ABSTRACT

Afro-American novel is essentially a social and human document which deals with the man and the social milieu. Afro-American novel primarily deals with the exploitation of the blacks and quest for identity with psychological and socio-economic dimensions to it.

A community which has experienced a long period of socio-economic exploitation in the past cannot forget it, even though it made some progress. Most Afro-American writers carry the burden of their race in their art and literature. They also try to highlight how the dominant ideology of racism, the class exploitation and the cultural hegemony of the whites are responsible for their plight.

Black American literature came into being in the 1920’s, the heyday of what became known as the Harlem Renaissance. Important writers of this era include Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude Mackay, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston. These younger writers were encouraged by the older, established writers, critics, and editors including W.E.B. DuBois and Charles S. Johnson. Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, Terry McMillan, and Gloria Naylor are examples of successful women authors who have become prominent figures in the late twentieth century Afro-American literature.

Toni Morrison is one of the most sophisticated novelists in the history of African American novelists. Her creations are wonderful and
aesthetic because Toni Morrison tries to reveal the beauty and hope beneath the surface of Black America.

Toni Morrison was born on 18 February, 1931 in the small town of Lorain Ohio. She was one of the four children of Ramah Willis Wofford, a homemaker who sang in the church choir and of George Wafer, who held a variety of jobs including car washer, steel mill welder, road construction and shipyard work.

Toni Morrison’s literary honors include both the national book critics circle Award and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award for *Song of Solomon* in 1977. Prior to it, in 1974, *Sula*, her second novel was nominated for National Book Award. *Beloved*, in 1988, her fifth novel receives Pulitzer Prize, and in 1992, *Jazz*, is a best seller. For her collective achievement Toni Morrison won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, the first Afro-American writer to be so honored.

In her novels she depicts the problems of black people and tries to understand and interpret them. Morrison in 1974 stated, ‘what we (blacks) have to do is to introduce ourselves’.

A number of factors contributed to Toni Morrison’s developing social, political, economical and aesthetic consciousness. Familial background, community, African-American folklore, her educational background and early professional life, her Random House experience and literary works by great writers, these factors helped her become more conscious of the nature of the black people’s dilemma, the crisis of their personality, the cause and effect of it, and her increasing commitment to help solve it in terms of fictional art, thereby combining her political consciousness with aesthetic sensibility.

A black American is a Negro and an American as well. A product of Unique American situation, he is incomparable, culturally he is rooted
in his community, living in one place, subject to variety of outside influences. Being a Negro American he has to do with his past history hence is historically conditioned and is based on empirical experience of both the individual author and the community as a whole.

*The Bluest Eye* is Toni Morrison’s first published novel. The novel takes place in the 1940s in the industrial northeast of Lorain, Ohio and tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, a young African-American woman who is marginalized by her community and the larger society. Individually and collectively people mark Pecola and her dysfunctional family as falling outside the boundaries of what is normal and, thus, as undesirable. Pecola’s story intersects with and contrasts with that of the novel’s primary narrator, Claudia MacTeer, whose coming of age, while challenging, is not the alienating, ultimately impossible situation experienced by Pecola.

*The Bluest Eye* was well received and established an early following for her, particularly among black people who understood so poignantly the issues addressed in the novel. The novel begins with a passage from Dick-Jane family by means of which many of us learn to read. The first well punctuated version shows the life of white people. The second represents the life of Black MacTeer family which survives
all the evils of poverty and racism. Another third disorder version stands for Breedlove family. Klotman Comments that:

It also serves as an ironic comment on a society which educated and unconsciously socializes its children like Pecola with callous regard for the cultural richness and diversity of the people.

This observation illuminates the socio-political implications behind Morrison’s first novel.

In *The Bluest Eye*, there are three “minor” African families who, for their social status and economic and political advancement, exploit their own brethren in order to become close to the ruling class. One such family is the Peals. By dissociating itself from the African community, the second family, Geraldine Louis and Louis Junior also nurture the aspirations of the ruling class. They consider themselves to be colored signifying some nebulous group of neither Africans who are neither European nor African. The third family, the Elihue Micah Whitcombs, is so obsessed with the physical appearances of Europeans that they jeopardize their mental stability by intermarrying, only to maintain some semblance of whiteness.

Racism is a distinct phenomenon of social and political milieu, which was deeply rooted in the history of slavery. In human history, beginning of slavery and the years following, mark one of the ugliest examples of superiority of one race over another. Torn from the womb of
their communities, African’s were shipped across the sea bound in chains. So, dehumanization of the black slaves into static was only one of the steps that went into the creation of a racist America. For economic prosperity blacks were objectified which lead to the initiation of racial discrimination on American soil. Afro-Americans were ghettoized and were brutally outlawed from the main stream participation. In racist social order Afro-Americans have been marginalized.

The basic myth of racism is that the white are more intelligent and more virtuous than the black. Furthermore whiteness is automatically equated with beauty and culture; blackness with ugliness and slavery. What we see here is the omnipresent, all-embracing reality of racism as a common factor in the lives of all blacks irrespective of sex. The man faces with the hard fact and cruel reality to racism realized right from the days of slavery that his color and physiognomy were terrible handicaps, and as such would mark him off as evil, despite all claims, to the contrary. Judged by the white man’s standards of life, behavior and beauty, his life became unbearable. Universal codes of social and psychological praxis as laid down by the dominant white culture were forcibly thrust upon him.

Racism started in America when white masters of the land brought the first Africans in Chains and used their labor to enrich their coffers. As a result, black people soon ceased to exist as human beings in the white
world. In an illuminating study of the origin of racism in the United States, Joel Kovel says that the white master “first reduced the human self of his black slave to a body and then the body to a thing; he dehumanized his slave, made him quantifiable, and thereby absorbed him into a rising world market of productive exchange.”

The novels of Toni Morrison reflected the triumphs and complexities of black life from the painful past of slavery to the frustrating and agonizing, racial discrimination hovering over the present. At the beginning of her writing career, she thinks that racism is the main source of oppression of blacks in white America, but at the later stage of writing her emphasis of race matters varies from novel to novel. Whatever would be the basic concern in the novels, but racial matters are ever present as Afro-Americans have their origins in it.

*Tar Baby* is the expansion of her vision of the family beyond the constraints of time, place and dimension in an endeavor to reconstruct the origins and significance of family. In the novel she continues to expand the range of her subject and characters. There is not one single narrative voice in the novel but many, each belonging to a major and each contributing to the universal truth of the work marking it clear that Morrison’s emphasis in the novel is on class struggle between the ruling class and the subject class.
Toni Morrison, in her novel *Tar Baby* deals with not only conflicts within the self and the black community, but also with confrontation with the white society at various levels. Living in a completely radicalized society, the lives of the black people are determined and influenced in one way or other, by this whiteness. It is for the first time that white characters have got the full attention and the Afro-Americans have experienced the direct encounters with them. Valerian Street, an American Capitalist, has made his future bright by exploiting the labor of the African masses, while Sydney and Ondine symbolize those unconscious servants who identify themselves more with their employers’ culture than they do with their own people and their own culture.

Pecola Breedlove struggles with the questions of racial approbation, Sula struggles against the traditional role of African women, and Milkman individually struggles with the issues of race and class, the two protagonists in the novel *Tar Baby Son* and Jadine-must struggle together to resolve their opposing class interests in order to unite. Valerian Street and Margaret Street are the aristocratic whites, who have been enjoying their racial superiority over their servants, Ondine Child, Sydney Child and Therese and Gideon.

Toni Morrison places a women or a matriarch at the center of her novels. When Charles Raus asks her whether she feels that the women bear the burden of living in a society where the men are severally
discriminated. In answer she finds some problem about the role of men in the culture of black people or any group of people who have really to work. Men are identified with their capacity to work. They feel responsible for the people and take care of them. Now the times have changed. The people live at materialistic level as work is being split in two pieces. They do not do the whole job but only the part of it. They feel lucky to have part in it. That is devastating for the maleness of a man. Hence the women have to play at various places. They have the domestic burden of trying to keep things going on one hand, and also protecting the male from that knowledge by giving him little places in which he can perform his male rituals, his male rights, whether it is drunkenness, violence or running away. The man in fact is not free to choose his responsibilities. He is only responsible for what has been handed over to him. Morrison says: “It is the women who keep it going, keep the children someplace safe.”

_Sula_, the second novel of Morrison, deals with female bonding in celebration as if to see what miracles love and friendship may accomplish for Sula and Nel that failed in the case of Pecola and her friends. In ‘Sula’ Morrison ventures to create a black woman heroine, who consciously embraces the role of the pariah, shattering the image of the conventional black woman who conforms to the norms of black community and lives within it, having nothing to do with the white world, its people and way
of life. Morison sketches a very daring and adventurous character in Sula who breaks all bonds, ties of the community and human relationship in her quest for self, but is doomed, for life and experiences so desensitize and harden her that she loses the capacity to feel. She is depicted as a failure in her attempts to create ‘herself’ living according to the dictates of her mind, but she is a triumphant personality in the end, when the realizations dawns on Nel and the black community; the black community unconsciously accepts her ways and Nel realizes that she had been missing Sula.

Sula and Nel represent the two sides of the coin that stands for the total human personality. Both of them are Morrison’s favorite character since they are symbolic of the good and evil persistently present in the society. The heights of intimacy and friendship between Nel and Sula make explicit what can be called interesting and lifelong.

The narrative matrix of Toni Morrison offers a crisis-cross of opinions and observations. Kay Deaux offered gender as a subject variable, as a psychological construct, or as a social category. In all these approaches, gender is considered to be as an individual difference variable. Deaux concludes that gender as a biological marker with complex and unspecified connection to psychological characteristics, is too broad and undifferentiated a variable to have much utility as a predictor of human behavior. Truly, biology is not a psychology and
neither all men nor all women are similar, thus, the effects of the individual’s level of self-identification and introspection in conventionally masculine or feminine perspective. Sociologically, these categorical assumptions and presumptions affect the reactions and the relationships of male and female characters.

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) was an attack on the slavery system and the racial conflict. It presents a traumatic existence of an Afro-American family under slavery. On as socio-psychological level, *Beloved* is the story of Sethe Suggs’ quest for social freedom and psychological wholeness. Sethe’s act, ultimately results in the dissolution of tenuous family ties which she so desperately tries to build. The opening lines of the novel establish the real horror of slavery, which is not physical death but psychic death: “124 were spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom” (3) It is to prevent Beloved from such a psychic death that Sethe kills her. But, the slain baby’s ghost diabolically raises its head, assumes human from that almost kills her in retribution. The rage of the baby ghost is a form of frustrated and fatal claim for love which was denied to her by her own mother. The havoc the ghost creates in Sethe’s home prompts Denver to comment: “For a baby she throws a powerful spell” (4)

The power of the baby ghost’s rage is directly linked to Sethe’s maternal love. Schapiro dwells on the reason for the baby ghost’s
retributive rage: “If the infant is traumatically frustrated in its first love relationship, if it fails to receive the affirmation and recognition it craves, the intense neediness of the infant’s own love becomes dangerous and threatening.” The baby ghost construes Sethe’s overwhelming desire to protect her daughter from slavery as an act of murder.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison moves away from the focus on black women that had been at the center of her first two novels. She now focuses her attention on the character of a black young man. The journey towards quest for self is the subject of this novel and chapter which have been heralded for its language, its cultural richness is song, folklore and myth and the transcendence through ancestral reconnection. Morrison creates a male protagonist, one who first becomes conscious of himself in relation to his people. It is the story of a young Milkman Dead and his quest inadvertent at first for his identity. The only son in the household of two elder sisters and a love starved mother who nurses him till he is six. Milkman is encouraged by his father to become a successful businessman. As a son he feels immense pressure to embrace his father’s affection for things and money in particular. Milkman as one would expect chooses spirituality and in explicating its judgment, Morrison relates her precise boundaries of freedom and responsibility for individual. Like other characters, Milkman must be willing to resist all narrow definitions of self and take responsibility for the tough choice he
makes. Macon Dead, his father has lost this freedom and knowledge of self. He has traded freedom for the wealth under the impression and mistaken belief that, “You will own it all. You will be free. Money is freedom, Macon. The only freedom there is.”

He forbids Milkman any association with his sister Pilate, fearing that Milkman may be influenced by her unhealthy materialistic ways. Pilate, as a pilot to Milkman understands of humanity is a unique creation of Morrison. She lives a life with few of amenities of modern existence but supported by knowledge of ancestral history and family love and creates her own criteria for how to live in the world. A life time of acquiring property, collecting rents and making deals has rendered Macon a greedy self-absorbed unforgiving man. Hating his wife Ruth, ignoring his daughters Lena and First Corinthians and disowning his sister Pilate are some of his family connections. Crossing the limits of meanness he advises his son Milkman to steal the gold that he thinks his sister possesses and there starts his journey for self affirmation. Carolyn C. Denard briefs Milkman’s quest for self in these words:

Although his journey begins as a quest for money and revenge, it ends in glorious connection to ancestry revealed to him through the legends of great grandfather Solomon. Milkman answers not only his own submerged dipped questions of belonging but those of his father and aunt as well. The knowledge of the great grandfather
who could fly and who indeed did fly away from the slavery
destroying his manhood, empowers Milkman with love, strength
and a triumphant sense of who he is and his own potential for
transcendence.

Nobel Laureate, creative writer, African-American woman novelist
Toni Morrison began writing fiction in her maturity, and from the very
first she expressed the themes that she would explore and develop in her
subsequent work. She has written a body of work that is unified by
continuity and development. No official biography of Toni Morrison
exists to date, but future writers many note how her life story mirrors key
event in African American history.

*Psyche of the Blacks in Toni Morrison’s novels* focuses on
different aspects of psychology in the traumatic context of Toni
Morrison’s work. This aspect is meant to be an original experiment in
which literature can transcend its boundaries and merge into the
psychological phenomena. The touch of the pathological is what sets the
psychological interpretations in motion, in the context of a deeply
disturbing and traumatizing literary fiber. The contradictions and tensions
exhibited by Toni Morrison’s characters are the inevitable generators of
different pathologies, transforming the individuals into the ideal subjects
for psychic profiles.
The human psyche is dissected and analyzed within the psychological framework of racism which transforms Toni Morrison’s characters into captives of their own lives and of their own choices. Even though most of them are free individuals who are no longer oppressed slaves, they carry with them the invisible burden of another type of slavery, one that is exacerbated by the poisonous influence of racism. As an artist, Morrison negotiates a very complex matrix of reality in which she is both despised and revered. Her creative mediation between the real and fictive worlds generates possibilities rather than merely recording continued frustration and oppression. As Heinze observes:

Morrison may not write from a stance of art as life, but she may be
a psychological and spiritual wizard of Oz for life as art.

Today Morrison stands as a powerful figure on the international literary scene. Her place in American letters leaves her standing next to such eminent writers as Thoreau, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and William Faulkner. Morrison’s message is that each person should and must respect the reality of the human landscape of the world, with its unlimited possibilities and interpretations, if mankind is to achieve wholeness and if the global community is once again to be whole.