CHAPTER – IV

FOCUS ON GENDER

Morrison’s panoramic view of black women in an often quoted passage from *The Bluest Eye*, suggests the readers about the importance of women in daily African American life. Morrison says that not much has been done with women as friends. Men’s relations are often the subject of fiction but what about women’s strongest bonds? For this purpose Morrison places a woman 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.”

They ran the houses of white people and knew it. When white men beat their men, they cleaned the blood and went home to receive abuse from the victim. They beat their children with one hand and stole for them with the other. The hands that felled the trees also cut umbilical cords. The hands that wrung the necks of chickens and butchered hogs also nudged African violets in to bloom, the arms that loaded sheaves, bales and sacks, rocked babies in to sleep. They petted biscuits in to flaky ovals of innocence, and shrouded the dead. They plowed all the day and come home to nestle like plums under the limbs of their men. (Raus, 238-39)

*The Bluest Eye* opens with “Quiet as it is kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941.” (3) This sentence originates from environment of African American Community. It exhibits the role of black women conversing with one another, telling a story about someone or event with the circle, family and the neighborhood. Although Morrison flatly rejects a black feminist model of
criticism or evaluation, she just as decisively asserts that she and other authors write for black women. In fact she recalls that when she began writing in (1960s and 1970s) there was a paucity of books about the black woman. There was no fiction representing her experience:

This person, this female, this black did not exist centers self.

(Russell, 45)

This black woman then, is an evolving presence in Morrison’s work. For example *The Bluest Eye* examines the consequences upon black womanhood of an oppressive standard of white beauty. The reader is called to witness the blackness as an affront to a society in which blue eyes are valued above all others. In her next novel *Sula* Morrison moves from adolescence to womanhood, recording the community’s response one who dares to defy all narrow conceived ideologies of woman. Only in defiance, the freedom is possible. Even in *Song of Solomon* which is Morrison’s only novel to be driven by male characters, it is the presence of a woman, Pilate that imparts the spiritual dimension for which the novel has been praised. Pilate too, may be ancestor to the authentic women who haunt Jadine’s dreams and challenge her choice in *Tar Baby*. It is the novel where women have mutual
bonds beyond the racial borders. Womanhood, motherhood and selfhood come together in *Beloved*. Women come together to share the problem of Sethe and solve that menace. In her famous novel *Jazz* the women become armed to protect themselves against dangers. The novel becomes the musical piece like *Jazz* presenting the harmonizing pictures of mothers and daughters. *Paradise* is a different novel as its every chapter is devoted to a woman and everyone has a link with Consolata or Connie the white woman.

To begin with in detail, Pecola, in *The Bluest Eye*, has no voice at all, a condition that largely echoes her entire existence. She has no control over the events in her life and no authority over the narrative of these events. The authority goes to twelve year old girl Claudia, who narrates major portions of Pecola’s story with compassion and understanding. Claudia and her sister Frieda are the ‘We’ of the opening paragraph. They witness, Pecola’s distress and try to save her. “Her pain agonizing me”, Claudia says:

I wanted to open her up, crisp her edges ram a stick down
that hunched and curving spine, force her to stand erect and
spit the misery out on the streets. (61)

But the sisters fail. They do not save Pecola from her breakup. As the girls mourn their failure, Morrison chronicles the
loss of their innocence. But unlike Pecola’s short circuited innocence their loss is a part of natural ritual of growing up.

Morrison presents Claudia and Frieda as friends and foils to Pecola. They are strong and sturdy, Pecola is not. Claudia’s independence and confidence especially throw Pecola’s helplessness into stark relief. For Claudia the blue eyed dolls at Christmas and Shirley Temple dancing with Bo-jangles are unappealing and even insulting. With youthful but penetrated insight she declares her exemptions from the universal love of white dolls, Shirley Temple and Maureen Peals, Claudia and her sister tea verse Morrison’s landscape of black girlhood. Bound by a social environment that is hostile to their kind, they have become headstrong, devious and arrogant enough to dismiss limitations and believe that they can change the course of events and alter a human life. Their triumph over the gang of bullies briefly binds them together. Their Comrade is striking since Claudia and Frieda usually scorn Maureen. True to form shortly after they bond, the girls begin to fight with each other because Maureen makes explicit her contempt to their dark skin. Claudia and Frieda attempt to rescue Pecola and her baby. They will make beauty where ugliness resided, by planting marigolds deep into earth and
receiving the magic of their beauty as a sign of Pecola’s salvation. When neither marigold nor Pecola survive, the girls blame the community that is reduced by a white standard of beauty and makes Pecola its scapegoat:

All of us who knew her-felt so whole-some after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness.... We honed our egos on her our characters with her frailty and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. (160)

Mrs. MacTeer is one of Morrison’s nurturers. She unlike Pauline Breedlove looks after her children and Pecola as well. Claudia remembers the feel of her mother’s hand on her forehead and chest when she is sick. She does not want her children to suffer and die. Mrs. MacTeer takes Pecola in when Cholly burns his family out. She presides over Pecola’s first menses, hugging her reassuringly. This is the only hug Pecola ever receives. But Mrs. MacTeer influence in Pecola’s life is short in duration. When Pecola finds no one available, she turns to the whores who live upstairs over the storefront. These whores stand in opposition to the women like Geraldine in the community. They are not pretentious heirs to false values. They make no apologies for themselves and seek no sympathy. They are quick to laugh or sing. Pecola loves these women and they are more than willing to share
the lessons they have learned but they don’t know that their lessons are not for Pecola. They can tell her the stories that are breezy and rough about lawless men and audacious women. But they don’t teach her the right lessons that are how to be loved by family and society in general.

Quite different from the first novel, *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.

Sula Peace and Nel Wright are each the only daughter of mothers whose distance leaves the young girls alone with the dreams of someone to ease the solitude. When they first meet, they feel the ease and comfort of old friends. Indeed their meeting is fortunate for it lets them use each other to grow on. Sula’s spontaneous intensity is relieved by Nel’s passive reserve. Sula loves the ordered neatness of Nel’s home and Nel likes Sula’s household of throbbing disorder. Over the years they find relief in each other’s personality. The friendship between Nel and Sula is an example of the necessary bonding that has always taken place between black women for their barest survival. Together the two girls can find the courage to create themselves. Jan Furman Writes:
Sula and Nel together face life, death, and marriage and eventually they also must face separation. Throughout, Morrison affirms the necessity of their collaboration. (23)

Nel’s experience on the train journey with her mother Helene convinces her of the hard facts of racism and sexual weakness of her mother. The pain of humiliation on the grounds of racism is evinced in the scene where Nel and Helene are contemptuously questioned by a white conductor when they accidentally enter the coach meant for the whites. Helene’s foolish smile to ingratiable herself with the white conductor degrades her and disgusts Nel. Nel painfully realizes that custard was all that (her mother’s dress) hid. These serve to open eyes to values in life. She resolves to be on guard:

She wanted to make certain that no man ever, looked at her that way, that no midnight eyes on marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly. (27)

And

Sula and Nel estrange themselves from their families. This distancing unites them for they find in each other what they have failed to experience in their families: “Because each had discovered years before that they were neither what nor male and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughters of distant
mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula’s because he was dead; Nel’s because he was not) they found in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for. (52)

As perfect compliments, one incomplete without the other Sula and Nel seek solace in each other’s company because they share the common bonds of being young, black and female, in a world with different social backgrounds. Nel and Sula are bound by factors much stronger than those which might tend to separate them. *Sula* is fundamentally a women’s novel in the sense that it concerns itself with the feeling and affairs of women and roles they assume, whether by choice or force. It chronicles the fortunes of women in two matriarchal households within the black community whose life represent the range of choices possible for black women in white America.

Adolescence for Nel and Sula is marked not by individuation but by merger. Two significant moments define their intimacy. The first is of Sula’s cutting of finger’s tip in response to a threat by a group of white boys whose menacing bodies block the girls’ route home. If she could do that to herself, what could she do to them, Sula asked the shocked boys. The second is the death of Chicken Little; the young child whose hand slips from Sula’s and
flies to the river. Nel watches and no one discovers their culpability – They hold hands at the graveside:

At first they stood there, their hands were clenched together. They relaxed slowly until during the walk back home their fingers were placed in as gentle a clasp as that of any two young friends trotting up the road, on a summer day wondering what happened to butterflies in winter. (66)

Some reviewers maintain that Nel and Sula represent good and evil. Others interpret the relationship between the two as representative of an intrinsic conflict experienced by black women the conflict between desire to rebel and urge to confirm. They are more like bosom friends so close to each other. Their intense friendship reminds the readers of a similar friendship between Rosalind and Celia in Shakespeare’s As You Like It: The idea that Nel and Sula represent two halves of one person reverberates throughout the novel. When Sula returns to the Bottom, Nel thinks that her friend’s return is like getting an eye back and talking to Sula has always been a conversation to herself. The author comments in the novel:

Their friendship was so close they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one’s thoughts from the others. (83)
Nel and Sula are then separate faces of one being. Morrison suggests that to attain an ideal and holistic personality, the part embodied in Sula has to be wedded to the safe, conventional part represented by Nel. The friendship between the two black girls Nel and Sula growing into womanhood that serves as the periscope through which the tremendous contradiction of life is viewed. Their broken lives speak of the death of their agony which is the result of the loss of identity at cultural, gender and racial planes:

Their broken friendship is a measure of their broken lives that are cramped from the very start. As counter points, all the other women in the book Sula must either fit themselves into place-life has set for them or defy it with tragic circumstances proportionate to their degree of non-accommodation. (92)

Nel and Sula seek solace in each other’s company because they share the common bond of being young, black and female in the world that is commonly geared to meet the designs of nature, white males from drastically different social backgrounds; Nel and Sula are bound by factors much stronger than those which might tend to separate them. As Supported by her family Nel assumes the traditional role the community prescribes and retains her social identity though the personal self is dead. Sula by contrast accepts a
road of freedom goes to colleges and lives a life of experience with different men. She does not believe in traditions and culture. When she comes after ten years back to the town, Nel is happy and feels the revival of self. When Sula sleeps with Nel’s husband the bond is broken and Nel feels deserted. Quite different from Nel, Sula thinks that even this episode should go unseen due to their friendship. She does not want to hurt her friend. But this does not happen and both of them are alienated. Sula wants to tell Nel that she had come back to the Bottom only for her. Each girl had received security, love and identity from the other, blatantly denied to them in their homes. It is the death of Sula that brings Nel to realize the reality of her life. After Jude’s departure she had managed to live but it was not the real loss. With Jude she had allowed herself to become less than she was, it was only Nel who was the part of her life and spirit and helped her to understand herself. While coming from the graveyard her eyes twitch and burn a little:

All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude. And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up in to her throat. “We were girls together” she said as though explaining something. “O Lord, Sula,” she cried, “girl, girl, girlgirlgirlgirl. (174)
Morrison believes in fact that black women perhaps more than any other group in this society have the ability to see it whole and to understand the weakness, the complexities and the potential of humanity. The black women have been in position to see the world from inside out. Their knowing is deep, says Morrison. The black women are the touchstone by which all that is human can be measured. Though Milkman’s quest for self is the dominant theme of the novel the focus is on his mother Ruth and his aunt Pilate who are brilliantly contrasted with each other. Ruth is a society lady whereas Pilate is completely outside of the society as symbolized by her house outside the town. The distinction that Morrison makes between class and community is represented by the towering figure of Pilate who is totally beyond class distinction and yet is the embodiment of the spirit of community. In making Ruth and Pilate come together. Both of them love their father in strong manner. Ruth particularly has a strange relationship with her Father and Macon Dead, the father of Milkman is not able to understand the nature of that relation. Macon tells Milkman about it. He hates Ruth and does not want any child after Lena and Corinthians as her father handled the delivery of children. He (Macon) would not sleep with his wife who wants a boy. At last
she calls Pilate who runs to help her. By her primitive knowledge and medicines given to Ruth, she is successful in inviting Macon to Ruth and Milkman comes into this world. Even after the death of her Father Ruth is not able to shake off the influence and goes often to the grave yard secretly. Milkman comes to know it when once he hunts after his mother and finds her in the grave yard. The love of Pilate for her father is spiritual in nature. She knows the unnatural death of her father and keeps his bones in a cloth to give them proper burial at right time. She keeps the bones so sacredly and secretly that Macon misunderstands that sack of bones to be the bag of gold which she keeps. He asks his son to steal that bag. At the end of the novel she before being shot asks Milkman to bury those bones in the native place of her father.

While Ruth is the epitome of ideal rich lady- Pilate is a woman completely outside social structure. Both of them are single minded in their attention towards Milkman. While Ruth is the mother, Pilate is spiritual mother. Morrison compares and contrasts these two women in a beautiful passage:

They were so different, these two women, One black, the other lemony. One corseted the other, buck naked under her dress. One well read but ill travelled. The other had read only the geography book, but had been from one end of the
country to another. One wholly dependent on money for life, the other indifferent to it but those was meaningless things. Their similarities were profound. Both were vitally interested in Macon Dead’s son and both had close and supportive posthumous communication with their fathers. (139)

They come together, the upper middle class lady and the conjure woman to save Milkman who in sense is the symbol of their continuity.

Nevertheless, the general characteristics associated with Milkman in the beginning of the novel prove invaluable clues to his race and gender discrimination. Milkman’s gender consciousness can be gauged by his relationship with the local community as well as his awareness of national events that affect African people. Milkman is bored by all other events, revealing his complete estrangement from the community when informed of the heinous murder of the fourteen years old till, a murder which elicited the sympathy of both Europeans and Africans worldwide. Milkman replies: “Yeah, well fuck till. I am the one in trouble.” (88)

Milkman’s closest friend, Guitar Baines, believes that he has discovered love, but readers may question his wisdom.
Relinquishing love for individuals, Guitar embraces a race his black race. Joining the Days, Black men sworn to retaliate against oppressive violence by whites, Guitar isolates himself from women and men; for association with either group may cause him to betray the secrets of the Days. He even proposes to kill Milkman because he believes that Milkman has betrayed the Days. Nevertheless, it is Guitar whom Milkman would embrace in friendship and love. Just as Nel Wright Greene perceives that she loves Sula more than she loved her husband so, so Milkman finds love only in his asexual friendship with Guitar.

Soloman’s son Jake, is remained Macon Dead by a drunken Union solider who ignores the importance of a Black man’s name and identity. The original Macon Dead is killed by whites who covet his property. In *Song of Solomon* blacks take vengeance. Whereas Morrison earlier restricted her canvas to depictions of the interracial problems of Blacks, in *Song of Solomon* she presents more fully the gender problem of Blacks.

*Tar Baby* brings the bonding of Black and white women. That brings Margaret and Ondine. Margaret’s point of view inside renders her larger than her crime. Her offence horrible though it is links her to rest of humanity. In comparing himself to her Valerian
muses that Margaret knows the bottomless nests she has looked at it, dived into it and pulls her out—obviously tougher than he. Suffering all those years with the secret what she has done, earns Margaret the right to judge herself and Valerian. She can also forgive herself and ultimately feels tranquility and contentment. Morrison comes closer to empathizing with Margaret as a woman like other women victimized by a society that overvalues physical beauty. Born beautiful into a family of plain parents and ordinary siblings, Margaret is ignored, despised and finally left alone to make what she with of her assets. She is the teenage object of Valerian’s passion and nothing substantial is ever expected of her. Valerian’s wealth and elevated social position prohibits Margaret’s friendship with Ondine, the one person in Valerian’s life with whom she is comfortable. With her limited education and experience, she has nothing in common with wealthy socialists who would be appropriate companions. Margaret is isolated and having a baby isolates her more. It is Ondine who understands the boredom of isolation of Margaret. Valerian keeps Margaret stupid and idle and Margaret punishes him by sticking pins in his baby. She is like Ruth who loves her baby.
Margaret and Jadine are same in one sense as both of them have no sense of culture. Margaret too, has no roots. Her unnatural mothering has kept Michael alienated. He loves his mother but does not want to be near her. Ondine brings up Jadine but does not want to show possessiveness. She makes Jadine too much independent. Ondine does not pass her knowledge to her niece in time and realizes her mistake when the damage is done, Jadine, inspite of being black, lives and shares the world of Margaret due to her education and sophistication provided to her by Valerian. She lives near Margaret’s room and goes to Paris off and on. Margaret and Jadine, shop together, exercise together and generally spend-time in some mutual pursuits designed. Ondine and Sidney are her family but she inhabits a world which is larger than theirs. In crisis Ondine believe that, “nothing can happen to us as long as she’s (Jadines) here.” (87) She is mistaken like Margaret who plans to welcome her son on Christmas but he does not arrive.

However, Morrison suggests that the burden of guilt which Margaret has borne over the years has positioned her for forgiveness and triumph. The inner suffering which she bears by torturing her son has made her stronger than ever she suspects. As Valerian is rendered weak by his reasons of innocence and is
therefore in no condition to bear the burden of knowledge. Margaret emerges, burnished by the fires of suffering redeemed and ready to take care of Valerian. She is no longer a visitor on island as she settles in to her role of organizer and caregiver. She appears natural and at peace. She is able to make friends with Ondine and rekindle their brief youthful intimacy.

As women their racial differences not withstanding they have a great deal in common, a special bond. Ondine kept Margaret’s secret about Michael’s abuse because it was Women stuff. (Furmal, 53)

She could not tell Margaret’s husband or her own. They would not have understood but Ondine does. She despises Margaret, judges her and becomes her ‘mother superior’. Only she is a woman understands and explains Margaret’ transference of anger from Valerian to Michael. Morrison does not exonerate her or minimize her crime. She merely counts it as among the museum of horrible acts of which people are capable. All of Morrison’s characters are measured first against the yardstick of humanity and only after that by rule of historical racial culture. Ondine and Margaret revise themselves. Despite the cloud of Margaret’s crime hanging over them the women resume the laughter and camaraderie that Valerian, had interrupted thirty years earlier
because he objected to his wife’s intimacy with the cook since they only knew about it, it bonds them.

Like Margaret Jadine has no roots but she is rootless in double sense. The women in Paris market call attention to something that is missing in her as she has no connection to her cultural past. And she does not know the path to womanhood and to black womanhood in particular. She has no tradition and will have to find a way to live with her feelings. Ondine tries to guide Jadine, but that is too late and she can only express her regrets:

Jadine, a girl has to be a daughter first. She has to learn that.
And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can never learn how to be woman. I mean a real woman, a woman good enough for a child, well enough for a man-good enough for the respect of other women. (242)

Being black is not only a matter of genetics it is also a matter of culture. Jadine does not choose blackness because she has never learned what it is. Ondine encouraged her niece’s cultural disconnection and liked her living in Paris. But she did not understand the price of such encouragement. Morrison notes in Song of Solomon that without the chorus of mamas and aunts tending her black woman may easily loose her way. Morrison points to the feature that is essential to be a woman.
That quality of nurturing is to me essential. There should be a quality of adventure and a quality of nest. (Raus, 229)

Morrison says that contemporary woman is eager. Her feminist becomes sexuality rather than feminist, because it is perceived as weak. Ondine is a tough lady in the older sense of the word. She is keenly aware of her nurturing abilities whereas someone in Jadine’s generation would find that a burden. She does not intend to have children and she does not intend to look after her uncle and aunt. She is not afraid of male world but she is afraid of female world. She does not know the ‘ancient properties’ of black woman hood. Surrounded by aged trees whose long mossy growths assume mythic proportions, Jadine rejects trees’ maternal delight in her return to them. She does not acknowledge her link to their female nests. Hence she cannot have any bonding with women.

While dealing with various racist and sexist issues, Morrison looks at the concepts of women bonding as a means of coming to an understanding of the self in Jazz more than in any other of her earlier novels. Her novels are replete with such women bonding. In Jazz she makes an emphasis on the unity of women as a solution to gender oppression. Since the African people are
connected by their history and culture, the solution to the problem of exploitation and opposition that women in particular face, is unity. Separated from her man who is either sold during slavery or who leaves the black woman when he goes to seek jobs in the North during reconstruction the black woman has to depend on other women in the community who become a source of survival, information and psychic and emotional support. *Paradise* in the same way shows the theme of women bonding. Eight chapters of the novel bear a woman’s name viz., Ruby, Mavis, Grace, Seneca, Divine, Patricia, Consulate and Lone. Most of the women are bound together with strong bond of feminist beyond race, in the situation of crisis, Grace, Soane or Lone go to seek the help of Consulate, when they find her support. Soane knows the relation of her own husband with consulate but they become fast friends due to the same fact. Mavis gives up her husband being tortured by his brutal behavior. She comes to convent. She in the beginning is happy with her husband: “When she and Frank married, she did like it. Sort of Then it became required torture, longer but not much different from being slapped out of chair. These years at convent were free of all that.” (171)
Pallas, a girl of sixteen is deserted by her lover. She is pregnant and in miserable condition. It is Billie Cato, a girl of Ruby, who helps her and brings her to the convent. Consulate helps her to resume the normal behavior and health. She thinks that away from Carlos, her lover, she can find the meaning of her life:

In fact, as they (Pallas and Seneca) climbed the stairs, image of grandmother rocking peacefully, of arms, a lap, a singing voice soothed her. The whole house felt permeated with a blessed namelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters and exciting too. (177)

Arnette is pregnant before marriage and before going to city for education, she goes to Convent and once again Connie helps her in delivering the child. At the time of her marriage she and Soane invite Consulate to attend the party. The oppression becomes horrible in the case of Belie Delia who is the chestiest girl of the town but is considered wayward due to her frank behavior. She has to leave the town in order to avoid herself from the attacks. Her mother Patricia knows that she could not defend her daughter and sacrificed her. She feels sorry to smash her daughter.

“Pat licks her bottom lip, tasted salt and wondered who exactly the tears were for.” (203) the novel shows that the so called pure men of Ruby are unable to tolerate these women at Convent and attack
the place. Consulate is killed and other women run away. But the
death of Consulate deeply influences Soane and Deek in their life
afterwards.

In the same way Violet’s life in *Jazz* is the example for
viewing the lives of other black women who have been wronged.
Morrison calls them ‘armed’ and ‘dangerous’ because they carry
folded blades, packets of lye, shards of glass tapped to their hands.
Those who do not arm themselves are attached to armed men.
They are resolute women who are united in struggle. Whether they
struggle to keep a man, whether the fight is for some room or for
personal dignity, is unimportant, for Morrison they detail a single
composite pattern. They organize:

Leagues, clubs, societies, sister hoods... (designed to) bail
out, dress the dead, pay the rent, find new rooms start a
school, storm an office, take up collections, rent the block
and keep their eyes on all the children. (78)

It is the story of African Woman that Morrison is most
anxious to present in *Jazz* because it is only they who experience
the oppression of gender particularly. She takes a current problem
faced by African people and relates it to problem African women
confronted in 1920s and shows that the solution then and now
remains the same. All African people were in danger of explosive
Conditions caused by the changing U.S. economy in 1920s, the pattern moved rapidly from slavery to industrialism and racism that this industrialism extended. The results were the worst riots in the history of America. If conditions for all African people were barbaric and wild, then conditions for African women were war like.

Conditions of African women were no better in South than in North. The main reason parents gave for sending their daughters north was the fear of molestation. Jacqueline Jones Points out:

Significantly black men mentioned the degraded status of their womenfolk as one of the prime incentives to migrate....

Husband told of sexual harassment of wives and daughters by white men and other forms of indignities women in to the fabric of southern society. (157)

Northern cities like Harlem are not much different from the South especially for woman. The newspapers are colored with the blood and shame shed and faced by black women:

Every week since Dorcas’ death during the whole of January and February, a paper laid bare the bones of broken women.

Man kills wife. Eight accused of rape dismissed. Women and girls victims of Woman commit. (74)
So while migrate the Africans thought that they were coming to a tame place, free of exploitation and oppression, they were actually coming to a wild place, perhaps even wider than the South since the racism and sexism were alive as much in North. Hence Morrison shows the women bonding as one of the solutions against social evils. In Jazz, Violet finds herself through her relationship with Dorcas, Alice Manfred and Felice. It is the identification of self with the black women that leads violet to discover the real me as she goes out in search of Dorcas’ past and encounters. Alice Manfred, Dorcas’ aunt. Unlike Jadine in Tar Baby who rejects her culture and solidarity with those black women who help her confront reality, Violet accepts the influence of various black women on her life. Dorcas, Alice and Felice not only lead Violet to self discovery but also help her work on her relationship with her husband Joe.

Violet the wronged wife is many faceted creatures and a wronged woman in particular. But she was not pathetic from the beginning of her life. When violet tries to disfigure Dorcas’ face at her funeral, this violent act stuns the entire community but it is women who empathize with her just as it is women in the community who understand Sethe in Beloved and come out to save
her. Even a woman like Malvonne Joe’s neighbor, who admits that she hates Violet, cannot turn her back on another black woman. She tells Joe: “Okay, there is no love lost between violet and me, but I take her part not yours.” (46)

This affirmation of bonding develops in to understanding of the self in her relationship with Alice Manfred. Alice is one of the pistols, organizing charitable women’s club, violet is one of the armed. Alice’s niece is shot by Violet’s husband. But they find unlikely comfort and friendship with each other. At first Alice is afraid of her but her pathetic condition forces Alice to talk to her. She is prepared when violet first comes to see her, to look down from the mountain of superiority. At first she thinks that violet comes there to harm her. Then she thinks violet wants to offer confidence. Then she thinks violet comes to thank her for not calling the law. But none of such case is there. Violet replies, “I had to sit down somewhere. I thought I could do it here. That you would let me and you did.” (82) Alice becomes the person Violet can sit with and talk to someone who will try to understand her. Violet does not allow any surprised or angry response. She asks Alice not to judge her or dismiss her, look at her life and tell her what lessons, if any she has learnt in fifty seven years that can help
make her life intelligible. To such frankness and vulnerability, Alice can only mean ‘oh Mama’. And violet does the same.

In that moment they are linked by mutual compassion to each other and to ancestral woman. In that moment they occupy a space in the line formed by generations of struggling black women. (Furman, 91)

Alice and Violet come to an understanding of each other and of the self. Alice begins to speak to violet in a way she never did with other people. Soon the women became so easy with each other talk is not always necessary. More important Alice and Violet learn to laugh and understand that laughter is more serious than tears. Finally Violet convinces Alice as to why she had to disfigure the face of dead Dorcas. She makes Alice realize that she, a woman who had never held a knife to harm others would definitely fight and kill for her husband. Alice can no longer set herself apart pretend to be different from other women who are enraged and deranged by husbands’ betrayal. In the face of Violet’s assertion that Dorcas is her enemy even in death and that is why she attacked her, Alice suddenly remembers repressed images of violence against the other woman in her own married life. Thirty years earlier, she had craved not her husband’s blood but death and torment to the woman, he has chosen instead of her.
Alice had not acted but restrained herself only up to murderous dreams. This bonding and sisterhood between Violet and Alice allow them not only to talk but also to understand the ironies of life and accept those ironies with smiles. They disintegrate into healing laughter.

Violet not only helps Alice but also Felice, Dorcas’ girlfriend to review her life. Felice arrives at the Trace household only to retrieve her lost ring but stays back not only to discover her own self but also to understand her relation with her mother. Yamini Krishna Murthy says:

As Violet, Alice and Felice come together as black women, and discover their own selves through bonding with other black women, they come to an end of pilgrimage to know and be their own true selves. (82)

Thus Morrison succeeds brilliantly in arriving at the solution for the dilemma of African women in her novels through a sharp focus on gender.
Works Cited


