Chapter One

Introduction

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

Martin Luther King

The Olympic flag has five differently coloured, inter-linked rings which symbolize the unity of the races in the world – Black, White, Yellow, Brown and Red. In contrast to the idealistic view projected on the flag is the stark reality of racial hatred and colour prejudice. The Whites in the Republic of South Africa had confined the majority Blacks to reservations till recently. In other parts of the ‘Dark’ continent, many native cultures have been wiped off by the coming of the White Man who overcame the native on the latter’s own soil. The local inhabitants were neither torn away from their birthplaces to die on far-off, unknown seas, nor enslaved in an alien set-up; a fate which was reserved for the Afro-American was that he was forcibly taken to America as a result of the slave trade, with which the Black-White encounter in America began.

Named the ‘American Dilemma’ by Gunnar Myrdal, the Black-White encounter is perhaps the greatest problem that has confronted the American people. As Edward Margolies in his *Native Sons* says:

Ultimately, what is at stake is the future course of American civilization, for unless there is greater alignment of views between White and Negro Americans there is bound to be more of the violent civil disorder the country has witnessed in recent years. (13-14)
According to the American Declaration of Independence, every individual has ‘inalienable rights’ to ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’ So the treatment of the Blacks in America becomes particularly significant as it is a country which calls itself “a melting pot” of cultures and even a country of “ethnic pluralism” (Luedtke 9).

A historical perspective on the Black-White encounter in America and its reflection in literature is essential knowledge for an understanding of the important landmarks in the depiction of the racial encounter.

Although the Vikings were the first Europeans to set foot in America around 1000 A.D., it was the English who were the most successful colonizers of this ‘virgin’ territory. Labour was at a premium since the land expanses were vast while the manpower available was meagre. One of the solutions attempted by the pioneers was the enslavement of the Red Indian, but he was prey to many diseases and was not a good source of labour. It was under such circumstances that a few ships brought a limited number of Blacks to Virginia in 1619. The Industrial revolution created possibilities for large-scale production of goods and sent up the demand for cotton, tobacco and other raw materials; but agriculture still remained largely labour-intensive. It was possible for a land-owner to make huge amounts of money if only he has labour on a large-scale at his command which was procurable through the Black slave trade almost at minimal cost.

Pseudo-scientific arguments like, for instance, Edward Tyson’s study of the “Orang-outan” (Gross 40) established a connection between the ape and the West African Negro. These arguments proved that Blacks were inferior and deserved to be slaves since they were not full human beings. The concept of the White man’s burden played an important role in entrenching slavery in America. The benevolent ‘White’ father looked
down upon the Blacks as primitive children who had to be ‘civilized’ and converted to Christianity by the missionaries.

Spiritual grounds were also formulated to justify slavery in order to quieten the Puritan and Quaker consciences in America, especially by citing stories from the Bible. Cain, who is cursed to be a vagabond for his brother Abel’s murder, is provided with a mask to protect him during his wanderings which the Whites said was the black skin of the Negro. Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar, though elder, is superseded by Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah, since Hagar is Sarah’s slave and, according to Whites, a Negress too. The Biblical Ham is cursed by his father Noah since Ham sees him naked: Ham’s son Canaan and his lineage shall be “servants of servants”, i.e., the Blacks.

The Blacks did not, of course, passively submit to enslavement. Betrayed by their own tribal chiefs into the ‘one-way passage’ from Africa to America, many tried to escape, while some killed themselves. The one who reached America and survived the cultural shock often attempted to run away even at the risk of flogging, castration or death.

Yet, it was not merely slavery that degraded the ‘negro’ in America. The Blacks who came to America as freemen and the blacks who were freed by their masters or through laws like the one passed by Pennsylvania in 1765 too, faced rampant racial discrimination. John Hope Franklin, in this connection, quotes the words of Fanny Kemble, an English visitor before the Civil War:

They [Northern Negroes] are not slaves indeed, but they are pariahs, debarred from every fellowship save with their own despised race…. All hands are extended to thrust them out, all fingers point at their dusky skin,
all tongues...have learned to turn the very name of their race into an insult and a reproach. (236)

Freedom for all Blacks had to come first and to achieve this end, the anti-slavery movement arose in close association with movements for peace, women’s rights and temperance. A movement built up against slavery gained support in the non-slave-holding Northern States. The South decided to secede from the United States of America and form an independent confederation which led to the outbreak of the Civil War of 1861-64. Emancipation of the Negro was a by-product of the Civil War though popular belief would have it that the war itself was fought over the freedom of the Negro.

A feeling of euphoria prevailed for some time among the newly freed slaves, but emancipation only made the Black-White problem more glaring. The Black man had till then not posed a legal threat to the White. Now that he was legally free to pursue the American Dream, the El Dorado of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” (Cohen 137) peaceful co-existence became an impossibility.

The enslaved Negroes had been set free without any wherewithal for their existence. Many migrated to North in search of job opportunities. The White man of the South could not bear to see the Negro free and tried to curtail his freedom through enactment of codes which were akin to the Black Codes of the ante-bellum times. Substantially, the Negro’s condition continued as it had been before the Emancipation. The Congress, therefore, was forced to impose the Reconstruction Act of 1867 on the South and the Freedmen’s Bureau was set up to issue loans running into millions to both Negroes and poor Whites. Education and security of tenure in employment were also provided. Yet, both Negroes and Whites were by no means free from want and privation
at the end of the Reconstruction Era. The situation in effect provided an opportunity to Northern industrialists and capitalists to gain economic control of the South.

Further, the Whites disliked the Negro’s gain of political power through the Reconstruction, and so they prevented the exercise of the Negro-vote by patrolling the polling-booths to ensure “fair, peaceful and democratic elections” (Faulkner 255).

Philanthropy, however, was not completely absent and its contribution to Negro education in particular was significant. But the Negro community realized the value of self-help and the beginnings of a new life in the Negro could be seen as early as the 1890s with the rise of the Niagara Movement, which under the aggressive leadership of W.E.B. Du Bois, was almost an anti-thesis to Booker T. Washington’s advocacy of ‘humility.’ The Niagara Movement, begun in 1905, merged with the N.A.A.C.P. (National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People) in 1910 and spearheaded the Harlem Renaissance, otherwise known as the New Negro Movement, which witnessed the flowering of considerable Negro talent in literature, art and music, especially during the post World War I period. The euphoria of the 1920s was, however, temporary and the aftermath of the Great Depression of 1929 brought about a reversal of the Negro-Americans’ fortunes again.

The American experience has been that of the “melting pot” model or in contrast, the more recent “ethnic pluralism” (Luedtke 9). The statistics of the 1980 census reveal that the nation has no clear ethnic majority; the people of British ancestry—the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs)—account for only 15% of the population while 13% are of German stock and 8% Irish. The Blacks are 26.5 million (11.7%) out of the total population of 226.5 million. The WASPs have, however, been considered to be the
mainstream of American life and their attitudes adopted by the other ethnic groups which have joined the mainstream culture. Although there has been anti-Semite feeling in the U.S., and anti-Irish feeling did prevail during the initial stages of the Irish immigration, which is mainly the anti-Black stance that has coloured the Whiteman’s views about race. The Negro, unlike other races, has been isolated from the mainstream of American life, while his high visibility has added to his problems. Richard Chase in *The American Novel and its Tradition* points out that,

> The prevalence in American literature of the symbols of light and dark…this sensibility has been enhanced by the racial composition of our people and by the Civil War that was fought, if more in legend than in fact, over the Negro. (11)

Chase’s statement appears to imply that Black and White are dichotomously associated in American literature. The connotations of ‘light’ and ‘dark’ have not, however, been always stereotyped in literature, though traditionally, ‘white’ is chiefly associated with goodness, purity and ‘black’ with ugliness, evil, etc.,

The meanings implicit in ‘white’ are not necessarily positive. For instance, the white whale Moby Dick in Melville’s novel is a symbol of cosmic evil for Captain Ahab. Mark Twain in *Following the Equator* refers to “the added disadvantage of the White complexion” which is “bleached out, unwholesome and sometimes, frankly ghostly” (50). The Jewish writer Bernard Malamud entitles one of his stories “Black is My Favorite Color.” The Black Aesthetics position, “Black is Beautiful” is a calculated reversal of traditional colour symbolism.
In spite of the importance of the Black-White problem in American life, critics have been rather one-sided in their examination of the issue. Most of them have written either about the treatment of the Blacks by the Whites or the Negro’s characterization of the Whites. For example, Sterling A. Brown writes on “Negro Character as seen by White Authors” (179). David Littlejohn has studied Blacks writing about Whites, while Catherine Juanita Starke has examined Black portraiture in American fiction and Helena M. Smith makes a study of Negro characterization by Whites. No comparative evaluation of the treatment of the Whites and the Blacks by writers of both the races seems to have been attempted. Hence this attempt is made on Toni Morrison.

The first chapter, Introduction, 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 Blacks, and the Black authors’ portrayal of Whites as well as Blacks is examined. This chapter aims at gaining an overall perspective and greater insights into the racial problem.

America, having been a land of immigrants, has hosted people from various countries to its soil. There is no doubt that the American literary tradition is very complex and has many strands, one of which is the literature of the American Negroes. The literary writings of the Negroes are, no doubt, different from those of others. The difference stems from the fact that the Negroes have distinctive group experience, rooted in their race. The emergence of a bold and powerful literary tradition in the 20th century of the Negro writers has established the contention that the American Negro literary tradition is distinctive in character and to a greater extent, an independent tradition of
America, reflecting ‘a conflict’ which the dominant white social order powerfully mirrors the Negro’s perception of himself and the variety of his responses to his predicament.

The early unlettered Negroes, having no memory or tradition of their own, no images, no training in poetry, intuitively expressed themselves in poetry. Though unlettered, untutored and unknown, they were poets in their own right for they had the power of feeling, the power of imagination and the gift of expression, the constituents which make a poet. The spirituals reveal the gift for song of the early Negroes who chanted wildly in the darkness of nights; even as they were in chains. These crude old plantation songs have a wide appeal for they celebrate their tender feelings, their vows, their aspirations, their smiles and their tears. They have special appeal for those who experience deep anguish. They express themselves in broken English which articulates their tragedy and their triumph on another plane:

My heavenly home is bright and fair,
Not pain not death can enter there.
Oh, freedom! Oh, freedom oh, freedom over me!
An’ before I’d be a slave,
I’ll be buried in my grave,
And go home to my lord an’ be free. (Kerlin 8)

The troubled soul of the slaves cries out to God for help. This is the only meaning of their poetry which serves as an emotional safety-valve. Though suppressed by the cruelty and oppression, there is no spirit of vengeance in the spirituals, no bitterness towards the White race, but only patience, meekness and good nature. Unlike the 20th century black poets, to use an African proverb, they wept in their hearts ‘like the
tortoise’. These were mournful cries of those who had developed only one defensive device that was faith in their God while secretly weeping over the oppression of their white masters. This was the ‘secret sorrow.’

Phillis Wheatley, a delicate slave girl, born in Africa, landed in Boston in 1761. Purchased by a wealthy white American as servant of his wife, she was the first woman poet of America. In fact, she was the first American poetess to issue a volume. Horton, born three years after Phillis Wheatley’s death, expressed in his poem ‘On Liberty and Slavery’ a strong complaint at his conditions of slavery and a deep longing for freedom:

Alas! And am I born for this,
To wear this slavish chain?
Deprived of all creative bliss,
Through hardship, toil and pain!

Come, Liberty, thou cheerful sound,
Roll through my ravished ears!
Come, let my grief in joys be drowned,
And drive away my fears.

His longing was so deep that he desires to know:

How long have I in bondage lain,
And languished to be free!
Alas! And must I still complain—
Deprived of liberty. (Bontemps 11)
These articulate slaves belong to a tradition of writers in bondage. Making a detailed analysis of their attitude, particularly about God, Benjamin Mays says that they adhered to the tradition set forth in the Bible in which the primary emphasis is upon the magical, spectacular, revengeful and anthropomorphic nature of God as revealed in the Old Testament. The New Testament presents a just and impartial God. By implication, we may assume that the Negroes were helpless, having no image of themselves, and largely depending on God or on spectacular events for their deliverance or redemption from slavery. Frequently, we come across the cries of their souls, pleading God to help them without themselves making any attempt for social adjustments for their lack of social consciousness. This, of course, is not true about the later period of the 19th century.

Alain Locke, one of the great literary critics, while discussing the evolution of the Negro political and literary talent till the World War I observes that “slavery moulded the emotional and folk lives of the Negroes, it was the antislavery struggle that developed his intellect and spurred him to disciplined articulate expression” (qtd. in Nayak 26). Paul Laurence Dunbar, a purely black-poet, a blend of African blood and American civilization, felt the negro life aesthetically and expressed it lyrically. Dunbar presents the self-awareness of a Negro. He writes in his poem ‘Sympathy’:

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!

....

I know why the caged bird beats his wing

Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;

....

I know why the caged bird sings, ah, me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
I know why the caged bird sings! (Bontemps 34)

Till Dunbar came to the scene, the Negro sang in prayer to God, but with him came the dawn. Now the Negro saw himself, his potential and his real beautiful image. And all this happened, as Dunbar has it in his poem ‘Dawn’:

An angel, robed in spotless white,
Bent down and kissed the sleeping Night.
Night woke to blush; the sprite was gone,
Men saw the blush and called it dawn. (Bontemps 35)

The dawn was the Harlem Renaissance which grew out of profound socio-psychological transformation and blossomed during the decade following the World War I. Symbolising the liberation of the black in mind, spirit and character, it was an emotional experience for those who lived it. It gave birth to “sensitive, sophisticated, complicated and resourceful human beings” (Huggins 4) who were “capable of tolerance, co-operation and love but who also had ample capacity for anger, hatred, resentment and retaliation” (Huggins 4). More truly, in the words of Benjamin Brawley, the Negro was “up against a world hostile to him, ignorant of him, perplexed, uncomfortable, non-plussed” (72 ).
In literature and art, the Harlem represents an advancement in Negro thought and culture, having a large number of representatives like Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, J.W. Johnson, Countee Cullen and Jean Toomer, to grab a handful but significant poets. They provide a “reservoir of black feelings and attitudes” (Singh 129) familiar later in 1960’s. Harlem, a black section of New York city was not merely a residential area of the blacks, it was a movement of black aesthetics having a strong urban flavour which authenticated all that was good in the black art. That’s why an overwhelming majority of the Negro writers of 1920’s commemorated Harlem in their writings. It was here that the process of transformation from the old to the new Negro began. They began to search for their own identity, their roots and gave expression to group consciousness and self determination. The New Negro was not merely an individual; it was a movement with sentimental appeal, affecting a new group psychology, by imparting positive qualities like self-respect and self-faith, repudiating social dependence and social disillusionment and replacing it with race pride. In more concrete terms, it was a movement of mind, a belief shared by a number of black writers and intellectuals. “On the dark faces, for the first time, there was pride and joy and fulfilment, reflecting limpid faith in the completeness of living which they had found,” (44) observes Horace R. Cayton.

Harlem means so much to the Negroes and is exemplified in the well-known quip: “I’d rather be a lamp post in Harlem than the Mayor of Georgia” (Davies 142). Wordsworth’s lines aptly describe the mood of Negroes in Harlem: ‘Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive/ But to be young was very heaven” (Prelude X 692-693). It was a “Nigger Heaven” (a novel by Cart Van Vechten, a white author, published in 1926) of dance, music, gaiety of the abandoned nigger, hiding underneath frustration, starvation,
anger and despair which became more evident in the early thirties during the great economic depression. Harlem was more like a melting pot of many diverse elements of the Negro life giving them the opportunity to understand each other and their problems as the primary bond among them was of a common condition. Racial prejudice, lynching, segregation and economic backwardness created group consciousness and group assertiveness. Thus Harlem was a new spiritual home, a race capital, the “Mecca of the New Negro” and ‘Maker of a New Negro’ (Davis Arthur 145). It was “a colourful symbol of his age. He could now stand upright and celebrate his race—his African heritage, his music, his Negro blood” (Davis Arthur 145). Its literature symbolized the Negro renaissance as “the pulse of the Negro World” (Locke 16) had begun to beat in Harlem. This metamorphosis did not take place suddenly but evolved through time and space. Diverse streams merged to form a confluence i.e., the Negro renaissance, “a spiritual coming of Age” (Locke 56) “an extraordinary clan”, (Nichols 6) created by the self-discovery of the blacks.

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.

Taking into account the writer’s geographical location, one can trace a black aesthetics working at the base of a black artist’s sensibility. This sensibility is formed
through a century of colonial oppression, discrimination on colour bias and its demeaning memory. This memory forms the basis of a unified hatred and resistance towards anything European or Western in writers writing as Afro-Americans.

In *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o talks about the anxiety of expression in African writers, but then:

> Writing in our language per se—will not itself bring about the Renaissance in African cultures if that literature does not carry the content of our people’s anti-imperialist struggles to liberate their productive forces from foreign control. (29)

So Ngugi talks about the creation of an African identity by assimilating the power of every national language of the continent and to do justice to the burden of African experience. In an essay *Culture and Society*, Ngugi advocates the rejection and repudiation of the culture of the colonizer by replacing them with the culture content viz., the songs, poems, dances, oral and written literature of Africa. This attempt of redefinition of oneself and of bringing about a change in the outlook of the world is the uphill tasks that the writers must try to achieve.

Coming to the question of women’s place in the African society we find women writing in all corners of Africa have given rise to a plurality of voices craving expressions. Radical voices are showering forth their felt experiences by dint of their pens. There is thus a mosaic of sensibilities, a complex web of realities of race, class and gender in an evolving Africa.

It is a matter of great pleasure that women’s voices are being heard in all corners of the world and Africa with her immense possibilities in contributing to the wealth of the
globe in more ways than had been imagined. The aim is socio-economic and culture oriented. In his lecture on Society and Culture Ngugi Wa Thion’o clears the aim:

But the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist (i.e., anti-neo-colonial) struggle is also waged at the level of culture and values. In other words, for the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist political and economic struggle to be complete, it must also be cultural struggle since the aim is to restore the African personality to its true human creative potentialities in history, so as to enhance quality of life and of life-based values. (Paper presented at the Conference of Literature Teachers, Nairobi, Sep., 1974)

The preceding sections of the Introduction have mainly focused on the historical genesis of the Black-White problem. An attempt was also made to assess the current position in studies of the Black-White encounter in Afro-American fiction. Before a critical survey of the Black-White encounter is discussed, it is necessary to clarify the usage of “the Black” or “Blacks” and “the White” or “Whites”. The Blacks are the descendants of Africa brought to the American shores by the ‘Middle Passage’ ships besides the independent migrants and their offspring who have even a little Negro blood in their veins, this being the general attitude of the American mainstream towards Negro identity. The Whites are the WASPs--White Anglo-Saxon Protestants who have sprung mainly from the loins of early English migrants to America, e.g., the Pilgrim Fathers. In spite of the European origin of the Jews, Germans or Scandinavians, they are not considered mainstream Whites. The history of the Black-White encounter goes back to the seventeenth century. Its reflection in literature, particularly in fiction, however, came later. Samuel Sewall wrote an anti-slavery tract, The Selling of Joseph in 1700; John
Woolman was able through his writing to convince all his Quaker friends to release their slaves and Thomas Jefferson himself attempted to prevent the extension of slavery through the Bill of Rights in 1784. The American novel, however, was born only towards the end of the eighteenth century. The first Afro-American novel *Clotel* (1853) by William Wells Brown followed nearly a century later.

A survey of fiction by Afro-Americans on the Black-White encounter is quite essential for the present project. Robert Bone at the end of his book *The Negro Novel in America* gives a comprehensive bibliography of the novels written by Negroes in America; the study, however, concerns itself more specifically with Black-White relations than with Negroes or Whites by themselves. As a result, much of Black fiction gets excluded as it only deals with either Black-White life, and not with the Black-White encounter in particular, a reflection perhaps on the isolation faced by the Negro, from the mainstream of American life, which is predominantly White.

Many of the novels written by Black-Americans deal with the status of the blacks in America: the three novels written before the Civil War are all abolitionist in their bias, viz., *Clotel* (1853) by William Wells Brown, Frank Webb’s *The Garies and their Friends* (1857) and Martin Delany’s *Blake, or the Huts of America* (1859). Of these, the first (i.e., *Clotel*) is reported to have rivalled *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in popularity among Union soldiers. It was nearly thirty years after the War that the fourth Negro novel, *Iola Leroy* (1892) by Frances E.W. Harper was published.

Once the Negro became free, he was subjected to much discrimination on the basis of colour. Therefore, most Negroes writing in the Post-Reconstruction era concerned themselves with the class relations between the free man and the former
master. The novels published were either militant or accommodationist in character, depending on the author’s perception of the racial problem at a particular time.

Even as the Blacks wrote novels on racial relations, they also began to glorify Negro life itself. The trend later reached great heights under the influence of the Harlem Renaissance. Charles W. Chesnutt’s collection of short fiction *The Conjure Woman* and *The Wife of his Youth* (both 1899) were the first Negro attempts at highlighting the ethnic richness of Negro life. It is, therefore, a forerunner of the Harlem novel which glorified the healthiness of Negro life with its natural links to basic needs like home, love and recognition of individual worth. An opposition between the rural and the urban is set up here which gets further emphasized in Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1924). *Cane* has often been listed along with Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and James Baldwin’s *Go, Tell it on the Mountain* as one of the four most significant Negro novels.

Closely related to Jean Toomer’s themes is the work of Claude McKay, a Jamaican born Marxist who later became a major figure of the Negro Renaissance in Harlem, New York. His three novels, *Home in Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1929) and *Banana Bottom* (1933) present the theme of cultural dualism chiefly through two character types; the primitive Negro who is able to find happiness through his rebellion, and the ‘intellectualised’ Negro who rebels but is not able to find peace or happiness.

It has already been pointed out that another principal theme that has occupied Black writers in America is ‘passing’ or ‘crossing’ the colour line to become unrecognizable in White America as a Black. Charles W. Chesnutt wrote *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) which depicts how John Warwick, the son of a quadroon mother and a White man, passes as a White and becomes a plantation owner in South
Carolina. The novel is the first to deal with a Black man’s passing into White society, through marriage with a White woman. James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* (1912) also deals with the theme of passing.

Many Negro novels of the Renaissance follow the tradition set up by Johnson. Jessie R. Fauset’s *There is Confusion* (1924), *Plum Bun* (1929), *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931) and *Comedy: American Style* (1933), Walter White’s *Flight* (1926), Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) concern themselves with the skin-colour mania that was rampant among the negroes. There was, however, a move towards a satirical treatment of the issue as by Wallace Thurman and George Schulyer in their books, *Blacker the Berry* (1929) and *Black No More* (1931). Thurman’s novel is based on the Negro folk saying, “The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice” (Pam Aaron’s Reviews).

Even as the Harlem Renaissance led to high spirits and the hope of assimilation into mainstream American life, the dark years after the Great Depression of 1929 destroyed most of the immediate chances of the Negro becoming a part of the American Dream. As mentioned earlier, he was the first to be dismissed and the last to be hired. The Negro naturally began to feel aggressive. The rumblings can be seen in Arna Bontemps’ two historical novels, *Black Thunder* (1936) and *Drums at Dusk* (1939), both of which depict Negro insurrections. *Black Thunder* especially becomes significant as the folk courage it highlights is a new note in Afro-American Fiction.

The first novel embodying direct protest against the ill-treatment of the Negro was Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940). *Native Son* has been hailed as the starting point for the modern Negro Novel in America. It is, however, in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*
(1953) that the high point of the Negro novel in America is reached. *Invisible Man* makes the Blacks’ need of self-definition a metaphor for man’s, or rather humanity’s, search for meaning in life.

The novel has a nameless Black hero who is invisible not due to any magic unlike Wells’ hero in *The Invisible Man*, but because people refuse to see him. Even when he is about to murder a White man, he is not recognized as a man but as a phantom. Because he is not seen by others, the hero is determined to show himself to the world and has 1369 bulbs that burn with stolen electricity in the underground hole he has retreated to, after rejecting the White man’s values. Earlier, he has tried to participate in society’s rat race and has risen to be a prominent political leader. He now realizes that he himself is a non-entity to the Whites of the Brotherhood and that they are only using his Blackness to further their own ends. Although the hero would like to realize the American dream for himself, he is forced to retreat into a kind of ‘death.’ Yet he speaks for others too, though perhaps ‘on lower frequencies.’ The novel which has symbolism of various dimensions, is an important statement about the racial crisis in America as it sums up “all the existential rage of Richard Wright, all the sense of negritude of Langston Hughes, all the sense of America of James Baldwin, and all the sense of lonely, insecure identity that is the central core of the most important black writing of the twentieth century” (qtd. in Nayak 26).

Nineteenth century Black fiction in America seems to clarify itself as fiction of protest—initially against slavery and caste relations. Black writing later takes up protest against inequality as in the Richard Wright tradition of the twentieth century. The Harlem novel too is a twentieth century development and mainly asserts the individuality of the
Negro and his ethnic identity. Another strain comprises the novels of ‘passing,’ which either satirise the liking for a ‘light’ complexion, or deal with the tragic implications of colour consciousness. *Invisible Man*, therefore, becomes particularly significant as it encompasses the various strains; it is simultaneously a protest novel, a work which asserts the Black’s ethnicity and also a novel about the life of a ‘ginger-coloured’ hero.

African-American slavery has been widely written about. For example, W.E Dubois in his *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (1935) saw slavery as not always deliberately cruel, when compared with the suffering after freedom and work noted by Eugene D. Genovese in *Roll Jordon Roll: The World, The Slave Trade* (1974). Visitors to the slave museums of Hull and Liverpool in the UK will find documented and visual evidence of the cruelty of selling and transporting people, from different tribes in different parts of Africa, in exchange for cash and goods. Those who survived the cramped insanitary conditions of the long crossing to America could be treated often worse than animals while working as slaves on American plantations. Those who profited by this enslavement and transportation included unscrupulous African chiefs, plantation owners and British capitalists whose profits helped build the great Victorian cities of England such as Liverpool, Manchester and Bristol. Separated from partners, their families sold away, women under slavery were, like the men, forced to work long hours in both the fields and domestic situations. Additionally, women were the subject of sexual abuse at the hands of white plantation owners and their managers. Bell Hooks’ *Ain’t I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981) provides thoroughly researched, horrendous details of this abuse which dehumanized women, casting them as various
stereotypes, such as the Black whore (when they were forced into sexual relations with white men) and the black Mammy.

One element in the American Civil War (1861-65) was the Northern states’ insistence that slaves be freed, while the Southern states, depending on slaves to work their plantations, disagreed. One result of the war was emancipation. For many slaves as freed people, what followed was the opportunity to seek paid work in the industrial north, while for others, lack of land ownership and any decent wage forced them into poverty, working as ‘sharecroppers’—working the land for a small share of the crops produced. African-Americans had few legal rights and no right to the vote. Well documented also are the activities of the Civil rights Movements of the mid-twentieth century when great thinkers and political figures such as Martin Luther King (1929-68) expressed their dreams of equality: ‘I have a dream’.

One key stage in the development of a sense of identity crucial to all of us, and particularly so to people denied their identity, language and history, is to revisit and reclaim history. For African-American women writers this has been a central task as they research and re-imagine their forebears, their mothers and grandmothers. One central essay exploring the hidden creativity of Black women in the US is Alice Walker’s *In Search of our Mother’s Gardens* (1983) which focuses on the absence of Black women artists of all sorts, pointing out that their art was hampered by poverty, slavery and domestic drudgery. Walker puts forward the idea that much Black women’s art did exist, but it was ephemeral, in the form of gardens, stitch work and cooking.

African-American women writers concentrate on issues of race, colour, roots, motherhood, relationships, identity, women’s roles and representations, community, the
supernatural and the spiritual, recuperating and revivifying hidden histories. They are concerned with sexism as much as racism. Anne Petry, Gloria Naylor, Gwendolyn Brooks, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larson, Ntozake Shange, Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison are other well-known African American women writers of fiction.

Before trying to analyse the writings of these black women writers, it will be appropriate to study their writings in the historical perspective of black women’s literary tradition. Black women have tried to gain their lost humanity and collective and individual self through their art and literature. Not only this, they have also succeeded in establishing themselves as writers and creative artists of reputation. They have also succeeded in establishing black literature as a separate branch of American literature in general. However, though the black women had a major share in making and developing black literature, their contribution to Black literature was always denied and ignored till a few decades ago. It is only recently that the literature of black women has come into vogue and is recognized as a literature of distinct sensibility.

However, the literature written by black women was not so easily received and recognized by the establishment. Black women writers were ignored and neglected. Mary Helen Washington in her *Black Eyed Susans* expressed her disappointment at the deliberate strategy of critics to ignore black women’s writings. She has aptly stated that:

One of the factors contributing to the misconceptions and confusions surrounding the black women is the treatment of the black woman writer. Like all black writers, Black Women have never been fairly represented in anthologies—black or white. They are almost never as well known as Ellison, Wright, Baldwin, or Baraka, not to mention white, American
authors. It is incredible that major black women novelists such as Toni Morrison, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks, Dorothy West, Ann Petry, Paule Marshall, Alice Walker and Margaret Walker are almost never taught in college level American literature courses and rarely mentioned in women’s studies courses. We are not bemoaning the issue simply because of lack of equal time, but because so many countless generations of men and women have been deprived of the insight and sensitivity of these writers. (9-10)

To ignore the black women writers is to do the white women’s job. Patricia Meyer Spacks has done this job when she defended her ignorance in *The Female Imagination* by quoting Phyllis Chesler, who said: “I have no theory to offer to third world female psychology in America…. As a white woman, I am reluctant and unable to construct theories about experiences I haven’t had” (5). In response to this, Alice Walker in her *One Child of One’s Own* has rightly stated: “Spacks never lived in nineteenth century Yorkshire, so why theorize about the Bronties?” (50).

Deborah E. McDowell adds that not only Black women writers have been “disenfranchised” from critical work by white women scholars on the “female tradition,” but also they have been frequently excised from those on the Afro-American literary tradition by Black scholars, most of whom are males. For example, Robert Stepto’s *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* purports to be a “history… of the historical consciousness of an Afro-American art form, namely, the Afro-American narrative, yet Black women writers are conspicuously absent from the table of contents” (McDowell 187). She adds further: “when black women writers are neither ignored
altogether nor merely given honorable mention, they are critically misunderstood and summarily dismissed” (187).

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. Though the uniqueness of their problem was long understood by them, this kind of awareness of the uniqueness and separateness could be located in 1892 in Anna Julia Cooper’s *A Voice from the South*. It is she who first argued that just as white men cannot speak through the consciousness of black men neither can black men “fully and adequately reproduce the exact voice of the black woman” (Cooper 3).

As stated earlier the black women’s writing is a part and parcel of Black American Literature in general, although it has its own distinct identity. Since the day Phillis Wheatley raised her voice and published her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religion and Moral* in 1773, we heard a new voice, a voice that came from a black feminist sensibility. The day black woman picked up a pen, she started to expose, reveal and describe her state of being as a black woman.

Mary Helen Washington, Claudia Tate, Deborah E. McDowell, Valerie Smith and Barbara Smith have described beautifully in what way the black women writers differ from other groups of writers in terms of their experience and concern. Basically, the black woman was seen by all other groups of writers and ordinary men and women as follows:

- Sapphire, Mammy, Tragic mulatto, Wench. Workhorse, can swing an axe, lift a load, pick cotton with any man. A wonderful housekeeper. Excellent
with children, very clean. Very religious. A terrific mother. A great little singer and dancer and a devoted teacher and social worker. Curiously enough, she frequently ends up on welfare. Not beautiful, rather hardworking unless she has white blood, but then very beautiful. The black ones are very exotic though, great in bed, tigers. And very fertile. If she is middle class, she tends to be upright about sex, prudish. She is unsupportive of black men, domineering, castrating. Very strong. Sorrow rolls right off her brow like so much rain. Tough, unfeminine. Opposed to women’s rights, movements, considers herself already liberated. (Wallace 106-107)

This was the general understanding about the black woman. Consequently, when black women thought of writing something their concern was themselves, and to put in the words of Mary Helen Washington, their main preoccupation was the following:

Black woman herself—her aspirations, conflicts, her relationship to her men and her children, her creativity. The black woman writers have looked at the black woman from an insider’s point of view and tried to discover what happened to the black woman as she raised a family under ghetto conditions, or as she looked into the mirror and tried to see beauty in full features and dark skin. (Black Eyed Susan 10)

Claudia Tate has also expressed her ideas about black women writers. On this score she wrote:

Black women writers project their vision of the world, society, community, family, their lovers, even themselves, most often through the
eyes of black female characters and poetic personae. Their angle of vision allows them to see what white people, especially males, seldom see. With one penetrating glance they cut through layers of institutional racism and sexism and uncover a core of social contradictions and intimate dilemmas which plague all of us, regardless of race or gender. Through their art they share their vision of possible resolution with those who cannot see. (17)

Because of the newness of themes and style of writing and use of language, Black Women’s writing has been claimed to be a separate branch of literature by many black feminist critics. Lorraine Bethel is one such critic who believes that there is a separable and identifiable tradition of black women writers, simultaneously existing within and independent of the American, Afro-American and American female literary tradition.

To prove the separate identity and features of Black women’s writings, Mary Helen Washington has stated: “… they use specific language, specific symbols, specific images, with which they try to record their lives … and try to claim their own name and their own space” (Midnight Birds 16).

Black women do certainly share some commonalities with black men writers and white women writers. However, they have their own uniqueness which comes up from their own black feminist consciousness which has its roots in their own experiences full of sexual and racial atrocities, negation of their selves as well as the experiences of survival. Of course though the humanity is male, white and also something else than themselves, black women have succeeded in declaring that humanity cannot be constituted without them and they are part and parcel of it.
The black women have been trying to reclaim their lost womanhood and self through their art and literature. However, as they were relegated to a subhuman status, they were projected negatively, in the form of stereotypes by the white men, women and also by the black men. Many black men writers have also dealt with the themes related to the dark lives of black women. However, most of the black male writers have failed in depicting black women in the background of their real, genuine and authentic life. It is because of this, that the black women themselves have come to the forefront to reveal their own, real, genuine and authentic selves.

Many black women have been in the forefront of the black literary movement. However, the significance of their contribution to the black literature has only recently been accepted by the critics. In fact, it is Phillis Wheatley, “a black woman who laid down the foundation of black American literary tradition,” (Gates 10) by publishing her poems, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religion and Moral*, in 1773. Wheatley gave birth to the genre of black poetry; in the same fashion, Ann Plato gave birth to the genre of essays and Harriet E.Wilson, initiated the tradition of novel in the United States.

But their achievement has been ignored. In addition to this, till recently, the writings of these nineteenth century Afro-American women in general have remained buried in obscurity, accessible only in research libraries in overpriced and poorly edited reprints. Many of their works were never reprinted at all. It is only recently, say since the last couple of decades, many a scholar is taking interest in their writings, as black women themselves have started to dig out their own literary history and have started resurrecting their literary past. As a result, it is now possible to have and study to a full extent the Afro-American literary tradition.
The very first novel by a black woman of America is that of Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig: Or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859). It is also the first novel in black American Literature to examine the life of an ordinary black person in realistic detail. Prior to the unearthing of *Our Nig* as the first black woman’s fiction, by Henry Louis Gates Jr., Frances Ellen Watkin Harper’s *Iola Leroy* or *Shadows Uplifted* (1892) was considered the first novel written by a black woman.

Pauline Hopkins, an editor of *Colored American Magazine* published in Boston from 1902 to 1904, wrote the novel, *Contending Forces*. In the preface to the novel she wrote that blacks must use fiction to preserve race memories:

> It is record of growth and development from generation to generation. No one will do this for us. We must ourselves develop the men and women who will faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro with all the fire and romance which lie dormant in our history. (75)

Hopkins also wrote two other novels: *Winoma: A Tale of Negro life in the South and South-West* which appeared in the May and October issues of *The Colored American* and *Of One Blood: or The Hidden Self* which appeared in November 1902 and September 1903 issues of *The Colored American*. However, both the novels are not as powerful as *Contending Forces* either in theme or in style.

Jessie Fauset, a literary editor of the *Crisis* from 1919 to 1926, has four novels to her credit. They are: *There is Confusion* (1924), *Plum Bun* (1929), *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931), and *Comedy: American Style* (1934). These novels portray middle-class black Americans who are striving for middle-class goals, indicate the fact that the black Americans share values similar to those held by whites. These novels document a facet of
black culture in which the author’s predominant aim is to convince whites that blacks are like them. Her aim was to emphasize the similarities between the blacks and the whites, rather than the differences.

Nella Larsen, another black woman celebrity of Harlem Renaissance, through her two novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) deals with the problem of black women of the middle class who are both unwilling to confirm to circumscribed existence in the black world or move freely in the white world. To a certain extent, Larsen wrote what she lived.

It is interesting that the woman’s literature of the Harlem Renaissance era had emphasized the thrust of the black woman’s drive towards economic stability and problems of passing. However, Zora Neale Hurston concentrated her efforts on depicting the black woman “who is neither after passing or hiding her identity after self-fulfilment and after attaining her female autonomy” (Christian 174). Zora Neale Hurston is one of the more prolific writers of the Harlem Renaissance period. In addition to short stories, and plays, she has published four novels: *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1932), *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1942), and *Seraph on the Suwannee* (1948), and two books of Folklore, *Mules and Men* (1935), and *Tell My Horse* (1938), and an autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942).

Ann Petry is one of the major black women writers who highlights the issues of both the blacks and women in her novels. *The Street* (1946) is the main work from a black feminist perspective. *The Narrow* (1953) also traces out some problems of racism. However, *Country Place* (1947), her second novel in the order of its production, does not deal so prominently with the problem of race.
Dorothy West’s *The Living Is Easy* is a story of Cleo Judson, a black woman protagonist, who runs the risk of becoming an elite black woman. Born in the South and married to the wealthiest black man in Boston, she struggles to become a black elite. Thus, in a way it is a depiction of “the psychological, social and material lives” (Robinson 2) of the small but important Black population that have always been scattered throughout New England.

Gwendolyn Brooks’ first autobiographical novel, *Maud Martha* (1953) depicts the scars that the blackness creates in the heart of a black woman. It is a novel about “bitterness, rage, self-hatred and the silence that results from suppressed anger” (Washington *Invented Lives* 387).

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. *Jubilee*, a novel by Margaret Walker is based on such a kind of experience.

Paule Marshall, a black woman writer of Barbadian origin, has written *Browngirl, Brownstone* (1959), *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969), *Praisesong of the Window* (1983) and *Soul Clap Hands and Sing* (1961) and *Reena* (1983) a collection of her short stories. Unlike other black women writers, Marshall highlights the dilemma of black women of West Indian origin as an African American. As the West Indians and Barbadians are late-comers in the U.S.A., their problems are not similar to that of African American.
Louise Meriwether’s *Daddy was a Number Runner* is a portrait of a poor black Harlem family disintegrating under the pressures of economic stress during the Great Depression. In fact the world of blacks is a divided world between the women and men. The women work as ‘housekeepers’ and men as ‘housemakers.’ Sarah Wright feels the need to redefine woman’s role in the black culture in her novel *This Child’s Gonna Live* (1969).

Gayle Jones is one of these black women writers who portrays the psychosexual abnormality of some of the black women. Her *Corregidora* (1975) is a bizarre, romantic story of a black woman, Ursa Corregidora who exposes the intimate family history of three generations of black women residing in rural Kentucky from the early to the mid-twentieth century. The story of the *Corregidora* is in fact an indictment of slavery and also a commentary on the morbidity of the slave culture.

Many black women writers have provided a great deal of space to the problems of black woman’s life and existence in their writing. Toni Cade Bambara in short story anthologies *Gorillia, My Love* (1972), and *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (1972) and a novel *The Salt Eaters*; Kristin Hunter mainly in *God Bless the Child* (1964), *The Lakestown Rebellion* (1978), *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* (1968) and Ntozake Shange in *Saffafra, Cypress and Indigo* also deal with the problems of being black, female and poor.

This vast hinterland of feminist tradition in black women’s writings in America provides a solid supportive background to an in-depth indulge into the realm of Toni Morrison, the writer considered for present study. Morrison is a prolific black woman writer who has written novels such as *The Bluest Eye* (1969), *Sula* (1973), *Song of*

As already stated, black women have a unique place in American life and literature. Morrison knew this uniqueness. Hence she has stated “there is something inside [them] that makes [them] different from other people. It is not like men, and it is not like white women” (Parker 255). Because of their difference from the other categories of American society she observes that:

I think women probably do write out of a different place. There’s some difference in the ways they approach conflict, dominion and power: I do not find the large difference between male and female writing in terms of intimacy though. But I do think black women write differently from white women. This is the most marked difference of all those combinations of black and white, male and female. It’s not so much that women write differently from men, but that black women write differently from white women. Black men don’t write very differently from white men. (Tate 122)

In the case of white women they have some support to fall back upon. However, this is not the case with black women. Morrison writes:

And she had nothing to fall back on, not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolution of her reality she may very well have invented herself. (New York Times Magazine August 22, 1971:14)
As the blacks are the vanquished and the whites are the victors and again the black women are vanquished among the vanquished, they develop a Janus-faced self-perception. The vanquished has to follow the lifestyle of the victors. Being a most sensitive black woman writer, Toni Morrison has tried to highlight this kind of a dilemma of black woman in *The Bluest Eye*.

The novel, indicates a black girl’s quest to attain white standards. Morrison tells the story of a young black girl, Pecola Breedlove who wants to have blue eyes, a symbol of white beauty. She believes that such eyes would make her beautiful, acceptable and admirable. However, her eyes cannot be changed into blue eyes in reality. She wants them desperately and as a result her quest for blue eyes culminates in madness. Pecola is pitted against two hostile worlds: one, the white world that entices her with values unnatural to her, viz., blue eyes, and then ruthlessly rejects her; the other, her own people, her own culture.

In *Sula* Morrison depicts the quest of the protagonist, Sula, for creating her own self and coming to terms with her identity as a black and female. Morrison demonstrates difficulties that black women face when they try to explore different aspects of their self. This theme is centred around a character called Sula who believes that she can create an identity for herself and that she exists “beyond the community and social expectation” (Smith V. 130). She believes that she has “no centre, no speck around which to grow” (*Sula* 119). Hence she sets herself on a mission—the mission which she defines: “I don’t want to make some body else. I want to make myself” (*Sula* 92). As a result, every activity that she performs is in the continuation of her relentless efforts to make herself, and to attain her unified black female self. The novel *Sula* also examines the dynamics of
friendship and the expectations for conformity within the community. *Sula* carries the theme of dual oppression still further. In their effort to run after and adapt the value system of the whites, the blacks suffer intolerable psychological trauma. The novel appears to criticize the feminist doctrine of unconditioned freedom.

The theme of universal oppression is reiterated in *Song of Solomon*. It presents Macon Dead, the slumlord and his bootlegging sister Pilate who are pitted in a duel that is carried into the third generation by the affair between his son, Milkman and her granddaughter, Hagar. Within the conflicts of the black community, Toni Morrison introduces a secret society dedicated to retaliating murder for murder, every crime against the black community. In the vast scope of the novel Morrison has harped on one thing i.e., the loss of identity, the feeling of insecurity and above all susceptibility to any kind of oppression arises from the rootlessness of the people themselves.

*Tar Baby* (1981) is Morrison’s fourth novel. With *Tar Baby*, the conflict between the race explodes, revealing all the underlying interrelationships between white masters and black servants. Tar baby is the black couple’s niece (an adopted daughter) educated by their employers to a privileged position that places her midway between the two worlds. The novel is set on a Caribbean island, which explores conflicts of race, class and sex. Contemporary life has been finely delineated in the *Tar Baby*. Here Morrison has effectively shown that relationship between the genders has reached an impasse. The novel also denounces the possibility of a White and Black cultural amalgamations.

In her fifth novel, *Beloved*, which won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in 1988, Morrison again turns back to the history of slavery. Here Morrison delineates the psychological and emotional effects of slavery. There is no sense of self; a fear to trust or
to love when anything can be taken away at anytime. The painful and slow growth of the slaves and ex-slaves towards a damaged self-awareness is quite effective. *Beloved* chronicles the fortunes of Sethe, once a slave on the Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky. She kills her own daughter called Beloved, to prevent her from the ancient sufferings. Sethe’s is an act of mercy killing; an act performed by a mother out of concern for her own daughter and her community. *Beloved* is a ‘product of invention’ of Morrison’s imagination, but it is based on a factual story. It grew out of one of her Random House projects, *The Black Book* (1974), a ‘scrapbook’ detailing three hundred years of the “folk journey of black America” (Cosby 1).

*Jazz* (1992) is a historical novel which utilizes the call and response style of Jazz music, allowing the characters to explore the same events from different perspectives. It is a story of violence and passion set in the New York city’s Harlem during the 1920s. In *Jazz* Morrison continues with her examination of gender relationship; of relationships between individual and community; of the theme of multiple oppression. Here her treatment of the themes seems a little different. The characters are all based in a city and are no longer mere dreamers. They have graduated to respond in kind to any violence against them. The sparkle of the city is corrosive in that it is white–tainted and destroys the internal morality of the characters. In keeping with modern city life most of the characters are commercial in their relationship with one another. Relationships between the genders in *Jazz* are either strained by exploitation or are broken by breach of trust. But at the end of novel Morrison offers a small hope by reuniting Joe and Violet. *Jazz* justifies the music referred to in the novel’s title. Jazz music represents an original Afro-American response to the need for community cohesion. It is instantaneous, collective
improvisational and cumulative. It involves the acts of anonymous individuals. It expresses and emphasizes difference in collectivity.

Paradise (1998), the seventh novel of Toni Morrison is a richly detailed portrait of a black Utopian community in Oklahoma. The novel opens with a horrifying scene of mob violence and then chronicles its genesis in a small black town in Oklahoma. Paradise is a tour de force of story telling power, richly imagined and elegantly composed. Morrison challenges our most fiercely held beliefs as she weaves folklore and history, memory and myth, into an unforgettable meditation on race, religion, gender, and the way a society can turn on itself until it is forced to explode.

Love (2003) is the story of Bill Cosey, a charismatic but dead hotel owner. Or rather, it is about the people around him, all affected by his life, even long after his death. Morrison used split narrative and jumps back and forth throughout the story, not fully unfolding until the very end. It is a richly conceived novel that illuminates the full spectrum of desire. This audacious vision of the nature of love – its appetite, its sublime possession, its dread – is rich in characters and striking scenes and in its profound understanding of how alive the past can be.

A Mercy (2008) is a powerful tragedy distilled into a small masterpiece. It is almost like a prelude to the story of Beloved, set two centuries earlier. At the novel’s heart, like Beloved, it is the ambivalent, disturbing story of a mother and a daughter – a mother who casts off her daughter in order to save her and a daughter who may never exorcise that abandonment.

The foregoing analysis of Toni Morrison’s fiction shows that she tries to uphold the dignity of blacks and expose the designs of whites. The fact is, the whites seem to
have developed a vested interest in subjugating and exploiting the blacks. In order to subvert this grand design, black consciousness comes handy both to highlight the injustice and the age-old tragedy. Her novels are social documents packed with a powerful ideological punch. The themes covered in her novels are provocative and the sensibility seethes with the sense of legitimate rage and outrage of a human being wronged. But her works were heralded by abolitionists as silent arguments against the existence of human slavery.

An attempt has been made to study and analyse the concept of ‘silence’ as an ideology in the second chapter. The third chapter *Articulation of the Inarticulate* shows how the oppressed African Americans used silence as a literary device—indeed, even silence as a coded language—as a strategy of confrontation and resistance. This chapter also attempts to convey the sufferings and distress of the African Americans in the American socio-political scenario as found in the works of Toni Morrison. She echoes the voices of the marginalized who suffer the burden of racism and sexism. The third chapter also uncovers and discovers all possible sites of oppression and repression. In this chapter we can hear the protest in the voices of the African Americans through Morrison’s novels, which are considered the – voice of the voiceless, speech of the silent race. In her novels, Morrison effectively transforms black silence to speech. It is important for us to celebrate Morrison’s works as explosion of the repressed blacks which is the main focus of the fourth chapter entitled *Explosion of the Repressed*. This chapter analyses how through her writings, she has voiced her protest against the matrix of oppression such as racism, classicism and sexism, all these unjust systems holding African Americans down, silencing them to submission. This chapter also attempts to analyse the works of
Morrison as tools of protest and revolt against unjust and inhuman systems imposed on the repressed blacks. Anyone whose right is denied has the right to protest. We find in the works of Morrison how the oppressed and exploited blacks try to explode against all the unjust systems. This chapter presents the journey of the African Americans which is a tale of resilience and courage. The fifth chapter *Summation* deals with the summing up of the preceding chapters. It attempts to establish Toni Morrison as a conscientious writer committed to values. The important assertions analysed in the previous chapters are restated and emphasized to prove the artistic genius and dexterity of the novelist.

The scope of the thesis thus stated, an in-depth analysis is made on the ideology of silence which is the focus of the second chapter.