a house on such and such a street’” (SS 60). Guitar, enraged by the false promise of the American Dream and the distance between real justice and “*their* laws and *their* courts” (SS 154), joins the Seven Days. He explains to Milkman that the group is not about hate: “What I’m doing ain’t about hating white people. It’s about loving us. About loving you. My whole life is love” (SS 159). Like Shadrack’s concern for the people in the Bottom, Guitar’s love demands a willingness to face and force death.
Elaine Brown explores the centrality of love in the Black Power Movement: “The answer was love—the love that was inside the madness. It was about not forgetting. It was about living and dying for freedom” (355). Twenty-five years after the height of her involvement with the Black Panthers, Brown stresses the need to survive—to refuse, because of one’s commitment, to take unnecessary risks. She says that she would never tell anyone “black and in America” (355) to put down a gun, but she warns young people against idealizing violence and death:

I’m saying that if you are committed,…that commitment must be based not on hate but on love. And that’s the other thing. My theme is that love of your people. Then you gonna have to realize that this may have to be a lifetime commitment and that the longer you live, the more you can do.

(Smith A. 230-31)

*Song of Solomon* engages with this complex of love, commitment, and revolution, beginning with Smith’s suicide note: “I loved you all” (*SS* 3).

Within the first thirty pages of *Song of Solomon*, we learn that the “longing for another shore” that compels revolutionary action may result in active resistance or tired surrender. Ralph Story argues that Smith was “committing revolutionary suicide—an idea which most western readers and even some contemporary Japanese have had a hard time embracing despite the fact that in Japanese culture the idea of ritualistic suicide has long been considered both noble and manly” (149). According to Newton’s definitions, Smith’s jump from the top of Mercy Hospital seems more reactionary than revolutionary. As a participant in the Seven Days—a society made up “of a few men who are willing to take some risks” (*SS* 154)—Smith had engaged in revolutionary suicide: in choosing to
kill himself, he abandoned the revolutionary cause and chose reactionary suicide, the “reaction of a man who takes his own life in response to social conditions that overwhelm him and condemn him to helplessness” (Newton 2).

The novel culminates in a scene of possible flight, murder, or suicide. Just as the Middle Passage haunts Sethe’s escape and white supremacy haunts the mass drowning in Sula, slavery haunts Milkman’s journey to the South. At Solomon’s Leap, Milkman, like his ancestor, must choose. Kneeling beside Pilate—the unintended victim of Guitar’s bullet—Milkman “knew there wouldn’t be another mistake; that the minute he stood up Guitar would try to blow his head off. He stood up” (SS 337). Milkman rises, knowing he faces certain death. On a nearby rock, Guitar puts down his rifle and also stands, murmuring, “My man…My main man” (SS 337). The brothers join in Newton’s dialectical vision of hope and reality: “The revolutionary must be prepared to face death” (Newton 5). Milkman calls out to Guitar, “You want me? Huh? You want my life?” (SS 337) and immediately plunges into action:

Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees—he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. (SS 337)

Guitar hunts down Milkman because he needs money to fund a bombing to duplicate the one that killed four girls in Birmingham. Milkman asks Guitar if he is trying to kill him because of the money:

“Yes.” “Because I ripped you off?” “Because you ripped us off? You are
fuckin with our work!...I told you I had this funny feeling.” “That I was going to cut you out?” “Cut us out. Yes.” (SS 297)

Guitar twice stresses the we, rejecting Milkman’s automatic individualization of the situation. Guitar forces Milkman to face history and to enter into revolutionary awareness. Guitar’s sense of responsibility is intimate and violent and aims at a face. It cannot be forgotten that the retaliatory commitment of the Seven Days proceeds from White tyranny. Nor can it be forgotten that this commitment takes Pilate’s life.

Morrison does not grant more than this: The leap is the beginning. Milkman’s ambiguous flight, may be life, may be death, and is a suicidal reckoning with pain. Solomon flew without wings, and Milkman leaps without “even bending his knees” (SS 337). There is no crash of bones on pavement. Exposed to Pilate’s exceptional and vulnerable face, Milkman is borne by a new epistemology and led by a lodestar, the North Star; the return to slave ancestor at Solomon’s Leap is a return to survival. If this is suicide, it is ‘revolutionary’ suicide, a hopeful, costly, imperfect escape into night, into uncertain arms. Suicide frames the novel, acting as a touchstone for communal struggle, despair, and resistance. It does not offer an answer but shapes the questions. In Morrison’s novels revolutionary possibilities inhere in the unsaying, in the unliving, and in the mutinous refusal to forget.

Toni Morrison’s works are concerned with African American people and their culture. Her writing focuses attention on the predicament of black women and their double-eyed persecution, sexism and racism. The Blacks lament as though in anguish and anger. Their problem was always a cry in the wilderness. As Toni Morrison’s works embody the personal experiences of African Americans, their sufferings and miseries,
their hopes and dreams, they are truly considered the ‘voice of the voiceless’. Through her works, she attempted to establish a new paradigm of justice totally the opposite of the unjust social structures that prevailed in the American society. The fifth chapter, *Summation*, deals with the summing up of the preceding chapters. It attempts to establish Toni Morrison as a conscientious writer committed to values. The important assertions analysed in the previous chapters are restated and emphasized to prove the artistic genius and dexterity of the novelist.