Chapter 1

Introduction

Mythology—the body of inherited myths in any culture, and folklore—the oral tradition which encompasses the whole of that which is transmitted by word of mouth, are chief elements of any literature. Literature is a means of extending mythology and folklore. Literary works may thus be regarded as mythopoeic and folkloristic, tending to create or recreate certain narratives which human beings consider crucial to their understanding of the world. Lawrence Coupe observes:

... the work of the myth is to explain, to reconcile, to guide action or to legitimate. We can add that myth-making is evidently a primal and universal function of the human mind as it seeks a more or less unified vision of the cosmic order, the social order, and the meaning of the individual’s life. Both for society at large and for the individual, this story-generating function seems irreplaceable. The individual finds meaning in his life by making of his life a story set within a larger social and cosmic story. (6)

Myth and folklore are therefore very important dimensions of cultural and literary experiences.
Folklore and myth have been great sources of creativity. In the modern age, they have become powerful instruments in the preservation of both history and culture. A pervasive, percolated mythical climate has been dynamic in nature with a great potential to merge with, and even mould contemporary reality. History has a past whereas myth and folklore are ever present. Use of myth as a strategy to present contemporary truth, however effective, can impose certain challenges on the writer. If he or she is not a beneficiary of the sustenance of the mythical tradition, his/her use of myth on a technical, skilful plane will only lead to either distortion, willing or otherwise, or stereotypical yoking of myth with reality.

A contemporary literary text that turns to myth has to be regarded as an extension of an earlier cultural discourse, though, of course, with many altered perceptions and perspectives. The element of contemporaneity thus worked out from within the framework of texts is not an external component that comes from without.

A myth does not state. It implies. Though it surpasses the ordinary human world, a myth reveals situations basic to that world. Some myths also validate social classes.

Structuralists assert that all myths throughout the world have a family resemblance. In myth, anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss search for the resemblance in a logical coherency analogous to
patterns in linguistic discourse. Freud uses myth as a source to analyse the psyche and evolves a trans-historical mechanism based on a biological conception of man and not on cultural history. Jung deals with myths as the archetypes of the collective unconscious. From the mythical themes, the epic poets chose to use the themes of culture.

In modern society, there are attempts of secularisation of myths devoid of their religious functions. Every mythology has to confront the world in which it is transmitted, and, therefore, has to go through the process of secularisation. We have demythologisation in which people make conscious efforts to purify a religious tradition of its mythological elements.

The modern times use myth also for political and social function. In such a use, the role of a religion or a myth is replaced by politics. Myths were never totally apolitical or asocial. In strengthening a given civilisation or community or a nation, quite a few myths had political and social components. Modern times lay down concepts such as “freedom” and “equality” as a basis in the same way as the myth asserts its authority and autonomy. Its structural and representational elements provide the frame, and myths are often used as masks to escape reality.

Both Lévi Strauss and Barthes look upon myth as a structure as well as a language. Language, in fact, would provide a model for its analysis. Lévi Strauss makes a distinction between what he calls
“reversible and non-reversible” temporalities that he associates respectively with langue and parole, and suggests that myth is in terms of its time function, both reversible and non-reversible at the same time. Myth is expressive of a timeless structure, that is, in its manifestation as langue, it is ahistorical, and carries with it reversible time, but as history, as parole, myth expresses non-reversible time. Barthes gives a new twist to this idea when he interprets myth as "depoliticised speech" that acts in close collaboration with ideology. For him, it is a system of communication and a mode of signification that functions within given historical limits and specific social conditions. It is useful to quote at some length Barthes' articulation of the scenario:

What the world supplies to myth is a historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality. And just as bourgeois ideology is defined as the abandonment of the name “bourgeois”, myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things. In it, things lose the memory that they once made. The world enters language as a dialectical relation between activities, between human actions, it comes out of myth as a harmonious display of essences. (117)
What myth does for Barthes, and for several other scholars who have elaborated the idea of myth as a form of ideology, then, is to naturalise events and subject them to easy assimilation by the community. It empties reality of history and fills it out with nature. It is in this sense that myth becomes depoliticised speech. Myth’s relation with literature and fiction is quite evident here. Myth is language, but it is also, as Lévi Strauss points out, something different from language. Literature on the other hand is language through and through. That is why myth is said to survive all translations, while literature loses some of its genius in the process of translation. This would also mean that unlike myth, literature would not lend itself to be naturalised and depoliticised. So, there is a certain sense in which literature can be interpreted as a contemporary, secularised version of ancient myth. This shift of emphasis from myth as a sort of plot (mythos) often communicating a sacred, religious meaning to myth as a way of thinking, as an ideology also corresponds with the passage from a mythical world to a literary world. The emergence of the novel as a literary form in a sense is linked to this passage, and even the absence of myth in given novels can sometimes become an index of its significance.

The death of the novel has often been announced, and part of the secret of its obstinate vitality must be its capacity for growth, adaptation, self-renewal and self-transformation: like some vigorous organism in a
speeded-up Darwinian eco-system, it adapts itself quickly to a changing world. War and revolution, economic crisis and social change, radically new ideologies such as Marxism and Freudianism, have made the twentieth century unprecedented in human history in the speed and extent of change, but the novel has shown an extraordinary capacity to find new forms and techniques and to accommodate new ideas and conceptions of human nature and human experience, and even to take up new positions on the nature of fiction itself.

The African-American folklore has wielded a tremendous influence upon the characters and worlds that Toni Morrison and Alice Walker create, as well as upon the very shape of their novels. Their awareness of the inseparability of oral forms and effects from written media in African-American culture informs their writing throughout their career. In their use of folklore, both are fascinated by the magic of fairytales and intrigued with the horrors to be found in monsters, or at least in monstrous behaviour. Their familiarity with the African-American folk communities and with other oral traditions enables them to develop the themes, shape the structure of their novels, and delineate the characters. Furthermore, they exhibit a fascination for patterns of Black folk speech and use folk metaphors so authentically engaging that they compete with theme and character in most of their novels. Perceiving themselves as cultural preservers, Morrison and Walker write from a folk aesthetic that
is much like the one that informs Ralph Ellison's theoretical assertions that folklore is the basis of all great literature.

For us (Black-Americans) the question should be, what are the specific forms of that humanity and what in our background is worth preserving or abandoning. The clue to this can be found in folklore, which offers the first drawings of any group's character. It preserves mainly those situations which have repeated themselves again and again in the history of any given group. It describes those rites, manners and customs, and so forth, which insure the good life, or destroy it; and it describes those boundaries of feeling, thought, and action which that particular group has found to be the limitation of the human condition. It projects this wisdom in symbols which express the group's will to survive. . . . These drawings may be crude that they are nonetheless profound in that they represent the group's attempt to humanize the world. It's no accident that great literature, the product of individual artists, is erected upon his humble base. (172)

All narratives move in at least two directions at once—toward recovering the past and toward being heard or told. They grow out of the roots of history, memory and culture, and they take flight on the wings of
desire. This perpetual interplay between history and memory, remembering and telling, reminds us that storytelling is always the art of repeating stories. This cross-cultural study is based on the discovery that Toni Morrison and Alice Walker wrote as culture workers and redemptive scribes to affirm village values. Thus their works validate the individual journey outside and the return to home and community.

Mythology (reading myth) and Mythopoeia (making myth) are complementary activities which involve mythic reading. Writers like Dante, T.S. Eliot, Coppola or Morrison have made use of it. Poems like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are a useful summary of received myths in a form known as epic. Plato’s *The Republic* itself contains the story of the cave, a curious variation on hero myth. It depicts the world of sensuous experience as a dark underground cavern, the inhabitants of which take flickering fire-lit images to be reality. Essentially, what we have in the tale is an allegory, a result of the demythologization of the Greek allegory. Plato is thus seen to have allowed myth its place in the larger scheme of rational understanding. Allegory is therefore domesticated myth.

As people move from one land to another, they take their folklore with them and adapt it to the new surroundings. From the 1500s to the 1800s for example, thousands of West Africans were transported to the Western hemisphere as slaves. West African folktales include stories about a sly spider named Anansi. Over the years, the slaves continued to
tell tales of Anansi, though the stories about the spider were gradually changed to reflect life in the New World. Today, Anansi remains a popular character in Black folklore, both in West Africa and the Caribbean Sea. The same lyrics can be used with different tunes, or different words can be set to the same music.

Folklore has made a major contribution to the world’s arts. Many folk stories and folk songs are beautiful works of art themselves. Folklore has also inspired masterpieces of literature, music, painting and sculpture. The English poet Geoffrey Chaucer used a number of folktales in his famous work—*The Canterbury Tales*. William Shakespeare based several of his plots on folktales. These plays include *King Lear*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Certain legends and myths have attracted artists, composers and writers for centuries. One legend tells us about a medieval German scholar named Faust who sold his soul to the devil. This legend has been the basis of many novels, plays, operas and oriental works. *Faust*, a drama by Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, is probably the greatest work in German Literature. Not less famous is Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, an adaptation of the same theme in English Literature.

Jazz developed largely from the folk music of Southern Blacks in the southern states of the U.S.A. Classical composers also have incorporated folk melodies into their works. For example, the Czech
composer Antonin Dvorak used Black spirituals in his famous symphony from the New World. The Austrian composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart used the melody of “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” as the basis of a work he wrote in 1778. In African-American literature, we have the famous work by the leading novelist Toni Morrison, who has titled her famous novel as Jazz itself.

Every major culture in the world has a wide variety of folktales to its credit. The Arabian Nights includes stories such as “Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp”, and “The Seven Voyages of Sindbad, the Sailor” is a collection of fairytales and folktales from cultures in Asia and North Africa. Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm gathered a famous collection of German fairytales and folktales in the early 1800s. The best known tales in this collection include “Rumpelstiltskin” and “Hansel and Gretel”. Epics like the Iliad and the Odyssey still continue to be the delight of generations.

Ballads which tell dramatic stories in verse like those of Robinhood, stories which illustrate moral stories like Aesop’s Fables, fantasies like Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, adventure stories like Robert-Louis Stevenson’s Treasure Island are all adaptations of folklore. The Incredible Journey by Sheila Burford, a Canadian author, describes how two dogs and a cat travel together through the Canadian wilderness to reach the humans they love. In the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, even Cartoons have their foundation in folk literature:
The lesson to be drawn from this cursory glance at what I may call the past, present and future of our Race Literature apart from its value as first beginnings, not only to us as a people but literature in general, is that unless earnest and systematic effort be made to procure and preserve for transmission to our successors, the records, books and various publications already produced by us not only will be the sturdy pioneers who paved the way and laid the foundation for our Race. Literature be robbed of their just due, but an irretrievable wrong will be inflicted upon the generations that shall come after us. (The Norton Anthology xxvii)

In the third quarter of the eighteenth century, the English Language became richer by a body of literature created by African slaves and ex-slaves writing in English. These Black slaves created a genre of literature that at once testifies against their captors and bears witness to the urge to be free and literate. The Norton Anthology divides African-American literature into seven periods, beginning with the Vernacular Tradition which ranges from eighteenth-century anonymous Black sacred music to the twentieth century Blues, Jazz and Rap.

Despite the fact that there had been a lot of resistance to acknowledge the merits of African-American literature, critics have been
forced to recognize this branch of literature as an expression of the deeply felt emotions of the African in America. Alienated from his own native land, he has poured forth his soul’s agony in a foreign land, where race and gender stand against him. His misery is often the groundwork for the most affecting touches in poetry. His love is ardent and kindles not only the senses, but also the imagination. The African was not destined by nature to be a slave, rightly relegated to a low place in the great chain of being, an ancient construct that arranged all of creation on a vertical scale ascending from plants, insects and animals through human beings to the angels and God himself.

For the past decade or so, African-American literature has been enjoying a Renaissance in quality and quantity. It grew to a significant extent since 1970 by the writings of African-American women such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Rita Dove, Gloria Naylor, Jamaica Kincaid and Terry McMillan. The number of literary prizes won by Black authors in the past decade, including Pulitzer prizes, National and American Book awards, far exceeds the total number of such honours won by African-Americans during the rest of the century. And several times since 1990, as many as three or four Black authors have appeared simultaneously on the best seller list of the New York Times. While the audience for this magnificent flowering of Black Literature crosses all racial boundaries, Black readers have never been more numerous.
Black literature courses have in the past two decades become a central part of the study in the departments of English and American studies. Maya Angelou’s appearance at President Bill Clinton’s inauguration in 1993, the first poet to read at an inauguration since Robert Frost did so for John F. Kennedy in 1961, and Rita Dove’s unprecedented two-term appointment as Poet Laureate of the United States, are further signs of the pervasive presence of African-American literature in American society. Just as the sustained popularity of rap poetry has revitalised the spoken word movement in Cafes, the post-modern end of the century has reaffirmed the poetry readings in the coffee houses of the 1950s.

Another factor to be noted is that Negro history and Negro literature have maintained a very close relationship through the years. The Negroes had great desire to become full-fledged citizens of the United States. Their literature was made into a purposeful venture in his struggle for a better way of life. But still, there is the “African” element in African-American literature and there is definitely an inseparable relation between Vernacular literature, the blues, gospel, the sermon and jazz and the formal African-American literary tradition. The canon of African-American literature is highly indebted to American tradition. Virginia Woolf claims that “books speak to other books” (The Norton Anthology xxxvi). It is true also that works of literature created by African-
Americans often extend or signify upon other works in the Black tradition, structurally and thematically.

In African-American literature, the “Vernacular” refers to the church songs, blues, ballads, sermons, stories and in our own era, rap songs that are part of the oral, not primarily the literature or written down tradition of Black expression. It is not, generally speaking, produced for circulation beyond the Black group itself and is secretive, defensive and aggressive in character. This highly charged material has been extraordinarily influential for writers of poetry, fiction and drama. The work of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison or Alice Walker would have been empty without it. It is a production of the unconscious. It is not a male province. Nor is it associated with a particular level of society or with an era. It is neither long ago, nor fading. It is a dynamic process of expression, past and present. It makes up a rich storehouse of materials wherein the values, styles and character types of Black American life are reflected in language that is highly energized and often marvellously eloquent. Musically, the slaves are more gifted than the Whites with accurate ears for tune and time.

The African-American Vernacular consists of forms of sacred songs, prayers and sermons—as well as secular—work songs, secular rhymes and songs, Blues, Jazz and stories of many kinds. It also consists
of dances, wordless musical performances, stage shows and visual art forms of many sorts.

Spirituals:

Negro spirituals are religious songs sung by African-Americans since the earliest days of slavery and first gathered in a book in 1801 by the Black church leader Richard Allen. These religious songs were sung not only in churches or in religious, ritual settings. They were sung during work time, play time and rest time. For the slaves, the concept of the sacred signified a strong will to incorporate within this world all the elements of the divine. Along with a sense of the slaves' personal self-worth as children of a mighty God, the spirituals offered them the much-needed psychic escape from the ordinary world of slavery's restrictions and cruelties. Certainly, "This world is not my home" was a steady theme in the spirituals. Some of the songs spoke of the dream of flying away, leaving the world of care behind.

I've got two wings for to veil my face
I've got two wings for to fly away.

And:
I'm gonna tell God all my troubles,
When I get home...
I'm gonna tell him the road was rocky
When I get home. (The Norton Anthology 6)
In such visions of justice and peace resided both a healthy impulse to escape the sorrowful world and an implied criticism of life’s earthly overwork, injustice and violence.

Ralph Ellison commented that Richard Wright’s “Black Boy” was like the Blues in its refusal to offer solutions; he also penned the following compelling definition of the form:

The Blues is an impulse to keep the painful detail and episodes of a brutal existence alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jazzed grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the Blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. (22)

This music borrowed harmonic and structural devices and vocal techniques from work songs and Spirituals. But this music was sung not by a chorus but by a single voice accompanied by one or more instruments. It also involved a compellingly rhythmical sound that relied on patterns of call/response between singer and audience. In spite of all the affinities with the church songs, Blues music was decidedly secular, it promoted no heavenly grace or home but offered instead a stylized complaint, countered, if at all, by flickering promise of an occasional good time or loving companions. They also involve particular sounds—train
bells and whistles, sexual groans, conversational whispers, rhapsodies, shouts, stories and barnyard noises as well. As Murray’s and Ellison’s words show, to term a poem or work of fiction a “Blues piece” or to note Blues’ influence within it, is to associate it with a modern Black American Vernacular expression at its finest.

Jazz

Jazz is a form of music that emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century from the artistic meeting of elements including ring time, marching band music, opera and other European classical music, Native American Music, Spirituals, work songs and especially the Blues. It developed in New Orleans where there was a broad range of musical influences and where there were abundant opportunities to hear, play and practise music. Although it spread to a wide variety of places across the nation, it developed primarily as a city phenomenon, one that attempted to capture in music cadences, voices and even the rising skylines of new urban America. From the beginning, Jazz was a music of train-whistle, guitars, bell-ringing, pianos and horns, conductors calling and squalling. It was influenced by the tremendousness and the music-in-motion of the modern train, the beautiful machine that seems to have represented both the power and the promise of moving away from the land where one’s parents and grandparents had been slaves, which occurred in a mighty wave during the Great Migration and the
remembrance of such earlier train images in the spirituals with their trains bound for glory and in the underground railroad with its stations, conductors and hand riding runners for freedom. It was primarily an instrumental music, strongly influenced by the sound of the African-American voice. Singers used their voices as they were jazz instruments which meant ironically that they were voice imitating instruments that were imitating voices. As opposed to Pop music which comes and goes with every era, Jazz music fingers the jagged grain of experience and knows that despite all hopes and efforts, things might not work out for the best.

And yet with the deep tragic sense of life that underlies the Jazz music comes an overwhelming impulse to celebrate human experience. Jazz is a music with a strong sense of possibility and humour. It is a music of rejuvenation. It proclaims the human will to keep on in spite of the troubles traditionally sung about in the Blues lyrics. Whatever its key and time signatures, whatever its paces, it has remained a dance music, one defined by the urge to make the body rock in rhythm, to swing. It is a music of Black American endurance under the fast changing circumstances of a new century.

Like its parents, rhythm and Blues and Jazz, Rap is at once on ingroup ritual music, a performance music, and a dance music, designed to make dancers move together to drumlines and machine-gun-like firings
of chanted sound. It is animated music that celebrates Black verbal and musical style; but it is also music that rejoices in the poetry of the human body in soulful, dance-hall-rocking motions.

The African-American sermon is a complex oratorical form with significant differences from religion to religion, denomination to denomination, region to region and era to era. The folklorist Gerald L. Davis has outlined several features that define the Black Sermon as a distinctive form. According to Davis:

... the African-American sermon typically has these parts: (1) the disclaimer, in which the preacher makes clear that the morning's message comes not from him or her alone but from God; (2) the statement of theme as drawn from specific Biblical readings; (3) the literal and then the broad interpretation of the Biblical word; (4) the formulaic body of the sermon, the morning's main message, and (5) the closing statement, rarely a summary as such but rather an open-ended conclusion leading to the next part of the church service. (69)

Since their arrival in the New World from Africa, the folktales have been a key part of the African-American equipment for survival and sustenance. Africans brought with them a vast house of stories—along with other expressive forms such as songs, dances, styles of worship,
games, patterns of adornment, and the like that helped them to maintain on the new continent at least the broad outline of their original world view. Many kinds of trickster tales along with tales of metamorphosis and wonder have distinctive counterparts in the New World. But, whatever their sources—Old or New world, black, white, red—the African-American hammered these myriad tales into unmistakably Black-American shapes and themes. The voices of these stories (sometimes one story could involve several voices—of Bear, perhaps or Sis Cat, or Brer Fox) marked them as African-American. Frequently the “weak” rabbits of these tales are greedy monsters of selfish pride or the rabbits can be just plain pretensions. In a sense, that is what gets Brer Rabbit into trouble in the famous Tar-Baby tale; he insists on being addressed with genteel etiquette, and to say the least, the effort fails. And Toni Morrison has adapted the Tar-Baby tale for her famous novel with the same title.

These Tales were originally invented not for the printed page but for spoken performances. The tellers and their tellings full of whispery asides, silences, dramatic clicks, calls and other story sounds are lost when there is no audience. The best effort to catch the dancing spirit of the tale on paper is done by writers. For example, in Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon, there is the story of Macon Dead in the framework of Icarus with his wings. In the tale, All God’s Chiller Had Wings, the story begins thus:
Once all Africans could fly like birds; but owing to their many transgressions, their wings were taken away. They remained, here and there, in the sea, inlands and out of the way places in low country, some who had been overlooked, and had retained the power of flight, though they looked like other men. (103)

Behind the achievements of individual African-American writers lies the communal consciousness of millions of slaves, whose oral tradition in song and story has given form and substance to literature by Black people since they first began writing in English. Even in those spirituals that express a poignant yearning for deliverance in heaven from earthly burdens, one can hear a powerful complaint against the institutions that forced Black people to believe that only in the next world would they find justice. The animal tales on the other hand, testified to the slave's common sense and understanding of human psychology and everyday justice in the world. Although many of these tales explained in comic fashion, how the world came to be as it is, many more concentrated on the exploits of trickster figures, most notably Brer Rabbit, who used his wit to overcome stronger animal antagonists. Tales that celebrate the trickster, whether in animal or human form, are universal in human folklore. Still, the popularity of Brer Rabbit in the folklore of the slaves attests to the enduring faith of the Black-Americans in the power of mind
over matter. The spirit of Brer Rabbit lived in every slave who deceived his master with a smile of loyalty while stealing from his storehouse and making plans for escape.

The African-American writers bequeath to their modern literature a prescient and provocative example of what W.E.B. Du Bois would call “a double consciousness”—the African-American’s fateful sense of “twoness” born of a bi-cultural identification with both an African heritage and a European tradition. Women writers like Phillis Wheatley had first to write their way into American literature before they or any other Black writer could claim a special mission and purpose for an African-American literature. She had no models other than European Americans for her poetry and she could not assume that her White readers would want to know what a slave woman thought or felt unless she could demonstrate her capacity to express her ideas and feelings in a manner sanctioned by the dominant culture. In response to these conditions, Wheatley adopted a literary persona and style that affirmed her seriousness as an African-American artist and created a precedent on which subsequent Black poets could build with confidence. No other single writer has contributed more to the founding of African-American literature.

The influence that the continent of Africa exerted on many contemporary African-American writers cannot be underrated. Though
only a few texts are actually situated in Africa, such novels as Morrison’s *Beloved*, Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, Paule Marshall’s *The Chosen Place* incorporate African belief systems and rituals still central to African-American life. Many contemporary African-American writers have preserved and drawn on a sense of distinctive African-American cosmology and mythology. Central to works in 1970s and 1980s is the significance of the ancestor. Morrison’s evocation in *Beloved* of the importance of “rememory” in the construction of a people which includes both the living and those who have passed on. Alice Walker’s recuperation of her ancestors in *The Color Purple*, Gloria Naylor’s characterization of *Mama Dey* in the novel of that name, John Wideman’s use of dream time as a continuum rather than a significance of time—all are fictional representations of spiritual or cultural rituals. In her Pulitzer Prize winning *The Color Purple* (1982), Alice Walker demonstrated the rich potential of Black English. Walker’s novel represents Black English not as a deficient form of standard English, but as a language in its own right.

Contemporary poets and novelists continued to use African-American musical forms as the basis of their work. Playwright August Wilson and poet, novelist and playwright Sherley Anne Williams drew on the healing power of the Blues for their exploration of the Black cultural forms. Poets Michael Harper and Quiney Troupe consistently used the structures of the Jazz as the basis of their complex poems, while Al Young
wrote many lyrical musical memoirs. Novelist Gloria Naylor employed the formal qualities of a Jazz for her fourth novel _Bailey's Café_ (1992) while the very title of Toni Morrison's most recent novel, _Jazz_ points to the layered rhythms of freedom and improvisation crucial to its composition. And the 1960s poets used rhythm and Blues as the basis for their forms. Young poets in the 1980s and 1990s have drawn on the rhythms of Rap music.

Early twentieth century African-American writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes had drawn on the Black oral tradition for inspiration. In the 1970s writers intensified the poems on what began to be called The Vernacular. Toni Cade Bambara used the Black traditions of oral story telling, what she calls as the kitchen traditions in her stories. Toni Morrison pointed out that making Black literature was not just a matter of dropping the "g"s but rather the linguistic embodying of particular values. Some of her prose contains gaps—actual spaces between words—which invite reader participation in much the same way a Black preacher's pauses allow his congregation to respond. Increasingly, writers use the call/response patterns so central to the vernacular and have invented what Morrison calls unorthodox novelistic techniques such as the chorus to elicit group participation. The image of the quilt is often used as a metaphor for a complex, connected fabric of cultural constructs.
A central hope of the oral tradition is that of signifying what Henry Louis Gates Jr defines as “repetition and revision, or repetition with signal difference”, a quality as well as jazz. That quality is, of course, not new in African-American literature, as the works of Zora Neale Hurston so aptly demonstrate. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, writers self-consciously played with the language in their texts. Ishmael Reed’s _Mumbo Jumbo_ is itself a search for an apparent contradiction, “the talking back”. Reed’s double entendres are complex signifying the play with language at the crux of the Black oral and literary traditions. Such “talking back” has certainly increased because Black writers have now access to their literary predecessors. Walker’s _The Color Purple_ speaks back to Hurston’s _Their Eyes Were Watching God_. Naylor, who was able to study African-American literature in a way that the writers of the 1930s and 1940s could not, tells us that reading Morrison’s _The Bluest Eye_ in college, gave her the authority to enter the forbidden terrain of prose. Naylor’s second novel _Linden Hills_ (1985), is a tribute to her knowledge not only of Dante’s _Inferno_ but also of works by Hurston, Morrison and Walker.

Between the 1960s and the 1970s there was an explosion of works by African-American women novelists as a result of the intersection of two movements—the Black movement and the Women’s movement. There were earlier women writers like Jessie Faucet, Nella Lansen, Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, Dorothy West, Guendolyn Brooks and Paule
Marshall. They had also placed Black women at the centre of their narratives. But their texts had not been perceived by either the mainstream or the African-American literary establishment as significant. It was not that African-American women had suddenly become literary artists in the 1970s but that the cultural ethos was ready to accept them as writers who were engaging in the valid exploration of social, political and literary issues.

Many African-American women writers such as June Jordan, Audre Lorde and Alice Walker had been major participants in both the Civil Rights and the Women's Movements. In the early 1970s, they began to explore the racism in the Women's Movement and the sexism in the Black. In 1970, Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was published. In the same year the anthology *The Black Women* (1970) edited by Toni Cade (later Bambara), the first novels by Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Jude Jordan (*The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *The Bluest Eye* and *His Own*) were published. Set in different times and places—Morrison’s novel featured a small mid-western town in the 1940s; Walker’s spanned the first sixty years of the twentieth century in rural Georgia; Jordan’s was set in contemporary New York city—these novels shifted the focus from that of a monolithic Black community to that of specific Black communities. They refused the all encompassing definitions of the Black community and criticised the relationship between Black
women and men rather than the relations between Blacks and Whites or the Black-White wars in the northern cities. They did not idealize Black communities, but articulated the complexities of African-American culture and history; and at the same time they demonstrated how Black communities had also deeply internalized racial stereotypes that radically affected their definitions for and expectations of men and women.

In exploring gender issues, these writers also introduced new themes into African-American literature, such as motherhood, mother-daughter relationship, women’s friendships, and the relationship between sexuality and spirituality in African-American cosmologies. In *Sula*, her second novel, Morrison’s central character tests the conventional definitions of good and evil in relation to women by insisting that she exists primarily as and for herself—not to be a mother or to be the lover of men. While Morrison worked with the idea that the Black women have always been the harbour and the ship, Walker in her second novel *Meridian* explored the relationship of motherhood to revolution and wondered whether the nurturing and protecting qualities of motherhood might in fact be necessary qualities of a revolutionary. Unlike many White women writers of this period, African-American women writers related the personal issues of their communities to global and political issues. In effect, they insisted that personal and political issues could not be separated into exclusive categories.
Culture and heritage are the integral parts which play crucial roles in the shaping of a society. They give a base to its conventional customs. When any society is said to be characterized by culture or heritage, it includes the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, intellectual and emotional features. It also brings about the tradition, beliefs and a particular value system. And the mode that is used to reflect all these aspects is "literature" either in written form or spoken form.

Black women have long possessed "magical" powers and told stories to their daughters. They challenge the authenticity and accuracy of an American history that failed to record their voices and a literary history—written by Black men as well as White—that has compounded the error of that neglect. Black women, achieving partial literacy, despite the prohibitions of slavery, began making their voices heard well before emancipation, published books that are novels of the 1890s and the 1930s, in the figure of Zora Neale Hurston, a prolific and self-conscious novelist, folklorist and essayist. In the 1970s and 1980s, Black women novelists are metaphorical conjure women, "mediums" like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison who make it possible for their readers and for each other to recognize their common literary ancestors (gardeners, quilt makers, grandmothers, root-workers, and women who wrote autobiographies) and to name each other as a community of inheritors. By their combined recognition and mutual naming based on magic, oral inheritance and the
need to struggle against oppression, Black women writers enlarge our conventional assumptions about the nature and function of literary tradition. Focusing on connection rather than separation, transforming silence into speech, and giving back power to culturally disenfranchised, Black women writers affirm the wholeness and endurance of a vision that once articulated, can be shared—though its heritage, roots, survival and intimate possession belong to Black women alone.

Literary success brings popular admiration and critical attention, and Toni Morrison’s work has been singled out for a variety of creative characteristics—narrative experimentation in the great Faulknerian Modernist tradition, the successful absorption of the lessons of Latin American “magical realism”, the masterful presentation of Black women of all ages and conditions as figures of capable imagination. Morrison is a complex writer and part of her complexity is that while she is contemporary, literary and experimental, she is at the same time solidly grounded in the culture of the Black American community. If Morrison’s protagonists are always the “single, separate persons” of American individualism, then the community from which they have become isolated and alienated is always the community of shared beliefs, practices, stories and histories that is the folk heritage of African-Americans. Toni Morrison is an inheritor as well as an innovator. Her predecessors—especially Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison, actively
sought to bring the rich resources of the folk heritage under the transforming hands of the novelist. The lessons of these masters have not been lost on Morrison. Her fiction relies heavily on images of folk processes of communication.

Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are two prominent African-American writers who belong to the same era, cultural background, racial identity and place of origin. As chroniclers of African-American life in the twentieth century, there are definitely certain common elements that unite their fictional concerns. A folk aesthetic gives structure and meaning to Morrison’s and Walker’s works and a mythic impulse informs their ability to depict people and values that the dominant American culture has traditionally neglected. In these female narratives, one finds that the voices of both the writers are an attempt to enact the process by which marginalized communities sustain themselves and resist cultural domination. Folk and mythic elements are used in their fictional narratives to challenge the accepted notions of gender, class and race.

Morrison and Walker attempted the art of writing at a time of great historical and cultural change. They saw Black-Americans losing many of the cultural values and sense of tradition that had sustained them before the massive migration from the South to the North. In their fiction they consciously seek to incorporate the language of these lost or forgotten traditions. Their reaction to burgeoning wealth, rising industrialism,
growing alienation between town people and country people, was to write fictional sketches and novels that spoke of the values which they saw vanishing. Although the inclusion of folk materials may initially signal a reductive mimetic realism to some readers, they also suggest how the fiction of each writer surpassed the limitations of realism as a literary convention. But Morrison’s blending of African-American cosmology and epistemology calls traditional definitions of realism into question and reveals how her use of convention differs from that of Walker’s. Unlike Walker, Morrison does not lament the past, but seeks a means of reclaiming what is useful and good to empower her people to survive difficult circumstances in the present.

At the root of Morrison’s works is a nexus of myth and folklore that is deeply rooted in African-American history and culture. In fact, it is difficult to discuss her fiction without alluding to myth, folklore or both. Unfortunately, much of the criticism has tended to focus more on myth in a strict literary sense and less on folklore or the profound cultural context in which her writing is based.

Morrison seeks to use the novel in a “Black way”. Hence she continues to incorporate the oral tradition of the Black literary tradition in her fiction. In her own words, she wants her fiction to be both print literature and oral literature, to make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless and spoken. Her desire is to represent what is best in African-
American literature. She depicts the historical and linguistic portraits of a culture, (once imprisoned by an enforced illiteracy), questing for, finding and relishing the written word. Ultimately, she seeks to offer narrative fiction to foster connections within the community, to focus on shared experience and the affirmation of cultural identity in the context of national diversity, to be both an archivist and a redemptive scribe for her people.

A native of Georgia (b.1944), Walker published her first collection of poetry in 1968 and she has since published two collections of poetry, two collections of short stories, a biography and three novels. Her recent novel, *The Color Purple*, won both the American Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. She is currently the editor for *Ms Magazine*. Walker grounds her fiction and poetry primarily in the experiences of the South and the Southern Blacks. Her works depend upon what Black life is, has been and can be, in a specified landscape that becomes emblematic of American life. Her dominant themes are spiritual survival and individual identity and she shapes her fiction and much of her poetry according to patterns of generations. In her literary works, she stresses her own history and by extension, the cultural history of Southern Blacks and American Blacks. "It is", Walker asserts in the novel *Meridian*, "the song of the people, transformed by the experiences of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost, the people suffer and are
without a soul” (Women Writers of the Contemporary South 205-206). Her own works are in a sense “the song of the people” celebrating and preserving each generation.

Oral tradition, essential even to the most literary of slave narrative, is a prominent part of Walker’s writing. Mary Helen Washington had asked Walker whether she actually spoke with her mother’s voice. The response is forthright:

Just as you have certain physical characteristics of your mother’s—her laughter or her toes or her grade of hair—you also internalize certain emotional characteristics that are like hers. That is part of a legacy. They are internalized, merged with your own, transformed through the stories. When you’re compelled to write her stories, it’s because you recognize and prize those qualities in yourself. (Women Writers of the Contemporary South 38)

Walker also recognizes that much of life is a matter of perspective. Surviving whole means in part choosing which self to celebrate. Part of the celebration of the self in Walker’s work is her characters’ acknowledgement that there is something of the divine in everyone and everything in the universe. The garden thus becomes her recurrent metaphor for both art and beauty: endurance and survival.
The present study is an effort to link two women writers whose ethnic backgrounds, narrative themes and cultural and literary contexts are the same. By drawing on recent scholarship in such areas as literary folklore, myth criticism, narrative theory, African-American literary theory and feminist criticism, a way of examining the unexpected similarities in their literary concerns and textual production is arrived at. Their respective literary and cultural circumstances prompted them to engage analogous literary projects. A connection of this sort can provide what Walker describes as the "unifying theme through diversity, a fearlessness of growth, of search, of looking at that which enlarges the private and public worlds" (The Cultural Function of Narrative 26).

Some of the best clues to Morrison’s narrative intentions can be found in the interviews she has given over the past ten years. She wants to restore the language that Black People spoke to its original power. For her, that means turning to folktales, gossip, music, myth and other manifestations of oral traditions. Morrison brings a sense of history to her fiction, that, when combined with myth and folklore, reveals the accumulated collective reality that Walker feels is lacking in much of what is termed as Black Literature. Morrison sees myth in a broad sense, as usable past that she can consciously draw on to affirm the existential quest of the self as to affirm the folk processes that give meaning to literature.
Folklore differs from myth in that it is the Vernacular expression of beliefs, customs and traditions that identify a particular people. Classical mythology, elements of rituals associated with the heroic quest are all narrated through the language of African-American folklore. Hence the oral traditions, vernacular expressions, naming customs and folk music are all part of Walker's and Morrison's narratives. But neither myth nor folklore is static. Myth is both a usable form and a process by which both Morrison and Walker could affirm what the larger culture had discredited or marginalized by appropriating, revising and reshaping that form for the fiction. Likewise, folklore is not a collection of things, of commodities but a communication process that operates within the given cultural context. Therefore, the present study will also consider the ways in which the authors transformed and adopted the folkloristic and mythic phenomena to suit the demand of the age.

Chapter 2 of the present study “Flight and Return” is an illustration of Morrison's use of myth and folklore to give voice to a generation whose stories have been untold and unheard. She believes that the past makes the present coherent. At the root of Morrison's work is a nexus of myth and folklore that is deeply rooted in African-American history and culture. In fact, it is difficult to discuss her fiction without alluding to myth, folklore or both. Her fiction is a response to the loss of tradition. It is only when Milkman in the novel Song of Solomon discovers,
understands and respects these traditions that he discovers the meaning of his name, his own life and his familial past.

*Song of Solomon* is essentially the story of Milkman Dead’s search for and discovering of meaning in his life. Part I of the novel illustrates the folk aesthetic in that it focuses on the Black community into which Milkman is born and on the means by which that community gives itself coherence. Part II illustrates the mythic impulse in that it focuses on Milkman’s individual quest for identity and meaning. American history is evoked in the flight of Mr. Smith, and in references to racial exclusionary practices in housing. Her elaborate telling of the mythic dimensions of Milkman’s birth, name and childhood gives the narrative a fairytale quality. Morrison concludes that each one of us must take a journey like Milkman’s into the cultural roots of the past if the present is to become meaningful to us.

*The Bluest Eye* is Morrison’s *The Wasteland*. The novel presents Blacks who become grotesque by embracing the generationally inherited White culture and its value structure as their own. The Narcissus story, a critique of mirrors and reflections, Demeter and Persephone, the ironic juxtaposition of the White mythology of the Dick Jane Primer and the lives of African-Americans, are all made use of to illustrate how Morrison uses myth as usable past on which she can consciously draw on to affirm the existential quest of the self. In *Sula* and in *Beloved* also, Morrison
makes use of folk and mythic elements to suggest how the contemporary Black woman who denies her history and culture marginalizes her authentic self. She achieves this effect by adapting the famous folktales and myths to suit the need of the times. Morrison affirms the value of the return to the nest, the place of nurturance.

In *Tar Baby* also, all of Morrison's characters are artists: tale tellers, musicians, good cooks, conjurors. Even Pauline Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* is an artist in her soul, defining the world by its colours, its rainbows and searching for order in the chaos of her experience. Pilate, too, is an artist in *Song of Solomon*, conjuring her world, brewing her wine, singing her spontaneous songs and telling her stories in magical ways. And every character in *Beloved* searches for colour and finds it in a colourless, meaningless world. Myth thus becomes a metaphor for human experience, a means of communicating that experience and of ascertaining its meaning.

*Beloved* is not only a novel with a patchwork quilt structure which the reader has to piece together but also a text which literally demonstrates how any narrative has the potential to conceal a myriad of other narratives. In its structure, *Jazz* is indebted to the aesthetics of African-American music. The influence of Jazz where the melody is introduced and then subsequently unravelled and embellished is clear from the outset where the essence of the story is unfurled within the first
ten lines and then retold from different view points. Like *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*, *Jazz* moves backwards and forwards in time.

Critics have often termed Morrison as a magical realist as well as a mythical symbolist. She has the poet's sense of using the pure language and her characters usually discover that they must go back to their African heritage if they are to find themselves in the fullest sense of the term.

Walker considered it her duty as an artist and witness for the future to preserve the stories of the unknown men and women whose everyday lives constitute the communal past. In Chapter 3, of the present study "The Ancestor as Foundation" Walker's ability to link the survival of the artist to the survival of cultural heritage is examined. Even the earliest works of Walker reveal the folk aesthetic, mythic impulse and cultural function of narrative that characterized her best work. Her works bear witness to the cultural function of the narrative to alter our perspective and transform our consciousness.

The narrative technique in *Meridian* is the construction of a fictive fence to preserve folk roots. The folk elements in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* illustrates how the consciousness of young Ruth is transformed through the story-telling sessions she shares with the denizens of the rural community she visits. In *The Color Purple*, Walker presents her female characters as capable of breaking the bonds of oppression and defining themselves in all human and non-human elements of the universe. The
lessons they learn about the need for balance between the flesh and the spirit help them to redefine themselves.

The novel *Temple of My Familiar* is a myth that is stretched to accommodate history. Walker also recognized the healing power of forgiveness that promises that there will be a final return at the end. In her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker weaves multiple polemic issues into a mythopoetic framework. A primitive ritual is rendered in a post modern dialect. Keeping a tribal rite in the foreground, Walker’s narrative makes constant shifting to the past and present, linking together multiple forms of oppression resulting from Sexism, Racism, and Patriarchal, Religious, Colonial and Cultural Imperialism. There is an unusual blending of the old and the new, the primitive and the modern, the savage and the civilized, tradition and science. In the course of telling Tashi’s story, Walker transports us to a primitive world of ritual, dreams and folklore. She employs these archetypes to tell the tale of suffering, especially because Tashi’s tradition considers it a taboo to speak of women’s sufferings. The archetypal narrations adjust and readjust the position of these signs to form a spectrum of meanings.

Walker believes in the unifying spirit of nature that runs through the whole cosmos. The Termite Hill, The Fertility Dolls, The Flag, The Banner with the words “Resistance is the Secret of Joy” (*PSJ* 281) are all signs which Walker employs to visualize the hope that people as a whole will survive for the liberation of the planet.
Like Morrison, Walker too sees folk magic as art and fiction, as a form of conjuring. Through their fiction, they challenge the authenticity and accuracy of an American history that failed to record their voices. They have become metaphorical conjure women who make it possible for their readers and for each other to recognize their common literary ancestors—gardeners, quilt-makers, grand-mothers and root-workers. Chapter 4 of the present study “Reclaiming the Ancient Power” is an attempt to elaborate how Morrison and Walker use folk material to explore and define human relationships. The women in Tar Baby and Meridian make apparent that when the effects of racism and sexism can be identified and acknowledged, then forgiveness and hope are possible. The final chapter “Conclusion” winds up the discussion by pointing out how the fiction of Morrison and Walker can be used as catalysts for cultural and social changes.

Story telling is the primary folk process in the fictional world of Morrison and Walker. A close reading of the texts of Morrison and Walker highlight how a society has answered basic questions about the world and the individual’s place in it. A folk aesthetic gives meaning and structure to their works and a mythic impulse conveys their ability to depict people and values that the dominant American culture has traditionally neglected.