Chapter Five

Conclusion

“Oppression does not destroy people. It is the acceptance of oppression that destroys.”

Albert B. Cleage, Jr.

Toni Morrison, the celebrated African American novelist, through her works celebrates and heralds the fact that her race no longer wants to be at the margin but prefers to be at the centre. An analysis of her works in the backdrop of her life endeavours to prove that her belief in herself and her community is the motivating factor in her life. She endeavours to assert and celebrate her identity as well as that of her people, the African Americans.

In the sudden flowering of the African literary genius, few women seem to have come to the fore. The African woman in her tribal past has had a career more active than that of man. Indeed there was no need for the African woman to reach out for emancipation as her counterparts had to in Europe or the Orient.

Perhaps in almost all African societies, the woman has a ‘Kingdom’ of her own, with both its obligations and its recognition. She frequently has responsibility for cultivation of land; for the preparation of food, with its customary significance; for rituals concerned with fertility; and in settling a host of questions concerned with the marriage of young people and the obligations connected with it. (Hunter 321)

The blossoming of Toni Morrison into a very creative and daring artist is as fascinating as her own characters like Pilate Dead, Eva Peace, Violet Trace and a host of
others who are embodiments of courage and resilience. They managed to survive in a very hostile country that decimated the slave community completely.

How she became a writer of tales is a tale per se. Destiny guided her into a small group of fiction writers and poets who brought for their monthly meetings some creative output. When she ran short of whatever she had written earlier as a student, she put her pen and pensiveness to work. Her imagination created the story of a little black girl whose wish for the bluest eyes – a brutal side effect of white culture – deranged her youthful life. This became the germ of *The Bluest Eye*. There is a close similarity between Pecola Breedlove’s (*BE*) life and that of Toni Morrison’s frustrations in finding a publisher for her maiden novel *The Bluest Eye*. Just as Pecola Breedlove the central character of the novel was rejected by her own community and had to live on the edge of the town, so too Morrison’s first novel was made so little of. She takes her readers into confidence and unveils her frustrations without inhibitions: “With very few exceptions, the initial publication of *The Bluest Eye* was like Pecola’s life: dismissed, trivialized, misread. And it has taken twenty-five years to gain for her the respectful publication this edition is” (Afterword *BE* 172).

To Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* was an enabling agent to recognise the hidden source of creative wellsprings in herself which were dormant in her until then. Ever since the publication of *The Bluest Eye* she was on a writing spree and produced novel after novel in quick succession. The creative stamp left a black feminine impact on all of her novels, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* (*SS*), *Tar Baby* (*TB*), *Beloved* (*BD*) and *Jazz* (*JZ*).

Toni Morrison grew up in a family ambience that believed in the indomitable spirit of the soul, which can confront insurmountable obstacles and even run towards it.
That is why when Morrison had to face crises in life she did not crash. She made use of the loneliness arising from a broken marriage to divine her embedded dynamism and creative springs. Thus the novel *The Bluest Eye* came to be written. It is no wonder then that she has dedicated her maiden novel, “To the two who gave me life and the one who made me free.” Though it is not very explicitly stated as to who they are, a discerning reader may not go wrong in surmising that they might be her children and her former husband.

Morrison’s novels represent a whole gamut of black life in its varied dimension. Many approaches are employed to understand Morrison’s canon. Greek tragic motifs, psychological approach, garden metaphor and Christian symbolisms are used as critical tools to analyse the rich literary landscape of Toni Morrison. The present study uses the concept of silence to analyse Morrison’s novels which can be rightly considered as the ‘speech of the silent’ black race.

Morrison has often been regarded as the foremost American literary voice for both pre-slavery and post-slavery African American culture. In her works, she addresses the position of the African American person in the contemporary world. She is especially concerned with the way that African American individuals and communities are expressive or silenced within a dominant culture which historically has been intolerant of racial difference. It is for this reason that Morrison is often asked why she writes “about race” or if she will ever not write “about race,” in her literary work. One response she has given, is to ask, “Who doesn’t write about race?” (*Interview with Toni Morrison*). For Morrison, to write “about race” is not a matter of parading her characterizations as a way to depict essential traits and universal experiences of African Americans as a unified
people. For Morrison, race is inextricable from the question of what it means and how it feels to be an individual in a particular time and place.

The first chapter *Introduction* serves as an introduction to the problems that African American women writers face in the United States. It intersects Morrison’s privileged position as a writer with her daily struggle against racism, sexism and the Anglo-male-mainstream efforts to silence her. It also examines both intimate personal relationships that concern the individual and the family, and the more far-reaching issues of exploitation and the quest for equality, from the point of view of the Black authors’ portrayal of Whites as well as Blacks is analysed. This chapter aims at gaining an overall perspective and greater insights into the racial problem.

In a way, African American writers like Toni Morrison are the antennae of the race. Their creations, the most sensitive registers of spiritual and social well-being or malaise, are like water drawn from the spring of people which is given back to them in a cup of beauty so that they may drink and in drinking, understand themselves. As a body of psychological and social documents, the black fiction expresses the psychic state of the people who are on the point of acquiring self-awareness and beginning to articulate their demand for social and cultural emancipation.

In their writings, black women have identified themselves with the problems of the African American in general. However, they believed that their problems are slightly different from those of black men and also of white women. It is Anna Julia Cooper who first argued that just as white men cannot speak through the consciousness of black men neither black men “fully and adequately reproduce the exact voice of the black woman” (Cooper 3). Black women’s writing is a part and parcel of Black American Literature in
general, although it has its own distinct identity. The day black woman picked up a pen, she started to expose, reveal and describe her state of being as a black woman. Different black women writers have tried to highlight the problems faced by the black men and with an extra emphasis on women. Most of the time, these black women unitedly have tried to reconstruct their own historical past in their fictions. The life lived and faced by these women is so full of horrors and sufferings and degeneration and it casts a long black shadow on their very lives. Many black women writers have provided a great deal of space to the problems of black woman’s life and existence in their writing.

The first chapter Introduction presents a vast hinterland of feminist tradition in black women’s writings in America and this provides a solid supportive background to an in-depth indulge into the realm of Toni Morrison. Morrison, through her works, has put Black English on the literary map. Her thoroughness and universality are drawn from a wide range of mythic, biblical and historical lore as well as her illumination of the similarities between apparently unrelated people and places. Though her novels are often challenging, they richly reward the reader who explores their depths.

The dark continent of Africa is a repository of a very rich culture and tradition. But the institution of slavery has destroyed the glorious African heritage. Morrison’s novels provide a window to the black women’s world of oppression. Black authors have not deliberately aimed at projecting certain specific images of black women: certain images spontaneously emerge from their literary works. Some of these are the archetypal images derived from the African American’s social and political history. These images fall into four categories: the black woman as professional Moll, sweet heart, wife, and mother figure. Through these images the black woman reveals herself. There is common
focus on the limitations placed on both black men and women, but in the case of women there is the problem of “double-jeopardy,” (Beal 90) of being both black and female in white America. Toni Morrison’s novels reflect their dual cultural heritage and the resultant tension which deeply influenced their romantic and marital relationships.

America is a vibrant nation of diverse heritage and culture. In this context of dominant American culture, the African-American’s experience to attain his identity and self-definition is much complicated. It was a struggle for him because the problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the colour line. Du Bois has coined the phrase “Double-consciousness” to explain the jeopardy of the Negro who is at once Black and American.

Toni Morrison has gone a step further to revise the metaphor of Du Bois to explain the disfigurement in the lives of black women. She portrays black women characters as bearers of “Triple consciousness” so as to bring out the condition of the black woman who is at once black, American, and female. Zora Neale Hurston’s observation in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world” (14) depicts black woman’s plight under the different forms of Racism, Sexism and Capitalism in America. Black women have to contend against the challenges of racial and sexual oppression and they have been oppressed not only by the white world but also by the men of the black world. Toni Morrison’s Black affirmation and her perspective of black values and black heritage are with the purpose of fighting against the marginalization, oppression of sex and race towards freedom and self identity.

Morrison has done admirable justice to her role as the representative spokes-woman of the black woman. She examines and brings out the real life of black women in
Africa and America. As a womanist, her chief concern is to free the black women from their state of deprivations, denials, dehumanization and exploitation. She wants the black woman to be liberated, get freedom, and stand on their own and to be educated.

Social stratification determined by race has recorded indelible impact on those placed in the lower stratum. The eloquent illustration for this is the race of African Americans, and their plight getting reflected in Black Art. The response of the African Americans to their desperate condition of their existence varies. Their varied sensibility is illustrated by different writers in different ways. Toni Morrison speaks out against racism and sexism. A special focus was that of suffering and silencing the “triple burden” of class, colour and gender.

Morrison’s opening dedication of her novel *Beloved* is to the sixty million or more, who died as a result of slavery. Her novels are not only about America’s legacy of slavery, but also about the collective silence and silencing involved in what Morrison calls our “national amnesia” (Angelo 257).

When Toni Morrison was directly asked by the TIME Magazine in 1989 about the “60 million” figure and whether that was proved historically, she replied:

-Some historians told me 200 million died. The smallest number I got from anybody was 60 million. These were travel accounts of people who were in the Congo – that’s a wide river—saying, “we could not get the boat through the river, it was choked with bodies.” That’s like a logjam. A lot of people died. Half of them died in those ships. (*Time Magazine*)

Morrison’s novels help her race emerge from the cocoon of silence in which they enveloped themselves. An attempt has been made to study and analyse the concept of
‘silence’ as an ideology. In its broad sense, silence usually refers to the absence of something which should be present. Sometimes a form of silence is usually produced consciously, promotes or fails to promote interaction in different ways, and can reflect a variety of both positive and negative attitudes and values. For instance, deliberate abstention from talk in an on-going interaction may indicate consideration for the other person or lack of it. Thus, it can be a way of preventing disagreement and conflict or it may, on the contrary, indicate that there is conflict. This is the type of silence described in Greek as “eloquent silence” (qtd. in Kitto 14).

In encounters with participants of unequal status, the superior’s silence may indicate domination, whereas the inferior’s silence may indicate subordination. However, the inferior’s silence may also indicate defiance against the superior’s authority. Tannen suggests that silence in itself is not necessarily “a sign of powerlessness, just as volubility in itself is not necessarily a sign of domination. It is the interaction of the two and attributes meaning to each form of behaviour” (176).

Silence does not always perform all communicative functions to the same extent as speech. The two categories—speech and silence—seem not only to complement each other, but also form a contrasting pair. Silence is so commonly set in opposition with speech. Speech is the liberty to express opinions and ideas without hindrance and especially without fear of punishment. Speech is the freedom of liberty to speak and otherwise express oneself and one’s opinions. Freedom of speech is the freedom to speak freely without censorship or limitation, or both.

Thomas I. Emerson argued that freedom of speech helps to provide a balance between stability and change. Freedom of speech acts as a “safety valve” to let off steam
when people might otherwise be bent on revolution. When people remain silent, representative writers come forward to act as a safety valve, to speak on their behalf, to voice their grievances. Toni Morrison is one such living example who represents her race and their voice in her writings.

The power of Toni Morrison’s writings resides in the way she resists any straightforward equation between silence and resistance. Silence is certainly one locus of a text’s potential resistance to hegemony. However, the act of writing a text, as a means of breaking that silence, is inextricably bound up with the very forces it wishes to oppose. The idea of breaking a silence underscores the implicit violence in the act of writing. In each of Toni Morrison’s works, the act of writing is a breaking of silence embodied within the narrative itself.

To speak, to break the silence, becomes in this context fraught with anxiety. Violence is potential within both speech and silence. Toni Morrison therefore represents her speech i.e., her works, as a liberation from the internalized violence of her enforced silence. The release of speech therefore is liberation from oppressive forces. The ‘release’ is also a response to the symbolic violence of growing up as a poor black woman in the South. Toni Morrison’s works record not only the literal violence but also the symbolic violence of a white cultural hegemony that metaphorically threatens the intellectual as well as physical existence of the African Americans.

Silence is linked with victimization. The violent atrocities perpetrated by the whites on the blacks gave Toni Morrison a voice and forced her to speak. The oppression of African Americans is represented as a symbolic violence to which the writing of the text by Toni Morrison is a response.
A committed and engaged writer like Toni Morrison cannot content herself with simply being silent. The breaking of silence in her works opens up questions of dominance and violence. Breaking the silence of her race and speaking for them as the legitimate representative is really a problematic exercise. In her realistic representation of the oppression of her race, she opens up a space for the discussion of violence within the context of American social system. In the third chapter Articulation of the Inarticulate, we can hear the protest in the voices of the African Americans through Toni Morrison’s novels which are considered as the voice of the voiceless, speech of the silent race.

African American literature is evidently a record of the struggle of the Black race through ages. They suffer everything in silence without protesting which is the hallmark of African American literature. In a primarily white dominated society of America, the African Americans are marginalized but their silent sound has gained momentum to a level of a deafening noise, through the works of writers like Toni Morrison. She expresses the problems her race faces because she is a minority. She uses Art as a medium to burst out her agonies. She saw how African Americans are poorly treated by the dominating class. Since they are minorities they were seldom given a chance to develop their social status. Even democracy has not put an end to their suffering.

In her novels, Toni Morrison effectively transforms black silence to speech. She defines speech as a force that embraces blackness. She goes on to question how much a black woman can speak, and in what tone. Her works define Toni Morrison as a black female writer who breaks the boundaries of silence and proclaims that her asserted aim is to bring light to periods of history untold and hidden: “… to bear witness to a history that
is unrecorded, untaught in mainstream education and to enlighten our people” (Wisker 80).

Toni Morrison’s works are considered as a voice that expresses the literature of the African Americans being oppressed in America and worldwide. However, unless a person tells about his own problems, no one can understand them. Only the foot knows where and how exactly the sandal hurts. “Only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches.” The people who are hurt must tell, how, when and where they were hurt. Otherwise, their hurt goes unnoticed and unrecorded and becomes a prohibited history. Thereby, it leaves a tradition for the coming generation to keep silent over their agonies and suffer like their forefathers. In a way, rather than doing good it does much harm to their offspring and nation as well. If they keep silent over their sufferings, others who have not experienced it, might try to give voice to it and in the process they might even distort the original. In India too, the situation is not different. Swathy Margaret, a Telugu speaking Dalit-Christian writer says,

I, as a Dalit woman, primarily write for Dalit women to uphold our interests. This statement of mine is necessary because if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others for their use and to our detriment. This voice is not representative of all Dalit women. However, I know that my voice is important because it is the voice of a socially denigrated category, suppressed and silenced. (Dalit Feminism 1)

In this regard, each voice is important as it represents the problems are peculiar to its identity. It also gives the onlookers a look at the problem from a fresh angle. Hence it is necessary and obligatory on the part of the writer to represent the problems his section
faces in the society as the problems vary from section to section and individual to individual. Hence the third chapter examines how Morrison portrayed and attempted to articulate the harrowing tale of sufferings and the struggles of the African Americans in America.

The African Americans, the marginalized people in America do gain momentum while they amplify their voices which have been unheard of for the past many centuries. As they are politically weak, territorially segmented, economically unfortunate, culturally stigmatized and socially marginalized, they could echo their voices to this world only through their writings. Toni Morrison echoes the voices of the marginalized who suffer the burden of racism and sexism.

What motivated Blacks to write was the condition of oppression and what they desired of their writings was for it to ameliorate their condition. Black people have often summoned and even harassed black writers to report on and define the condition of the race. Since writers possess the ‘word’ and the word is powerful, Blacks feel it is the inherent duty of writers to communicate their wishes and, if need be, lead them against those who oppress them. By virtue of its origin, nature and function, black writing is thus ‘mission conscious’ and is necessarily a hazardous undertaking.

With Toni Morrison’s writings, one comes to a definite turning point in the history of black women’s literature. Morrison, the Nobel Prize winner, broke through the barriers for women and blacks and beautifully evoked the legacy of displacement and slavery in her various novels. Her works articulated key issues for African Americans, presenting the true face of racism in all its human complexities. She goes much deeper into the very roots of racism and sexism in her novels, *The Bluest Eye*, *(BE)* *Sula, Song*
of Solomon, (SS) Tar Baby, (TB) Beloved, (BD) and Paradise. Morrison vividly analyses how racial discrimination and gender bias act as powerful tools of oppression and harm or destroy individuals. Her novels fuse the universal themes in the particularity of the African American experience and define the beauty and brutality of human life.

Blacks in America were relegated to an underclass by virtue of their race and culture. The Africans in America fell into the deep pit of inequality and were roasted alive. The whites inflicted physical torture on the blacks. The Americans looked down upon the culture and humanity of Africans as historically devalued and marginalized. Slavery has been characterized as a peculiar Institution by the whites that subordinate and drives them to the periphery. Morrison portrays in her Beloved the truth about the life of the black people in America. It presents the trauma of their lives and the dehumanizing effect of slavery on the blacks in America.

Beloved focuses on the grief of mothers who even attempted murdering their babies to abort the sufferings of slave life. The novel is meant to give grief body, to make it palpable. Beloved leaves no name, and the only name she has is the one inscribed on her grave. Morrison’s novels, Ann Snitow in “Death Duties: Toni Morrison Looks Back in Sorrow” (1988) says, honours “… those who didn’t even leave their names, who died before they had the chance to become the sort of people about whom you could tell real stories” (197).

Beloved is a poignant analysis of the unspeakability of slave life, because it is too painful and therefore defies telling. The unspeakability also arises because positive images of the black women are tellingly absent. Sethe is emasculated and shattered completely. Andrew Levy in “Telling Beloved” (1991) explains that “Sethe’s story is also
unspeakable because the vocabulary and ideological oppositions needed to describe it do not yet exist and because the ones that do exist are perniciously inappropriate” (122).

All her novels are set against the background of slavery and slaves stalk and stride like colossus against a very rich and complex canvas. Hence black life is mirrored in all its intensity. A vast concourse of characters appears from the debris of historical sites telling their history from a black perspective. Morrison undertakes the sacred mission of rewriting black history, and she has no qualms to tell the truth unvarnished. Thus the whites stood exposed in all their blackness. Instances of such ruthless honesty abound in her novels. In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs’ anguish drives her to blurt out the pain of oppression: “Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed,” she said, “and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but white folks” (*BD* 89). Tired of the brutality of the whites, Baby Suggs gives up faith in life, eventhough she herself had been a source of hope for others once upon a time. She, who had taken her people to the place of Clearing to cleanse them of their sorrow and hurt, is now desolate and grief stricken:

   Baby Suggs grew tired, went to bed and stayed there until her big old heart quit. Except for an occasional request for color she said practically nothing—until the afternoon of the last day of her life when she got out of bed, skipped slowly to the door of the keeping room and announced to Sethe and Denver the lesson she had learned from her sixty years a slave and ten years free: that there was no bad luck in the world but white people. “They don’t know when to stop,” she said, and returned to her
bed, pulled up the quilt and left them to hold that thought forever. (BD 104)

Paul D too cautions Denver of the dangers of coming under the spell of the whites, because from experience he knows that they could be the most dangerous persons:

When he asked her if they treated her all right over there, she said more than all right. Miss Bodwin taught her stuff. He asked her what stuff and she laughed and said book stuff. “She says I might go to Oberlin. She’s experimenting on me.” And he didn’t say, “Watch out. Watch out. Nothing in the world more dangerous than a white school teacher.” (BD 266)

Slavery is not just an institution, it is a mindset which is difficult to be cast off. Though treated nicely, the Negroes on Sweet Home are little more than toys to be manipulated by the Garners. Yet they are unable to shed the ‘white supremacy’ attitude. This unconscious attitude makes them retain the statue of the Black boy in their household. The Bodwins in Beloved though involved in the movement against slavery and racial discrimination, deep in their psyche they still possess racial prejudice. The separation or segregation of human beings in the name of either caste or colour leads only to violence, disharmony and self-destruction. Upper caste men exploiting lower caste women sexually either with inducements or by force is the result of the material power they have over the lower castes. Similar is the case of an African American woman who is used as an object of sexual pleasure. One more dimension is added to the plight of the blacks in that there is an economic motive behind the miscegenation in the slave system.
Morrison acknowledges that history is always fictional, always a representation, yet she is also committed to the project of recording African American history in order to heal her readers. Instead of a playful exercise in deconstructing history, Morrison’s *Beloved* attempts to affect the contemporary world of the “real”. Her work should be recognized for contributing a fresh voice to the debates about postmodern history, a voice that challenges the centrisms and elitism of much of postmodern theory. *Beloved* reminds us that history is not “over” for African Americans, who are still struggling to write the genealogies of their people and to keep a historical consciousness alive.

*Beloved* is based on the want of power, a homeland and a language. Morrison articulates these historical problems through the action of the novel. In *The Bluest Eye* she graphically depicts the effects of the legacy of nineteenth-century classical racism for poor black people in the United States. The novel tells of how the daughter of a poor black family, Pecola Breedlove, internalizes white standards of beauty to the point where she goes mad. Her fervent wish for blue eyes comes to stand for her wish to escape the poor, unloving, racist environment in which she lives. In the American society, blacks are treated with aversion and contempt and are denied individuality. Such a racial prejudice contributes to psychic and emotional problems.

In *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*, Morrison provides a voice to African American children, men, and women. In *The Bluest Eye*, she provides a voice for the major characters, Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola, who are children between eleven and thirteen years old. When Morrison wrote this novel, very few novels provided a voice to the children of any ethnic background. The damaging internalization of negative representations of beauty and Blackness is Toni Morrison’s major focus in this novel.
Loss of identity, confusion and a devaluation of self emerge in Pecola’s tragic story. Morrison in this novel highlights the silencing and devaluing of black people in American society, and the resulting pains and evils. Morrison regards racism here as a primary obstacle and a primary cause of the African’s oppression in the United States. She articulates that racism devastates the self-image of the African female in general and African female child in particular. The novel attempts to show the terrible consequences for blacks of internalizing the values of a white culture that both directly and indirectly rejects them. Morrison, through her conscious use of the impact of racism on the psyche of the African Americans, rouses them out of their complacency and shocks them into the recognition of various possibilities. Pecola is a symbol of all the African Americans who have no options in traditional American culture.

Thus Morrison provides a voice to those who have been silenced in the white and male dominated American atmosphere. She articulates the problematic and the pathetic life of African American women in this atmosphere. She presents a vivid picture of how the black men are arrogant sexual exploiters of black women. At the Sweet Home, the absence of young black women seems to have made them crazy. They are always obsessed with the thought of women. However, for them rape appears to be the only gift of life.

Morrison portrays poignant scenes of cruelties the blacks are forced to endure for generations. Her novels present facets in the lives of the blacks who are denied humanity and identity. It is quite evident that the black women, in addition to being cruelly treated by the whites because they belong to an inferior race, also suffer and occupy a marginal position in the society because they are women. Everywhere, conquered people have
suffered humiliation. But no other people on earth suffered and continue to suffer such cruel humiliation of social and cultural segregation sanctioned by economic and political exploitation as African Americans. Morrison’s novels are the authentic expression of the suffering masses and classes. In her novel *Song of Solomon*, Morrison uses Milkman’s journey, the characters’ names and identity to provide a voice for the silenced middle class African American male. The protagonist, Macon [Milkman] Dead III, is on a quest to find his self-identity and family’s history because his present life is unsatisfying to him. This leads to the many levels of Milkman’s search for his self-identity and family heritage. In this novel, Morrison also raises her voice against female oppression. Ruth’s oppression begins even before her marriage, in her own home, by her own her father. Her oppression has gone deep into her psyche that she is incapable of any aggression.

In *Tar Baby* which deals with the sufferings of the African American people, Morrison articulates what it means to be black and the influences of the past on the present as well as what is the relationship that a black person has to his/her community. As 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.

In *Sula*, Morrison depicts the quest of a female protagonist, Sula, for creating her own self and coming to terms with her identity as a black woman. Morrison demonstrates the exploitation and difficulties that black women face when they try to explore different aspects of their self. A close analysis of Morrison’s characters in *Sula* reveals how white standards of beauty and acceptance have instilled an inferiority complex in the minds of
the blacks. Morrison in *Paradise* successfully articulates the glaring problems of the African American women who are haunted and hunted by a discriminating and oppressive society. She goes beyond the depiction of racial and sexual oppression in this novel. The women at the Convent have gained a voice through Morrison, as explained by Collins, “… black women’s journeys often involve ‘the transformation of silence into language and action’” (Collins 105).

Morrison wants her writing to bring about some change in the lives of poor children, women and people of colour. Writing that is born from real human beings and returns to them liberatory and useful: this is Morrison’s solution for what she and other black women writers see as the problem with detached, objective writing. The most important truth one needs to understand is that liberation of the oppressed is possible only when the oppressed make up their mind to participate in the struggles against their oppressors. Hence the fourth chapter entitled *Explosion of the Repressed* portrays the protest and the explosion of the repressed African Americans against the matrix of oppressions such as racism, classicism and sexism. This chapter presents the journey of the African Americans which is a tale of resilience and courage.

In a country like the United States, peopled by the immigrants, it is common to see both the meetings of cultures and the cultural displacements that usually follow them. America has got a long tradition of immigration and has harboured many important ethnic minorities. Sometimes it leads to the predicament that the cultures that are involved do not meet on equal terms. Such conditions of unequal positions and of the resistance offered therein have become the issues for analysis in the works of Toni Morrison.
It is important for us to celebrate Toni Morrison’s works as explosion of the repressed Blacks. Through her writings, she has voiced her protest against all the unjust systems holding African Americans down, silencing them to submission. 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. The fourth chapter of the thesis 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.

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 sympathize with the Black Americans. Sethe possesses the tiger spirit and she cannot be easily cowed down. She 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. Sethe who earlier frees herself from the iniquitous system of slavery then denies to yield her daughter to the monstrosity of the racists.

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.

Beloved, as the murdered daughter of a slave woman, as the ghost-child of 124, is the most powerful symbol of resistance within the text: Beloved resists even death by returning to her life in an embodied form. Beloved is a projection of Sethe’s unconsciousness surrounding the trauma that is slavery; she is Sethe’s desire to reunite with her daughter and the desires of all ex-slaves; she is Sethe’s past and the past of slavery; she is Sethe’s memories of Sweet Home and all other memories associated with slavery. Beloved, as the past of slavery, represents the slaves who both perished and survived the Middle Passage. Clearly, Beloved is Sethe’s daughter, yet she is also a sister, a lover, and a mother. She is all the roles that are womanhood and thus signifies the matrilineal legacy of resistance to enslavement.

Morrison’s novels are not about victims, 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.

Morrison, through her novels, works to illuminate the violence of the American 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.

The life of slavery gave to the black women an experience which got seared into their bodies like the “chokecherry tree” (BD 16) on Sethe’s back, which the white women find difficult even to visualize. So the hardware and software experiences of life made them mature and grow up as icons of courage and daringness. Such an excruciating experience of life is diametrically opposed to the “doll-like status” (Mori 58) of white women who are idolized as objects of beauty and feminine grace.

During slave era, the whites made the black women work in the fields just like black men. While the image of a white woman is that of wife and mother, it is so very different in the case of black women who altogether had a different drum to beat.

Violet Trace (JZ) and Son Green’s mother (TB) are portrayed as powerful field hands. Son takes pride in his mother’s prowess and narrates the episode to Jadine who is cloned by white culture. Son reminisces:

His mother’s memory was kept alive by those who remembered how she roped horses when she was a girl. His grandmother built a whole cowshed with only Rose to help. In fact the room Jadine had slept in, Rosa built herself which was why it didn’t have any windows. Anybody who thought women were inferior didn’t come out of north Florida. (TB 271)

The very peculiar circumstances in which the Black women found themselves enabled them either consciously or unconsciously to develop a sense of aggression and rebellion. The commonality of their sufferings compelled them to be for each other a
tower of strength. Toni Morrison herself concedes to this fact in her interview with Lester:

I think black women are in a very special position regarding black feminism, an advantageous one. White women generally define black women’s role as the most repressed because they are both black and female, and these two categories invite a kind of repression that is pernicious. But in an interesting way, black women are much more suited to aggressiveness in the mode that feminists are recommending. Because they have always been both mother and laborer, mother and worker, and the history of black women in the States is an extremely painful and unattractive one, but there are parts of that history that were conducive to doing more, rather than less, in the days of slavery. (48–49)

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 by virtue of their race. Marginalization is the social process of becoming or being made marginal which involves people being denied their power. It deprives them of their material, social and economic status. Along with material deprivation the marginalized individuals are also excluded from services, programs and policies. 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. Every
thing around them weighed down both their body and mind and as a result their life became miserable. 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 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. In Pauline we also see 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 is seen in Pauline.

Morrison honours and reveres the way in which these indomitable women handle the hardships of life. In *The Bluest Eye* the narrator turns eloquent piling up compliments on the black women who are embodiments of extraordinary courage.

Then they had grown. Edging into life from the black door. Becoming. Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders. White women said, “Do this.” White children said, “Give me that.” White men said, “Come here.” Black men said, “lay down.” The only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other. But they took all of that and re-created it in their own image. They ran the houses of white people, and knew it. When white men beat their men, they cleaned up the blood and went home to receive abuse from the victim. They beat their children with one hand and stole for them with the other. The hands that felled trees also cut umbilical cords; the hands that wrung the necks of chickens and butchered hogs also nudged African violets into bloom; the arms that loaded sheaves, bales, and sacks rocked babies into sleep. They patted biscuits into flaky ovals of innocence – and shrouded the dead. They plowed all day and came home to nestle like plums under the limbs of their men. The legs that straddled a mule’s back were the same ones that straddled their men’s hips. And difference was all the difference there was. (*BE* 108)
The two major themes in marginalized Literature are slavery and colonialism. The inhuman cruelty of slavery and the frustrations generated by colonialism are yet raw wounds on the African sensibility. When a woman starts writing, she invests the nation’s womanhood with its unique significance and presents her heroine as the eternal feminine caught in the web of “living” with its criss-crossing sorrows, frustrations and tragedies. Pecola, Toni Morrison’s heroine, is thus many things in one—an African “every-woman”, hardworking, suffering and patient; a symbol of the universal woman who is also the mother of sorrows.

Many women writers of African American literature such as Toni Morrison give voice for the voiceless people in their works. She writes about and for women in particular, for otherwise ignored, silenced Black women. Morrison breaks the stereotyped image of women and elevates them as an empowering agent. At the same time, she couldn’t end up her writings without depicting black women’s life of slavery. Because their past life of slavery was not an easy thing to forget. Yet she portrays her women characters as very strong and powerful. By empowering her women with a new portrayal, she creates a new type of analysis. The Afro-American novels chart out “black women’s development from stereotypes to character, from dependency to self-empowerment, from assimilation to autonomy, from innocence to maturation” (Kulkarni 112). Mary Helen Washington, using Alice Walker’s paradigm, comments that “the evolutionary process is both historical and psychological and consists of three interrelated circles: suspension, assimilation and emergence” (Kulkarni 113). The third cycle composed of women of the late sixties. These women were greatly influenced by the political events of the sixties. They try to create a new identity for women. They create a new type of women.
Sula is a representative of the Black women whose lot it was to go through life as sexual slaves. The heroine of the novel *Sula* refuses to be the “tuck and hem.” She is a symbol of resilience of a woman. Sula irritates the Bottom with her individuality, her refusal to accept a woman’s role. Morrison gives Sula license to act as she pleases. Significantly enough, Sula can be said to behave like a man. She is adventuresome, she trusts herself, and she is not scared. She is curious and will leave and try anything. Because of this ‘quality of masculinity’ she is seen as a ‘total outrage.’ In her quest for balance between gender and identity, the individual and the society and the race and sexuality, Morrison portrays the protagonist as a fundamentalist and a feminist. Sula acquires liberty in a perfect mode of projecting her isolation, which is built upon a real detachment from both the society and its roots. Her refusal to live according to the values of her community ‘to marry and settle down’ and ‘distinctly different’ quality about her which causes the townspeople to see her as evil, have often been seen as contributing to the picture of a young woman suffering and fighting for the right to choose her own path in life.

One of the themes which rings the note of Morrison is the truthful portrayal of the plight of the women in society and their marathon struggle for seeking the sense of ‘identity’ in a male-dominated conservative framework. The social structure of an African American woman is full of many ups and downs, ifs and buts. Life offers little choice for the forsaken women in Morrison’s novels, who yearn for pleasure and happiness and a life far from shackles or constraints.

In *Sula* Morrison introduces her protagonist as a revolutionary representative of Blacks, who resists and explodes 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 freedom and selfhood. 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 has 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. Sula takes relentless efforts to make herself, and to attain and appreciate her unified black female self. In *Sula* one thus sees the stoical Negro tradition transforming pain into poetry and misery into music. This is clearly true of Sula, who seems to protest against the treatment meted out to the women and aspires to establish her own identity. Morrison portrays Sula as a rebellious woman.
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.

Lena and Corinthians in Morrison’s *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. 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. Pilate Dead’s resiliency surfaces as she learns to bounce over the sharp bends of life. She learns to live without a man. She does not allow worry to corrupt her.

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.

Guitar and Railroad Tommy (*Song of Solomon*) are spokesmen for the oppression and violence created against African-Americans by the traditional white ruling class. Railroad Tommy told Guitar and Milkman about things they are not going to have because they are African Americans. Guitar makes several references about the African Americans being oppressed by the traditional American culture’s ideals 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.

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.

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.

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.
The novel *Song of Solomon* 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. Guitar hunts down Milkman because he needs money to fund a bombing to duplicate the one that killed four girls in Birmingham. 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.

Morrison’s novels are distinctly black and examine distinctly black issues. The theory of postmodernism has its emphasis on race, class and gender, but the theory of naturalism is of the idea that one’s social and physical environments can drastically affect one’s nature and potential for surviving and succeeding in this world. Morrison’s novels *The Bluest eye, Beloved, Sula* and *Song of Solomon* can be explored from a naturalistic perspective. Richard Wright in his *Native Son* warns us to “remember that men can starve from a lack of self-realization as much as they can from a lack of bread! And they can *murder* for it, too!” (366). As the riots in Los Angeles and in cities across the country indicate, men and women are forced to struggle for self-realization and yet one’s environment remains a key factor in influencing and limiting an individual’s potentials and aspirations.

Does this mean that by focusing on the influences of environment in literature we are labelling our main characters helpless victims? Absolutely not. In *The Street* Lutie Johnson fights the ghetto with a determination that can only be called heroic; her tragedy is that she loses her battle against her surroundings, but her triumph consists of her
willingness to break the boundaries that both white and black society had created for African American women in the 1940s.

The theory of naturalism is also about the primal struggle for freedom. One cannot think of African Americans without considering the society’s insidious racist attempts to retain black men and women as cheap sources of labour. A universal characteristic of Morrison’s novels has been her depiction of male and female protagonists failing or succeeding on the difficult journey to freedom through self-awareness. For Morrison, self-realization for African Americans can only be achieved through an active acknowledgment of one’s cultural past. Only by understanding and accepting the past can African Americans achieve a psychological wholeness in the present and strengthen their power as a race in the future.

In *Specifying*, Susan Willis captures very well the importance of Morrison’s themes and the highly charged atmosphere of her novels:

There is a sense of urgency in Morrison’s writing, produced by the realization that a great deal is at stake. The novels may focus on individual characters like Milkman and Jadine, but the salvation of individuals is not the point. Rather, these individuals struggling to reclaim or redefine themselves, are portrayed as epiphenomenal to community and culture, and it is the strength and continuity of the black cultural heritage as a whole that is at stake and being tested. (93-94)

What is “at stake” in Morrison’s novels and in black fiction in general is a consistent emphasis on the need to resist forces stemming from society which may serve to destroy “continuity of the black cultural heritage” (Willis 94) by a conscious
embracing of the past combined with a concurrent quest for identity. There is a natural pattern of creative resistance of outside forces and rebuilding of the self in Morrison’s novels. While Morrison’s works do exhibit naturalistic tendencies, she presents them in a new way, illustrating different challenges specific to minorities and offering alternate ways of dealing with these challenges. Morrison’s protagonists face a world that is complex, oppressive, and destructive because Morrison’s protagonists must battle against intraracism and interracism as well as poverty and sexism.

Black naturalism in Morrison’s novels explores the challenges African Americans experience as they contend with the conflicting responsibilities to the self and the community that arise to a great extent due to racism. In order to gain a better understanding of the complex, psychological struggles minorities experience as they attempt to resist influences from a dominant society, it might prove helpful to consider Elaine Showalter’s discussion of the three phases that subcultures go through in their search for independence and cultural identity. In “The Female Tradition”, Showalter describes the first phase a subculture or minority experiences as an extended period of “imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalization of its standards of art and its views on social roles” (1108). As a subculture values the unique characteristics of its identity and gains a better sense of its power, it progresses collectively into the second phase that includes a “protest against these standards and values, and advocacy of minority rights” (1108). She describes the third phase as a period of “self-discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity” (1108). We can apply her phases of development to Morrison’s characters as well.
Morrison’s novels present characters striving with these same issues: the danger of indiscriminate *internalization* of white Western customs, the need for advocacy of African American values, and the importance of *self-discovery*. The first two stages Showalter describes elucidate the psychological barriers African Americans must travel through before they can acknowledge the past and consequently achieve self-identity. For all minorities, the journey to self-realization is a journey of survival for the individual and for the race.

When analyzing Morrison’s characters, it is important to remember that along with combating prejudice and injustice stemming from society, they are also overcoming inner struggles that are unique to a member of a minority. And because Morrison suggests a healing, vital process to freedom and self-awareness, her novels go beyond protest literature. Morrison incorporates the naturalistic theme of the “waste of individual potential” (qtd. in Hamilton 115) due to environmental circumstances in many of her novels and most emphatically in the character of Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*. Pecola is victimized by a society that conditions her to believe that she is ugly and therefore worthless, because she does not epitomize white Western culture’s idea of beauty. In studying Pecola from a psychological perspective, one can say that Pecola and much of her community are trapped in Showalter’s first phase of growth for a subculture—“*Imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and *internalization* of its standards of art and its views on social roles” (1108). Sethe in *Beloved* occupies the second phase as she “*protests* against these standards and values” (Showalter 1108). Sula naturally comes under Showalter’s third phase of “*Self-discovery,… a search for identity*”(1108).
Because Morrison is concerned with and committed to African people, she uses each of her novels as a framework for investigating various solutions to the African’s class exploitation and race and gender oppression. The idea that African people are one people, bound by history, culture, and current oppression, pervades all of Morrison’s work. In *Sula, Song of Solomon, Tar Baby,* and *Beloved,* the individual who selfishly violates the collective in some way either reaps disaster or learns from his/her mistake. The price Sula pays for such a violation is death; Milkman and Baby Suggs learn to respect the collective. While the unification of all African people is not new to *Jazz,* the thematic emphasis on the unity of women as a solution to gender oppression is new. In *Jazz,* women of the 1920s, like many African women today, are wild because of the conditions in which they live.

Wild, in *Jazz,* signifies defiance, rebelliousness, aggressiveness, selfishness, and silence—all caused by class exploitation and race and gender oppression. Because conditions throughout the US, indeed the world, in the 1920s are so oppressive for African people, there are traces of Wild in everything and everyone. *Jazz* itself is wild. It is “the dirty, get-on-down music the women sang and the men played and both danced to, close and shameless or apart and wild” (*JZ* 58). Harlem, the City, is wild as well. It is a place where

... people think they can do what they want and get away with it. I see them all over the place: wealthy whites, and plain ones too, pile into mansions decorated and redecorated by black women richer than they are, and both are pleased with the spectacle of the other. I’ve seen the eyes of black Jews, brimful of pity for everyone not themselves, graze the food
...stalls and the ankles of loose women, while a breeze stirs the white plumes
on the helmets of the UNIA men. (JZ 8)

It is the wild in African women which is especially alarming since they are the
cultivators and nurturers of the family unit. It is their story that Morrison is most anxious
to present because it is only they who experience the triple oppression of class, race, and
gender. These wild traces may be submerged, but under the right conditions, they will
emerge. One is as wild in the city as she is in the country. Wild is the wildest of all. And,
of course, her child, Joe Trace, is impacted upon as a result, causing him to search most
of his life for Wild, or someone like Wild.

These traces of his mother haunt him for the rest of his life, causing him to act
wild at times; indeed, Joe is marked by traces of her from the beginning, since any
fascination with Wild

...could mark a newborn: melons, rabbits, wisteria, rope, and, more than a
shed snakeskin, a wild woman is the worst of all. So the warnings the girls
got were part of a whole group of things to look out for lest the baby come
here craving or favoring the mother’s distraction. (JZ 165)

Not only does Joe settle for the traces of Wild (thus the name “Joe Trace”), but also,
being marked, he craves the attention of wild young girls like his mother. Both Violet and
Dorcas have traces of Wild in them.

The reader is given little information to rationalize Wild’s wildness. But since
there are traces of Wild in all the female characters—that is, there is a common bond
among women of African descent in that they all experience a triple oppression—the
reader can infer that similar conditions cause all of these women to become wild. Intimations of those conditions are revealed through the thoughts of Alice Manfred.

If conditions for all African people were barbaric, wild even, then conditions for women were downright warlike. Unlike African men, African women were also in danger from the sexism that, like racism, is spawned by capitalism. So Alice Manfred (conditions have made her afraid of men; thus, Manfred) instructs Dorcas to hide her womanliness:

Taught her how to crawl along the walls of buildings, disappear into doorways, cut across corners in choked traffic—how to do anything, move anywhere to avoid a white boy over the age of eleven. Much of this she could effect with her dress, but as the girl grew older, more elaborate specifications had to be put in place. High-heeled shoes with the graceful straps across the arch, the vampy hats closed on the head with saucy brims framing the face, makeup of any kind—all of that was outlawed in Alice Manfred’s house. (JZ 55)

Conditions for African women were no better in the South than in the North. In fact, the main reason parents gave for sending their daughters north was fear of molestation. Wild, a young woman in the South, is impregnated by someone. Or perhaps a young African woman is impregnated by someone and is made Wild. Northern cities—and Harlem is the City of all the cities (young, vibrant, and wild)—are not much different from the South, especially for women.

The message in the novel is that as African people are connected by their history and culture, the solution to the problem of exploitation and oppression that African
people, women in particular, face is unity, the same as it is in most of Morrison’s canon. For the Wild women of the novel, the solution is bonding, coming together to communicate: “The woman who avoided the streets [must] let into her living room the woman who sat down in the middle of one” (JZ 73). If Alice Manfred does not let in Violet, if the two women do not come together to communicate, to listen, to share, to care for each other—then Alice will continue to fear men, to stifle the Wild in her; Violet will continue to be silent, to distinguish that (Wild) Violet from herself. Alice needs the company of Violet just as Violet needs the company of Alice: “Take that dress off and I’ll stitch up your cuff” (JZ 82). The community consciousness that prompts Alice Manfred to put tiny stitches to Violet’s worn out coat, is in the spirit of African tradition of quilting. By mending her coat, Alice transfers some inner strength to Violet to darn her ragged life. The almost invisible stitches she makes to mend the coat of Violet, go a very long way to soothe a nerve shattered woman.

Though the black consciousness was an unsettling experience, it also had a bonding effect. The blacks, aliens in the new land, could only survive by creating a sense of community. It enabled them to steer through slave oppression and knitted them into a community of people where everyone’s pain was felt and shared as if it were one’s own. It is this sense of solidarity that sharpens the sensitivity of Stamp Paid to come to the help of Paul D who has taken shelter in the basement of the church, as if he has no one to count on. Stamp Paid is ready to acknowledge, on behalf of the community, its callousness in letting him spend his nights in the cellar of the church:

You pick any house, any house where colored live. In all of Cincinnati.

Pick any one and you welcome to stay there. I’m apologizing because they
didn’t offer or tell you. But you welcome anywhere you want to be. My house is your house too….You ain’t got to sleep in no cellar, and I apologize for each and every night you did. (BD 230)

Just as African people as a whole must band together (bond) to survive and to progress, so also must African women—the most exploited adult sector in the world—help one another in order to live healthy, wholesome lives. Sisterhoods, groups of African women bonding together, help clear things up:

When Violet came to visit … something opened up….The thing was how Alice felt and talked in her company. Not like she did with other people. With Violet she was impolite. Sudden. Frugal. No apology or courtesy seemed required or necessary between them. But something else was—clarity, perhaps …. Alice sighed a little sigh, amazed at herself as she opened the door to the only visitor she looked forward to. (JZ 83)

Alice learns not only from Violet’s teaching, but also from her own voice. With Violet, Alice speaks her mind. She develops a Wild tongue instead of a silent one. She lets the Wild come up and out. And through this cathartic process, she learns about herself: “Alice slammed the pressing iron down. ‘You don’t know what loss is,’ she said, and listened as closely to what she was saying as did the woman sitting by her ironing board in a hat in the morning” (JZ 87). This bonding between women, this sisterhood, allows African women not only to talk, but also to cry and to laugh. All three are signs of healing.

Unity is a major theme in Morrison’s canon. In The Bluest Eye, Claudia recognizes that Maureen Peal is not her enemy. Both she and Maureen are products of the
society in that they are taught that beauty has to be measured by the standards of the ruling class: “And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us” (TBE 62). In Sula, Nel must come to realize the truth of Eva’s words: “You, Sula. What’s the difference?” (Sula 168). Remember, it is Nel who takes control of the Chicken Little incident by covering up the accident. This bold, wild act is one the reader would typically associate with Sula, not Nel. In Song of Solomon, Milkman must see himself as a part of the community—in Michigan and in Shalimar—as a prerequisite to becoming a part of the living. In Tar Baby, Jadine’s isolation from her people—including Sydney and Ondine—makes her more a tanned European (“Copper Venus”) than an African. In Beloved, Sethe must rely on the African community in order to purge the ghost from 124: “Unloaded, 124 is just another weathered house needing repair” (BD 264).

What makes Morrison so proud of her roots is that the black slaves in America contributed a great deal in evolving a rich black tradition based on the principles of forgiveness and love. Morrison says that in spite of the most degrading bestial treatment of the blacks, they manifested a love that is so very aristocratic. Morrison is happy that black people did not adulterate or dilute the essence of their culture even when they were displaced. In fact, their lores and languages played a great role in sustaining them in their fight against slavery’s insanity. In her interview with Claudia Tate, Morrison testifies to this fact:

Black people take their culture wherever they go. If I wrote about Maine, the black people in Maine would be very much like black people in Ohio.
You can change the plate, but the menu would still be the same. The barbershop in Maine would still be the same kind of barbershop in Ohio; there would be the same kinds of people sitting around. They cook a little bit differently, but I know what the language will be like. (*Conversations* 158)

In *Jazz*, Morrison is a jazz musician, experimenting with technique and form, improvising on tested narrative methods. The idea of women coming together as a result of gender oppression may not be a new idea in the Morrison canon, but it is a jazz melody plucked anew and given prominence by the musician who is Morrison. And its promotion in this work to major theme suggests just how acute the problem of gender oppression is in the African community. If one sign of oppression is the African’s need to look and act like a European, then African females are oppressed in all of Morrison’s novels. Pecola Breedlove, the youngest, poorest, and the most African-looking, is probably the most oppressed female in Morrison’s canon.

Once again, Morrison reveals herself as an admirable artist because of the crucial nature of her subject matter:

> Conditions make people Wild, bring out the Wild in people, and make women run Wild. With over 60% of African families headed by women and nearly 70% of these families living in poverty; with the alarming and increasing rate of teenage pregnancy; with crack and new, deadlier chemical drugs being introduced in the African community everyday; with increasing numbers of middle school youth dropping out; with inadequate health care, poor nutrition, and increasing numbers of Africans in their
thirties dying from AIDS, cancer, and heart attacks—is it any wonder there are Wilds in the African community? (qtd. in Mbalia 642)

Morrison reveals that her first priority as an artist is in arriving at solutions for the dilemma of African people. Sisterhoods are needed in the African community, and through them, communication, not silence, will forge the way toward a healthy, wholesome future for all people of African descent, especially women.

Morrison’s novels weave dreams for better tomorrows for the women chagrined by the weight of an oppressive patriarchal system. These women are just like the soldier ants which have no time even for dreaming, as they are caught up in the spokes of grinding daily chores. Her novels are an attempt to rewrite and reinterpret a lost history which accorded a very respectable position to women.

The present study provides the background for understanding of how Morrison employed the powerful weapons of silence, speech and explosion to protest against the hegemony. This potent perspective enables Morrison to provide a very powerful theoretical framework to artistically delineate the entire locales of the black community particularly the women who were “victims of triple jeopardy” (qtd. in Branch 125) as described first by the feminist Beverly Lindsay. It also gives her an opportunity to protest with a sense of righteous indignation the partisan, lopsided, white favoured, racially spiced feminist notions of cosmetic womanist liberation, which totally refuses to look into the miserable plights and anguish of one half of human race.

Morrison’s artistic mission enables her to delve deep into complex and complicated terrains. One such fascinating and challenging territory is the racial semantics embedded in the rituals of naming. An aura of mystery and meaning surrounds
the naming rituals of the blacks. The way the whites named the blacks serves as a yardstick to measure the magnitude of black oppression. The original black names are “trapped” in the names given by the whites. So discovering one’s name was part of appropriating their “black legacy,” “black identity” and “black power.”

Morrison’s novels brim over with names that have an odour of death, for in *Song of Solomon* the central characters have a “Dead” name as its suffix. By giving them names that degrade, the whites instilled a sense of self hatred in the blacks. A name that has humiliating overtones is very suicidal in its effect. The names given to Paul brothers are signs of shame. They are just reduced to A, F and D. And Sixo is named after a numerical and he names his unborn baby as ‘sevens’ in order to taunt the oppressors. Thus all the names stain, stick, and stink.

Morrison employs naming as a very potent satiric tool to demonstrate to the world how the institution of slavery employed very subtle forms of oppression in order to denigrate and debase their sense of self-esteem. Naming thus was nothing less than an unnaming process. Naming, unnaming, re-naming, namelessness and nicknames become literary tools in the hands of Morrison to capture the gloom and doom that loomed large in the life of the slaves.

The naming process lays bare the deliberate depravity of the white masters. But Morrison portrays her characters with courageous undying spirit which enabled them to fight against all odds in order to assert their identity as the proud possessors of a rich cultural heritage. Slave structures were aimed at keeping the slaves on the lowest rung of society at all levels. Some characters perished unable to withstand the ferocity, arrogance and brutality of the white masters. White culture trampled upon black culture and it had a
very deleterious effect on the women especially the young. They began life at the margin and this marginalized consciousness kept them on the ‘hem’ of life.

Yet, on the other hand, slavery created some of the finest persons in terms of personal worth, maturity, spiritual strength and cheerfulness of life. Pilate is delineated as having a beautiful face (SS 224). Her death creates a void that cannot be filled up. Milkman says, “There’s got to be at least one more woman like you” (SS 336). It is a glorious tribute to Pilate and to all black women in general. They occupy the centre stage of life and thus testify to the world that they are no longer secondary citizens of the U.S.A. or of the world in general.

Thus the story of the blacks is the story of the extraordinary sense of endurance and resilience. Morrison celebrates the capacity of the blacks to construct their lives from the debris. And this becomes a positive image of black people’s courage. Eventhough oppression haunted them like a spectre from birth to death, the slaves carved out a new life; for in Milkman’s decoding of the song, the source of African history is traced. Milkman is a symbol of all the blacks who wove happy and contented lives form the looms of death.

Toni Morrison’s emergence as a great fiction writer of the present times is itself a tribute to black resiliency. Her artistic gifts came to the forefront at a time when her personal life was caving in. Her own personal triumph bears close semblances to the indomitable spirit which slave era nurtured in its victims. Her novels are profoundly characterized by a cosmic and universal vision. She looks at the world from the black perspective, but the perspective is so very wholesome and holistic. At the metaphorical
level every black is also a dalit. He is the symbol of hope for all the oppressed people of
the world.

The meticulous execution of her novels leaves nothing to be desired. The
characters have a life of their own and they even clamour for the attention of the novelist,
their maker, their creator. Like an alchemist, she mixes sordid black history with creative
imagination and blends them so gracefully, that her novels have become great
masterpieces. To read her novels is to experience an epiphany. In her interview with
Anne Koenen, Morrison speaks about the mysterious nature of the character she has
created with such fecundity of imagination. And the beauty of their message strikes at the
softest chords of the human heart:

… at the end of every book there is epiphany, discovery, somebody has
learned something that they never would otherwise. But that’s the only
way I can say, that’s the only message, that’s the only way I can reveal the
message, and it gives my books a melancholy cast, because it’s more
important to make a reader long for something to work and to watch it fall
apart, so that he will know what, why and how and what the dangers are,
more important than to show him how they all solved their problems.
That’s not the only way, but that’s the way I perceive it…. If I can really
make their relationships alive, the reader will remember. (Conversations
74)

Morrison, while discussing the role of the artist in her critical work “Rootedness:
The Ancestor as Foundation”, asserts the following: “There must have been a time when
an artist could be genuinely representative of the tribe and in it” (326). She also claims, a
novel should be not only “beautiful, and powerful”, but it should also “work” (328). Indeed, it “should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are” (328). But, she adds, “it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe” (328). For Morrison, art should thus not be prescriptive, but illuminating. She makes it a point to incorporate in her fiction what she labels “Black art.” By “Black art”, she means, for instance, a form of literature that involves the combination of both “print and oral” (328) elements of literature. These are meaningful to the extent “that the stories can be read in silence, of course” (328). But, for Morrison, one should also “be able to hear them as well” (328). These two elements are crucial because they enable a form of literature that has great testimonial value.

Music is a standard part of Morrison’s narrative constructions. Jazz and Song of Solomon employ music to varying degrees. Jazz is the most obvious example, in which Morrison personifies the music, creating, in effect, another character. Song of Solomon is most like Beloved in the way music enters to resolve personal and communal conflicts. The insertion of music gives new dimension to the narrative. It is not merely ancillary or incidental, but recurring. The two novels are also similar in the ways Morrison uses music to assert the voices of her female characters. Sound in Beloved is embodied as cries and utterances. These utterances eventually become articulated as music or song. Sound serves as a kind of discourse in the novel. Thus music becomes the vehicle for communal restoration and is the means by which the women in the novel demonstrate spiritual authority and feminine theological practice.
At the most rudimentary level, the articulation of sound, in both song and speech, is indistinguishable—both are utterances. Sound suggests an articulation, a starting point for and eventual transition to something more universal song. In Beloved, sound as cry, as utterance, is also feminine-associated articulation. Song itself, the fully articulated expression of sound, metaphorically represents Sethe’s full remembrance and reconciliation, and the point at which each individual’s fragmented bits and pieces of memory (as sound) come together to form a newly created expression drawn from the past.

Morrison, during the course of her literary journey, has established herself as a distinguished writer. The terra firma of her works chiefly rests mainly on the principal query of relevance of human existence in an indifferent universe. She achieves a remarkable feat as she chooses to probe the dilemma of human beings against a realistic social backdrop, that renders her works all the more plausible and convincing. Her works like Beloved, Song of the Solomon and Jazz leave an indelible impression on the mind of the reader because she explores human life through the themes of existentialism within the territory of society itself.

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. (McKay An Interview with Toni Morrison 421)

A socio-psychic interaction is found in the lives of her characters. 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. There may be a long chord, but 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 An Interview with Toni Morrison 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.

From The Bluest Eye to Jazz, Morrison gives us women who are beaten by the past, but in the end she gives us hope for their survival. Although Morrison leaves it a little unclear whether it is truly a “happily ever after” ending, the growth and coming together of the characters shows the possibilities for African-Americans to rebuild even after such a hard history. Morrison continues to explore relationships, but with added weight of slavery in Beloved. However, the growth of the number of problems only creates a stronger and more capable woman, as Denver is. Morrison uses this opportunity to bring to light the cure for the women’s ailments as the community joins forces to save a family. In all Morrison’s novels, the family and community originally contribute in
some way to the troubles the self-destructive women face, but they begin to understand that they must help rather than hinder these women to build a complete community.

Women such as Pilate and Claudia are mixed along with the troubled women to show that there exist strong women who are already a part of the community. These women become the voice of the community that we find in the end of Morrison’s novels, and they show that there is an understanding of the pain and neglect that the other women struggle to free themselves from. Their voices are necessary to round out these weak women and to tell their stories so that hopefully someone will hear that they too can survive the torment around them. Both the weak and strong women add a communal voice that teaches the reader what it is to be done to end the women’s self-destructiveness.

The communal voice is not a new element in literature, as the Greek Chorus serves the same purpose, which is to point out to the audience what is happening and what is important to remember. This voice recognizes the flaws in the women, and at first uses them as scapegoats for their own problems, but begins to bring help to those women who need it. The communal voice, then, becomes a storyteller, like Morrison herself, passing down lessons. The storytelling quality that the community brings to Morrison’s works serves to teach the reader to learn from mistakes that characters make. By making an example of Margaret’s willingness to accept a false ideal, or Hagar’s obsession with appearance that ends in her death, Morrison tries to teach, as Baby Suggs did when bringing together the community, that these problems only cause pain and can be overcome with the coming together of family and friends. This lesson is taught again and again in Morrison’s works, and the progression of her novels shows promise for her
future novels to develop women who gain even further strength and control over adversity. The progression from weak to stronger women improves the chance for future women in Morrison’s novels to live complete and fulfilling lives.

In *Tar Baby*, Morrison turns to full creative use the stereotypical story of minority ethnic literature in which the ethnicity is always the hero and the White man the confirmed villain. While a good many minority writers let their ideologies of race, gender and class consume the identity of their characters as persons, Toni Morrison does not write off their identity as persons. As a person herself with an understanding heart, she empathizes with people whether they are Black or White or whatever, and helps her reader imagine, if he/she can, what it is to be in their position.

Morrison’s novels acquire greater relevance in a country like India, where Dalits are treated as inferior to the so-called upper caste people and where Dalits are presently trying to assert their individuality, resisting the upper caste domination in various fields of life. Thus her novels prove the fact that the more the theme is localized, the more the spirit will be universalized. “Black lore, black music, black language, and all the myths and rituals of black culture” (McKay 414), and the predicament of the black people are used to convey the humanitarian zeal of the great literature of the world. Hence it is fair to say that her fiction belongs to the great humanistic tradition of world literature. She achieves generality through particularity. Toni Morrison’s novels can be appreciated only if the readers are ready to be involved in the process of reading. She speaks about reader participation, in her interview with Claudia Tate:

…My writing expects, demands participatory reading, and that I think is what literature is supposed to do. It’s not just about telling the story; it’s
about involving the reader. The reader supplies the emotions. The reader supplies even some of the color, some of the sound…. Then we [you, the reader, and I, the author] come together to make this book, to feel this experience. (*Conversations* 164)

This thesis shows how Morrison is able to discuss slavery from an angle that few others have rivalled. Slavery has not been a neglected story, but it is often presented and received dispassionately. This is not the case with *Beloved*. Morrison is able to create characters and events that seem real, while at the same time they shock and confuse the readers. The grotesque visual images that Morrison paints with her words cannot be erased from the mind’s eye. And finally, the killer motherlove, a love so selfish, yet humane, all act as aggressive weapons, thereby providing a new perspective.

One important area that could be investigated is the experience of enslaved women and children, an area that seems to be more neglected than the overall slave experience. In addition to the demoralizing system of slavery, Morrison also addresses other oppressive and corrupt systems in her writing that have negatively impacted the black people. Primarily by creating disabled characters, Morrison is able to reveal the corrupt social, cultural and educational systems. These areas have not received the importance they deserve and therefore they can easily lend themselves to a meaningful critical study which would help the liberation of the marginalized and oppressed men and women racially and regionally.

The task of Morrison, like other black women writers, is to unravel, explain and transform her work into meaningful, useful and empowering tools for our lives. Morrison has sensitized the society not only about colour consciousness but also infused the spirit of
struggle for equality in all spheres of life. Her writings highlight the importance of equality and aspire towards creating a world of equality in the postmodern global scenario.