Chapter IV
IV. Toni Morrison’s literary background:

Toni Morrison, one of the most significant African-American writers and Nobel Laureates was born on 18 February 1931, in Lorain, Ohio. She was born almost a quarter of a century later than Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970, almost thirty years after Wright’s *Native Son* was published and about twenty years after Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. It is to be realised that even a quarter of a century after Wright’s and Ellison’s works were published, not much has changed in the conditions of the exploited oppressed. The less spoken about the condition of women, the better. Toni Morrison enters the scene at such a stage and her family background and her living environment have moulded her into one of the greatest African-American writers.

Her father, during his childhood in Georgia, received shocking impressions of white oppression and for the rest of his life he despised the whites. But still he was responsible for creating a positive self-image upon his daughter, preventing her from acquiring “the zero image”, “a negative definition of self commonly associated with oppressed peoples and familiar to black children . . .” (ix-xii) mention Wilfred D. Samuels and Hudson-Weems Clenora. Her positive self-image makes Toni Morrison choose the novel form. The following is quoted from one of Toni Morrison’s interviews:
In a novel you take something that’s very small and make it bigger and bigger and bigger. There’s so much room and the possibilities are infinite. That’s why I find it the most challenging form... I’m overwhelmed by all the space in a novel, all the possibilities, all the ways in which characters can turn; but the novelist can still try to contain all of this and let the characters breathe.

IV. 1. Toni Morrison is not racist:

Toni Morrison’s words regarding the role of African-American writers being called racist are worth mentioning:

Only black writers, it seems to me, are required to be larger than Shakespeare or Tolstoy or Dostoevsky. It’s a racist question, it always provokes racist answers.... No-one suggested that Faulkner stop being parochial and writing about the South. But they have implied that about black writers. The question does not deserve an answer. It’s the wrong war; a writer can write any way he wishes...

One notices here that Morrison’s concern is not racism; she does not bother about being called racist; but her concern is the oppressive conditions thrust on her protagonists, the oppression let loose on them and the traumatic effect caused by the oppressor-oppressed relationship. As a woman in general and as an African-American in particular, Toni Morrison “examines problems of race and gender
oppression before exploring class contradictions within the race” (9-10) according to Doreatha Drummond Mbalia. Samuels and Clenora state,

Generally through her main characters, in particular black women, Morrison reveals the dynamic blacks ... coming to grips with their search for selfhood in the empty, meaningless world, whether urban or agrarian, to which they belong. (ix-xii)

IV. 2. The Oppressor-Oppressed relationship in Toni Morrison’s novels:

The oppressive world portrayed by Morrison, similar to the ones portrayed by Wright and Ellison, shows the loss of identity of the African-American and the African-American’s quest for establishing his/her identity. Pain, horror, violence and crime are not uncommon but rather the order of the day-to-day life of the oppressed African-American. In this world of oppression, the African-American women remain more exploited, violated and oppressed. “To survive”, in such a world, Morrison’s “protagonists must somehow violate the rule of the oppressive system, reject the values it venerates, and recover the human potential denied to blacks” (1-7) states Terry Otten.

Mentioning about aggression and violence in the lives of African-American women Morrison states:

Aggression is not new to black women as it is to white women.

Black women seem able to combine the nest and the adventure... They are both safe harbor and ship; they are both inn and trail. We, black women, do both...
... There's a special kind of domestic perception that has its own violence in the writings by black women – not bloody violence, but violence nonetheless. Hence one can assume that aggression and violence are all part of the oppressor-oppressed relationship portrayed in the novels of Morrison.

Morrison's novels reveal the author's deep understanding of the African-Americans and her sympathy for them. Morrison's words, "I have never met yet a boring black person. All you have to do is scratch the surface and you will see. And that is because of the way they look at life", come alive in her novels.

IV. 2. 1. Oppression of the African-American people – a major concern of Morrison's novels:

A study of the novels of Morrison reveals not only her evolution as a writer but also her growing concern for the oppressed African-American, especially the African-American woman. Mbalia's statement,

In each of her novels, Morrison explores some aspect of and/or solution to the oppression afflicting African people. *The Bluest Eye* examines racism; *Sula*, gender oppression; *Song of Solomon*, the necessity of knowing one's family, community, and heritage; *Tar Baby*, the class contradictions that keep African people divided; and *Beloved*, the solution that will help solve the class exploitation and racial oppression of African people. (9-10),
is in accordance with the line of argument that oppression and the resultant oppressor-oppressed relationship are some of the major concerns of Morrison’s novels. This concern for the oppressed African-American is carried further in *Jazz* and *Paradise*.

IV. 3. *The Bluest Eye*: 

Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* has its original inspiration from an earlier attempted short story by her about a little African-American girl who longed for blue eyes. This has been developed later by Morrison in her *The Bluest Eye*.

This feeling of ugliness felt by the African-American girl, caused by her skin colour is the result of many factors, such as the imposition of a ‘Zero-image’, the white oppressor’s concept of beauty that cannot accept black as beautiful, and the identity crisis. A feeling of rootlessness created by a horrible and almost nonexistent home life adds insult to injury. Unfortunately for Pecola, the young girl and a member of the Breedlove family, her home and her family do not offer any warmth or affection and of course there is no breeding of love. Her home becomes a place of violence, hatred and sadism. Otten’s statement on the effects of oppression let loose on Pecola illustrates this:

Ostracized from the American dream by virtue of her blackness and from a black community too much corrupted by the values of the white culture, she (Pecola) can only succeed in her insanity, having borne the effects of a devastating fall. (9)
IV. 3.1. ‘The zero image’ imposed on female children:

“The zero image” (349-356) is a term used by Carolyn F Gerald. It is a term of “negative definition of self commonly associated with oppressed peoples and familiar to black children of Morrison’s Depression generation” (3), according to Samuels and Clenora.

The imposition of the zero image on African-American children and their negative definition of self become obvious even at the outset:

We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola’s father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair.

This is further amplified by the treatment meted out to them at their home. The children, especially the girl children are expected to behave themselves by remaining silent spectators: “Frieda and I are washing Mason jars. We do not hear their words, but with grown-ups we listen to and watch out for their voices”. The place of female children in an African-American household is insignificant, as revealed in the description of ‘pointing out’ the girls, to Mr. Henry, a new boarder at their house: “Frieda and I were not introduced to him - merely pointed out. Like, here is the bathroom; the clothes closet is here; and these are my kids, Frieda and Claudia;”

While discussing the ill-effects of racism and oppression on women, Mbalia goes to the extent of asserting that “The thesis of the novel (The Bluest Eye) is that racism
devastates the self-image of the American female in general and the African female child in particular” (28).

Pecola Breedlove, is placed by the county into their house. Pecola is a “case”, “a girl who had no place to go”, and “outdoors”. ‘Outdoors’, they know, is the real terror of life.

There is a difference between being put out and being put outdoors. If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was subtle but final. Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition.

The callous attitude of the parents, especially toward the female children has a telling effect on Claudia:

... I did know that nobody ever asked me what I wanted for Christmas. Had any adult with the power to fulfill my desires taken me seriously and asked me what I wanted, they would have known that I did not want to have anything to own, or to possess any object. I wanted rather to feel something on Christmas day.

Claudia is not interested in ‘having’, but interested ‘to feel’, and her parents do not even care to ask their child what she wants. These things, though normal and quite
insignificant in the viewpoint of the parents, help only in creating a negative zero-image in the child's mind.

When Toni Morrison was asked why she wrote *The Bluest Eye*, she has stated, “I was interested in reading a kind of book that I had never read before. I didn’t know if such a book existed, but I had just never read it in 1964 when I started writing *The Bluest Eye*”. This response of Morrison’s may perhaps be the answer to the yearnings of Claudia and Pecola’s horrors of life.

**IV. 3. 2. The zero image imposed on Pecola:**

Pecola like most of the other children remains innocent even after she has reached puberty. Her hesitant, soft way of seeking certain clarifications exposes the ominous fact that Pecola is no exception to the zero image. Pecola is told that somebody has to love her, for her to have a baby. Then Pecola asks a question: “How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?” This becomes very pertinent and the answer to her questions unfortunately lies in the tragedy of her being raped by her own father.

The zero image is forced on Pecola, since she is one of the Breedloves, whose “ugliness was unique”.

You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without
question. The master had said, “You are ugly people”... “Yes”, they had said. “You are right”. And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it.

Cholly, Pecola’s father, a burnt-out alcoholic, has “the meanest eyes in town”. Mrs. Breedlove is an ever complaining woman, using her anger against her husband as a safety valve, to relieve her boredom.

If Cholly had stopped drinking, she (Mrs. Breedlove) would never have forgiven Jesus. She needed Cholly’s sins desperately. The lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became, the more splendid she and her task became. In the name of Jesus.

Cholly becomes a victim of racism and oppression at his young and impressionable age:

When he was still very young, Cholly had been surprised in some bushes by two white men while he was newly but earnestly engaged in eliciting sexual pleasure from a little country girl. The men had shone a flashlight right on his behind. He had stopped, terrified. They chuckled. ... “Go on”, they said. “Go on and finish. And, nigger, make it good”... For some reason Cholly had not hated the white men; he hated, despised, the girl. Even a half-remembrance of this episode,
along with myriad other humiliations, defeats, and emasculations, could stir him into flights of depravity that surprised himself— but only himself.

The scars of oppression, the shame, humiliation, defeats and emasculations connected with such oppression have made Cholly an alcoholic and a depraved animal.

Morrison identifies the emotional violence heaped upon children by parents as a special concern, which she sets out to explore in *The Bluest Eye*. On the negative influence of emotional violence heaped on Pecola by her parents, Samuels and Clenora state:

To be sure, the onus of Pecola’s negativity rests initially with her family’s failure to provide the socialization, identity, love, and security that are essential to healthy growth and development. The emptiness of her parents’ lives and their own negative self images are particularly hurtful. ... their perception of themselves as ugly isolates them further, offering evidence of self-hatred. This self-hatred is the most destructive element in their lives; the central element they lack is self-love. (13)

The lack of love that shatters a family, the misfortune of being born in a breed ‘hate’ family, a family which has thrown the mantle of ugliness on themselves without a question and the denial of self-love all go to make Pecola’s life a tragedy, especially a tragedy of the oppressed.
Pecola is abused not only by her family, but also by the oppressive society making its contribution to hurt and damage Pecola. Pecola is a never-sought-after companion at her school. Pecola is ill-treated at Geraldine’s home, after being made the brunt of a cruel hoax. Geraldine’s son Louis Junior, invites Pecola in, throws a frightened cat at her, and later he sends the cat flying into the radiator, pointing an accusing finger at Pecola. Geraldine is more disgruntled by the presence of a little African-American girl in her house than by the injury done to her cat. Samuels and Clenora state, “Geraldine expels the innocent girl with words that cut deeper than the cat’s claws: “Get out... you nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house.” (13) revealing the insults and injustice heaped on Pecola, for no fault of hers. This ill-treatment she receives from the society and the total absence of love and warmth of her family hasten the process of her self-hatred and her zero image: “Please, God”, she (Pecola) whispered into palm of her hand. “Please make me disappear”. All these contribute to Pecola’s suffering an identity crisis making Samuels and Clenora state, “Pecola, a young girl in quest of womanhood, suffers an identity crisis when she falls victim to the standard set by an American society that ascribes what is beautiful to a certain image of white women” (11).

IV. 3. 3. Pecola’s anger short lived and ineffective:
It is not that Pecola never feels angry against oppression and rootlessness, but her anger is short lived and ineffective:
She has seen it (the distaste) lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. ... her blackness is static and dread...

Anger stirs and wakes in her; it opens its mouth, and like a hot-mouthed puppy, laps up the dredges of her shame.

Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging... The anger will not hold; ... the shame wells up again, its muddy rivulets seeping into her eyes.

It is this ineffective anger that makes Pecola bear the pain silently when she has been ill-treated by Geraldine and her son Louis Junior: “Pecola turned to find the front door and saw Jesus looking down at her with sad and unsurprised eyes, his long brown hair parted in the middle, the gay paper flowers twisted around his face”. With her mother saying, “But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly”, right from the day Pecola is born, Pecola cannot afford to be angry.

IV. 3. 4. Cholly’s rape of Pecola:

Pecola does not receive any parental love or affection. Her father Cholly has no feeling of tenderness or love left in him.

Having no idea of how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he (Cholly) could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be.
As mentioned earlier, the effects of racist oppression have made Cholly an alcoholic and a depraved animal. In the words of Samuels and Clenora “Humiliated and scarred by the experience, Cholly internalizes his oppression, developing a distaste for his black self and hatred for black woman before whom he has been emasculated” (27).

Such a man, a depraved alcoholic staggers home “reeling drunk” “on a Saturday afternoon, in the thin light of spring” and sees Pecola, his daughter in the kitchen: “The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him, and a bolt of desire ran down his genitals…” Cholly rapes Pecola, his act being an incomprehensible mixture of violence, hatred and tenderness.

Cholly stood up and could see only her grayish panties, so sad and limp around her ankles. Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her.

Cholly’s incestuous rape of Pecola is the sad result of a strange African-American response to male-female relationships. The male African-American, himself being a victim of oppression, turns a heartless oppressor on his women. Calvin Hernton’s words illustrate this aspect in the study of oppressor-oppressed relationship: “Black men who are themselves victims of oppression [victimize] Black women with what looks like the same oppression” (17).

On Cholly’s incestuous rape of Pecola Otten has the following to say:
...it is against this history of depravity and perversion that
Pecola’s violation occurs. It gives a witness to a world already
fallen ... the rape is also an exercise of power and freedom, a
protest against an unjust and repressive culture. (20-21)

IV. 3.5. Pecola’s tragedy in the viewpoint of critics:

Pecola’s tragedy is treated variously in the viewpoint of critics. Samuels and
Clenora have said, “She (Morrison) indicates that a major part of Pecola’s tragedy is
her failure to recognize that she is responsible for defining a life for herself” (14-15)
and “By acting in “Bad Faith”, Pecola remains responsible in the final analysis, for
what happens to her” (15). On the other hand Mbalia feels that the devastated “self-
image of the African female in general, and the African female child in particular”
(28) – the gender oppression suffered by the African-American female to be precise –
has caused the tragedy of Pecola. Otten feels, “Morrison depicts Pecola more a victim
than as genuinely tragic figure. Unable to commit a saving sin or protect herself
against the prolonged self-hate of Cholly or Pauline or Geraldine, she (Pecola) falls
prey to an evil beyond herself” (23). Butler-Evans feels that the tragedy of the
Breedloves and their oppression have been caused by their acceptance of ugliness.
(65) Trudier Harris is of the opinion that “a self-hatred that manifests itself in Pecola
Breedlove’s desire for the bluest eyes of all” (29) causes her tragedy. Thus one can
surmise that various factors, such as the intense self-hatred, the feeling of ugliness,
gender oppression, and the feeling of rootlessness and ill-treatment felt especially by
African-American female children – all these work against Pecola resulting in her tragedy of violation and her madness.

Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, becomes exclusive in the sense that it is one of the earliest novels to address the problems of child abuse and the emotional violence heaped upon children by parents. Morrison herself has identified “the emotional violence heaped upon children as a special concern” of her *The Bluest Eye*. Samuels and Clenora state:

Although now a highly publicized topic, child abuse, including incest and rape, was once a socially unmentionable subject that remained unaddressed though secretly known. It is readily exposed by Morrison, however, in her pioneering novel. (14)

On the significance of physical and psychological violence done to female children by their parents they have stated:

Equally significant is the physical violence done to the black child by parents who are themselves confused about their identity, as is the case with Breedloves. ... when Cholly rapes his daughter, it is a physical manifestation of the social, psychological, and personal violence that, together with his wife, he has put upon Pecola. (Mrs. Breedlove blames Pecola for the rape and puts her out.) (14)
IV. 4. Toni Morrison’s *Sula*:

The publication of *Sula*, Morrison’s second novel marks her as a significant literary voice in America. Naama Banyiwa-Horne, while mentioning the evolution of Sula states:

(Sula) “protects herself against the mean world with a meanness which bristles against the hostility of the world. Independent, adventurous, inquisitive, strong-willed and self-centered, Sula offers a welcome, if uncanny foil to Pecola’s unquestioned acceptance and futile pursuit of those values which lead to her destruction. (28-31)

Mbalia writes,

... in *Sula* (1973), her second novel, Morrison.... turns her attention to securing individual rights in general and women’s rights in particular. This switch in thematic emphasis suggests that she sees the lack of individual rights as the primary cause of the African’s oppression. (20)

According to Mbalia, the ending of the novel suggests that Morrison has rejected her assumption at that stage. Mbalia considers *Sula* as a continuation of *The Bluest Eye*, for she states, *Sula*, in effect, takes up from where *The Bluest Eye* leaves off: when *Sula* opens, the heroine is the twelve-year-old Pecola, isolated and oppressed” (25).

Otten’s statement:
... in a society operated by an oppressive order, not to sin in the conventional sense perpetuates an immoral justice. In such a world innocence itself is a sign of guilt, because it signals a degenerate acquiescence. Not to fall becomes more destructive than to fall. (1-7)

may very well be applicable to Sula.

IV. 4.1. Oppressor-oppressed relationship in Sula:

Sula opens with a description of a place once mentioned as Bottom, in the hills above the valley town of Medallion. It tells subtly the effects of oppression on the African-American people. “… the laughter was part of the pain”. A ‘Nigger Joke’ on the word ‘Bottom’ is made thought-provoking. Giving the promised ‘Freedom’ to the African-American slave was ‘easy’. The white master, had no objection to that. But he didn’t want to give up any land. So he told the slave that he was very sorry that he had to give him valley land. He had hoped to give him a piece of the Bottom. The slave blinked and said he thought valley land was bottom land. The master said, “oh, no! See those hills? That’s bottom land, rich and fertile”.

“But it’s high up in the hills”, said the slave.

“High up from us” said the master, “but when God looks down, it’s the bottom … It’s the bottom of heaven – the best land there is”.

The nigger got the hilly land, where the planting was backbreaking, ... and where the wind lingered all through the winter.

Which accounted for the fact that white people lived on the rich valley floor in that little river town in Ohio, and the blacks populated the hills above it, taking small consolation in the fact that every day they could literally look down on the white folks.

The essence of ‘the Nigger joke’, the laughter – a part of the pain – is seen in the African-Americans “taking small consolation in the fact that every day they could literally look down on the white folks”. As Toni Morrison has asserted that she writes the kind of books she wants to read, one can assume that she is fascinated by the horrors to be found “in monstrous behaviour” (53) of the people as mentioned by Harris.

Shadrack, the founder of National Suicide Day, has been shell-shocked, “Blasted and permanently astonished by the events of 1917... had returned to Medallion handsome but ravaged”. Shadrack, remains a tragic example of the ill effects caused by the oppressive power mongers.

He (Shadrack) knew the smell of death and was terrified of it, for he could not anticipate it. It was not death or dying that frightened him, but the unexpectedness of both. In sorting it all out, he hit on the notion that if one day a year were devoted to
it, everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free. In this manner he instituted National Suicide Day.

The way a National Suicide Day is instituted, so that “everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free” indicates the level of oppression the poor, helpless oppressed have been subjected to. National Suicide Day, gets absorbed into “their thoughts, into their language, into their lives”, the lives of the people of Bottom.

Nel, Sula’s friend, gets introduced to the hatred caused by racism at a tender age, during a journey South, with her mother. In their hurry and on their way to the COLORED ONLY car, they walk through the white section. The conductor calls Helene, Nel’s mother, derisively “gal”, and then warns her in no uncertain terms, “We don’t ‘low no mistake on this train. Now git your butt on in there”. Nel realises that they have become objects of hatred and indifference by the African-American section, by the meek behaviour and the “foolish smile” of her mother:

She felt both pleased and ashamed to sense that these men, unlike her father, who worshipped his graceful, beautiful wife, were bubbling with a hatred for her mother that had not been there in the beginning but had been born with the dazzling smile.

This experience makes Nel to be resolved, to be on guard, always:
It was on that train, shuffling toward Cincinnati, that she resolved to be on guard – always. She wanted to make certain that no men ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly.

Her experiences during her journey to the South, make Nel more resolute. On her return to Medallion she feels:

“I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me”.

Each time she said the word me there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear...

“Me”, she murmured. And then, sinking deeper into the quilts. “I want ... I want to be ... wonderful. Oh, Jesus, make me wonderful”.

One finds Nel’s yearning akin to Pecola’s in *The Bluest Eye*, though Nel’s experience is not as tragic as Pecola’s. Nel like Pecola feels the oppressive atmosphere of her home:

As for Nel, she preferred Sula’s wooly house, where a pot of something was always cooking on the stove; where the mother, Hannah, never scolded or gave directions...

Sula Peace comes of a family who have learnt to live hard, in ways others cannot even imagine. The creator and sovereign of this family is Eva Peace, who according to somebody stuck one of her legs under a train and made them pay off. Her daughter Hannah shows her generosity to any available man. Hannah exasperates
the “good” women as well as the whores: “She (Hannah) could break up a marriage before it had even become one – she would make love to the new groom and wash his wife’s dishes all in an afternoon”.

Eva torches her son Plum, and as the whoosh of the flame engulfs him, shuts the door to make her slow and painful journey back to the top of the house. Hannah tells Eva that Plum is burning and that they “can’t even open the door”.

“Eva looked into Hannah’s eyes. “Is? My Baby? Burning?” The two women did not speak, for the eyes of each were enough for the other”.

Born in such a family, Sula seeks the company of Nel,

Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor males, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be.

Mbalia quotes this specific passage while referring to the oppression of African-American women. Mbalia states:

Morrison’s most articulate statement in regard to the female’s degradation comes in a passage that appears after Nel and Sula first meet… Within this statement are found both the dilemma of the novel and the solution to the dilemma: African women are oppressed, and to escape their oppression, they must become self-propagators. Accordingly, Sula rejects the traditional role ascribed to women, telling Eva, “I want to make myself” (40)
This is in accordance with what Mbalia has stated earlier:

In *Sula*, Morrison grapples with the idea of individual or gender freedom as the African’s solution: the answer to Sula’s dilemma being born “black and female” seems to lie in her simply rejecting the traditional role ascribed to women… (25)

Sula reveals from the very beginning that she is different and that she will not tolerate harassment and oppression. When Nel is harassed by four white boys in their teens, Sula stands her ground:

When the girls were three feet in front of the boys, Sula reached into her coat pocket and pulled out Eva’s paring knife… This was going to be better than they (the boys) thought…

Sula squatted down in the dirt road and put everything down on the ground:… Holding the knife in her right hand, she pulled the slate toward her and pressed her left forefinger down hard on its edge. Her aim was determined but inaccurate. She slashed off only the tip of her finger. The four boys stared open-mouthed…

Sula raised her eyes to them. Her voice was quiet: “If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I’ll do to you?”

This toughness against the harassment and oppression by the males becomes one of the characteristic qualities of Sula.

Sula’s accidental drowning of a twelve year old boy Chicken Little, becomes their closely-guarded secret, tying their bonds of friendship closer. Sula learns the art
of remaining stern and unmoved even at the moment of witnessing horrible death. When her mother Hannah is burning like a human torch, Sula is seen “standing on the porch just looking”. Everybody thinks that Sula has been struck dumb, but Eva remains “convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested”.

Sula leaves Medallion in 1927, on the day Nel gets married, to return in 1937, ten years later, her return accompanied by a plague of robins.

When Eva suggests that Sula gets married, pat comes Sula’s reply: “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself”. She asks Eva with a point-blank frankness: “Just ’cause you was bad enough to cut off your own leg you think you got a right to kick everybody with the stump”. As Eva tells Sula that God will strike her, Sula retorts, “Which God? The one watched you bum Plum?” Sula has the guts to say, “Whatever’s burning in me is mine!” and “And I’ll split this town in two and everything in it before I’ll let you put it out!” And then Sula puts Eva in the home for the aged, once again revealing her individuality.

Sula’s comment on the plight of the African-American is full of sarcasm:

... I mean, everything in the world loves you. White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is cut off a nigger’s privates. And if that ain’t love and respect I don’t know what is? And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed.
They think rape soon's they see you, and if they don't get the rape they looking for, they scream it anyway just so the search won't be in vain... Even little children – white and black, boys and girls – spend all their childhood eating their hearts out 'cause they think you don’t love them... Nothing in this world loves a black man more than another black man. You hear of solitary white men, but niggers? Can’t stay away from another a whole day. So. It looks to me like you the envy of the world”.

Sula’s rebelliousness makes her unpopular and she becomes unforgivable in the opinion of the people of Medallion.

... She (Sula) was guilty of the unforgivable thing – the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion. The route from which there was no way back, the dirt that could not ever be washed away. They said that Sula slept with white men. It may not have been true, but it certainly could have been. She was obviously capable of it. In any case, all minds were closed to her when that word was passed around...

... They insisted that all unions between white men and black women be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally
unthinkable. In that way, they regarded integration with precisely the same venom that white people did.

Sula becomes an outcast and untouchable. The words of Samuel and Clenora on Sula’s rebelliousness are mentioned here:

... Sula’s rebelliousness manifests itself in several ways. Unlike other Medallion women, including Nel, Sula refuses to marry, settle down, and raise a family. Moreover, as insult to them she attends their church functions underwearless,... and “tries out” and discards their husbands. She feels no obligation to please anyone unless she in turn gains pleasure (34)

and “A desire to transcend the sterile soil of the Bottom, coupled with her need for independence, lead Sula away from it” (35). For Sula “Bottom and Medallion are microcosmic of the world at large” (35) they state.

In one of her interviews Toni Morrison has hinted that Nel and Sula are the split halves of the same personality. Morrison has stated: “If they (Nel and Sula) were one woman, they would be complete”. Thus by developing two female characters, Sula and Nel, neither of whom is complete in herself, “Morrison chooses to explore the nature of women’s oppression” (40) in a unique way, states Mbali. Mbali feels, “Unfortunately, she (Sula) does not connect her oppression with the oppression of the entire community. And without such a connection her struggle is doomed” (41).

Sula’s is an “experimental life”, “as willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure”. “... she had no center, no speck around which to
grow”. Morrison makes Sula a person who “... was completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments – no ego”. Sula feels “no compulsion to verify herself” or “be consistent with herself”.

Sula remains independent till she breathes her last. Nel gets exasperated with Sula, “with her lying at death’s door still smart-talking”. Nel’s words indicate the position of women in the society: “You can’t do it all. You a woman and colored woman at that you can’t act like a man. You can’t be walking around all independent like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don’t”. Nel’s words reveal the crux of the problem and the level of oppression to which the women have been subjected to. A woman, that too a coloured woman cannot act like a man, be independent, doing what she wants and rejecting what she does not.

Sula’s comprehension of life is different. She feels that even in her death, she is different from the other coloured women.

“But the difference is they (the other coloured women) dying like a stump. Me, I’m going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world” ....

“But my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else’s.

... A second-hand lonely”.

Sula does not bother that the people of Bottom have no love last for her. Her words are a commentary on the state of oppression:
“Oh, they’ll love me all right. It will take time, but they’ll love me.” The sound of her voice was as soft and distant as the look in her eyes. “After all the old women have laid with the teenagers; when all the young girls have slept with their old drunken uncles; after all the black men fuck all the white ones; when all the white women kiss all the black ones; when the guards have raped all the jailbirds and after all the whores make love to their grannies; ... then there’ll be a little love left over for me. And I know just what it will feel like”.

Sula’s last, final moment is touchingly rendered:

A crease of fear touched her breast, for any second there was sure to be a violent explosion in her brain, a gasping for breath.

Then she realized, or rather sensed, that there was not going to be any pain. She was not breathing because she didn’t have to.

Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead.

“She was not breathing because she didn’t have to”, seems to suggest, that the total freedom, the freedom even from breathing is available to the oppressed African-American woman, only when she ceases to be, only when she is clinically dead. The words of Barbara Christian on The Bluest Eye and Sula serving as models illustrating the destructive limits imposed on African-American women are worth mentioning: “The Bluest Eye and Sula teach us a lesson about the integral relationship between the destructive limits imposed on the Black woman and the
inversions of truth in this society” (179). The selfishness of the community in exploiting Sula has been mentioned by Christian as follows: “In spite of their attitude toward Sula, the community does not expel her. Rather, it uses her, in spite of herself, for its own sake, as a pariah, as a means of reaffirming their oneness as a community” (54).

*Sula,* also reveals, the oppression and injustice done to the African-Americans by the white oppressor by nurturing false hopes. Harris states:

Over a period of fourteen years, the whites have killed black hopes for working on the new road as well as on the tunnel. Some men have died and others have grown up and gone away while waiting for those hopes to be fulfilled. Their hopes have been as inconsiderable as those of the slave who desired good bottom land... When the deweys, Tar Baby, and others die in the tunnel, their deaths denote the end of a particular kind of hope, the end of an era of belief that justice would be done through an unprompted, natural course. (68)

The novel reveals the deplorable and bitter fact that the African-Americans remain totally oppressed and their struggle for progress remains stunted. The train conductor shows “a nigger is a nigger” (46) as stated by Mbalia: “The struggle has enabled a few Africans to progress, that is, to be as much like their oppressors as they can, while the masses of the African people continue to struggle for survival” (46).
Mbalia’s statement also hints at the pathetic and painful fact of the oppressed African-American surrogating his oppressor.

IV. 5. Tar Baby:

Tar Baby, Morrison’s fourth novel reaches a well marked stage in the evolution of the oppressor-oppressed relationship. Tar Baby reveals that the whites try to be a little more accomodative, though the fear of the African-American remains latent in them. The novel also reveals the two extreme ends of the dilemma faced by the African-American, the dilemma being the African-American’s inability to give up his ancestral and traditional values and his inability to wholly accept the white, western values. Some of the African-Americans nurtured in the American ways, think negatively about the African ways, only to realise later that such negative doubts are unfounded. They also realise at that stage the physiological fact of their being African-Americans can never be altered. In other words, the problem created by getting “trapped between two cultures: black and white, European and African-American” (79) as mentioned by Samuels and Clenora gets exposed in Tar Baby.

Tar Baby differs from Morrison’s previous novels by its setting also. The setting is not the United States of America, but an island – Isle des Chevaliers – in the Caribbean. The novel begins dramatically suggesting pregnant possibilities: “He believed he was safe”, a beginning to be soon followed by the words:

There he saw the stars and exchanged stares with the moon, but he could see very little of the land, which was just as well because he was gazing at the shore of an island that, three
hundred years ago, had struck slaves blind the moment they saw it.

IV. 5. 1. The Oppressor-oppressed relationship in Tar Baby:

Tar Baby, according to John Irving is, “a novel deeply perceptive of the black’s desire to create a mythology of his own to replace the stereotypes and myths the white man has constructed for him”(31). This desire to create a ‘mythology of his own’, results in certain situations, physically and emotionally violent, and these become an integral part of the oppressor-oppressed relationship. Tar Baby reveals the man-woman relationship in its various dimensions: between Valerian and Margaret, between Son and Jadine and between Sydney and Ondine. These relationships have not resulted in anything progressive. Though Valerian and Margaret have a son, he has left them and it is likely that he is not interested in coming back to his parents; The relationship between Son and Jadine is fated to end in abortive futility; Sydney and Ondine are childless, though they have taken care of Jadine through Valerian’s philanthropy. Human relationships become dull and devoid of any feeling. Mbalia’s words: “With his (Valerian’s) son, Michel, he has no communication. And after thirty years of faithful butlering and cooking, Sydney and Ondine are thought of as mere Uncle Toms”(70) validate this.

Valerian lives in his own world, aloof, ignorant, demanding and ununderstanding. His relationship with Margaret cannot be called cordial and he derives great pleasure by teasing and laughing at her. The conversation between Sydney and Valerian reveals Valerian’s bad treatment of his wife.
“She’s expecting a trunk. It’s been shipped already, she said, and ought to be here by then”.

“What an idiot.”

“Sir?”

“Idiot. Idiot.”

“Mrs. Street, sir?”

“Mrs. Street, Mr. Street, you, Ondine Everybody…”

Lauren Lepow states: “Since Valerian is the highest authority in his world, he feels justified in all he does, including his remaining aloof from those he ought to know and understand” (363-377).

Into this seemingly idyllic world, where the land is rotting and haunted by demonic forces, enters Son. He secretly enters Valerian’s mansion and remains hidden there. Margaret is shocked to discover a black African hiding in her closet. The other members in the house initially think that she is drunk:

“She’s drunk”, said Valerian with the wisdom of the drunk,

“and nobody’s paid her any attention for a whole hour”.

“Why don’t you believe me?”

She looked around at them all... and then they heard the footsteps of Sydney plus one. Into the light of the sixty-four-bulb chandelier came Sydney pointing a .32 caliber pistol at the shoulder blades of a black man with dreadlock hair.

...
Valerian’s mouth was open and he closed it before saying, in a voice made stentorian by port, “Good evening, sir. Would you care for a drink?”

The way in which Valerian accosts the stranger reveals unambiguously that he is the master and he attaches no significance to the reactions of others in the house – especially to those of his wife – by the shock caused by the sudden discovery of an alien found hiding in their place.

The unexpected, shocking appearance of a stranger, an African-American causes varied reactions. Margaret is totally shocked:

She had no sleep to speak of, and now, drained of panic, wavering between anger and sorrow, she lay in bed. Things were not getting better. She was not getting better... with Michel on his way, this had to happen: literally, literally a nigger in the wood-pile.

Margaret reveals the total distrust and fear of the whites have for the African-Americans. “May be the man killed everybody, and she alone escaped because she had run up to her room and locked herself in”, she imagines wildly. Anything connected with any African-American, becomes repulsive in her frenzied state of mind: “she would have the whole closet cleaned. Or better still, she’d throw them all out and buy everything new – from scratch”.

On the other hand the reaction of Sydney, Ondine and Jadine are unexpectedly different. They are African-Americans themselves but they regret the
presence of another African-American, as an intrusion. Sydney and Ondine feel proud in their tradition of Philadelphia Negroes, and being true and faithful servants of their white master. "A crazy white man and a crazy Black is a shake too much", thinks Ondine. Sydney feels that it is beneath his dignity to wait upon another African-American:

At one point, after the man was seated and when Sydney held the bowl of salad toward him, the man looked up and said, "Hi".

For the first time in his life, Sydney had dropped something. He collected the salad greens and righted the bowl expertly, but his anger and frustration were too strong to hide. He tried his best to be no less dignified than his employer, but he barely made it to civility.

Jadine, brought up by a white, behaves like one, though she herself is an African-American. She feels:

At any rate he (Valerian) sipped his brandy as though the man's odor wasn't there... More than grace, she (Jadine) thought, Valerian had courage. He could not have known, could not know even now, what that nigger was upto.

The feeling of repulsion for an African-American, and the thought of being raped by him may be natural for Margaret, a white woman, but when Jadine thinks of Son as a "nigger", she surrogates her white oppressors.
The topic of rape occurs again in the conversation between Ondine and Sydney. Sydney considers the newcomer, the stranger “a... stinking ignorant swamp nigger, ... a wild-eyed pervert who hides in women’s closets”. But Ondine has a more positive outlook, for she says:

“He didn’t rape anybody. Didn’t even try”.

“I know he’s been here long enough and quiet enough to rape, kill, steal – do whatever he wanted and all he did was eat”.

With the natural instinct of a woman she advises Sydney not to worry himself.

Jadine left alone with Son, immediately surrogates the white oppressor, telling Son, that he smells and she thinks that he will rape her:

Jadine closed her eyes and pressed her knees together. “You smell”, she said. “You smell worse than anything I have ever smelled in my life”

“Valerian will kill you, ape. Sydney will chop you, slice you...”

“No, they won’t”.

“You rape me and they’ll feed you to the alligators. Count on it, nigger. You good as dead right now”.

Jadine accuses Son of an imaginary, uncommitted sin, calling him an “ape” and a “nigger”. Though she calls Son, a “nigger”, she falters when he calls her a little
“white girl”, and then it is the turn of Son, to ask Jadine to shut up and stop behaving like a white woman:

“Rape? Why you little white girls always think somebody’s trying to rape you?”

“White?” She was startled out of fury. “I’m not ... you know I’m not white!”

“No? Then why don’t you settle down and stop acting like it”.

Jadine, educated, a graduate in arts and brought up in the ways of whites cannot accept such a slap. She vents her anger against Son:

“... you ugly barefoot baboon! Just because you’re black you think you can come in here and give me orders? Sydney was right. He should have shot you on the spot. But no. A white man thought you were a human being and should be treated like one. He’s civilized and made the mistake of thinking you might be too. That’s because he didn’t smell you. But I did and I know you’re an animal because I smell you”.

... “I smell you too”, he said....

“I smell you too”.

While discussing this scene in Tar Baby, where Jadine accuses Son of intended rape, and her reactions on being called a “white” by Son, Otten states, “Condemned as white, Jadine feebly responds, “White... I am not... you know I’m not white” (121), but Son captures her in a truth. It is no wonder she fears him” (67).
In Mbalia's words, "Ideologically, she (Jadine) thinks like the European, and like her aunt and uncle, she embraces the stereotypes of the African, calling Son a raggedy nigger and thinking he is about to rape her" (72). Butler-Evans, on the other hand has a different opinion about Jadine’s reaction stating, "Identification with the myth of Black authenticity proves a problem for Jadine. Her cultural experiences and psychic makeup are essentially different from those of the “authentic” Blacks" (157) and states, “She (Jadine) resists the definitions of Black women constructed by others and proceeds in her own manner to construct an identity” (158).

Son proves to be a direct confrontation to the feminine ego and the feeling of superiority nourished by Jadine.

"Tell him", he said. “Tell him anything but don’t tell him I smelled you because then he would understand that there was something in you to smell and that I smelled it... there is something in you to be smelled which I have discovered and smelled myself. And no sealskin coat or million-dollar earrings can disguise it”.

Even at this stage, one can foresee that whatever may be the attraction – born out of repulsion – between these two protagonists, Son and Jadine cannot last long.

Strangely enough Valerian, a white, sympathises with Son and Valerian is appalled and outraged by the suspicion and hatred shown by Sydney, Ondine and Jadine.
... in the space of that flash he (Valerian) felt not only as Michel when he urged Jade to do something for her people... but something more. Disappointment nudging contempt for the outrage Jade and Sydney and Ondine exhibited in defending property and personnel that did not belong to them from a black man who was one of their own.

Here, Valerian reveals one of the rarest glimpses of a white sympathising with an African-American, in this specific instance the oppressors being none other than the African-Americans themselves.

But Sydney offers a different explanation for Valerian’s kindness. He tells Son, “White folks play with Negroes. It entertained *him*, that’s all, inviting you to dinner... you think he cares about his wife?... If it entertained him, he’d *hand* her to you!” Sydney’s words echo an African-American’s opinion of his white master.

A flash point is reached when Valerian dismisses two of his African-American servants for stealing some apples. Son feels that their “scale of value... would outrage Satan himself.” When the poor servants want “a little of what he wanted, some apples for *their* Christmas, and took some, he dismissed them with a flutter of fingers, because they were thieves...” Son cannot relish the sight of Valerian “chew a morsel of ham and drink white wine secure in the knowledge that he had defecated on two people who had dared to want some of his apples”. Son cannot also relish the idea of Jadine defending Valerian, “basking in the cold light that came from one of the killers of the world”.

Even the subservient Sydney and Ondine cannot take lightly the dismissal without even the courtesy of informing the dismissed. Son tells Valerian unambiguously: “You didn’t row eighteen miles to bring them here. They did. ... Two people are going to starve so your wife could play American mama and fool around in the kitchen”.

This results in Valerian asking Son to leave his house, immediately. Valerian cannot be questioned: “I am being questioned by these people, as if, as if I could be called into question!”

This in turn makes Ondine to retort, “I may be a cook, Mr. Street, but I’m a person too” and Sydney demanding that his wife “should have the same respect” as Valerian’s wife.

The confrontation leads to Ondine’s letting out a terrible and painful secret of Margaret’s abuse of Michel, when he had been a kid. “A little boy who she hurt so much he can’t even cry”.

The shocking revelation of the child abuse indulged by Margaret, makes Valerian, almost a recluse. The revelation, as an after-effect makes Jadine realise the significance of Son’s words:

“... white folks and black folks should not sit down and eat together”.

...
“It’s true”, he said, “They should work together sometimes, but they should not eat together or live together or sleep together. Do any of those personal things in life”.

Son also teaches Jadine how to feel love, to feel like a star:

You are by yourself, just shining there... star throbs. Over and over and over. Like this. Stars just throb and throb and throb and sometimes, when they can’t throb anymore, when they can’t hold it anymore, they fall out of the sky.

But it becomes obvious that the new found love between Son and Jadine cannot last long, for they are made of different tastes, yearnings and hopes. Son with his feet anchored in his ancient African tradition and Jadine, an arts graduate brought up by the whites and having toured in Europe, cannot hope to come together at a common meeting point. Son finds New York terrifying:

The street was choked with beautiful males who had found the whole business of being black and men at the same time too difficult and so they’d dumped it... the black people in white face playing black people in black face unnerved him.

Son cannot adjust himself to the fast track of New York: “No more moment to moment play-it-as-it- comes existence. That stomach required planning. Thinking through a move long before it was made”.
At Eloe, an African village reconstructed in the United States of America, Jadine finds life boring and terrifying. “If she (Jadine) was wanting air, there wasn’t any. It’s not possible, she thought, for anything to be this black”.

Rosa’s gazing down Jadine’s body and her offer of a kind of slip, wrinkled but clean-smelling, makes Jadine more uncomfortable:

She lay down in the slip under the sheet and her nakedness before Rosa lay down with her. No man had made her feel that naked, that unclothed. Leerers, lovers, doctors, artists – none of them had made her feel exposed. More than exposed. Obscene.

Eloe becomes a “burnt-out place”, with no life, “may be a past but definitely no future” and finally “no interest”.

Son realises,

Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be. One had a past, and the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands.

and questions such as, “Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?” remain unanswered. Jadine who finds Son, incompatible, abandons him.

After Jadine abandons Son, the novel moves at a quick pace with Son trying to follow Jadine to Isle des chevaliers to be told that she had already visited and left the island on her way to Paris. An almost blind Therese offers to take Son to the
island, but leaves him on the wrong side. He cannot go back to the main land; He has lost Jadine, irrevokably.


Otten remarks, “With its apparent poverty and ignorance and isolation, Eloe defines all the “blackness” Jadine has long struggled to escape. To Son it represents the opposite: self-worth, wholeness, and human values” (76) and states, “But he, (Son) too, is from the beginning a wanderer in search of self” (77).

Butler – Evans mentions:

... Toni Morrison brings to the fore an issue largely marginalized or even suppressed in her earlier works: the contentiousness between the desires of the mythical community and those of the Black woman whose existence is structured by historical and social circumstances different from those of the community. Jadine can be said to represent what had previously been “unpresentable”, the individual Black woman who deconstructs the notion of “the Black Woman”, a fictive construction generated by the ideological desires of a mythical community. (162)

The words of Harris,
The little "white" girl who has forgotten that she is black can return to her "whiteness" only by suppressing that blackness forever. She denies passion, spiritual affinity with black people, history, and the power of the past to influence the present or the future. (134-135)

and "Determined not to be like the female dog, to be used at the mercy of males, Jadine has resolved that she would never allow her basic femaleness to be her downfall; she will retain control at all costs" (136) make one realise that Jadine is not the poor, helpless Pecola and that she has transcended Sula.

It is relevant to conclude this chapter quoting the words of Otten:

In Toni Morrison's fiction characters one way or another enact the historical plight of blacks in American society. She offers no apology for her black female perspective... For all their complexity and diversity, the novels are woven together by common themes: the passage from innocence to experience, the quest for identity, the ambiguity of good and evil, the nature of divided self, and especially the concept of a fortunate fall... Blacks as frequently as whites inflict extreme physical and psychological violence on blacks: the Breedloves torment each other, and Cholly rapes his daughter, Eva Peace burns her son, and Nel and Sula betray the other self; ... Son takes revenge on the childlike Cheyenne, and Jadine abandons Son; ... Clearly,
Morrison wants us to see the most insidious form of evil in the malevolent ability of racism to misshape the human spirit.

Racism and oppression are not the exclusive properties of white Americans, however, nor are the blacks their only victims, as Morrison makes clear... The whiteness she castigates represents the dehumanizing cultural values of a society given over to profit, possession, and dominance. It is a whiteness worn by blacks as well as whites. Most of Morrison's characters, black and white, earn a measure of condemnation and sympathy. (95-96)

Thus Morrison's novels reveal the oppressor-oppressed relationship not confined to just one race, age group or sex, the relationship caused by violence, hatred and the blindness to recognise truth and practical realities. The novels reveal the plight of the oppressed women specifically, from Pecola to Sula as revealed in this study, and Jadine's inability to give up her ancestry leaving her in an unenviable plight. In other words, Morrison portrays a transition of her women – from zero image to independent individuality – a portrayal showing her deep concern for women.