CHAPTER V

THE DERIVATION OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS:
THE AESTHETICS OF AFRO-AMERICAN
FOLKLORE, MYTHS AND BLUES

The Afro-Americans, lacking a written literary tradition and formal education until recently, have always been considered as entirely dependent on the white culture and society. But, recent research has proved that a rich and diverse Black culture existed even under slavery and it has developed and diffused since emancipation. As Lawrence W. Levin shows in his book, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, the Afro-Americans have possessed a vibrant oral culture, which has been handed down from one generation to the other. "Derived clearly from its African roots, this oral culture existed in the music of spirituals, gospel songs, work songs and the blues, in folk tales and in the creation of folk heroes like, legendary John Henry and the prize fighter Joe Louis; in a ribald, self depreciating brand of humour that was also satirical and biting in its exposure of the American racial system." \(^1\) They manifest the individual and group reactions of the Black community to the absurdities of life in America.

The study of Black folklore also reveals certain false notions about their acculturation: that the Blacks yearned hungrily and unhesitatingly to adopt the culture of the majority Whites and that the process was taking place progressively and irreversibly. From the first African capture, through the years of slavery and into the present century, the "Black Americans kept alive

important strands of African consciousness and verbal art in their humour
songs, dance, speech, tales, games, folk beliefs and aphorisms." They were
able to do this mainly because many of these culture patterns became
associated in the white mind with "negro" inferiority or at least peculiar
"negro" traits. In some areas there were cultural parallels between the
African and European or Euro-American patterns; thus paving the way for
some sort of syncretism between them. Cultural diffusion between Whites
and Blacks did occur, though the Blacks were not always the sole
beneficiaries as was often made out.

Black relationship to the larger culture was quite complex and multi-
dimensional. Blacks had, like other ethnic groups, "a deep ambivalence
concerning the degree to which they desired to enter the mainstream of white
American culture because they shared with these groups a strong urge, which
continually drew them back to the central aspects of their tradition even as
they were surging outward into the larger society." Whenever the Blacks
faced the threat of whole layers of tradition becoming wiped out due to
increased opportunities and mobility, they also brought forth manifestations
of significant cultural revitalization. Thus the process of acculturation was
mainly ambivalent.

Black verbal art as stated by Ellison is more than a sum of its
brutalization. The historical use of folklore, myth and legend in the literature
of a people recaptures their joys and pains, reveals the world view and vision,
the attitudes and manners towards each other and the mechanism adopted to
guard their values and maintain their sense of self worth. Ralph Ellison
clearly observes: "Everybody wants to tell us what a negro is... But, if you

\[2\] Ibid., p.444.
\[3\] Ibid., pp. 444 - 445.
would tell me who I am, at least, take the trouble to discover what I have been."⁴ Tracing the instances of Afro-American folk thought and the haunting appeal of the blues and Jazz in the novels under study would give us a picture of the Afro-American’s past and its impact on the present, and consequently on the Black self-concept. As Ellison remarks, “Great literature is erected upon this humble base of folk forms.”⁵

1. The Legacy of the Folk

Although it is true that Africans who were brought to the New World were inevitably influenced by the tales they found there, it is found that generally Afro-American slaves did not borrow indiscriminately from the Whites among whom they lived. In the place that slave tales occupied in their lives, the meaning slaves derived from them and the ways in which slaves used them culturally and physically, slave tales bear closest resemblance’s with their African past. Regardless of where the tales originated the slaves quickly adopted them; made them their own. The most effective single force in making the slave tales popular was the work of Joel Chandler Harris — *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (1880). Although Harris asserted that his work embodied everything of importance in the oral literature of the “negroes” of the South, critics have discovered that his tales give the faulty impression that slave tales comprise almost exclusively the adventures of Brer Rabbit. These tales, however, through the medium of the animal trickster demonstrate successfully the main feature of the consciousness of the antebellum slaves, the victory of the weak over the strong.

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Slave tales for the most part were devoid of cosmological myths giving factual accounts of all natural and divine phenomena. Although they embodied a historical dimension they did not contain the intricate genealogies and historical narrative patterns common to the African oral tradition. Africans, both who were forced into slavery in America and those who remained behind in a colonized state were subjected to the same European racial myths and reacted in the same manner, transforming them to suit their peculiar circumstances. While some of the tales reveal a detailed knowledge of the customs, religion and food, most of them shifted to stories of capture, the middle passage and slavery, as far as the Afro-Americans are concerned.

African slaves were often associated with conjuring and magical power as exemplified in the frequently told stories of slaves who put up with the treatment meted out to them by Whites in America as long as they could, and then simply rose up and flew back to Africa. In some versions of the tales these African-born slaves delayed their escape until they could teach their friends and relatives the power of flight as well.

Self preservation is the prime motive in the animal trickster tales. The simplest form of the most common among these is that of Brer Rabbit. Knowing Rabbit’s curiosity and vanity, Wolf constructs a Tar Baby and leaves it by the side of the road. As expected, Rabbit is fascinated by the stranger and tries to draw its attention. But, when the Tar Baby fails to respond to his friendly overtures he is infuriated. Brer Rabbit strikes at Tar Baby with his hand, kicks with his feet and butts his head and gets thoroughly enmeshed. But, Brer Rabbit is cleverer and has a more profound knowledge of his enemies. Understanding that wolf will do exactly what he thinks his victim least desires he convinces wolf that what he most dreads is being
thrown into the briar patch, which is the worst way to be killed. Wolf promptly throws him into the briar patch, allowing Rabbit to escape.

The situation is repeated in many tales where the strong attempt to trap the weak but are outwitted by their superior wits and wisdom. Mere escape, however does not prove to be victory enough. In a significant number of tales the weak learn the brutal ways of the more powerful. Fox, taking advantage of Pig’s sympathetic nature gains entrance to his house during a storm by pleading that he is freezing to death. After warming himself by the fire and seeing a pot of peas boiling he begins to sing:

Fox and peas are very good,
But pig and peas are better.\(^6\)

Though frightened at first, Pig soon recovers his wits and pretends to hear a pack of hounds; helps Fox hide in a meal barrel and pours the peas in, scalding Fox to death. He then chants:

Pigs and peas are very good,
But fox and peas are better.\(^7\)

Thus in tale after tale the trickster proves to be as merciless as his stronger opponent.

These animals are all thoroughly humanized and their needs include all the prizes human beings strive for — wealth, success, prestige, honour, sexual prowess. But it is the human trickster stories that are more conscious and realistic than the animal tales. The human trickster, in keeping with reality does not win as big a victory or become as brutalized as the animal trickster. The human trickster would outwit his master over and over again,

\(^6\) Levin Lawrence, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, op. cit., p.107.
\(^7\) Ibid.
but his main satisfaction is in making the master look foolish exposing the myth of white omniscience and omnipotence. They describe patterns of behaviour, which with slight modification could be adopted into the slave’s life. They serve to channelize the bond-man’s discontent, reduce their anxieties and anger, and some of the slave masters actually used to encourage these tales and songs, realizing their cathartic effect. But, the slave tales also encourage trickstery and guile, breed contempt for the powerful and show ways to preserve the wisdom and wit of the weaker men.

Apart from the tales, slaves also had access to religious songs or spirituals. In spite of the difference in tone and spirit, the spirituals like the folktales also emphasise the triumph of the weak and humble over the evil and powerful. The spirituals also stress that no force however strong, could remain powerful forever. Spirituals have a tendency to regard man, beasts, spirits, and even inanimate things as a natural part of the order of things. Thus folk tales and slave spirituals “were not separate expressions of diametrically opposite attitudes, but parts of a continuum, in which slaves gave conscious and unconscious voice to a relatively well integrated and consistent world view.”

The slave songs did not only create a sacred universe which promised change, allowed the slaves to relive the victories of the past and drew them into a rich future, where the justice and hope experienced before, would exist again, but also made them understand the world as it operated in the present. The universe held promise and hope, but it was also dominated by malevolence, injustice, arbitrariness and paradox, which had to be dealt with here and now. The tales allowed the slaves to do this by identifying the forces that shaped their lives and by giving prescriptions for overcoming

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8 Lawrence W. Levin, op. cit., p. 133
them. Aesthetically, slaves derived great pleasure from all forms of their folk culture. Functionally these different forms of expression operated in diverse ways to serve distinct needs. These slave tales and spirituals contributed much to the formation of Black consciousness.

2. The Rising Beat of the Blues

During slavery, it was the religious songs and folk tales that were popular, but after emancipation when the Afro-Americans were thrust into the larger world, their experiences were expressed in more explicitly worldly terms. The aesthetic forms of the spirituals and folk tales did not altogether disappear, but they were reshaped by the new imperatives. Basic changes took place not only in the content, but in their very structure.

After world war I the images surrounding Black music began to change. The work-prayer context seemed to give way to the leisure setting. The Black workers, singing and praying together as a group were replaced by the image of an isolated individual, with a guitar. The figure of the blues singer, giving vent to his or her own emotions without the necessity of an audience, singing for the song’s sake only, without a shred of the Protestant ethos or the work ethic, supplying a rationale for the song, rose to eclipse the older and more familiar nineteenth century figures. Early examples of the blues existed in the last half of the nineteenth century or possibly even during slavery but it was in the twentieth century that it became one of the dominant forms of Black songs.

The rise of the blues did not call for the invention of wholly new musical forms. It evolved out of the tradition of Black spirituals and worksongs. What emerged was not only new types of music, but new forms
of self concept. The blues were the most highly personalised forms of music. Some claimed that it was the first almost completely personalised music that Afro-Americans developed. Hence, the infusion of blues in the works of the twentieth century writers is a manifestation of the individuality and higher concept of the self of Afro-Americans. In this respect the blues are nearer to the Twentieth century American ethos of giving importance to individual identity. It works at two levels — contributing to enrich the consciousness of the Afro-American and at the same time the mainstream American culture.

The blues thus become the dominant musical form among the Afro-Americans, expressing the consciousness, the attitudes and experiences of the majority of them. Ellison’s definition of the blues is that it “is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experiences alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged 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.”

The tonality of the blues comes from an indeterminacy in several crucial intervals of the scale, the third, fifth or seventh degrees which are the so-called blues-notes. But, the blues sound more complicated than any of these notations suggest, mainly because it depends on highly complex vocal effects and extensive ornamentation. Some of the sources of these effects are African but the blues notes themselves don’t seem to have African sources. Although the blues is usually described as three lines in a twelve bar frame work, there is the possibility of an unlimited number of variations.

The blues generally suggest sadness, an awareness of trouble or a
general lament, and the meaning of the word goes back to its usage in
Elizabethan poetry. The poetry of the blues' imagery reveals the ability of
the folks to create impressive imagery of sorrow and trouble. As quoted
before, Ellison points out that the blues do not skirt the painful facts of
human experience, but work through them to an artistic transcendence. It is
not what is called the power of positive thinking but a transformation of
catastrophe through the agency of art.

Just as the blues is a stage forward from earlier Black musical
expression, work-songs and spirituals, the jazz in the United States is a step
forward from the blues. Jazz provides one with a new sense of time. It
should not be merely the rhythm of a military march in which everyone must
be in step for despite its regular pulsating beat there is always the off beat or
off beats which are characteristic of jazz style. The drummer who establishes
the fundamental beat will be valued more if he pushes it a bit, and the
instruments will take their solos either slightly behind or ahead of the other
musicians. The ultimate source of this is in Black folk tradition where the
leader and chorus patterns are strong but overlapping of the relationship
between the two is a standard device. Instead of a mechanical rhythm, what
jazz demands is an awareness of the nodes, those moments within the heart of
pulsation which are static or which provide the occasion for a leap to another
rhythmic awareness.

Jazz was clearly associated with a level of culture outside the stream
of middle class white morality and rooted in the attitudes and expressions of
the “negro.” For the writers of the twentieth century, jazz carried strong
connotations and was associated with stereotypes of the Black as fantastically
virile and primitively effective in his sexual life. Attempts to pinpoint the
etymology of the word did not prove very successful but writers discover a primary use of jazz, sometimes spelt Jass as a verb meaning to fornicate. In any case, jazz reminds the Whites of the “negro” himself in a form of sentimental primitivism. Many consider it as a way of making some contact with the jungle madness which its beat suggests.

The blues and jazz are fashionable throughout America endowing the Afro-American with a new identity. Its strange mixture and repetitive patterns of sweetness and sorrow enabled the Afro-American to express the burden of his sufferings with all its accompanying emotions in a rather attractive and compelling manner. The ecstasy and the agony could never have been so tellingly revealed by mere words. The Afro-American thus celebrates his individuality by giving went to the collective unconscious of his race and makes a universal, haunting appeal. Its strong and powerful beat boosts his morale and self-confidence. It has enhanced the self image of the Afro-American giving him a sense of pride because the jazz and the blues are their own, something for which they feel a sense of ownership as it is valued outside their community. The jazz makes for the recognition of his racial worth by the mainstream Whites, even across the continent.

3. Folklore: An Index

The more conscious a person is of his personal, cultural, and national history, the freer he becomes and the more capable of developing an independent self-concept. According to Ellison, folklore is not a body of quaint folksy items associated with a particular level of society or with a particular era. It is a dynamic, current process of speaking and signing in certain circumstances. Afro-American folklore—sermons, tales, games, dozens, blues and spirituals—is a rich source for the writer through which
their life and culture are preserved and reflected. More than written literature, it is folklore that serves the twin functions of art — to delight and to teach. Ellison argues that folklore accounts to a large extent for the Black American’s self-awareness and endurance. It is the index to the Black American’s knowledge of self.

The writers themselves are aware of the life giving quality of folklore, its power in shaping the culture of a race, and its impact on the belief systems of a race. Many have exploited the potentials of folklore in their literary pieces. They have their own views on the subject. Ralph Ellison has become almost an ideal as far as this is concerned. As a young writer Ellison quickly became dissatisfied with narratives in which characters struggled to survive the merciless American environment and are overcome by impersonal forces. His desire was to capture the richness and variety of Black-American life as well as to describe men and women, who by the force of their will are able to endure. Shifting from the traditional naturalistic style of fiction he employed modern techniques of surrealism, multiple perspective, symbolism and stream of consciousness to focus his protagonists search for identity in a tempestuous world. Yet, what makes Ellison’s work most distinct is the infusion of Black American folklore.

Influenced by modern poets like T. S Eliot, Ellison introduced more and more folklore into his stories giving them great accessibility, since they are at once particular and universal. In Ellison’s fiction, “folklore stylized and transformed by modernist techniques, gives special resonance and power to his language as it frees his characters to fly towards the moon, dive unmarked into the briar patch or become invisible and sail through the air.
unseen. In his use of folklore, the vernacular and symbolist tradition in American literature, come together. Ellison connects the main theme of the quest for identity to that of the history and the folklore of the Afro-Americans. In several of his short stories and in *Invisible Man* the protagonists are freed of their alienation and blindness with the unlocking of the past.

Ellison's artistic views are always complex and ambiguous. He felt that since the Blacks were at the bottom of the American social hierarchy they were freer than most others. He was also the first to point out that much that the world knows as uniquely American with regard to languages, music and dance was created by Black slaves and their offspring. He also observed that Black culture is a product of the cultural blending of America and Africa. In Ellison's fiction there are portraits of such diverse, strong and affirming Black characters as Jefferson, Mary Rambo, Trueblod and Hickman. Characters may be cheated, tricked, left for dead, beaten and even lynched. But the powerful figures are conscious of their roots as a sustaining force, managing to survive or to preserve themselves with heroism and high style. This insistence on the heroic impulse in Black life has had a lasting impact on many younger writer like Al Young, Ishmael, Reed, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker.

4. *Brer Rabbit and Tar Baby*

In his *Invisible Man* Ellison makes ample use of folklore. By using the diverse folk characters of trickster heroes Ellison is able to convey that Black Americans have an extra-ordinary, broad heritage that spreads beyond political and social boundaries. The Invisible Man himself is made to play

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the roles of the thick-headed Brer Bear stumbling into the traps set by Brer Rabbit, in this case the trap by Bledsoe, Norton, Emerson, Brockway, and Jack and escaping out of one trap to another.

The novel is replete with verbal games. Critics have noted that the snappy patter of the blueprint carrier who claims to be Peter Wheatstraw, the Devil’s son-in-law “is framed in the form of an American boast, a folk form as old as the roaring of such ring-tailed folk heroes as Boone Crockett and Mike Fink: half-alligator, half-bulldog, half-rattlesnake.”11 They have also paid some attention to Ellison’s use of the “dozens” and “signifying” games of verbal competition in which one’s opponent is associated with polished insults. Ellison uses a Mother Goose rhyme, “who killed cock Robin” transforming it into a mock dirge “they picked poor Robin Clean.”12

In the *Invisible Man* the protagonist’s movement from innocence to experience, from ignorance to knowledge is spurred by folk forms. It is this touch with folklore that enables him to keep his identity intact. After an explosion in the factory, where he worked the protagonist gained consciousness in a hospital. They had tied him up like Brer Rabbit. And when he could not identify himself, the hospital authorities started asking him who he was and what his mother’s name was. When he fails to respond they go on questioning who Buckeye the Rabbit and Brer Rabbit were. Gradually the folk tales he had heard in childhood and their animal characters surface in his mind. Inspite of the confusion and the callous behaviour of the doctor he is able to sustain himself and also to escape from the hospital.

In time the “Invisible Man” sees that without his folk tradition and his

11 Ibid., p. 79
mother wit-spielng etc., he would really have been invisible, a machine rolling here and there in social space. Symbolically, the novel involves a series of elaborate greenhorn's initiations that test and prepare the "Invisible Man." He is sent on a fool's errand, by white men, whose design was to keep the nigger boy running. Thus, he moves from the school in south to the College, later looking for a job. He then joins the brotherhood from which he again escapes to participate in a riot.

Thus the novel's central metaphor of running is itself influenced by patterns from Black American folklore. The way the "Invisible Man" keeps running is reminiscent of various folklores. One step ahead of destruction, the "Invisible Man" scampers like a rabbit from scene to scene. Probably, one source of this running motif is the Black folk rhyme also adopted by white minstrels in Black suppression known as "Run, Nigger, Run." In one version the Black "nigger" is exhorted to run fast, because the Patter-rollers were chasing. The rhyme ends by laughing at both the patroller and the Black men. Ellison elaborates on the running motif by making a joke of the "Invisible Man's" flight as he was pursued by patrollers of a different sort; by Bledsoe, Norton, Brockway, Wrestrum and Jack, who like a slave patrol, threaten his freedom at every turn.

Another folk character from slavery days found in Invisible Man is Brer Dog. In Afro-American folklore the dog is an enigmatic and deceptive fellow, who is usually outdone by the rabbit. As in the novel, in folklore the dog earnestly pledges to be the rabbit's friend, but the careful rabbit is never convinced. Throughout the novel the dog is a threatening figure who, however, can be overcome. Brother Trap relates how he was guarded on the

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13 Robert G.O' Meally, The Craft of Ralph Ellison, op. cit., p.81
chain gang, (prisoners chained together and made to do hard labour) by a team of dogs, but gradually, he makes friends with them and escapes.

The folk character is found in the North too. Peter Wheatstraw singing “Feet like a monkey Blues” on the street in Harlem talks about his woman with legs “like a mad bulldog.” The Harlem dog is also part of the rituals of recognition between Black people specially from the south. Meeting the “Invisible Man” on the street and guessing that he was from the south the Black man asked: “What I want to know, is you got the dog.” The hero pretending middle class respectability at first does not understand, but Wheatstraw persists. “Who got the damn dog? Now I know you from down, home, how come you trying to act like you never heard that before” and finally, when the “Invisible Man” remembers his lines and says, “No, not this morning,” a grin spreads over Wheatstraw’s face. Then discoursing, on Brer Bear, Wheatstraw describes the way things are in Harlem. He says that may be, it was the other way around. “May be, he got holt of you, May be”. The protagonist says “if he is, you lucky, it just a dog-cause, man, I tell you I believe its a bear that got holt to me ...Hell yes! The bear. Caint you see these patches where he’s been clawing at my behind.” He goes on to describe Harlems as a bear’s den or a mad dog’s house, but naturally, since he was the Devils son-in-law he knew that he could get by as long as he has “a little shit, grit and mother wit.” Having remained conscious of his southern folk roots he is well prepared for Harlem’s bears or dogs and like Brer Rabbit he can escape from all traps one way or the other.

Brother Jack whom at the end of the novel, the “Invisible Man” calls “Marse Jack” is also another dog of the Afro-American folklore. Accordingly

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Jack the dog seems to be peaceful and trustworthy but is not. "The Invisible Man" had early sensed that Brother Jack was "in some ways... like a toy bull terrier". This is a warning submerged in folklore, that the protagonist does not comprehend until he recognizes his conversation with the man from the south in his mother wit.

The tale of the Brer Rabbit and Tar Baby forms the nucleus of Morrison's novel, *Tar Baby*. Son is the Brer Rabbit in the farmer's patch, Valerin's big house, Larbre de la Croix. Jadine, the dressed up Tar Baby, tries to trap the Rabbit. She is a green eyed Afro-American woman of fair complexion, high fashion model, painter, actress, graduate of the Sorbonne. Son is a Black Floridan, who had jumped ship and hid in Larbre de la Croix, Valerin's house, looking for food. Valerin lets Son stay. Jadine and Son become lovers and take off for New York city. But, after a visit to Eloie, Son's home town, Jadine leaves Son to return to her white lover in New York.

About the Tar Baby folktale Morrison remarks:

It was a rather complicated story with a happy ending about the triumph of cunning over law, of wit over authority, of weakness over power. Its innocence and reassurance not withstanding it worried me. Why did the extra ordinary solution the farmer came up with to trap the rabbit involve tar."  

Like Ellison, Toni Morrison, also projects the meaning of blackness and the role of Black oral tradition in her novels.

The stories in *Tar Baby* are open to multiple interpretations which can

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be done using the technique of deconstruction. Many critics have considered Jadine, the heroine as the *Tar Baby*. Jadine just wanted to be herself and was uncomfortable at the way her aunt, Ondine, kept alluding to racial characteristics. Of the two views of the Briar patch, the farmer’s and the Rabbit’s which one was correct and should be adopted by her? If Jadine was the Tar Baby, the sophisticated beauty who wanted to trap Son, with her dreams of gold and honey-coloured silk so is the beautiful African woman in Paris with skin like tar wearing a yellow dress and carrying three white eggs. There seems to be ample evidence in the text to suggest she is the Tar Baby. The woman seemed to personify something crucial and valuable about women and the Black tradition; who by spitting an arrow of saliva in Jadine’s direction, mocks her achievements and success in career somewhat the way “Invisible Man’s” grandfather spoils his supposed successes. This woman haunts Jadine’s dreams and appears along with the other women of Eloet, including Jadine’s mother and Ondine, point their breasts accusingly at the daughter who has gone wayward. Perhaps, Jadine was not really a strong enough Tar Baby, because she could not even hold on to one man Son, let alone a tradition. Deconstructing earlier readings Son himself could be considered the Tar Baby. Son seems to be a Tar Baby himself, a trickster of many names, a piano player and a folktale spinner. His ambitions like Jadine’s are not about securing high place in big cities. Things like cleaning a tub of fresh fish or minding the hot pies in the basement of a church are sacred to him. Son too tries to instil his dreams of yellow houses with white doors which women opened and invited everybody inside, into Jadine, He tries to breathe into her the smell of tar, its glow and adhesive nature. Hence Son whom Jadine calls a “big old country baby” is the silent figure of tar hoping to capture the world traveller and take her home to his blackness. Thus, Morrison plays on the Tar Baby story constructing various
versions with the purpose of pointing to multiple possibilities in meaning and to facilitate an understanding of the complexity of the Tar Baby folktale.

Through their writing Black women writers like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison eloquently express their claims to a legacy that is distinctly theirs; affirming their authority as participants, interpreters and perpetuators. As writers for the future they insist on their responsibility to build a heritage to be passed on to the new generations. “The search for legacy often presented as a ceremonial appropriation that follows a ritualistic pattern; dealt within remarkably different ways by Alice Walker (In search of our Mothers’ Gardens) or Audre Lorde (Sister Outside) who set the principles for an enquiry into the dialectics of black women in the essay or in a fictional work by Toni Morrison (Song of Solomon), celebrates narrative and parables that dramatise an archetypal journey across ancestral territory.”

Walker’s message is that daughters “in an attempt to build intricate emotional and artistic bonds and definite lineage” must know their mother’s names, their words, actions and lives. Her own attempt has been to recollect and reconstruct forgotten lines, if necessary, bone by bone and image by image. This attempt is found in Morrison’s Song of Solomon, also, to bring back the past from oblivion and neglect. Walker’s visit to her mother’s garden is itself a pilgrimage filled with “filial love.” “In search of my mother’s garden, I found my own,” she says. She creates her own garden, all types of symbolic properties, ancient spirits, images of her heritage and her identity as a Black and as a woman. She confirms that those who wish to

17 Alice Walker, In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens, op.cit., p.276.
18 Ibid. p.243.
record legacy must move away from the sociological forms in their writings. They must shift from an image of the Black women as mere victims to a greater concern for the ambiguities, the dilemmas and contradictions. Like Ellison, Walker and Morrison too construe folklore and the legacy of that Black past as a key to open a future of self-affirmation.

Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* is the best example for a study of the paradoxes, ironies and complexities of such a quest, through one’s ancestral heritage presented as a succession of riddles, often folk tales or fables, that must be understood, acknowledged and overcome. Morrison excels in the use of myth and folklore, in the fusion of fact and fantasy. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison first establishes a cast of possible characters in a Midwestern town. “Time, however, at a certain point is suspended altogether and in a movement reminiscent of the world of Jack and the Beanstalk, the story slips beneath the bottomline of Macon Dead’s property accounts, into the mythological realm of the author’s proper concern.”19 In the launching of the search for gold, Milkman the hero achieves a sense of Black folklore, just as in *Invisible Man*, the protagonist makes his journey from rural South to the urban North. Morrison reverses the age old escape route and sends her hero by stages back into a heritage common to practically all Blacks in America, the rural south of fable and legend.

In *Song of Solomon*, each story recreates a particular patch of the past, but also reveals a new mystery and then calls for another story. The accumulation of stories and the call and response pattern, gradually merge into a single story of the hero’s ancestry. The hero Milkman is unimaginative, insensitive, a reluctant confidant and a poor listener who does not pay

attention to words, asks the wrong questions and comes to wrong conclusions. He is ill-equipped for the quest, for the enquiry into a heritage that is cumbersome to him. Confused by many questions asked by those who confide their secrets to him, and by the revelations that seem at first to bear no meaning to him, he blunders on. Yet, each becomes a part of a whole and has to be put together like a quilt. By entrusting her own narrative to many voices, Morrison acknowledges the debt that any Black writer has to the oral tradition. Through the narration of these stories, Morrison creates both history and myth.

The stories in *Song of Solomon* are about the ceremonies of naming, births and deaths. Naming as a ritual is important to Black people. Blacks used to be given patronyms from the deceased Whites. The dead family had thus been misnamed as a result of some white official’s ignorance. First names were given by illiterate fathers, who took a fancy to the shape of a letter or to a sound. Thus, the names of places and people are often, jokes, disguises, reminiscent of yearnings, gestures, flaws, mistakes or weakness, the full meaning of which can be understood only when the whole story is told. *Song of Solomon* is full of such words — Song, Solomon, Shalimar, Sugarman and part of Milkman’s task is to trace the history of each name and thus to unveil the one name that is real, the ancestor’s name — Solomon.

As his name itself indicates, Milkman was the child who was breast fed too long. The ludicrous nickname also made Milkman an improbable perpetuator of his father’s legacy. However, it sets him free from his family name of Dead. He wavers between the desires of his father to build a world based on owning things, which would ultimately lead to a dead end and the invitation of the women, especially his aunt’s to follow a path, that would lead him to a journey back to his ancestry. His aunt’s name Pilate is
appropriate to her because, she was a strange woman, born without a novel, living in the outskirts of the city, a communal world rooted in ancient lore. With her reverence for the legacy and with her boldness, she becomes Milkman’s pilot the driving force, who initiates him into the mysteries of life and death and of blackness. “You think dark is just one color, but it ain’t... There are five or six kinds of black. Some silky, some woolly...” Guitar, the initiator who brings Milkman to Pilate’s house is the experienced trickster figure of the folklore. Cunning and violent, he is both Milkman’s friend and adversary. He can either save Milkman’s life or take it. At the end, in the final leap Milkman wheels into his friend’s arm leaving the conclusion ambiguous. He either surrenders to or frees himself from Guitar’s violence and vengeance. The act can be considered an act of commitment, of communion with his ancestor, who could fly. Milkman’s and Pilate’s stories are now ready to become legends for a new story to be told about and passed from generation to generation. The strength and richness of the oral tradition is the legacy that the Blacks have inherited. And it is this legacy that Morrison honours in this novel.

5. Myth, Legend and Ritual

Ellison’s skilful fusion of the Afro-American folk tradition and the famous myth of Oedipus can be seen in the Jim Trueblood episode of Invisible Man. Jim Trueblood is a Black sharecropper and a pariah to the nearby Black college community. He is a hard working family man and a spinner of yarns plus a singer of spirituals and blues. As a link with their slave past, he was tolerated by the aspiring middle class college community, who tried to help him to become respectable. He is more symbolic and legendary than realistic as a folk character.

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Norton, the white trustee of the College, symbolic culture bearer of the American tradition learns that the sharecropper Trueblood is the father of both his expectant wife’s and daughter’s children. Norton becomes very anxious to hear the details of the horrible tale. The dialogue between the two is a brilliant juxtaposition of the puritan sensibility of Norton and the folk sensibility of Trueblood. But, despite Norton’s apparent horror at Trueblood’s narration of how he impregnated his daughter, one gets the impression that Norton too shares the crime. The indecent ecstasy, with which he describes his daughter, who died while accompanying him on a world tour signifies the Oedipal level on which he unconsciously identifies with Trueblood. The impression is further re-inforced when after listening to Trueblood’s tale he takes a hundred dollar bill out of his wallet containing the picture of his daughter and gives it to the sharecropper. Like many epic characters Trueblood’s name is symbolic. Trueblood suggests being true to one’s blood and incest is one way of being true to one’s blood relatives. It is the social taboos and laws of community which force individuals to suppress and sublimate such basic drives and dreams. On this mythic level, then, perhaps Trueblood and Norton despite their racial and cultural differences are sharers in the human condition. Like Oedipus, who physically blinds himself and becomes a wanderer to atone for his guilt, Norton’s guilt blinds him to the humanity of Blacks. Trueblood turns to the blues tradition for vision and strength to put things in their proper perspective.

Throughout the novel, Ellison makes use of the ambiguity and paradox of social rituals and symbols to satirise the modern American myths of racial and cultural purity. In the Liberty Paint Company, where the protagonist is employed as a Union Scab, the advertisement is “Keep America pure, with liberty paints.” The Company takes pride in making the purest white paint in the nation, optic white. But, the protagonist discovers that this paint is
actually made by mixing ten drops of black concentrate with white paint. That was his job. "The irony of his unacknowledged role in the development of American industrial capitalism and culture is reinforced when buckets of paints that he ruins with concentrate remover and mischievously added drops of black graduate are declared optic white"21 eventhough to him they appear to have a tinge of grey. The Company slogan “if it’s optic white, it’s the right white,” created by the Black Lucius Brockway also brings out his unconscious compliance with the white myth. “If you are white, you are right”. The novel as such is a modern Odyssey of a nameless Black man in America; symbolically retracing the pattern of his people’s collective Odyssey from slavery to freedom bringing out the relationship between the two cultures in the growth of the nation.

Baldwin effectively makes use of a mixture of biblical metaphor, folk images and colloquialism in his novels to bring out the theme of alienation and estrangement in Black-White relations and the hypocrisies of the Pentecostal church. The smug elders of the ministry prey on the ignorance of the Black people and their blind faith in the slave inherited Christian faith about their suffering and deliverance. In Go Tell It on the Mountain Gabriel, since he was baptised at a camp meeting at twelve years of age, had been looked upon by his mother as a male child destined for the church. To keep Gabriel, on the narrow path of righteousness, his mother would pray for him after every whipping she gave him. But Gabriel enjoyed himself breaking every taboo of the church from dancing and card playing, to gambling and whoring. Finally, gripped by the fear of hell he became a preacher. Gabriel, whose namesake in the Old Testament is the interpreter of visions and prophecies, has a dream. He interprets it to mean that he should marry

Deborah and that he would have a son, who would work until the day of the Second Coming to bring about his Father's Kingdom. The analogue of God's promise to Abraham and David gives a mythic dimension to Gabriel's vision and the relationship with his son.

In the Old Testament, both Abraham and David, like Gabriel, were involved in bastardy and adultery. Abraham had a son, Ishmael, by Hagar, bondwoman to his wife, Sarah. David has a son, Solomon, by Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. Baldwin considers Ishmael and Absalom, David's legitimate son by Maacah, as symbol of the rebellious outcast. Both Ishmael and Absalom were disinherited and alienated by their father. Similarly, Gabriel disowns Royal, his illegitimate son by Esther. Gabriel steals money from his wife and gives it to Esther, who then goes to Chicago to have her son. She dies and her son is brought back home. Although Gabriel hears of or sees his son, Royal, everyday, he does not acknowledge him. It is only after news of Royal's death in a Chicago bar room reaches him, that Gabriel confesses his guilt to his wife Deborah. After Deborah's death Gabriel marries Elizabeth and receives her illegal son John, as a sign from God. Afterwards, he has a son whom he calls Roy. He then estranges both his step-son, John, as well as his natural son, Roy. Gabriel feels great bitterness, when John receives the call of Jesus and is saved. He feels that neither of his sons is there on the threshing floor. "only the son of the bondwoman stood, where the rightful heir should stand."^{22}

John's conversion is the central event of the novel. Baldwin examines the lives of Florence, Gabriel, Esther and Elizabeth, and brings out their failures in achieving self-identity and love in order to emphasize the

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importance of John's trial and his success. John's quest for self-knowledge can be compared to that of a mythological hero's journey for self-discovery. True to mythological pattern John embarks on a quest for his father — his biological father as well as God, the supreme father. This quest becomes finally a quest for himself, and his self knowledge bestows on him the power to help his fellows. John's descent into the spiritual darkness and unconscious prior to his conversion is reminiscent of mythic "symbol of the seed dying to bring forth life along with the implicit theme of resurrection."\textsuperscript{23}

Rites and rituals occupy an important place in these novels as the protagonist journeys towards a satisfying concept of self. Morrison's \textit{The Bluest Eye} is about the female initiation rites. \textit{Invisible Man} and \textit{Song of Solomon} are a series of rites and rituals as the heroes attain manhood by getting reconciled with their traditions. The simple urban ritual of buying a baked yam from a street vendor and eating it with delight in public gives the hero of \textit{Invisible Man}, a new sense of freedom and confidence in himself. He joyously affirms the symbolic nurturing of his soul and declares that they are his birthmark. "1 yam what I yam"\textsuperscript{24}

In \textit{Go Tell it on the Mountain}, Baldwin describes John's conversion as an experience necessary for his development as a young adult. His treatment of John's passing through the ritual of being saved on the threshing floor is ironical, but it is through this initiation that the alienated, guilt-ridden John comes to feel himself part of the community, finds a sense of autonomous self-identity and gathers the strength to confront his father's hatred with hope and love.

\textsuperscript{23} Joseph Campbell, \textit{The Power of Myth} (New York: Double day, 1988), p. XVII.
\textsuperscript{24} Ralph Ellison, \textit{Invisible Man}, p.231.
Walker's latest novel, Possessing the Secret of Joy is about the ritual of female genital mutilation. In Olinken culture, which forms the setting of the novel, the ritual was practised namely from a desire to limit women's sexuality and increase male pleasure. “without the clitoridectomy and infibulation the woman is imaged as dirty, masculine and whorish....”25 For those troubled by the conflict between traditional and colonial influences, the ritual becomes significant as a means of resisting tribal colonization.

Tashi is a sensitive native African woman, who is aware of the serious threat posed to her people by a rubber manufacturer from England. Tashi engages in the revolutionary activity of embracing traditional tribal rituals, it becomes her way of resisting tribal erasure. She voluntarily agrees to undergo the operation for female circumcision. Throughout the novel, we can perceive example of men and women trying to assert their connection with the race, culture or community and through its framework their own self-hood, by partaking of their particular rites and rituals.

Many critics have found that the sequence of events in The Bluest Eye — “of rape, madness and silence”26 bears close resemblance to the age-old myth of Philomela and Persephone. The story is narrated by Ovid in his Metamorphoses. “Procne leaves her much loved sister, Philomela to join her husband, Tereus in Thrace. After several years Prone convinces Tereus to make a trip to Athens and escort Philomela to Thrace for a visit”27 Arriving

in Thrace, Tereus drags Philomela into a dark wood and rapes her. When Philomela threatens to expose Tereus’ shame, he cuts out her tongue, depriving her of speech. Philomela weaves the tale of her sad fate on to a cloth, which she then sends to Procne. The myth concludes with the transformation of Philomela into a nightingale, forever chirping the name of her rapist, tereu, tereu.

Despite the obvious differences of race, class and context many similarities between the myth and the story of Pecola in Morrison’s The Bluest Eye may be found. For example in various ways the female Pecola suffers violation at various costs by Mr. Yacoboveski, Junior, Boy Boy and friends, Cholly and Soaphead. They don’t actually rape Pecola. Rape occurs later between Cholly and Pecola. Cholly doesn’t carry his victim into foreign territories, like Tereus carrying Philomela into the woods. Pecola’s rape occurs within her own house and this fact increase its horror. Several factors motivate Cholly, but one thought was predominant in his confused brain just before the rape. It was a gesture of Pecola - a scratching of the leg that reminds him of Pauline, or his reaction to Pauline’s gesture and the consequent love-making. Hence, it is his desire to regain an earlier perception of himself as young and carefree - to assert himself using the girl medium. And like Tereus he did not need to cut off her tongue. When after regaining consciousness Pecola tried to tell Mrs. Breedlove what had happened, she did not want to hear or believe. Pecola was thus, forced to become silent. When Cholly raped her for a second time, she did not even attempt to communicate. “In silence this eleven year old girl steps across commonly accepted borders of reason and speech to enter her own personal world of silence and madness.”

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Pecola's self becomes so crazed and fragmented that it conducts conversations with itself. Claudia describes the mutilated Pecola: "Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal grotesquely futile effort to fly, beating the air, a winged but grounded bird."\(^{29}\)

Like Philomela turned to nightingale, the little girl-cum-woman undergoes a transformation resembling a bird without wings. Silent, alone, insane Pecola has no way to escape.

Besides the Philomela myth, the story of Persephone can also be applied to *The Bluest Eye*. The Persephone myth as narrated by Homer begins in spring with gaiety, youthfulness and beauty. "Golden harried Demeter" and "her trim-ankled daughter Persephone"\(^{30}\) were enjoying themselves in a grassy meadow. Morrison also specifies the trim ankles of Pecola, which served as a stimulant to Cholly's desire. Pluto abducts this trim ankled Persephone to the underworld. Demeter’s anger and sorrow makes the world bereft of flowers and fruits. *The Bluest Eye* also begins with such sensual deprivation with the narrator saying that in the fall of nineteen forty-one there were no marigolds. Finally Demeter and Pluto reach a compromise, that is half of the year Persephone resides with her mother, and the flowers grow and the other half with Pluto, when the earth produces no fruit. After Pecola’s rape her friend Claudia and Frieda try to sow the seeds according to the ritualistic norms, but it does not sprout.

Thus it can be seen that archetypal figures, mythical ideas and belief systems of sundry types all compute to the shaping of an individual psyche depending upon the social milieu, the racial background, life situation and

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absence of opportunities in life. These surreptitious elements enter into the inner citadel of the racial consciousness and flourish in the unconscious with disastrous negative results. As a result of this, a healthy self concept becomes a mirage-like illusion distancing itself from the reach of these individuals. At the same time, myths, legends and rituals are like an unavoidable background, the recognition, understanding and affirmation of which is absolutely essential to foreground a clear picture of one’s self for they form an undeniable link to one’s conscious and unconscious past.

6. Black Musical Expression

_Invisible Man_ has been labelled as a blues novel by many critics. In so far as the blues is a lyrical expression of both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer courage and toughness of spirit the tone of _Invisible Man_ is certainly bluesy. In the Prologue, the “Invisible Man” remarks that he would like to listen to five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing “what did I do to be so Black and Blue”\(^{31}\) all at the same time. He thinks that he likes Louis Armstrong, perhaps because he made poetry out of being Invisible. “Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes behind.”\(^{32}\)

The theme of invisibility is “given resonance by the complex connotation of the stock blues phrase, the striking color imagery with its subtle, wry allusion to pain and violence, the ambiguous use of Louis Armstrong as the archetypal Black musician, who has successfully synthesised two cultural traditions and the technical allusion to model

\(^{31}\) Ralph Ellison. _Invisible Man_, p.11.  
\(^{32}\) Ibid.
improvisations in jazz and blues notes." Ellison saw the blues singer and jazz musician as paradigms of the American experience. Both are forms of Afro-American music and achieve their personal identities against the background of tradition. Drawing on the blues tradition of twelve bar stanzas divided into three call and response sections the blues singer achieves his individuality "by an improvisational use of stanzas, stock imaginative phrases, moans, groans, cries and shouts along with idiosyncratic physical movements and gestures." The jazz musician also explores the possibilities of expressing individuality through creative resourcefulness and mastery of traditional conventions. The blues is thus, best suited to express "the complex fate of the hero who must assert his individuality in the midst of chaos and the discordant beat of history, acknowledging the limitations of life, at the same time affirming its infinite possibilities."

Like Louis Armstrong, singing blues and blowing blues trumpet, the Invisible Man also struggles to cope with change after change through the magic of his words and his connection to folk tradition. The language and rhythm of blues music also resounds throughout the novel. Like a blues singer, the "Invisible Man" recounts his story with style, sorrow, irony and a sense of absurdity. Armstrong's blues, improvised just a fraction ahead or behind of the beat seems to express something vital about the "Invisible Man's" sense of timing as an Afro-American. If we delve into the most profound meaning of the blues, we may be put in touch with certain fundamental aspects of Afro-American history and culture. Like the blues, which never brings out any clear-cut solution to the human situation, the novel also ends in irony ambiguity and a little bit of hope.

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
Sometimes, the blues note enters into the action in the novel and increases its mood. After the hero has been dismissed from the College and told to leave his dream campus within two days, he stumbles blankly across the school lawn. The blues tradling in the distance offers him sympathy. "From somewhere across the quiet of the campus, the sound of an old guitar blues plucked from an out-of-tune piano drifted towards me like a lazy, shimmering wave, like the echoed whistle of a lonely train...."\(^{36}\)

The blues provide a cathartic and soothing effect to Jim Trueblood too. After having impregnated his wife and daughter and brought disgrace upon the whole race by his misdeeds, he was shunned by them all. Even after his wife has slashed him in the head, renounced and abandoned him, and marshalled community sentiments against him, he overcomes his own feelings of guilt and bewilderment and is able to continue courageously. As he recalls the situations his words achieve a kind of blues cadence: "I thinks and thinks until I thinks my brain go'n bust, 'bout how I'm guilty and how I ain't guilty. I don't eat, nothin' and I don't drink nothin' and can't sleep at night. Finally, one night, way early in the morning, I looks up and sees the stars and I starts singing...."\(^{37}\) He recounts that he was unable to identify the music but it was some church song he hears, "All I know is I ends up singing' the blues, sings me some blues that night ain't never been sung before and while I am singing them blues I makes up my mind that ain't nobody, but myself and ain't nothing I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen."\(^{38}\) "Somehow the blues provide just the vehicle for coming to terms with the twisted and painful details of Trueblood's situation. By expressing

\(^{36}\) Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man*, p.130.
\(^{37}\) Ibid
\(^{38}\) Ibid., p 63
himself in this "near tragic, near lyric form, he conquers his fearful guilt."^{39}

Like the references to folk tale characters and speech the blues occasionally reminds the hero of his Black folk heritage that he tries to forget in his hot pursuit of middle class prestige and power and his movement from south to north. In New York, as he keeps running from trustee to trustee believing in their benevolence, he hears suddenly Wheatstraw wailing his strange blues. Wheatstraw’s song provides the hero with a clearly comic and absurd vision of the world he lives in. The man seems to be describing a weird looking but good looking and loving woman, who had feet like a monkey, legs like a frog and a mad bull dog. Although the college educated hero in the north finds this blues lyric repulsive and derogative with its references to the southern born Black folk figures of the frog, monkey and bull dog, he also finds it oddly fascinating. “In his own blues-tinged reflections, he senses not only a complex artistry at work in the blues, but a previously unnoticed degree of personal affirmation.”^{40} Wheatstraw wandering about in Harlem, teaches the hero that southern folk experience must not be discarded in the North.

Mary Rambo is another of the folk characters, who runs the rooming-house in Harlem, where the invisible man stays after leaving the factory hospital in a daze. Mary’s name may have been suggested by the Biblical Mary, as well as the Mary of Lonnie Johnson’s blues song which begins: “she is my Mary”^{41} Mary puts the hero, who is weak and worn from the ordeal in the hospital bed. She sings him some blues from his childhood from down

\(^{40}\) Ibid.
\(^{41}\) Quoted in Robert G.O’ Meally, The Craft of Ralph Ellison, p.88.
south to soothe him. She herself is able to face up to her troubles with hope by singing the blues. Mary remains good and helpful throughout. But, the hero soon meets P.B. Rineheart, who is the strutting bad man of many blues, a sort of blues villain. Rineheart is the archetypal trickster a skilful and cunning master of improvisation. Among other sources Rineheart’s name is a rallying cry for mob action at Harvard College and a blues by Jimmy Rushing, which tells Rineheart about how lonesome it is upon Beacon Hill. Baldwin suggests that perhaps, if the hero had stayed in touch with common folk instead of the brotherhood he would have known about such characters or about the American character in general, and of the differences behind realities and appearances — the heart as well as the rind.

The *Invisible Man* ends with another blues by Louis Armstrong. Thinking about the song, the “Invisible Man” decides that he must emerge from his manhole to confront all his experiences, even those previously shunned and repressed. By the end of the novel the “Invisible man” himself is an idiom infused by the blues. By the time he sits down to write his memoir, he has gained something of the ironical perspectives of the blues — and has learned to be proud of his tradition.

Like the blues allusions, the references to the sacred folk music, the spirituals and gospel music also enrich the texture of the text. In the Prologue, there is reference to an old woman signing a spiritual which as she explains to the Invisible Man gives her a sense of freedom. In school, the hero was most ashamed and contemptuous of Black church music, which was often sung to entertain the white trustees and was a sign of Black docility. But at times the meaning of the sacred music penetrated the congregation. For example, before the speech of Homer A. Barbee, the Black preacher from Chicago, a thin brown girl sang expressing the bottled up feelings of anguish
of her classmates. At its conclusion the “Invisible Man” sat with a lump in
his throat and even the white guests appeared moved. Homer A. Barbee
explained how within the spirituals and gospel songs there exists a power to
endure even the worst and still leave room for hope. In the new world, the
hero kept hearing “swing low sweet chariot, resounding through its dominant
theme — my mother and my grandmother’s favourite spirituals. It was more
than I (he) could stand.”

Like the blues, spirituals and the gospel songs also help to make him
understand the value of his true folk heritage. Mary Rambo, alluding to
Mahalia Jackson’s gospel song reminds him of his responsibility to help other
Blacks better their lives. It is much later, during Tod’s funeral that the
“Invisible Man” becomes fully conscious of the meaning of the transcendent
value of Black sacred folk music. Two men start the spiritual “Many
Thousands Gone,” a stern renumeration, of slave life and the rest of the
crowd joined in. For the first time the hero becomes conscious of the wonder
and depth of feeling conveyed by the spirituals. Although the song spoke
of redemption from the evils of slavery, it was somehow able to transcend
that particular moment. The song’s emotion frees the Invisible Man from his
self-alienation and arouses within him a sense of continuity within his
tradition.

Black music is extensively used by Baldwin along with his soul-stirring
pulpit eloquence to plumb the depths of Afro-American suffering and the
possibilities of salvation. His expression of the rhetoric, lore and music of
the Black church is revealed best in Go Tell It on the Mountain, If Beale
Street Could Talk and in Just Above My Head. In If Beale Street Could Talk
the mood is that of sorrow, the blues world of everyday social myths and

42 Ralph Ellison. Invisible Man, p.121.
rituals derived from the impact of contemporary inner New York city life on young Black men and women. In this blues environment the myth of Black men as rapists and the rituals of police harassment continue to threaten the freedom and manhood of young Blacks and the survival of strong, supportive Black families. Nineteen-year-old Tish Fisher, three months pregnant, is awaiting the trail of her fiancé, Fonny, on a rape charge. Tish’s family is supporting, while Fonny’s is not. Fonny is spiritually strengthened like in the blues, toughened and transformed by his jail experience. In his affirmation of heterosexual and familial love as traditional values for black survival, Baldwin comes close to sentimentality almost, violating the integrity of his narrator’s blues character.

In contrast to the blues texture of *If Beale Street Could Talk*, *Just Above My Head* examines Black personal relationships rooted in the Black church and is full of sermons and gospel songs. The narration of the journey on the gospel road is divided into five major sections each prepared by epigraphs from traditional sacred Black music and interwoven with songs of sorrow and joy like the blues. The plot movement is spiral, as the narrator calls on us to witness the long narrow winding road of his gospel-singing brother, Arthur Montana, who attains love, stardom and death at thirty nine. Two years after the death of Arthur, his brother, Hall Montana, narrates the story of the agony and ecstasy of Arthur’s quest for love in the improvisational manner of the songs of sorrow and joy. Hall “hears his brother’s life as one melodic theme off which he riffs the personal history of those, whose rhythms lend that theme both assonance and dissonance.”

In the opening section the author invites us to see and hear with him

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the solid foundations of the Montana family provided by Florence, the compassionate mother, and Paul, the blues and jazz, piano-playing father. He also tells us about the spiritual death and violation of Julia, the child evangelist and her rebirth through the love of Hall, an African diplomat, the despair and death of three members of the gospel quartet before Arthur becomes a star. We also witness the agony and sense of dread Arthur feels over his inability to live the song he sings so well, as well as the ecstasy he finds in the love of Julia’s younger brother Jimmy.

In the final section of the novel Hall confesses what we as readers have already guessed from the passion of his language and music that the narration is actually a love song to his dead brother. “Oh, oh, oh, Arthur speak, speak, speak. I know, I know I wasn’t always nice to you; I yelled when I shouldn’t have yelled, I was often absent when I should have been present I know, I know.” He laments that people had misunderstood Arthur. Perhaps, Hall himself didn’t always understand. “If there was any jiving done, the people jived you my brother, because they didn’t know that they were the song and the price of the song and the glory of the song you sang, oh, my God, my God, my God…”

Hall sings variations on the theme of this song throughout the novel not only for the readers, for his brother, but also for his teenage children for whom he is, “their key to their uncle, the vessel which contain for them, his legacy.” In Go Tell It on the Mountain, the ritual of the old testament mode of sermons, threatening, punishment and condemnation, accompanied by the ecstatic singing and clapping of the sanctified members of the church serve to

46 Ibid., p.498.
hold a strong sway on many of its young members like John Grimes. A major institution in the Black community, the family and the church form important centres of Black life in Harlem. God is depicted as a stern father who answers the prayers of the obedient children and cruelly punishes those who disobey his commands. The Grimes family worship at the temple of the Fire Baptized, a storefront Pentecostal church, which preaches about the wages of sin and the wickedness of the world and frustrates the attempts of its members for healthy social and sexual freedom and for full personal development. Baldwin portrays how the ritual of prayer and church songs unites the members with each other and with their historical and cultural tradition. He also reveals the dogma and rituals of the church, the hypocrisy of its senior members as it exploits its younger members in the name of salvation and damnation.

In *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, jazz serves as the background for the events in human lives. But, it seems that in her novel, *Jazz* "human stories play back-drop to the dazzling improvisation rendered by the music itself."47 According to James Snead both African and Afro-American music, slave songs, blues and jazz make use of repetitive words and rhythms to make improvisation possible "since an improviser relies upon the ongoing recurrence of the beat."48 It also makes it possible for the "cut" — an interruption in the rhythmic and melodic statements, which take the music back to a previous beginning. Snead explains how Black music sets up expectations and then disturbs them at irregular intervals. "Improvisations, cut and departure from the 'head' or theme and from normal harmonic

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sequences are evidence of this process." Morrison uses these musical and language traditions in much of her fiction.

According to Paula Gallant Eckard, though not clearly named, jazz is the essential narrator of the novel. It keeps on shifting and taking ambiguous roles as it speaks about itself, the city and the people. "With an omniscient, blues-like knowing, the narrator speaks about the human dramas played out in the city. It possess a keen awareness of the thoughts, feelings and actions of the principal characters, particularly Violet and Joe Trace." The jazz narrator reflects at times a single entity and at times multiple ones. It is both male and female. It speaks in varying tones and rhythms that convey the presence of different voices in much the same way that a jazz performance is rendered through multiple instruments. At the same time the voices are blended within the text to give the impression of a single entity.

The novel opens with what seems to be a women's voice relating the intimate details of the love-triangle involving Joe, Violet and Dorcas. Violet used to live with a flock of birds in Lomox Avenue. Her husband "fell for an eighteen years old girl with one of those deep down spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going." The narrator goes on to describe how Violet "went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face" and "they threw her to the floor and out of the church." The narrator then speaks with great bravado about life in the city in what appears to be a masculine voice. "Daylight stands like a razor cutting

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49 Ibid., p.69
52 Ibid.
the buildings in half.” This image signifies Violet’s “cutting the face of the dead Dorcas as she lay in the coffin. The image also brings out violent riffs in the city as men and women confront each other with guns, knives, razor blades and ice picks.”

The narrator also possesses different voices for the city and the country; when describing rural scenes its voice is relatively devoid of musical language or jazz imagery. However, musical language is employed as the narrator moves from scene to scene, depicting the city and its inhabitants. Scenes of the city are particularly vibrant and musical. Blind men “thrum and hum in the soft air as they inch steadily down the walk.” Blues lyric appear frequently in the city and the narrator gives his words a certain rhythm. “Blues man, Black and bluesman. Black therefore blue man. Everybody knows your name. Where-did-she-go-and-why-man. So lonesome-I-could-die man.”

The narrator also engages in call-and response pattern when discussing how Black women in the city are armed and dangerous:

Did the world mess over them?
Yes, but look where the mess originated.
Where they berated and cursed?
Oh, yes; but look how the world cursed and berated itself.

Paula Gallant points out how the technique of call-and-response is also used at the ends and beginnings of chapters throughout Jazz. A chapter may end in

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53 Ibid., p.7
55 Toni Morrison, Jazz, p.119.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., p.78
a certain word, thought or image. In response to it the next chapter picks up the word or image and plays it out by improvising on what has gone before. For example, the first chapter ends with the image of Violet's speaking to her birds. One of them answers back: "I love You." The next chapter begins with "or used to" in response. The narrative thus plays out picking on Violet and the birds. It proceeds to tell how Violet threw out the birds and the parrot who said "I love you," which explains the "or used to" response. Thus music and language are the real performers of Jazz and the community of readers or listeners participates in its performance.

Alice Walker also utilises the blues nature in the depiction of her characters, who undergo great physical and mental trauma and are yet able to overcome it without breaking. Meridian in Meridian and Celie in The Color Purple and Tashi in Possessing the Secret of Joy are the best examples. In The Color Purple music forms an integral background as Shug Avery, the famous singer takes hold of Celie and teaches her to assert herself and her independence. Shug Avery even writes a song about Celie. In Meridian, Meridian experiences the thrill of spiritual communion with her self and her ancestors at the sacred serpent's pit. She had lost consciousness at the pit and come out of it invigorated and freshened. Later, after many experiences, being abandoned by her lover, pregnancy and giving up her child for adoption she finds that she is always searching for something. It is the sacred music of the Black church that finally reminds her that she was missing some sort of spiritual wholeness. Like the blues character she is able to find joy in her sorrow and eventually is toughened enough to be able to help others.

Hence jazz appears to be helping people to pick up their bits of life, to co-ordinate their energies to integrate them emotionally with their fellow

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58 Ibid., p. 24.
beings, to inculcate in them a sense of belonging. As a result of these multiple processes the Black selfhood is enhanced and expanded in terms of emotional and spiritual growth. The flexibility and improvising nature of jazz take away the stereotyping of life styles modelled mostly on those of the Whites. Hence the liberating effect of "All that jazz" as Philip Larkin calls it.

Thus Ellison, Baldwin, Morrison and Walker along with Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer, have been recognised for the infusion of blues, myths and rituals into their works. The recurrent use of blues and jazz in African-American literature is not by mere coincidence, according to Houston Baker. "It emerges from a complex matrix, which lies at the heart of African-American cultural expression."59 This matrix encompasses work songs, seculars, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folklore, ribald humour and elegiac humour. Houston Baker perceives this blues matrix as "an amalgam that seems always to have been in motion in America — always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experience of Africans in the new world."60

Joseph Campbell reveals the usefulness of myth in the modern rationalised consciousness. "To grasp the full value of the mythological figures that have come down to us, we must understand that they are not only symptoms of the unconscious, but also controlled and intended statements of certain spiritual principles which have remained constant throughout human history."61 The use of mythological motifs and themes go a long way in

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inspiring and shaping the belief of the protagonists to overcome the obstacles and to know themselves. As Campbell suggests there is, "the mighty hero of extraordinary powers... in each of us: not the physical self visible in the mirror, but the king within." \(^{62}\)

Considering the data analysed above it can be inferred that myths, folklore, rituals and folk music form an integral part of the racial consciousness of any individual within his social structure. In the case of the Afro-Americans, since they lack a formal written literary heritage this becomes doubly prominent as an unavoidable connecting link to his past which explains the heavy odds they face in their search for self-identity. The Black consciousness is uplifted by their identification with the mythological figures of pre-slavery heroes or legendary heroes of the slavery period. Ellison and Morrison are aware of the myths, both of African and European origin, and the tendency of mythological patterns of behaviour being repeated regardless of race, time and gender.

The blues and jazz are musical expressions which serve the triple function of producing a cathartic effect, enhancing race pride by virtue of being internationally popular and providing a model of dealing with day to day frustrations by manipulation and improvisation. Thus a knowledge of the Black folk forms becomes crucial for a study of the Black self concept and hence the analysis of their profusion in the fiction of the novelists under study.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., p.365.