Chapter III

THE RETRIEVAL STRATEGIES OF

TONI MORRISON

Toni Morrison has ceremoniously succeeded in carving a place of distinction for herself in American literature. This distinction has been augmented by her becoming a Nobel laureate in 1993. She is now one of the major literary figures of American fiction. She has produced some of the most artistically, historically and politically important works of the twentieth century. Some of the most scintillating and thematically surgical prose in American literature has also been attributed to her. The most important influence of Morrison is that her novels have created space for black and feminist texts, thereby affecting a creative change in the overwhelming male dominance in Afro-American literature. The central and recurring theme in the works of Toni Morrison is the issue of racism, bringing up along with it the crucial problem of the oppression of black women at the hands of both whites and black men. To be more precise, the issues she addresses are that of victimization of the blacks and the wounded black psyche, racial discrimination, the double jeopardy of black women, the search for identity and self definition in the blacks, and the emotional and psychological problems of Afro-Americans in trying to achieve a sense of white cultural codes.
Toni Morrison, her original name being Chloe Anthony Wofford, was born into a family whose ancestors were sharecroppers and who had bitter memories of racial violence. The sense of cultural identity was developed through her parents and grandparents from whom she inherited a rich Afro-American oral tradition and she also came into possession of a range of traditional folk tales, songs and myths.

Frantz Fanon, the political and cultural analyst, considered the works of the native intellectuals as a project of reclamation, committed to awakening his or her people. This is an apt description of Morrison’s works. Accounts of the experiences of her parents, her education, and her own recognition of her ancestry have enabled her to resist the cultural silencing of the marginalized by the dominant group. She tries to illuminate what is hidden within Afro-American culture and also across the boundaries of race, outside Afro-American culture. Her works sweep across the political, social, economic and historical constraints of her particular culture. They re-map the terrain of Afro-American cultural and social history. She has asserted that she wanted to write literature that is irrevocably and indisputably Black, because it is engaged in recognizing and verifying principles of black art. She also recognized that there is a powerful narrative functioning within an Afro-American culture and it informs a tradition.

The early influences and experiences of Morrison are reflected not
only in the texture, but also in the themes and forms of her fiction. Her novels depict dialectic of values, alternative ways of being black, or male or female or human. And the basic disparity the novels explore is the one her parents took for granted – the disparity between black humanity and white cultural values. This opposition brings into light the vileness of seduction and betrayal of black people by white culture. Instances can be drawn from *The Bluest Eye* where Pecola Breedlove is destroyed by her own, her mother’s and her community’s obsession with white standards of beauty. This opposition also produces the positive theme of the quest for cultural identity, as is the case of Milkman in *Song of Solomon* and also of Son in *Tar Baby* (1981).

Morrison is an ardent feminist. Her premises are that black women have been proto-feminists – aggressive, the objects of a labor history as oppressive as men’s and also required to do physical labor in competition with them. Due to the demands of the labor, because the requirements of the work were the same, the relation between black men and women turned out to be more of comradeship than the conventional pattern of male dominance / female subordination. Morrison’s ideas of feminism have been shaped by the influence of her family experience. She had witnessed how her parents confronted crisis together without addressing the system of gender divided responsibilities. She admires their partnership as comrades. But this dynamic of comradeship among the
black men and women has died out as blacks too began to participate in
the gender illness of culture.

Being an Afro-American, the novels of Morrison project an Afro-
American feminist consciousness. Her works trace the attempts of blacks
to define themselves and also celebrates the unique feminine cultural
values and qualities of resistance, excellence and integrity that had
informed black women’s past. She is gravely concerned about the
predicament of black women. She portrays black women who have
“nothing to fall back on, not maleness, not whiteness, not lady hood, not
anything. And out of the profound dissolution of her reality, she may
very well have invented herself” (1971, 63).

The novels of Morrison not only attempts to redefine a feminine
space for black women, but also seeks to establish that the foundation of
Afro-American culture is their ancestry. She asserts that through her
writings, she tries to find coherence in the world and also to sort out both
the individual and the collective past of the Afro-Americans. She stresses
the importance of the past because she believes that continuity between
past and present is very crucial in creating bonds, mutual obligations and
a shared communal history of struggle. In her essay “Rootedness:
Ancestor as Foundation” she maintains that if what is written as a novel
does not have anything to do with the village or the community or its
people, then that work isn’t just about anything. She says that her interest
lies not with the private exercise of her imagination, but to make her work political.

According to Morrison, black literature doesn’t simply mean works by black people or literature written about black people, or a literature that uses a certain mode of language. Several distinctive characteristics go into the making of black literature. The myths, metaphors and the elements of folklore and oral tradition are some of them. She also justifies the elements of mysticism that informs black art and the black belief system in general. There is the blending of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time, but neither of these ideologies is dominated by the other and this is the way the black people perceive the world. She claims that the blacks are the most practical people, but within that practicality they also accept the superstition and magic. Some of the belief systems and ideologies of the blacks were, as Morrison herself says, ‘discredited’ because black people were discredited. Another interesting aspect of the literature by blacks is the presence of an ancestor in their works. These ancestors are not just parents or other elders of the community but a sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective and they are the source of certain kind of wisdom. An insight into the themes of Morrison’s works will enable us to see how she works through to an establishment of a black self, a black feminine self,
the retrieval of an ancestry and also the establishment of the ethnic identity of the Afro-Americans through the discovery of the former factors.

The first product of Morrison's fictional endeavor came out in the form of *The Bluest Eye* in 1970. It was written during the emergence of a black aesthetic which was an important cultural weapon of black liberation movement. It is the story of a black American girl, Pecola, told through the voice of another black American girl Claudia. It deals with the psychological and emotional conflicts experienced by people and her ultimate psychological destruction as she judges herself by the standards set by the white cultural norms. Pecola is in constant quest for white values and wants to have blue eyes which she considers is the symbol of white beauty. She believes that blue eyes alone will help her in restoring her self-respect. This quest for white values has been installed in her by the context in which she lives. She is convinced by her family, classmates and community that she is ugly and she believes that blue eyes will make her beautiful and acceptable. However, when she finally recognizes that her eyes cannot be changed, her quest culminates in her total psychological annihilation. The emphasis of the novel is on racism which . . . abstracts the color of the living body into non-colors of extreme value, black and white within this organization; black represents the shade of evil, the devil's aspect, night,
separation, loneliness, sin, dirt, excrement, the inside of the body, and white represents the mark of good, the token of innocence, purity, cleanness, spirituality, virtue and hope.

(Kovel, 1984, 232)

The second born of Morrison’s literary ardor is *Sula* which appeared in 1973. The novel traces the family histories of two young black women, Sula Peace and Nel Wright. Morrison also focuses on military induced psychosis of a black veteran, Shadrock who tries to conquer his fear of death by externalizing it into a once-a-year ritual, “National Suicide Day.” The novel is a multilevel narrative that pivots on the history of a number of people – history of Nel’s mother, Helen, who is the daughter of a whore and insists on a life of arid, gentrified and conventional inability for her daughter, history of Shadrock, the schizophrenic, and the history of a man-loving female dynasty headed by Eva Peace who is Sula’s grandmother. But prime focus is on the histories of Nel and Sula and also the relationship between the two. Morrison has said that her original intention in *Sula* was to do something with good and evil. Nel is the conventionally good woman and Sula is a classic type of evil according to Morrison. But towards the end of the novel, the evil factors in Sula simply help others define themselves. Both Sula and Nel are trying to create a Black feminine identity as they discover that their freedom and triumph are inhibited because they are neither white nor
male. Thus *Sula* is a rehearsal of Afro-American women to forge an identity, and also to win freedom in the face of racial and sexual discrimination. *Sula* brought Toni Morrison national recognition as a writer.

For Morrison, black history is the core of black identity. Morrison holds that it is not in forging of new myths, but it is in the re-discovering the old ones that the clue to black identity lies. For black people, acquaintance with black history aids not only in defining what they really were, but also what they really are. It is this view of history that feeds the central concern of Morrison’s third novel *Song of Solomon* (1977). It is centered on Milkman Dead’s quest for identity, which becomes fruitful when he discovers his roots in ancestry. This novel dramatizes dialectical approaches to the challenge of black life. It is a mythic search for self and group and it is a politically and psychologically complex novel of explicit and implicit critique. It is a critique of ownership psychology, patriarchal culture and obsessive searches for narratives of authentic and stable “truth.” The narrative explores the ways in which individuals and communities construct reality and political formations. This novel won the fiction award of the National Book Critic’s Circle in 1978 and also the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award.

*Song of Solomon* was followed by *Tar Baby* in 1981. It has been described as an allegory of colonialism based on the tale of the Rabbit
and the Tar Baby. Morrison here portrays the impact of white culture on a black woman who shuns her indigenous culture and tries to imitate the dominant culture in order to identify with the dominant ideology. The central characters are William Green called Son and Jadine, niece of Sydney and Ondine Child, the black butler and cook to the Streets. She has had an elite education with the aid of Valerian Street, a retired white candy manufacturer. In the allegory of the Rabbit and the Tar baby, Son is the rabbit and Jadine the tar baby. The love affair between Son and Jadine is a conflict between opposing attitudes towards colonialism and opposing ways of being black. Jadine has been brought up almost as a white middle or upper-class young woman by the Streets. This has romanticized for her the white cultural values. Thus she always attempts to enter the white domain and tries to develop a white identity despite her blackness. Son recognizes the colonizer in Valerian Street and tries to rescue her from the alien who represents the colonizer who had destroyed the centuries old black culture in no time. While Jadine runs after an alien culture, with her finely nurtured artifice, Son tries to retain her to the black identity by making her confront her blackness. Thus the conflict between the life and humanism of black culture and the deadness and materialism of white culture reflects that between individual identity and black identity. The novel very clearly states that one’s identity can be forged only through one’s past, and by identification with that past.
Morrison’s next novel *Beloved* (1987) won her the Pulitzer Prize and is the most celebrated of her novels. This is also a history and a representation of the complexities of love and sexual attraction. The novel explores the psychological and physical impacts of slavery on Afro-Americans and its debilitating results on successive generations. *Beloved* throws light on the alienation of slave’s body and its exploitation for labor and also of surplus production like affection from either male or female, the children and also the mothering care of the slave woman. The text is centered on Sethe who escapes with her children from slavery but tries to kill her children since the tentacle of slavery follows her. She succeeds in killing one of them and even long after the end of slavery the spirit of the dead baby Beloved keeps visiting her house. Also Paul, another part of Sethe’s slave past appears and rekindles her memory of the past. The characters learn to love because as survivors of a time when love had taken as its objects abstractions that could not be taken away by the owners, they realize that freedom finally allows a satisfaction that results from reconsidering everyone’s connections to everyone else and to memory. *Beloved* foregrounds the dialogic tendencies of memory and its imaginative capacity to construct and reconstruct the significance of the past. The novel also portrays the incredible psychic power that ordinary men and women had to exercise to resist the devastation of slavery. Morrison asserts that memories of a slave past is necessary to
resist contemporary and future injustices.

The great migration of the blacks from the rural South to the North to Harlem in search of a shelter from racial violence is the backdrop of Morrison’s *Jazz*, which appeared in 1992. Along with problems of race and of a slave past, the complexities of psyche entangled in the crisis created by migration to the city – dislocation, dispossession, migration, assimilation and the questions of place and identity – the story moves around the loss of love and understanding between an ageing couple, Joe and Violet Trace. In trying to find a better living standard, both seem to have drifted apart and Joe Trace takes to passion for a young girl, Dorcas, over whom he acquires a positive vision of himself and a self-idealization. Once he loses control over his object of desire, Joe Trace murders Dorcas and it reveals male attempts to keep control over his object of desire. Violet Trace seems to be indifferent to Joe Trace’s activities, but finally gets jealous of the girl that she attempts to deface the corpse at the funeral service and then later on she tries to learn more and more about the girl. The actions of the couple can be attributed to their past when we unveil it. Joe had been an abandoned child, whose parents left without trace, hence the surname Trace. Violet also had undergone bitter moments in early days. Her father had deserted them and her grandmother took care of the children. The friendships that Violet makes with other female members of her community and
especially Dorcas’s aunt enables her to regain a meaningful self and a meaningful existence as a result of which Joe and Violet reach a mutual understanding. The friendship Violet develops at the wake of Dorcas’s death and also the burial of her own “old” marriage makes possible a different Violet and a more complicated new love affair. Nothing in Jazz, however, is completely resolved or revealed. The possibilities are just reconfigured, the characters are repositioned and a new perspective is put to play and re-play.

Morrison’s later novel, *Paradise* (1998), is a critique on black cultural commonsense as predicated on attempted male colonization of female bodies and psyches. The plot is located in Ruby, a town in Oklahoma, created out of a promise, a covenant that comes out of U.S racial history. The town is the concrete embodiment of a foundational myth of purity, authenticity, and power which is represented by the oven which is the unifying entity which holds the community together and also keeps the memories of past alive. The novel focuses on the lives of a couple of women who occupies the convent in the outskirts of Ruby. The convent is a place free of male control, of healing and co-existence that does not demand erasure of individual identity as its price for making community. But their non-conformity to the ethics of the Ruby community results in its attempt to destroy them, in fact, their liberty to be a female self. The convent emerges as a challenge to the older ways
and the older battles that produced Ruby. The novel is notable for its representations of black history and it is told as an interplay of larger forces and structures of power, as a force resisted and opposed and as the intertwining of family narrative within a wider frame work of larger stories. *Paradise* presents not only the past history of Ruby, which is a re-built town of Haven, but it also portrays the present. Ruby is the paradise of black community where there is no external white influence of any sort, no racial discrimination and no cases of sexual sabotage.

Morrison’s novels have made an impression for their inventive blend of realism and fantasy, an elaborate and unsparing social analysis and passionate philosophical concerns. The tension between myth and reality is what makes Morrison’s pervasive symbolism work. The credibility of Milkman’s leap and Pecola’s madness brings to life the metaphoric bases of these novels. This makes *Songs of Solomon* a recreation of the legend of the flying Africans, and *The Bluest Eye* an allusive tale. The combination of social observation with an allusive commentary gives her fictions the symbolic quality of myth. Morrison’s world and characters are inescapably involved with the problems of perception, definition and meaning and they direct our attention to Morrison’s own views and its implications.

Morrison places her characters within a world defined by its blackness and by the surrounding white society that both violates and
denies it. And instead of picturising the invisibility of black people in white life, which has often been the motif in black literature, she transports the white society’s ignorance of that concrete, vivid and diverse world of blacks. The excruciating influence of the hostile and demeaning surrounding society is emphasized by a consistent pattern of naming, rather misnaming because for Morrison power is the power to name, to define reality and perception. For instance, the black locality named Bottom in *Sula*, despite being up in the hills, is named so by white man’s greed to convince the black community that they are being offered a place at the bottom of heaven, the place closest to heaven. Another instance can be taken from *Song of Solomon*. The name of one of the important characters is Macon Dead and the surname, Dead was thrust on Macon by a drunken Yankee in the union Army. The name of streets in *Song of Solomon* also depict how the black experience is denied by the fathers who named Mains Avenue and Mercy Hospital, and blacks called “Not Doctor Street,” and “No Mercy Hospital.” The change from “Doctor Street” (as blacks originally called Mains Avenue) to “Not Doctor Street” shows a lingering reluctance to accept white naming; but it also reveals the loss of the original power to name.

Women of Morrison’s novels are enlightened in the sense that they discover “that they [are] neither white nor male and that all freedom and triumph [are] forbidden to them” (1973, 44). Womanhood is also
regarded as the “Other,” just like blackness, and dilemma of a woman in a patriarchal society is equal to that of the blacks in a racist society. And this makes the condition of black women even more deplorable because they are twice removed to the state of the “Other.” They are the “Other” of the “Other” (the blacks). They are black women in a society whose female ideal is a white “doll baby,” blonde and blue-eyed Shirley Temple. The black women are looked upon as the anti-thesis of American beauty. They are doubly defined as failures and outsiders and they make natural scapegoats for those seeking symbols of displaced emotions and make them the object of his displaced fury.

It is not only men who make black women scapegoats. Even black women find scapegoats in other black women, as is the case with Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*. This can be seen in the words of Claudia:

> All of us – all who know her – felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. . . . We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. (163)

Pecola is the epitome of the victim in a world that reduces persons to objects and then makes them feel inferior as objects. Pecola is an outsider in the system and this position makes her lose her sanity. These scapegoats, who are outsiders, are frightening to the community which is dispossessed and peripheral. Sula’s refusal to be confined within the
conventional role is condemned by her community. She refuses to conform to the shape molded by her society and her shapelessness gives shape to the other women in the society:

Their convictions of Sula’s evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst. (1973, 152)

Sula’s evil is her yearning for freedom and this makes her an outsider in her community. In a sick and power-obsessed society, even freedom becomes distorted. This distorted view upon Sula, gives other women of the community the ability to define themselves.

Through the novels of Morrison from *The Bluest Eye* to *Paradise*, she projects a black feminist consciousness. The repression of black female identity is a consistent theme throughout her works. Not only the erasure of female identity, but the issue of identity of blacks in general is a concern of Morrison. Morrison’s women generally refuse to be delimited by the oppressive patriarchal system – both the white and the black male world. Morrison’s literary triumph lies in her skill in describing the experience of black women in America. Most of the black
women writers of the latter half of the twentieth century gave expression to black female experience partly because they wanted to give expression to themselves and partly because they wanted to give voice to all the black women remaining excluded or marginalized from the literary mainstream. In an interview to the Newsweek after the Nobel announcement in October 1993, she said:

Our silence has been long and deep. In canonical literature, we have always been spoken for. Or we have been spoken to. Or we have appeared as jokes or as flat figures suggesting sensuality. Today we are taking back the narrative, telling our story. (18 October 1993)

The Bluest Eye traces the extent to which racism affects the identity, the fantasies and the sexuality of black women and men too. Born and brought up in a world informed by white domination which defines the meaning of beauty and truth, Pecola often finds herself at odds with the hostile white norms. The story opens with the script of a children’s story: “Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy” (1). This red door provides the child with entry to a social discourse which will shape a child’s social interaction. This script with which the novel opens is repeated three times with the words getting closer and closer each time,
until finally it is woven into a tight fabric. At a glance, the final script seems to lose its meaning. The reader is alienated from the significance of the words: “Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisveryprettiericisthefamilymotherfatherdickandjaneliveinthegreenandwhitehou setheyareveryhappy” (1973). The sentences are coalesced. They are not closed and they go on infinitely. This is the normality a black child has to identify with and this will engender a sense of alienation in the childhood consciousness and also a sense of worthlessness created as a result of the failure to identify with the standard discourse forms. Having been instilled with the perception of herself as the ugly “Other,” both by her parents and the society around her, including the black, Pecola perceives around her only images that are disjointed from the discourse of her understanding. She does not understand why the entire world agreed that “a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured” (14). For the adults, older girls, shops, magazines and newspapers, the blue-eye, yellow-hair and pink-skin were the set standards of beauty. Pecola lacked all these traits and what more, the society looked upon her as the ugliest of all. For the very same reason, she destroyed these dolls.

One of the effects of discourse which makes blackness a concept of excruciating visibility is the suppression of all other differentiations beneath it. If this discourse provides no space for the self, this would
result in self annihilation. This process begins first with the confrontation of the self with white society, then becomes a conscious and then an unconscious activity. Pecola's visit to the sweet shop has stated the deteriorating process in Pecola's identity. The process of self-extinction which had started with the yearning for white standards of beauty, especially for blue eyes, it reached a major turning point when the shop keeper, Mr. Yacobowske, extends to her a gaze as if she was non-existent. The gaze of the shop keeper stirs in her not a sense of recognition of an individual identity, but creates a vacuum within her. She recognizes that people, even the blacks view her with distaste in their eyes because of her blackness. So Pecola, in spite of her being a young girl is very much aware of her femininity. But through the eyes of the white shop keeper, we behold how her femininity is erased due to her blackness. She recognizes that the source of contempt, the source of her non-existence is her blackness. Thus the white gaze translates for Pecola who she is by virtue of her skin and features. Her sense of existence and her sense of belonging to the world is imbued in her through a number of inanimate things she saw and experienced around her because these were the things she knew and they were the things that made her feel that she too was a part of the world in which human beings gave her no value. For her,

[t]hey were the codes and touchstones of the world capable
of translation and possession. She owned the crack that made her stumble, she owned the clumps of dandelions whose white heads, last fall, she had blown away; whose yellow heads, this fall, she peered into. And owning them made her part of the world, and the world a part of her. (36)

Through these codes and touchstones, Pecola recognizes the beauty upon which she relies and which she understands as her own. The part of the world she is able to articulate, however, has no corresponding moment in white consciousness and before the shopkeeper she finds herself robbed of language and dumb in the loneliness of her perceptions. Robbed of her language and robbed of her sense of worth, the only means of articulation for her is anger. Since the dandelions do not return the affection which leaps out of her, she thinks that they are ugly. She also recognizes her own ugliness. She recedes into shame and anger wells up in her and she finds that impulse very charming because it gives her a sense of being: “Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging” (38).

Pecola’s experiences had always slammed on her ugliness. She was the scapegoat mentioned earlier. The boys of her school utilized her ugliness to define their own blackness, which they hold in contempt. Their pent up emotions of scorn and outrage at their blackness, at their
own racial experiences are spent on Pecola. It is a sort of purgation for them. These boys overlook the fact that they are black themselves and the sleeping habits of Pecola is not her fault and also the fact that their fathers might also have a similar habit. But their insult has its roots in their own racial experiences:

It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it up all into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds – cooled and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path. (50)

Pecola’s family is called the Breedloves. But the irony in the name is that the parents instead of breeding love in their children, Sammy and Pecola, breed hatred in them. It is to this the self-hatred of Pecola can be attributed. The house instead of being again the nest for breeding love is a place of dislocation and disjointed images. Pecola sees a black father enraged with the impotence which burned in his body when white men enacted a vicious visual rape, a black mother whose fancied identity with the white film stars of the dark cinemas smashed along with her front tooth and a gray and ugly home. Pecola is also psychically dislocated owing to her desire for blue eyes. Pecola approaches Soaphead Church as
her last resort to gain blue eyes. She had prayed to God for long time but without success and now she feels that Soaphead Church, who was believed to possess holy power, could help her. But the failure of Pecola to obtain blue eyes by no means finally resulted in her psychic breakdown. In Pecola we witness the tumbling of an individual owing to the reasons that she is a black and a female who is ugly. Pecola’s downfall comes about when she becomes a victim of her wrong values which do not belong to her community.

The maintenance of a black identity and a female identity by black women in the face of racial discrimination is very well elucidated through the character of Claudia, and also of her sister Frieda. Claudia and Frieda are also victims of racism. But they never let anybody insult them because they are blacks. When the school boys attack Pecola and shower insults on her blackness, Frieda hurled herself on the boys to rescue Pecola. She puts up a fight with them with all her ferocity that she could summon up. And when Maureen Peal insults Pecola on the song sung by the boys, Claudia comes to the rescue of the dumb Pecola who doesn’t put up a resistance. When Maureen calls Pecola’s father “black daddy” (56), Claudia’s response is violent:

“Black? Who you calling black?”

“You!”

“You think you so cute!” I swung at her and missed, hitting
Pecola in the face. Furious at my clumsiness, I threw my notebook at her, but it caught her in the small of her velvet back, for she had turned and was flying across the street against traffic. (56)

The Mac Teer girls, Frieda and Claudia could withstand and oppose racial discrimination and also any attempt to curb their identity as a black or a female because their parents had instilled in them a sense of self unlike Breedloves, especially Pauline Breedlove, Pecola's mother who hated her daughter for being ugly. Mac Teers have the inner strength to withstand the poverty and discrimination of a racist society and to provide an environment in which their children can grow. The Breedloves on the other hand lacks this strength. The self-consciousness instilled on Claudia protects and helps her to overcome the deadly destruction that befalls Pecola. Claudia is presented in contrast to Pecola. Unlike Pecola who fondles the image of blue-eyed and blonde-haired girls, Claudia destroys them and the values they represent. The egocentricity of her childhood causes Claudia to reject which is alien and threatening to her. By dismantling the doll, she responds with her anger, turning topsy turvy the negative socializing values the doll represents. The awareness of her rejection because of her blackness develops in her an acute anger towards those who reject her:

Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey
voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world. What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important? And so what? Guileless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness. Jealousy we understood and thought natural – a desire to have what somebody else had; but envy was a strange new feeling for us. And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The “Thing” to fear was the “Thing” that made “her” beautiful and, not us. (58)

Claudia’s consciousness helps her to understand and interpret the tragic end of Pecola. She probes into the causes of Pecola’s tragedy and she metaphorically describes it: “It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding” (3). She means to say that American values destroy people who find it difficult to adjust to it. She recognizes her position as a black, as an outsider and we see that she has learned to live with her situation. Her words exemplify this:

Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved but
anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weakness and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment. Our peripheral existence, however, was something we had learned to deal with – probably because it was abstract. (11)

Claudia’s maturity and understanding enables her to drive into the depth of Pecola’s descent into madness. Claudia discovers the role of community in Pecola’s ultimate destruction. She discerns how Pecola’s ugliness, her awkwardness, her poverty and even her familial relationships are used as a touchstone to describe their worthiness by the black community around her. Their identity was built up against her negation. Claudia’s words again in the last pages of *The Bluest Eye* can be quoted to illustrate it:

All of us – all who knew her – felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used – to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our eyes on her, padded
our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of
our strength. (163)

Pecola, on her part, is trying to cater to the values of American
beauty, thereby curbing her own identity as a black, as an individual in
herself. She is the “little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of
her blackness and see the world with blue eyes” (138). For her the door
to the world around her and the medium of articulating herself in this
world is through the blue eyes. Unlike Claudia, Pecola can neither turn
herself to the situation around her nor can she bring herself to develop a
resisting identity in her. Thus in these two female characters Morrison
reveals how the euro-centric standards of beauty bring chaos into the
lives of black women. Through Pecola, Morrison reveals the
deteriorating influence of the euro-centric white value systems and in the
character of Claudia, Morrison depicts how a self-conscious black
woman can evade the extreme effects of racism and sexism if she trusts
herself.

An exemplary instance of a black woman’s quest for self and discovery
of an identity is her Sula. The leading character of novel Sula creates her
own self and also succeeds in coming to terms with her identity as a
black woman. The novel beautifully portrays the hurdles that come up
when a black woman explores herself and tries to assert her personal
liberty. When they try to do so, they become outcasts. The theme that
Morrison unfolds in *Sula* is the two fold predicament of black woman – the effect of racism upon black identity formation, and the effect of racism and sexism upon the identity formation of the black female. Racism forces blacks to give up their traditional values in order to succeed in American society. They must leave their native communities and alienate themselves from their earlier traditional lives. Thus blacks in general are subject to double isolation and black women are subject to multiple isolation and suppression.

The women of Toni Morrison do not bow their heads in silence to suppression at the hands of whites and black men. We see how Claudia’s perception allows her to assert her identity both in the face of racism and sexism. Sula of *Sula* is a heroic character and her heroism is rendered by rejecting the submissive female role approved by the people of her community at Bottom. Her refusal to be a woman on their terms is the necessary condition of her heroism. Non conformism of Sula is condemned by her community and her character is contrasted with a woman called Nel Wright whose character conforms to the conventional mode of female virtue. When Sula is judged by the traditional model of female virtue, defined as taking care of others and keeping order, she seems immoral.

In *Sula*, Morrison beautifully shows how the concepts of good and evil are related to definitions of woman in a society. Sula is a complex
figure. The first part of the novel traces the early life of Sula and her growth reflects an inner process of disengagement. Her various experiences and especially the one where in she hears her mother say that she loves her but doesn’t like her, results in a gradual de-centering from the role of active participant to that of passive observer, and there on to a conscious self exclusion. This process can be captured through the different scenes where in she moves from active resistance to a passive withdrawn individual. This can be traced from the episode where she actively faces down Nel’s tormentors by lopping off her own finger; through Chicken Little’s accident where she is both the initiator and the helpless onlooker as the little boy flies out into the water as Sula loses grip over him as she swings him around; to the day when she stands by, watching with passive complicity, as her mother burns to death; and culminating when, at her best friend’s wedding, she refuses her involvement as even as the observer, turns her back and leaves Medallion. Sula’s return after ten years marks no symbolic reintegration into the community, and her central position within it serves mainly to offset a total inner detachment both from others and, more disturbingly from herself. Her refusal to live according to the values and norms of her community, i.e., to marry and settle down, and the distinctly different quality about her which causes the townspeople to see her as evil, have often been seen as contributing to the picture of a young woman suffering
and fighting for the right to choose her own path in life.

Sula produces an unusual world where the distinct characters in this world have unusual histories too. Within this unusual world there is still another world which is an exclusive domain of three women – Eva Peace, Hannah Peace and Sula Peace. Sula is born into a family where the sole dictators are women. Her grandmother Eva Peace is the life-blood of the family and is the archetypal mother figure. She provides sustenance and life to the family through the sacrifice of her leg. Though her sacrifice places her in a positive light, there is also a terrible part in her – she is capable just not of sacrificing herself, but she is also capable of sacrificing others if the situation arises. She sacrifices her son, Plum.

When we trace the family history of Sula we will be able to find that Eva and Hannah, Sula’s mother, are conventional to an extent. They confirm to convention by marrying and raising families. But apart from this, their activities show that Sula has developed her sense of rebellion and non-conformity from her mother and her grandmother. Eva very much enjoys the company of men except for her husband who abandoned her early in life and whom she hated – the only colored man she hated was Boy Boy, her husband. It was this hatred for her husband that sustained Eva and gave her the feeling of happiness and safety:

Knowing that she would hate him long and well filled her with pleasant anticipation, like when you know you are
going to fall in love with someone and you wait for the 
happy signs. Hating Boy Boy, she could get on with it and 
have the safety, the thrill, the consistency of that hatred as 
long as she wanted or needed it to define and strengthen her 
or protect her from routing vulnerabilities. (Once when 
Hannah accused her of hating colored people, Eva said she 
only hated one, Hanna’s father Boy Boy, and it was hating 
him that kept her alive and happy. (53)

Eva’s married life with Boy Boy was an unhappy one because he 
was much of a womanizer than a husband. He had been engaged in the 
company of other woman than his family and Eva was left with the 
responsibility of her three children – Hannah, Eva and the son Ralph who 
was called Plum. When Boy Boy deserted Eva after five years of married 
life, Eva was left with 1.65 Dollars, five eggs, three beats and a confused 
life with no idea of what she should do or how she should feel. She was 
very much pre-occupied by the needs of her children that she did not 
have time even to feel angry. Even that emotion had to be held back for 
two years. The pressing needs of the situation – the need for money made 
her to adopt a drastic measure – she sacrificed her one leg on a railway 
track so that she could claim the insurance and use the money to nourish 
and protect her family. When her husband returned after about two years, 
he returned with another woman and this gave expression to her fury and
hatred towards Boy Boy, and this hatred for Boy Boy developed into love for another man and sustained her for the rest of her life. And along with her property this was the one thing that her successors inherited or rather she has bequeathed to her successors, Hannah and Sula:

With the exception of Boy Boy, those Peace women loved all men. It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters. Probably, people said, because there were no men in the house, no men to run it. But actually that was not true. The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake. Eva, old as she was, with one leg, had a regular flock of gentleman callers and although she did not participate in the act of love, there was a good deal of teasing and pecking and laughter. (59)

The men around Eva loved her for what she is and always tried to keep her happy. Even when Eva argued with them furiously, she did it with manlove that made these men feel satisfied with her disagreement.

Eva’s daughter, Hannah follows the path of her mother in manlove. But hers was a different kind of relationship. While Eva had been assertive about her authority and always argued with, but still made them feel their convictions solidified by her disagreement, Hannah was not all demanding. Though her husband died after a short period of married life, when her daughter Sula was just three years old, Hannah never bothers
to remarry. She adopts a “sooty” (44) life style and doesn’t accept the support of a man in her life. But she enjoys the company of men and even extends her relationship to a sexual level. Just like her mother Hannah is also adored by men for simply what she is. She puts no pressure or demand on her gentlemen callers. Men loved her for this reason, and more than that they use her to complement their self. She gives them a sense of completeness and makes them feel their worthiness:

While Eva tested and argued with her men, leaving them feeling as though they had been in combat with a worthy, if amiable, foe, Hannah rubbed no edges, made no demands, made the man feel as though he were complete and wonderful just as he was – he didn’t need fixing – and so he relaxed and swooned in the Hannah-light that shown on him simply because he was. (61)

Hannah does not need any intimate relationship with anyone. What she needs is a feeling of fulfillment through “some touching every day.” And for her, “sleeping with someone implied . . . a measure of trust and a definite commitment” (62). Since she has no reservations about the choice of her men and she practically welcomed any man who came her way, the women of the town disliked her and gossiped about her. Thus her friendship with other women is short lived. She just rejects the norms of the society and refuses to be entangled in its shackles. She
attaches no passion to her relationships and does not want to be a wife, a lover or a prostitute. Hannah never feels the need to be possessed by any man. But the men around her felt a responsibility towards her because of the fact that Hannah made them feel their self, their identity, in her presence. Though the women of the town were exasperated because Hannah was unlike them in every way, the men of Medallion always defended her:

The men, surprisingly never gossiped about her. She was unquestionably a kind and generous woman and that, coupled with her extra ordinary beauty and funky elegance of manner made them defend her and protect her from any vitriol that new comers or their wives might spill. (63)

Thus Hannah and Eva Peace created a space for themselves in Medallion, without the so called protective wings of male domination. They have built up a domain of their own and have created a value system suiting their realm.

A black woman’s struggle towards freedom and self hood is best portrayed in Sula, the granddaughter of Eva Peace. Though Eva Peace lives in relation to the society and Hannah too, the novel begins and ends with an exposition of individual rather than group fulfillment. Sula dismisses herself from the ties and codes that bind the people of Bottom, and Sula goes in search of selfhood. In her quest for selfhood, Sula
comes across Nel Wright, a girl of same age. Medallion is a self-destructive, closed world that functions at the expense of the self-esteem of its individual members. Sula and Nel become friends because they recognize that as black girls and as females they have no worth, no esteem and no free existence. Both the children recognize this fact and their meeting is a turning point in their respective lives. Nel had recognized this early in her life after her visit to New Orleans. Her discriminating experience as a black girl throughout her journey to and from New Orleans had rendered her this recognition of her self as “Me” (43). She doesn’t want herself to be the daughter of anybody but herself:

“I’m me,” she whispered. “Me.”

Nel didn’t know quite what she meant, but on the other hand she knew exactly what she meant.

“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. (43)

The finding of her self gives Nel the strength to cultivate friendship with Sula in spite of her mother. This relationship develops into a mutual complementariness. Soon enough both Sula and Nel discover that each of them is incomplete by herself. This idea of Nel and Sula representing two halves of a person reverberates throughout the novel. Not only are the two of them complementary to each other but in
each other’s company, they are able to develop their own attitude towards life, they are able to develop their own individualistic perceptions, different from that of the community’s:

In the safe harbor of each other’s company they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things. . . . Joined in mutual admiration they watched each day as though it were a movie arranged for their amusement. The new thing they were now discovering was men. (75-76)

Sula develops her intense friendship with Nel and both of them receive a sense of security, love and identity which their community denies them. And since they share the common bond of being a black, a female, and of the same age, this gives them the strength and courage to create themselves; each was a fertile ground for the other to grow on.

Though Sula and Nel have developed a strong bond between them because of shared affinities, they differ from each other. If one (Nel) is the traditional counterpart, Sula represents a liberalist. Nel confines herself to the traditional role assigned to her by the community and through this she succeeds in retaining a social identity acceptable to her community, sacrificing the self, the individual identity she had once attained through Sula. She forfeits her independence in response to masculine need. She sacrifices the freedom and independent outlook that
she had created for herself with Sula. Nel assumes the role of a black woman based on the status of working-class black men. Following her mothers self-effacing model, she submerges her identity in Jude’s when she marries him. Jude Greene chooses Nel for his wife because he finds these qualities, which the society calls good, in her. He finds that she can define him as a man and also care for him and always be there for him. It was his “determination to take on a man’s role anyhow that made him press Nel about settling down” (109). He chose her because she was “the girl who had always been kind, who had never seemed hell-bent to marry, who made the whole venture seem like his idea, his conquest” (109-110). Though Sula had always made Nel feel complete, the pain of Jude Greene touches Nel and convinces her that her need of Sula and her friendship is much less than Jude’s need of her. She even had a feeling that Jude gave her quite a different kind of fulfillment because he saw in her what she herself had not yet noticed in her:

Nel’s response to Jude’s shame and anger selected her away from Sula. And greater than her friendship was this new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly. She didn’t even know she had a neck until Jude remarked on it, or that her smile was anything but the spreading of her lips until he saw it as a small miracle. (111)

The efforts of Nel’s mother, Helene’s, attempts at negating Nel’s
attempts to attain an identity, to attain a self, become fruitful. Helene is class conscious and precise about her manners, manipulates and turns her into an obedient daughter. She erases the spontaneity of Nel and her rigid self-righteous moral code gives Nel a model for martyrdom. The liberalist in Nel was curtailed by the creeds of her mother and Sula was the only means of her purgation because only with her Nel could be her free self. Thus Nel reduces herself to the role of a traditional black woman or rather any woman whose meaning of existence is rendering meaning to her man and she sacrifices her identity for Jude’s through her marriage to him: “The two of them together would make one Jude” (110). Nel loses the identity that Sula once made possible for her. Consequently when Nel marries, Sula gets alienated from her and she leaves Medallion.

Sula returns to Medallion after ten years. She returns not as the person who had left, but as a liberated woman. It is not merely Sula’s expedition away from Medallion that liberates her from conventionality. Sula’s independence is the product of her background. Her complete liberation from the suffocating grasps of convention is only enhanced by her leaving Medallion for some time. Sula becomes hardy and self-reliant because of her upbringing. She has an unstable relationship with her mother and Hannah’s unconventional mothering liberates Sula from lifelong dependency on others. When Sula overhears Hannah’s words: “... I
love Sula. I just don’t like her. . . . They different people, you know” (178). She recognizes herself as distinct from her mother and from there on she gathers strength to live an independent life. But the independent life Sula adopted breaking away from the conventions and the societal norms, infuriated the women of Bottom and made her evil in the eyes of her community. The pain and misery caused by their hatred gave her a sense of pleasure.

She was unlike her mother Hannah, who was also unconventional, in her experimental life:

Hannah had been a nuisance, but she was complementing the woman, in a way by wanting their husbands. Sula was trying them out and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow. So the women, to justify their own judgment, cherished their men more, soothed the pride and vanity Sula had bruised. (148-149)

While Hannah gave men a feeling of completeness in her presence and a consciousness of their self, Sula never bothered to complement anybody. Even Nel, whom she had recognized as “the closest thing to both an other and a self” (153) early in her life, is discovered as not her complementary self. She discovers “that she and Nel was not one and the same thing” (153). Eva and Hannah, who have also defied the norms of the community, had found fulfillment in giving birth to babies, though they
had not loved their children, as they ought to have is different matter. But for Sula, her meaning of life is not creating anybody, but creating a space for herself, and an identity for herself: “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (121).

Even though Sula had easy ways with men, she discovered that no lover could even become a comrade like a woman and she also came to understand that no woman could ever be her complementary self, even Nel. She comes to the conclusion that she can find her self not in anybody else, but in her own self:

She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be – for a woman. And that no one would ever be that version of herself, which she sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand. There was only her own mood and whim, and if that was all there was, she decided to turn the naked hand toward it, discover it and let others become as intimate with their own selves as she was. (156)

Sula’s rebelliousness is manifested in a number of ways by being elusive and indifferent to the established codes of conduct. She is not preoccupied with what is going on in the world around her, but concerned with what is going on within her in her mind. Her remark regarding her love for men elucidates this: “I never loved no man because he was worth
it. Worth didn’t have nothing to do with it . . . my mind did. That’s all” (183). She has got her mind and what goes on within it and this gives her full possession of herself. She has no commitment to the people around her. “. . . she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her” (153). She is free of any ego, has no ambition or desire for wealth and she doesn’t demand attention from anybody. She chooses her life according to her own whims and fancies. Thus, by being aggressive and defiant, Sula fabricates an identity and a self-fulfillment. But in her attempt to attain herself, Sula helps other women of Medallion to be what they are. She helps Nel recognize herself and others too: “Sula never competed; she simply helped others define themselves” (124).

Sula refuses to be powerless and subordinate till the end. She is claiming the kind of freedom and adventurousness Morrison admires in black men and abandons her caretaking responsibilities when she feels that it might curb her autonomy and safety that she enjoys. She rejects the proposition of having to surrender her independence as a woman at the hands of a chauvinistic society: “You say I am a woman and colored. Ain’t that the same as being a man?” (181). Sula invents her own form rather than conform to a form invented by the society. Sula wants to live a life of her own. She does not want anybody to create her either. On her
deathbed she is satisfied and happy because she feels that she has been able to unveil her feminine identity and she could call her experiences in life “mine” because it is not a contribution from anybody, but her own invention: “But my lonely is ‘mine.’ Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed to you. . . . A second-hand lonely” (182). Sula lives ambitiously and even on her deathbed, when Nel looks for signs of remorse, loneliness and self doubt, what she finds is a contentment: “Every colored woman in this country . . . [is] dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I’m going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world” (182).

Sula’s acceptance of the reality of death, the end of things, enables her to eject herself forward into the future to go forward unafraid. In contrast, Nel’s false self and fear of change represent not stoicism but living death. Rather than being betrayed by Sula, Nel betrays herself. When Nel regains her old idea of Sula, she rediscovers herself. When Nel realizes Sula’s legacy, a “soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze” (220). She discerns that it was not Sula who had betrayed her by her malevolence and obscenity. She realizes that it was not Jude she had been missing but Sula. She cried for her loss and it was a cry that “had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow” (221).

Nel’s cry is an acclamation of Sula’s undaunted experimental life.
It confirms Sula’s choice to live for herself, giving nothing but also asking nothing and yet, in her freedom, enabling others to be themselves as freely – liberating all from the web of guilt and need. In acting, Sula realizes her dreams; in suffering and comprehending, passionately rather than passively, Nel finally does too. *Sula* is a woman’s novel in the sense that it is concerned with the self-perception and her subsequent reactions to the concept of self. The novel deals with the perception of a woman who becomes conscious of being black and female. She not only raises her consciousness but stirs it in Nel too: “Talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself” (124). And this helped Nel to define herself. Sula recognizes that there is no love left for the black woman and therefore, she must love herself. And to acquire self-love, she does what pleases her though she is discarded by society as a pariah. She comes to terms with herself and defines the male and white dominant societal norms. She creates her own standards of life and tries to live up to it.

The main interest of Morrison in her novels is her increasing concern for the creation of a black feminist identity. But her interests do not remain confined to a feminine consciousness but repossessing historical experiences which reclaim the past in order to create an ethno-centered consciousness is also a major focus of Morrison. In her novels like *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* till her last novel *Paradise*, Morrison is seen to be explicitly concerned with the process of
re-memory. In her essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Morrison says:

We don’t live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don’t sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new information has to get out, and there are several ways to do it. One is in the novel. I regard it as a way to accomplish certain very strong functions.

(Evans, 1984, 339)

Thus the Afro-American writers have tried to recapture their past to situate it on the present and their attempt is to create an awareness of their cultural identity in the new generation. Through an unprecedented approach to theme and style, they try to convey the peculiarities, depth, magnanimity, universality and intimacy of the black culture to a degree which no black male writers have succeeded in doing.

America seemed to promise unlimited cultural space for European immigrants, but Afro-Americans were denied such space because their African heritage and later their Southern slave pasts were repudiated by the larger culture. In response to such displacements, Afro-Americans embraced and deepened their separate cultural traditions as a means of survival and as a chosen separation from mainstream American culture. Over time, as historical events like emancipation, migration and
integration expanded the limits of the physical and cultural space which Afro-Americans inhabit, they have been constantly under pressure to negotiate their relationship with their cultural pasts and the separate cultural traditions such separate cultural spaces embodied. An inner/outer tension has developed as a result of this and has characterized the cultural growth of individuals in the community and the development of character in Afro-American fiction. While white characters are often seen to be wishing for an escape from their communities in search of freedom, black characters seek redemption in the return to community and find a solution to the problem of inner/outer fragmentation.

The American South is the locus of their inner/outer tension. In the novels of Morrison, North is the present whereas the past is the South. In the Afro-American fiction we often find the characters moving from South to North in search of healthy identities. This movement from South to North and vice-versa thus should be regarded with deep social and psychological significance. As characters in the North struggle to create a worthy individual identity, they must come to terms with their own past or their ancestors’ past of South and find a fusion of past and present. While coming to terms with their Southern pasts, they should also be able to overcome the trappings of their past. The characters situated in the North cannot succeed in erasing their slave past completely. Despite their efforts at it, traces like names, language, rituals and traditions linger.
In the South, Afro-Americans have created a culture of their own. Black English and the oral tradition are among them. When they migrated to the North, they took with them their music, their religion and their language. Afro-American issues like place, past, identity and culture remained inseparable from the oral tradition. In the novels of Toni Morrison, the degree of identification of a character with that tradition measures the psychic wholeness of that character. The Afro-American oral tradition is of the greatest significance in their cultural tradition. The language of this tradition, which is the Black English, has distinct and unique rituals, codes of conduct, pedagogy and rhetoric that shape and define who speak it and their space in the world. Geneva Smitherman defines Black English as:


It includes oral stories, songs, proverbs, jokes, old sayings and other cultural products that have not been recorded in written form. The oral tradition had come to the South as part of the African culture brought in through slavery. It survived the blows of slavery and got imbibed into
Afro-American culture. Even while some of the rural ways of South had been given up by the emigrants to the North, the Southern oral tradition has remained within their language system.

Morrison’s novels can be read as fictive cultural documentaries that recall and record America’s past using Afro-American historiography – cultural truths, that have been encoded and preserved orally in personal and communal recollections, re-memories, fables, folktales, music and the folklores. Morrison’s novels place the black past at the center of the American chronicle trying to supplement or even negate those mainstream histories and fictions that marginalize trivialize or exclude the Afro-Americans from their positions. Her works offer a full range of Afro-American realities that define authentic Afro-centric interpretations of humanity, culture and history. In her narratives, her argument is that Afro-Americans are undeniably “human” and undeniably “American.” Thus she casts them as vital subjects of and actors in the “American” stories that constitute her works. Her fictions celebrate the authenticity of black people’s “lived lives” by recording their experiences in perceptions of and reactions to American daily life against the backdrop of evolving history and culture.

The America Morrison imagines mirrors the archetypal black community and the Afro-American cultural ethos she evokes is rooted in its relative importance of community over the individual, its attempt to
live in tune with nature rather than turning nature to his convenience and its belief in corporate responsibility and interdependence. Her works not only reinvent the meaning of and significance of the Afro-American’s cultural “home,” especially on the South, but also makes it accessible to people everywhere. For Morrison, South is the source of authentic Afro-centric culture, which is the storehouse for Afro-American’s true and ancient properties. The Afro-American narratives, in the process of revitalizing the significance of Afro-centrism, bring into use remembrance/memory of their past in order to establish their present. Memory is culturally inscribed and it is a tactile path toward cultural recovery. This cultural inscription is assigned to the genre of myth. Mythologizing is recognition and an articulation of an implicit cultural memory. In their myths, the African invariably teaches that the first appearance of people was as a group and that it is as a community that they came. Thus one of the remnants of the African past that has been cherished by the Afro-Americans is the community life. In both the African tradition and the Afro-American literary remembrance of this tradition, the call to community meets a response from a gathering – a coming together – that reflects both physical and psychological significance of the collective community, linked by stories and traditions. Toni Morrison’s Shadrock in *Sula* gathers the community to celebrate the myth of his own making, Suicide Day, the day that at first metaphorically
explicates and then literalizes the community’s plight.

Morrison’s works are inextricably entwined in her own black folk roots and the community in which she grew up. Her works are informed by the stories passed on to her by her mother, her tribe and her ancestors both African and Afro-American. According to Morrison there must have been a time when an artist could be a genuine representative of his tribe possessing a tribal or racial sensibility and gives individual expression to it. She adds that within the context of the community there are spaces and places in which a single person could enter and behave as an individual. This relationship between the artist and the community that Morrison describes is an Afro-centric one and their discourse is based in an African orature whose artists are both participants in and representatives of the community. This participatory experience is recreated in her fiction *Song of Solomon*. The novel explicates the ethnic background of the Afro-Americans. Morrison employs a number of elements of black oral tradition like the blues songs and myths and legends from the African folk roots.

In *Song of Solomon* Morrison creates the whole autonomous world of typical world of blacks. The two major characters – Milkman and Pilate – are typical representatives of black life. Milkman is symbolic of all black and his aunt, Pilate, is the archetype of black women, the Great Mother. Morrison reveals how blacks take pride in being black and their
sense of historical heritage as the backbone of their culture. Morrison’s role as an Afro-centric story teller is unmistakable and the orature of her foremother as well as the oral traditions of the black community is evident in both the language and the structure of the novel. Morrison’s works incorporate the use of Afro-American folktale, folk songs and legends. *Song of Solomon* is based on a story that she learned from her maternal grandparents and it is imbued with folk myths and legends from the African diaspora. In her discussion of the epic qualities of Morrison’s text, Dorothy Lee asserts that the author “draws on specific Afro-American legends of Africans who could fly and who used this marvelous ability to escape from slavery in America; that is literally to transcend bondage” (1982, 64). Legends about Africans who either flew or jumped off slave ships as well as those who saw the horrors of slavery when they landed in the Americas and in their anguish sought to fly back to Africa are very popular among the Afro-Americans.

One of the main features of Morrison’s narration in *Song of Solomon* is her use of superstition, folklore, children’s games, songs, etc. In these old songs the spirit of the Black culture and history are intensified. Milkman’s search for his ancestral roots finds meaning in such sources as the blues songs, and especially the “Song of Solomon” and he links himself with the past by unceasingly piecing it all together. Morrison recognizes that oral tradition or folklore can more directly
convey the truth rather than relying on the analytical description based on Western logic and tradition. Morrison wanted to utilize the black folklore especially the magical and superstitious part of it, in her texts because black people believe in magic and it's a part of their heritage. And that she says is the reason for using flying as the central metaphor in *Song of Solomon*.

Throughout the novel Morrison questions the imposed values and perceptions of the dominant culture. As an alternative Morrison tries to offer a cultural knowledge and belief situated in black American's African traditions and heritage. The song of Sugarman flying away to his home sung at the time of Milkman's birth is the key to Milkman's quest of his own roots. Moreover it expresses the function of the Afro-American women in passing on their legends to future generations. The novel involves three progressive steps in the quest for identity which finally proves to be epiphanic to Milkman Dead. It starts with Milkman Dead's unwitting search for identity in a life alienated from himself and others because of his adherence to rigid, materialistic Western values which he inherits from his father, Macon Dead. This develops into a quest to learn the complete family history practically related by Pilate and this quest ends up uncovering the legend of his ancestors to the legend of the flying Africans, one of whom was Solomon, or Shalimar, his great grandfather. Milkman realizes the significance of past in the
creation of present and when he incorporates both his familial and his personal history into his sense of the present, he repairs his feelings of fragmentation and comprehends for the first time the coherence of his own life.

“Rootedness” explicates the relevance of past history and ancestral heritage in rebuilding the present of black culture. She, in her works, validates that past is something that cannot be erased from a black man’s/woman’s world. In the opening pages of *Song of Solomon* itself Morrison exemplifies it directly in the Sugarman’s song sung by Pilate and a few pages later on, symbolically, through Ruth Dead, Milkman’s mother:

Ruth let the seaweed disintegrate, and later, when its veins and stems dropped and curled into brown scabs on the table, she removed the bowl and brushed away the scabs. But the water mark, hidden by the bowl all these years was exposed. And once exposed, it behaved as though it were itself a plant and flourished into a huge suede-gray flower that throbbed like fever, and sighed like the shift of sand dunes. (12)

This is metaphoric of the black cultural past which often lay hidden under the bowl of dominant culture. Once this submerged culture gains proper exposure, it thrives, flowers and flourishes in the past. Thus the Deads
too though they are alienated from the black community because of the alien values they hold on to, cannot escape from the influence of their ancestral values and traditions and this is explicated by the journey taken on by Macon Dead, Jr., i.e., Milkman, as he travels to Virginia in this quest for an ancestral identity, which helps him to identify himself with the black community in which he lives.

Milkman’s quest is undertaken initially to provide him access to gold, which he believes Pilate has left behind. He undertakes this endeavor not for any abstract reasons. It is the result of the materialistic values he has inherited from his father:

> Come to my office; work a couple of hours there and learn what’s real. . . . Let me tell you right now the one important thing you’ll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too. (55)

Apart from this, his quest is inspired by an urge to avoid emotional commitment and familial responsibility. Milkman, at the beginning starts his journey as an effort to gain freedom from obligation to others by taking possession of a familial treasure. But instead of gold what he comes across is a treasure more valuable than gold – a treasure rich with the history of his ancestors. He develops a mature sense of familial obligations and discovers an informed knowledge of familial and tribal
history and a profound complementation of tribal wisdom. His experiences at Shalimar, Virginia, bring over a complete change in Milkman and he passes on to a real black sensibility which had remained obscured by the Western sensibility that he has adopted from his father. He had always considered himself too good for others of his community. And this attitude receives a hard blow at Shalimar when the people around view him with hostility because he was an arrogant, urbanite Negro who looked down upon the black men around him and made them feel worthless:

His manner, his clothes were reminders that they had no crops of their own and no land to speak of either. Just vegetable gardens, which the women took care of, and chickens and pigs that the children took care of. He was telling them that they weren’t men, that they relied on women and children for their food. . . . He hadn’t found them fit enough or good enough to want to know their names, and believed himself too good to tell them his. They looked at his skin and saw it was as black as their, but they knew he had the heart of the white men who came to pick them up in the trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless laborers. (269)

Just because at Danville, where he came across his family history,
he was the object of hero worship, he had expected that in his home town he would be loved and respected by all. But he soon finds that his sense of superiority over the people at Shalimar has earned him only contempt and abhorration:

In his own hometown his name spelled dread and grudging respect. But here, in his ‘home,’ he was unknown, unloved, and damn near killed. These were some of the meanest unhung nigger in the world. (271)

But during the course of an initiatory trial-by-fire in Shalimar in which black male elders invite the bourgeois urbanite on a long, arduous hunting track, and then leaves him to fend for himself in the dark forest, a new knowledge of self and culture dawns on him. Left to himself in the dark forest filled with wild animals, Milkman tries to analyze the treatment he has received since his arrival, and also the ways he has mistreated others. He considers those people to be savages “Suspicious. Hot-tempered. Eager to find fault and despise any outsiders. Touchy, devious, jealous, traitorous and evil. He had done nothing to receive their contempt” (279). But gradually Milkman recognizes the necessity of abandoning such immature perspectives. He had always assumed that he deserved only to be loved and given what he wanted and that people around him should share with him only their happiness and not their unhappiness. He did not deserve Hagar’s vengeance. But the attack on
Milkman at Solomon’s store changes his perspectives. He now realizes the case of Hagar’s vengeance towards life than Hagar “whom he’d thrown away like a wod of chewing gum after the flavor was gone” (280) had a right to kill him too.

In the forest, forced to use his wits to navigate the forest by himself, his mind begins to work retrospectively on his life that he had lived till then, outside the darkness of the forest. His loneliness in the forest is epiphanic to him. “They were troublesome thoughts, but they wouldn’t go away. Under the moon, on the ground, alone . . . his self – the cocoon that was ‘personality’ – gave way” (280). The atmosphere created by the shouts and noises of hating created ripples in his mind. The trees and the ground transmit a new sensation into him. The indifference with which he interacted gives way to affection. He feels a “sudden rush of affection” (281) for all the people around him and he also gains the power to understand others. He understands his friend Guitar, Hagar and, above all, the things that went into the making of Macon Dead, his father.

As the son of Macon Dead the first, he paid homage to his own father’s life and death by loving what that father had loved: property, good solid property, the beautifulness of life. He loved these things to excess. Owning, building, acquiring – that was his life, his future, his present, and all
the history he knew. That he distorted life, bent it, for the sake of gain, was a measure of his loss at his father’s death.

(304)

It is the blues song sung by the children at Shalimar while playing singing the “Song of Solomon” that brings about the total change in Milkman. It tosses his mind to an uncomfortable state. The feeling of hatred he had nurtured until then towards his parents and sisters gradually dissolves. When he listens to the song carefully, it rings a bell in his ears. He discovers that the blues song the children were singing were about his own ancestors – his great grandfather and grandmother. The song was about Solomon, his great grandfather, who tried to fly back to Africa taking his son Jake along with him. But he dropped the boy, in the course of his flying, near the porch of the house where Heddy, mother of Sing whom Jake later married, found him and brought him up. Milkman could identify all the names that figured in the song to be of his ancestors – Solomon, called Shalimar by Heddy, Jake, Ryna – Jake’s mother, and Heddy – the foster mother of Jake. These names remind him of a number of places like Solomon’s leap, Reyna’s Gulch, the little village in Shalimar, Not Doctor Street, called so by Negroes in memory of his grandfather because he was the first colored man of consequences in that city etc.

The knowledge of his tribal and ancestral history thrills him. He is
excited over the discovery that his great grandfather, Solomon, was a flying African and he had flown back to Africa. The knowledge that he belonged to this tribe of flying Africans fills him with a sense of pride. The self alienated man who had left his hometown in search of gold, and in search of an identity discovers a whole history of his tribe, of his ancestors who had their roots in Africa. He develops a sense of community and also a strong black identity. He achieves a sense of his identity, which is firmly rooted, in his relationship to his family and community. He has learned that he can achieve a sense of self only when he is able to embrace his unavoidable responsibilities to family and humanity, when he can recognize and relish a sense of membership with his people. He now discerns the significance many of the actions of Pilate – the song of Sugarman often sung by her, collection of rocks from the places she had lived in and why Pilate hung her name as an earring. All these contribute to the (re)creation of an identity with a black Afro-centric lineage in Milkman. And just as Shalimar surrendered to the air in order to ride it, Milkman too finally undertakes this expedition to fly back to his homeland. Thus we find Morrison reinforcing the fact that the roots of Afro-Americans lie in African heritage and culture. For the purpose, apart from the plot of the novel, she employs a number of elements towards enriching this sense of ancestorhood.
Through the creation of the revolutionary group called Seven Days, Morrison tries to capture the complexities of Afro-American life, history and life. She delves into the historical black community and its contemporary equivalent to reveal a dissonance that has characterized Afro-American world very often. This dissonance is depicted in the relationship between Guitar Bains who is the representative and spokesperson for the Seven Days and Milkman. Just as coffee houses had been very significance in the intellectual circles of the earlier centuries, the barbershop is of importance in the black communities because it is here that the blacks articulate their views and speak openly and candidly. Barbershops have been venues for political discussions in the late 1960s and Morrison has used the barbershop as the informal meeting place of the Seven Days. Thus she delineates a class and race history of Afro-American political thought. The Seven Days can also be said to have its links with the black secret societies of the twentieth century, which was organized to overthrow slavery. Thus the Seven Days can be regarded as a group grounded in both contemporary and nineteenth century Afro-American history.

In her novels, Morrison can be seen to be often dramatizing the traditions of her community and thus her works resemble the oral technique of the storyteller. Just as an African woman storyteller does, Morrison narrates the tale of the Flying Africans. This is done with a
purpose to rejuvenate the traditions and culture of her community. Though Morrison uses a number of storytellers in her text, it is Pilate who is the most significant. Through Pilate, she tries to convey and retain the traditional role of African women as the guardians of a rich cultural heritage and the transmitters of this cultural history to the future generations through oral techniques of story telling. Throughout the novel, Morrison allows the stories of women to be recognized and privileged, especially that of Pilate. It is Pilate’s remembering of her past which sows the seeds for Morrison’s growth – both socially and psychologically. Moreover, the stories of his sister Lena, his mother Ruth, and his distant cousin Susan Byrd, along with Pilate, help Milkman learn to become a single, separate Afro-American individual while remaining intricately entwined in a relationship to a family, a community and a culture.

Through Pilate, Morrison asserts and exemplifies African values and African culture that has been brought to America by their forefathers. She has stature, strength and presence associated with an ideal African woman. Macon Dead, Pilate’s brother himself states thus: “If you ever have a doubt we from Africa, look at Pilate. She look just like Papa and he looked like all them pictures you ever see of Africans” (54). Pilate is considered a supernatural being with mystical power because she is born without a navel and this allows her special privileges as a conjure
woman, Pilate’s role as a conjurer is well-documented throughout the novel. In it we can see the enactment of some of the practices in many West African cultures. One of them is that the education of children, till boy’s initiation, is done by women. Pilate seems to understand the necessity of Milkman’s life before his birth itself. Understanding that Macon Dead, her brother has turned into a hard man and that his wife is suffering due to lack of love, she gives Ruth a greenish-grey powder to add to Macon’s food in order to invigorate their sex lives. And when Pilate finds that Macon is trying to destroy the child conceived by Ruth, in its foetal stage itself, Pilate once again uses her conjuring powers to make Macon leave Ruth in peace of mind by placing in his office a male doll with a chicken bone stuck between his legs.

Toni Morrison adds another dimension of supernatural elements when Pilate holds conversations with her dead father and has an uncanny knowledge of things which she has not experienced or witnessed in person. For instance, she holds some details of her mother like the color of her hair ribbons and her history though she had died at Pilate’s birth. Another retrospection of African heritage can be had in the image of the three generations of women living in harmony, plaiting hair and singing songs. This recalls to our mind a scene from the African villager. But the difference with Afro-American life comes when we see that Pilate is unable to bring her extended family back together as a force to confront
racial oppression. She is not finally able to save Hagar from the influence of dominant culture’s definition of beauty, which she maintains till the end when her life ends up in a disaster.

Morrison has very beautifully painted Pilate as the ancestor for Milkman whose nurturing transforms him into a responsible individual who is humane too. It is stories and songs, the children’s songs turned into woman’s blues which she passes on to her children, that inspires Milkman to unravel the history and the lore of his family. The song that is sung by Pilate at his birth accompanies him throughout his life and helps Milkman to realize that he is a descendant of the Flying Africans who refused to exist under the confines and humiliation of slavery. The myth of the Flying African, we can see, is being re-enacted from time to time as a ritual to enliven their past. This is what we draw from the novel. The novel opens with the symbolic flying of Robert Smith. As a member of the Seven Days which functions to liberate the black community from slavery and yearns to fly to freedom, Smith’s act can be viewed as a remembering and a re-enacting of their past. This myth of Flying Africans is kept alive from time to time through such acts of Robert Smith. From Smith, the tradition is taken on by Milkman when finally he surrenders himself to air at Solomon’s Leap. He realizes what Shalimar knew: “If you surrendered to the air, you could ‘ride’ it” (341).

*Song of Solomon*, one of the most impressive and substantial
fiction by Morrison elucidates how the past of a community makes its impression in re-creating a present rooted in this cultural past. The concept of knowing one’s name, tribe and cultural heritage, the importance of the knowledge of the ethnic elements of one’s community and its retention in the present is very evident and paramount in the novel. She exposes the conflict of Western and African cultural perceptions and reveals the importance of African heritage and values for black Americans. Through the text Morrison asserts the necessity of stripping off the layers of hegemonic discourse which is subversive and which conceals the values of a civilization that lies underneath.

Thus, through the analyses of the three most significant and noteworthy works of Morrison – *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*, we witness how the author seeks to centralize the marginalized – both from a feminist and an ethnic perspective. While *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* elucidate how a strong black feminine identity is constructed in the face of racial and sexual oppressions, the third work is a discourse on the construction of a strong ethnic identity by recreating the past through recalling the traditions, customs, lore, culture, experiences and values that had originally gone into the making of an ethnic individuality of the black community, especially the Afro-Americans who have their roots in African heritage. For these reasons Morrison can be regarded as an ethnic feminist writer who performs to overthrow discriminations at all levels.