Chapter V

Discovering Indigenous Aesthetics: Dalit and Black Aesthetics, and the Applicability of Dalit Aesthetics on Morrison’s Fiction
Chapter V

Discovering Indigenous Aesthetics: Black and Dalit Aesthetics, and the Applicability of Dalit Aesthetics on Morrison’s Fiction

1. Introduction

The literatures of minority and protest have set up a new trend for the entire debate regarding aesthetics in literature. The very concept of aesthetics is being scanned from the view of sociological perspective of art of writing. Pleasure, form and artistic features have been replaced with social sensibility and representation of down trodden communities. The issues of essential human identity, existence and survival have replaced the conventional ideas of beauty and delight. Like other marginalized literatures of the world, African American literature and Dalit literature too demand a revision of the traditional classical aesthetics and also for the application of a new aesthetics to evaluate them. “This kind of literature is the expression of the awakened sensibilities of its author and so naturally, it takes quite a new form, making it difficult for the critics to apply the traditional critical canons to it” (Sargar 1).

2. Defining Aesthetics

Basically, aesthetics is a branch of philosophy related to beauty, art and perception. The word, aesthetics, has its genesis in the ancient Greek word ‘aesthetikos’ which means perception by the senses. It refers, in general, to the judgement or evaluation of any work of art, culture, literature and nature. As based on the sensory perceptions, its definition is not to be fixed. It is to be in flux- changing and varying through time and differing between people and culture. The term ‘aesthetic’ has been defined as “the branch of philosophy that studies the principles of
beauty, especially in art” in Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary (“Aesthetic”).

When it comes to aestheticism, the term is defined as “a doctrine that the principles of beauty are basic to other and especially moral principles” (“Aestheticism”). It takes us back to the concept of Greco-Roman Aesthetics, Indian Classical Aesthetics or Oriental Aesthetics.

“Aesthetics is concerned with issues connected to natural and artistic beauty and with art, including all aspects of its appreciation and production” (Bychkov xii).

When the discussion comes to an important idea of the Classical Aesthetics “Art for Art’s Sake”, propagated by Edgar Allen Poe and Walter Pater, the significance is attached to the belief that pure artistic pleasure is the chief aim not the moral earnestness. Poe writes, “there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified, more supremely noble, than this very poem, this poem per se, this poem which is a poem and nothing more, this poem written solely for the poem's sake” (‘The Poetic Principle’). However, Plato followed later by Wordsworth, Arnold, Dickens and others replaces this belief with ‘Art for life’s sake’ considering art or literature as the carrier of moral and social sensibilities. However, Philip Sidney keeps poise between moral and artistic purpose of literature when he says that “Poesy, therefore, is an art of imitation…a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth; to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture, with this end,—to teach and delight.” (Sidney 101)

The ancient concept of aesthetics had its share of treatment of both beauty and art. Most of modern aesthetic theories focus on art-rather than beauty. Another modern theory of Marxist ideology attaches the element of economic and social reality to it. However, modern aesthetics inclines to put emphasis on subjectivity and individual taste.
3. Black Aesthetics

The term Black Aesthetics, used during the 1960s, represents an artistic movement of Black writers of the nineteenth century. The Black Aesthetic movement highlights the exclusive artistic elements evolved by the writers such as Langston Hughes, Zora Hurston, and Richard Wright from its inception to its apex in 1960s with Lary Neal, Amiri Baraka, Mari Evans, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. In the process of formation of the theory of Black Aesthetic, the opinion difference can be seen, overtly or covertly, between the late 19th and early 20th African American writers and late 20th century (contemporary) writers. The late 19th and early 20th African American writers are blamed to associate themselves more with ‘American’ instead of celebrating their unique ‘African’ identity. W.E.B. Du Bois’s coined term “double consciousness” infers this dilemma of African Americans who have sought to assess their place within American society. Many of Black writers like Paul Laurence Dunbar identify with white Americans and believed in “write(ing) like white men” (172). However, another opinion weighs African Black art and the Black experience upon the White element.

In the odyssey of evolution of Black Aesthetics, the name of the early nineteenth century writer, Pauline Hopkins is worth mentioning. Her work champions the Black Aesthetic belief of rejecting Western ideology. In her work, there is an urge to African Americans to have gratification for their rich heritage instead of disassociating themselves from it. The Black Aesthetic notion of incorporating African American musical styles and African American folk traditions in their work are chief establishing components of Black Aesthetic in the twentieth century. Several writers like Claude Mckay (Home to Harlem), Zora Neale Hurston (Their Eyes were Watching God) and Sterling Brown (Southern Road 1932) espouse the importance of
Black folk music. Black aesthetic rejects the long established component of classical aesthetic-art for art’s sake and puts emphasis on the political and social function of art in this century. During the 1960s, Black aesthetic starts giving importance to Blacks and strives for the progress of Black race. Black writers preferred to the oral and performed (poetry and drama) to the written (prose) as a form of artistic expression in order to achieve their goal. In their writings, there is a call for Black people to take up arms in their fight against White America through the use of violent and profane words as well as the language of everyday.

The artistic component of Black aesthetic establishes a deep connection to the politics of Black Power Movement. Larry Neal discusses the newly awakened sensibility of Black writers in his essay “The Black Arts Movement” (1968) and finds that “new breed” of artists deviates from their predecessors in centering their force on their black identity; he calls for the need for a Black aesthetic which includes “a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology” (702). The works of Black women writers, like Sonia Sanchez and Mary Evans, speaks the dignity of Blacks committed to the goal of the revolutionary political movement. The ‘black is beautiful’ ideology and the spirit of Malcolm X find a significant place among Black writers. The Black Arts Movement, or Black Aesthetic Movement, was the largest African American cultural movement since the Harlem Renaissance (1919-1940), also known as the ‘Second Black Renaissance’. This movement asserted, according to Larry Neal, “a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic” (as noted in Jablon 16). Addison Gayle Jr., a leading spokesperson for the Black Aesthetic, defines it as “a means of helping black people out of the mainstream of Americanism” (xi). He further writes, “To evaluate the life and culture of the black people it is necessary that one live the black experience in a world where substance is more important than form,
where the social takes precedence over the aesthetic, where each act, gesture, and movement is political” (xi-xii).

Lakisha Odlum, very aptly, sums up the basic elements of the Black Aesthetic in her article “The Black Aesthetic”, “(1) The black writer speaks directly to a black audience; (2) the work contains a call for revolution; (3) the work emphasizes the rejection of Western ideology; (4) the work rejects the notion of art for art’s sake and instead privileges art that serves a social and political function; and (5) the work incorporates African American musical styles and folk culture (i.e. Black vernacular, blues, jazz)” (36).

4. Dalit Aesthetics

Dalit writers have been repeatedly claiming that the criteria set up for assessing the mainstream literature are not at all relevant for the analysis of Dalit literature. As far as existing literature of the mainstream is concerned, it can be examined through the parameters of Indian Poetics or Western theories and discourses be it the Greek Poetics, the Romantic Theories or Marxist theories of the modern times. These thoughts have been governing the literary and intellectual world for a long period. But Dalit writers believe it is not possible to analyze Dalit literature on the basis of these. Limbale gives reason why need for separate aesthetics, “Dalit literature is not pleasure-giving literature. Consequently, the aesthetics of Dalit literature cannot be based on the principles of an aestheticist literature that privileges pleasure derived from beauty” (116). A new aesthetic sense is required to study and evaluate Dalit literature.

Dalit aesthetics has its inception in the literature of protest, opposition, non-conformity, and resistance against hegemony of mainstream literature. From its outset
in Vasana (Kannad) in 12th century and Chokhamela (Marathi) in the 13th century to Namdeo (Marathi) and Vasvana (Tamil) in the mediaeval period to the present time, Dalit literature manifests rejection and sociological resistance against marginalization, exploitation and humiliation. It also rejects purely artistic tradition of the classical aesthetic considering that the representation of stark realities of life cannot be examined through the standards set to evaluate artistic pleasure. Mukherjee agrees with Limbale, “Dalit literature is neither a pleasure-giving literature of the sentiments and refined gestures, nor a narcissistic wallowing in self-pity” (14).

Dalit literature has emerged as ineluctable reality of literary world with the growing translation of works by Dalit writers from various regional languages into English and other languages. Since Dalit literature rejects the canonical literature, it also rejects the established standards of evaluating literature i.e. aesthetics. “The purpose of traditional literature is to provide aesthetic pleasure. Though traditional aesthetics talk about three basic principles Satyam (Truth), Shivam (Goodness), and Sundaram (Beauty), it is never realistic. On the contrary, Dalit literature is based on reality and for it man is superior even to God and nation” (Prasad 6). In Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature Limbale strongly demands to replace these three basic principles with the conception of the aesthetics that is “material and social” (21) and consists of the discussion on “the equality, liberty, justice, and fraternity of human beings” (22). Hence Dalit text can’t be evaluated through applying Indian concept of aesthetics i.e. Bharat’s concept of Nayak. Dalit literature rejects western theories as well as Indian theories of Rasa and Dhwani. Limbale and other critics like Yadunath Thatte, and Acharya Jawdekar find the Rasa theory as insufficient and advocate to increase the number of rasas e.g. ‘revolt’ as the tenth rasa and ‘cry’ as the eleventh rasa (Limbale 115-116).
Dr. C.B. Bharti in his Hindi article, “The Aesthetics of Dalit Literature”, writes, “The aim of Dalit literature is to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the higher castes. There is an urgent need to create a separate aesthetics to Dalit literature, an aesthetics based on the real experiences of life” (as noted in Prasad 6). In the series of this discussion, Devendra Choubey questions how to analyse Dalit literature in his article “Why Dalit Aesthetics”. Interrogating the need for a new aesthetics, he talks of the claim of the Dalit writers, “The issue of ‘Dalit’ or ‘Dalit literature’ are related to ‘caste’. Therefore the parameters to analyse these will arise from this only” (104). Choubey elucidates a very important point in this debate regarding the rejection of traditional literary standards by Dalit writers, “Though it cannot be said that the Dalit literature is totally free from the influence of the traditional literary sense, yet modern Dalit literature is primarily inspired and cherished by the thoughts of Ambedkar”. In fact, he adds, “this caste and class system is that exit point in Dalit construction on which the modern Dalit discourse is based” ((104-105). In the words of Sharan Kumar Limbale, “‘Rejection’ and ‘revolt’ in Dalit literature have been birthed from the womb of Dalits’ pain. They are directed against an inhuman system that was imposed on them. Just as the anguish expressed in Dalit literature is in the nature of a collective social voice…” (Limbale 31).

There are different phases in the development of Dalit literature and its Aesthetics. It has reached a stage of broad inclusion from extreme insularity. In his article, ‘New Connotations of the word Dalit’, Arjun Dangle writes, “A number of doubts were raised as to its nature...Initially the discussions centred on Buddhist (or Mahar) as they led the movement” (217). However, there is another view in this respect that to be labeled as Dalit literature only dealing with the sufferings of Dalits
and the problems of untouchability is not enough rather a true Dalit literary work should plead for the annihilation of caste system and integration of Dalits in the mainstream. These salient features of Dalit writing play a vital role in the process of the formation of Dalit aesthetics:

- The term ‘Dalit’ is not confined to downtrodden and marginalized subject of the lower castes; it imbibes all subaltern groups including women, tribes and other marginalized sections of the society in its fold.

- The emergence of identity and realization of ‘self’ yet not separated from community are significant components of Dalit literature. There is a call for liberating the Dalit society from caste and class centric social slavery.

- The rejection of romantic aesthetics and the initiation of the ideals of realism and humanism has been the pivotal of Dalit literature. It is only the power of the pen of Dalit writers and even of non-Dalit writers to expose the stark realities of human existence to explore the absurdity of social conventions that even ignores the essential humanity of those who are destined to survive in the adverse life conditions. In an interview given to Beena Agarwal, Neerav Patel, an eminent Gujarati Dalit poet, envisions the idea of Dalit aesthetics. His words are worth quoting here, “Dalit aesthetics doesn’t aim to create feel-good factor in its readers. It has a dual role of ‘destr uct and reconstruct to usher in the coexistence of Indian trinity of Satyam Shivam Sunderam, as well as the western trinity of liberty, equality, fraternity. And to demolish the unjust social order, Dalit aesthetics has to be ruthless as Shiva’s tandav. And that is why we say the beauty of the sword is hot in its ornate handle. The word that is more potent is more aesthetic, and the Dalit poet has to employ that very principal of aesthetics” (qtd. in Agarwal 167).
• Dalit literature does not find conformity to the traditional canons of literature hereby declaring it the literature of marginality. It has already refused to be evaluated by the upper-caste hegemonic literary standards, and though it has commenced to establish its own independent standards. Jalote opines, “The protagonists of Dalit literature reject the old morality and develop or adopt a new realistic morality with a view to ameliorating the existing state of affairs in the society” (15).

• Another significant aspect of Dalit literature is the deconstruction of the myths whose very basis is questioned by Dalit writers. The Dalits treat Ekalavya as their great grandfather. Shambooka is another name in this category. The usage of folklore in Dalit writings traces the oral tradition in them. It adds the quality of being indigenous or aboriginal to Dalit literature.

• Dalit literature deviates from the traditional aim of ‘art for art’s sake’ as its aim is to portray the reality of caste burdened society. In Dalit narratives, all the elements of narrative writing-plot, character, and dialogue are subordinated to the central thought or idea. Idea regulates over plot, characters and situations. In brief, for a Dalit writer art is just a carrier to express their ideas. “Art, for dalit writer, can never forsake the social reality, without such concerns it becomes barren” (Yadav 27). Dalit writings aim at depiction of pain and sufferings of Dalits and the object of study is exploited, suffering mass of Dalits which is not beautiful in the traditional sense.

Dalit critics, led by Sharan Kumar Limbale and Gopal Guru, while defending the necessity for alternative Dalit aesthetics, base their arguments on Dalit literature’s essential separability from traditional literature, its realistic nature, its connection to human life, its evocation of pain in place of pleasure, the kind of audience it addresses
and its redefinition of beauty. Dalit critics opine that the end of Dalit literature is not imparting of pleasure and the object of study need not be beautiful. M.N. Wankhade asserts, “The concept of beauty is related to the thought of each particular age. At one time kings were the subject of literature, common people were not acceptable subject. But today the life of untouchable quarters and slums have become subject-matter” (Dangle 297).

Dalit literature is innately man-centric and disparages any art which is abstract, spiritual or narcissistic (Yadav 27). It forms a matrix for the rejection of the postulations of art for arts’ sake movement. In his essay, “Dalit Feelings and Aesthetic Detachment”, R.G. Jadhav observes that though social content and aesthetic form are indivisible in any work of literature and social awareness assumes significance when it is expressed in the proper literary form. Aesthetic detachment marks Dalit Literature because “the tradition of social awareness lends a quality of realism to Dalit literature” (305).

5. Difference between Traditional Indian and Dalit Aesthetics:

Indian aesthetics begins with Bharata (Bhava and Rasanishpatti), continues to grow with Dandin (Guna School), Vamana (theory of Riti), Anandavardhana (theory of Dhwani) and reaches its culmination of growth and development with Abinavagupta who revived Rasa Theory. These theories propounded various theories stating one, literature and art are beautiful and please the minds of people and another, literature teaches and refines carrying a didactic purpose. Kshemendra proposed the theory of Auchitya or sense of propriety which mainly deals with the form and structure of the poem. Traditional aesthetics, being purely artistic, aims at pleasure born out of discovering beauty in a work of art, a person who derives pleasure from
any work of art must be sensitive enough to appreciate and taste it. It leads to inference **firstly** that the aim of any work of art is to impart pleasure, **secondly** that the work of art must possess beauty and **thirdly** that the targeted audience should be refined enough to appreciate the beauty only then they will be able to taste it. Generally, the concept of literary aesthetics is applied to evaluate the literary works. As is the aim of the study, the Dalit literary aesthetics can be applied to the writings of Toni Morrison to trace its importance in the Indian context. The similarities of these experiences lead us to compare their efforts to frame their own literary aesthetics. Waghmare aptly observes that “In an attempt to redefine their identities through the crucibles of their plays, poems, short stories, novels...They are harnessing and developing their own aesthetics like African Americans in America…The Indian Dalits are trying to develop their aesthetics mirroring their perceptions of life and the world around” (22).

In an effort to create Dalit aesthetics, an obvious attempt to subvert the norms of conventional literary aesthetics is seen. Dalit writing has tried to rework a new aesthetics, different from the mainstream literature, by delving into areas of day to day experience not imagination, element of reality not idealism, art for life’s sake instead of art for art’s sake, and stark realities of life not romanticism or beauty. The Dalit aesthetics replaces the concept of trio- truth, goodness and beauty with equality, liberty and fraternity; the idea of pure artistic pleasure with social and political cause. In the mainstream writings, there are elements like propriety, balance, and restraint, while Dalit literary ethos is marked with the rejection of these values. The use of language is often deliberately in opposition to the linguistic standard of the established literary aesthetics. As Valmiki states, “Dalit literature struggles against the language of traditional literary aesthetics” (51). Their search for their own aesthetics
results in an aesthetics that can be acknowledged as aesthetics of protest, materialism, and freedom demanding the need for sociological perspective. Omprakash Valmiki enlists five intentions and characteristics of (Hindi) Dalit literary aesthetics, First, they are affiliated with notions of equality, freedom, justice, dignity and meaningful expression; Second, they deny methods of concealing reality in the name of culture and religion; Third, they challenge fictitious standards; Fourth, their evaluation is based on the value of life; Finally, Dalit literary aesthetics establish freedom of expression and truth of experience as its foundation (50).

Sharan Kumar Limbale utters the similar view in his book, *Towards the Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*, that traditional literary aesthetics are not permanent parameters thus “new literary trends cannot be evaluated with traditional literary yardsticks” (107). Dalit literary aesthetics has incorporated the ideology of resistance. As an eminent Hindi Dalit writer Namwar Singh asserts, “The strength of Dalit literary aesthetics are in their powerful blow, not in their charm” (Valmiki 48). Limbale questions the validity of the aestheticism in discussion of beauty to be reconciled with the ‘Dalit Consciousness’ in Dalit literature. (115). He further asserts that the basis of aesthetics of Dalit literature is pain, agony and suffering not pleasure. “This is why it is important for Dalit critics to change the imaginary of beauty” (115). According to Limbale, the traditional theory of beauty seems abstruse and spiritualistic as it implies that the beauty of an artistic creation lies in its expression of world-consciousness or other-worldliness. Dalit literature, void of abstraction and spiritualism, rejects this theory and demands for the materialist aesthetics which proposes that ‘the beauty of a work of art is its rendering of reality’ (116). He establishes the element of freedom as ‘aesthetic value’ and propounds that it is more important than pleasure and beauty. He explicates that ‘the idea of freedom has an
aesthetic aspect, as much as it has political, economic, social and moral facets’ (119). Limbale enlists three important elements of Dalit aesthetics: “the artists’ social commitment”, “the life-affirming values present in the artistic creation”, and “the ability to raise the reader’s consciousness of fundamental values like equality, freedom, justice and fraternity” (120). Limbale further adds the elements of relevance and “strength to cross provincial boundaries” (120) as the standards to evaluate Dalit literature.

6. Similarity between Dalit and Black Aesthetics

Dalit literature shares its identity and some of its agony and suffering with African American literature. Writers from both contexts reject the long established literary tradition annihilating the major texts, and highlight the richness of dialects. History, language and identity marked by class, race or caste are central to their work. Dalit as well as Black aestheticians are of the view that the chief aim of arts lies in the betterment of life. They do not find the concept of ‘Truth, Good, and Beauty compatible with the idea of ‘art for life’s sake’ which is the core element of the aesthetics of these literatures. Madhu Dubey views, “Refusing the ideology of art for art’s sake and fusing aesthetics with Ethics, black aesthetic critics regarded artistic form as a transparent medium of moral and political messages, and could justify art only if it served the function of raising the cultural consciousness of the Black community” (80). Dalit aesthetics as well as Black aesthetics emphasize on the lives and experiences of their communities in the colloquial and vernacular language actually spoken by their people. They strive to create their own “separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology” to resist hegemonic mainstream aesthetics (Neal 702). They plead for the retrieval of their culture, history, ancestry, folklore, and dialect and the creation of something new out of it. Larry Neal says, “The Black artist
must create new forms and new values, sing new songs (or purify old ones): and...he must create a new history, new symbols, myths and legends...(703). Limbale finds approval of revolt, acceptance of humanism, and need for a sociological perspective as the common elements between the Dalit and Black aesthetics and advocates to use “a sociological perspective in the assessment and criticism of literatures whose very souls are constituted by ‘society’ and ‘social problems’” (100). Thus, the ‘man’ especially the oppressed man, at the centre stage, the expression of thoughts and ideas, dreams and expectations, and the feelings and passions of their community, discovering various aspects of their culture, and delving deep into the history of Dalits are the keynotes of the Dalit and Black literary aesthetics.

6.1 Dalit and Black Discourses and Marxist Discourse

Dalit writers resist the idea of their works being judged in the light of classical Indian aesthetic theories of literature. They move away from the Classical structure as well as Classical critical theory. They plead that these theories would not serve the purpose- the purpose of propagating their idea of resistance, deconstruction, and rejection. Dalit literature does not stick to traditional values i.e. to instruct or to delight, rather its values are to resist, to question, to answer, to talk back. Therefore, this literature is very different in its nature and makes a ground for different aesthetics. It can be evaluated through a separate literary discourse: a discourse of resistance, questioning, deconstruction, rejection, and marginalization. “Dalit literature is marked by a wholesale rejection of the tradition, the aesthetics, the language and the concerns of a Brahmanical literature that…carried within it the signs of the caste-based social and cultural order” (Mukherjee 10). This point links Dalit literature to some other discourses as Marxist discourse and Feminist discourse. The question arises if Dalit ethos can be linked to Marxism. Critics have opined differently
on it finding an inseparable connection between them at one place and noticing the underlying ideological difference at another place. Marxist discourse is a humanist discourse developed in the context of historical materialism. It envisions an exploitation-free society as is the case with Dalit discourse. Both of these are geared towards the idea for “human freedom” reckoning common man as the protagonist and making people “conscious about their slavery” with a commitment (Limbale 71). Since the Marxist ideology of revolution is based more on economic disparity less on social disparity, Dalit writers and critics have shown opposition towards it. They find Marxism in India as insufficient approach to their aim as Marxists have not paid to the caste system and untouchability and “inequality in Indian society is not the consequence of capitalism alone” (Limbale 62). Choubey writes, “Due to excessive stress on Marxism, Dalit enthusiasts have expressed their protest against this thought (Marxism) of the progressive literature... Marxism is based on the belief that suppression, exploitation and oppression is all due to economic reasons, whereas Dalit writing rests on the social inequality reflecting through racial and caste centric institutions. Here the problem is not of economic inequality, it is of national identity (caste and birth)” (104). Chobey quotes Ambedkar, “caste system is not just about division of the workers; they are divided in a hierarchy...whosoever is born in whichever sub caste, caste, s/he dies there” (Ambedkar 376). Limbale also rejects this one-dimensional approach that they should be labeled either only economic or only social. He propounds a need for the convergence between Marxist discourse and Dalit discourse as the cause of the Dalit’s economic slavery is hidden in the Indian social order. Although, these discourses are products of different circumstances, they are not entirely distinct or mutually damaging. The life-affirming values, commitment to humanism and adherence to realism underline commonly these two discourses.
7. Reading Morrison’s Fiction in the Light of Dalit Aesthetics

On the issues of the representation of Black art and culture in literature, Toni Morrison stands as an icon. Although, Toni Morrison does not recognize the direct affiliation with the Black Arts Movement; however, Claudia, the narrator in her novel *The Bluest Eye*, rejects Western or White standards of beauty and Sula’s rebellious nature influences the Black community of Bottom especially Nel. Morrison’s oeuvre, more specifically non-fiction, underlines the uniqueness of Black culture, ancestry, history and heritage and acclaims for its due place in the American aesthetic/literary tradition. She questions the mainstream hegemony of conventional literary culture in America and stresses the urgency for creating their literary ethos. The similarity between Dalit and Black aesthetics establishes the ground to examine how Morrison’s literary corpus corresponds with Indian Dalit literary theory and it leads to re-evaluate Dalit ethos, Dalit aesthetics, and Dalit consciousness.

7.1 Seeking Equality, Freedom, Justice and Fraternity

Raising the readers’ consciousness of fundamental values like equality, freedom, justice and fraternity is an important component of the Dalit aesthetics. Muktibodh remarks that “human freedom is the inspiration behind it…the nature of this literature consists in a rebellion against the suppression and humiliation suffered by Dalits—in the past and even at present…”(270). It is, overtly, visible in Morrison’s fiction as well as non-fiction. In her work, the issues of slavery, segregation, racism and oppression, the influence of musical or folk tradition and discovering self and recovering identity are intricately linked to the theme of freedom and self-expression. Her novels vocalize the silent agony of the enslaved Blacks and their rightful assertion for freedom and equality along with their anger against the violence and injustice. In an attempt to seek freedom, her work retrieves Black culture which has
faced the blows of bondage. Along with it, it deals with the common cause of humanity—raising consciousness among readers with reference to the suffering of the Blacks in White dominated America. In *A Mercy*, she depicts the destitute of Blacks in the grip of slavery and thereby, raising awareness to make society free from its ramifications. Her novel *Sula* focuses on the personal struggle for self-realization and affirmation through the character of Sula. Morrison at the same time contrasts this instinct to become rebellious with the harmonious relationship with the community. She explores the mysteries of human emotions and relationships and finds that all sorts of social conventions are mere restrictions upon the free will and liberty. *Beloved* traces the quest of Sethe, an escaped female slave, for integrated and ameliorated identity in both slavery and freedom. Her non-fiction, “Remember: The Journey to School Integration” is a remembrance of the journey to equality.

7.2 **Element of Realism**

The element of realism in Dalit aesthetics finds a place in Morrison but fancy also joins it to give her access to bring the past in its true implications. “Toni Morrison’s novels have attracted both popular and critical attention for their inventive blend of realism and fantasy, unsparing social analysis and passionate philosophical concerns” (David 322). Morrison has stated that since “memories and recollections” cannot give her complete access to the “unwritten interval life” of her ancestors, she must rely on imagination to give her a roundabout access, she must remain faithful to the world of her ancestors: “Infidelity to that milieu – the absence of the interior life, the deliberate excising of it from the records that the slaves themselves told – is precisely the problem in the discourse that proceeded without us” (Morrison, *Unspeakable Things* 9). However, the major concern of her work is to articulate the real picture of racism in American society. Most of her novels find the originating
idea in a real incident of life, for instance, Morrison’s childhood friend who once
expressed her wish to have the blue eyes inspired Morrison to write her first novel
(The Bluest Eye); the memory of a woman of Morrison’s acquaintance shaped the
character of Sula (Sula); the story of Sethe in Beloved traces its origin in the real story
of a slave Margrate Garner who tried to kill her child; A Mercy gives the real picture
of the slave trade in America. The narrative technique, theme and characters all are set
to reveal the reality of Black Americans’ life marred by biased stance of dominant
culture.

7.3 Social Commitment

The element of social commitment of Dalit ethos finds an important place in
Morrison’s fiction as well as non-fiction. Her novel Song of Solomon was published
with the Black Arts movement at its culmination. The movement believed that the
main aim of Black artistic expression was to bring a change in social plight of Blacks
along with political revolution. It attaches the element of being political with the
literary expression as a standard to affirm its validity. Morrison herself has affirmed
the validity of a literary expression if it makes a political statement, “all good art has
always been political” (qtd. in Taylor-Guthrie 3). She further adds that the Black artist
has a responsibility to the Black community. Her work Song of Solomon demonstrates
what Stephanie Li writes of Morrison, the author shares “a commitment to exploring
the inter-related nature of oppressive social systems” with other Black writers.
Morrison’s commitment to Black society extends to efforts to preserve key aspects of
African American history. Her ‘Black Book’ (1974) is a type of archive of African
American life and was an outcome of her deep concern for the past, culture, beliefs,
folk tradition and music of African American communities. Her words speak of the
effort to preserve their past and ancestral legacy:
“Like every other book, it would be confined by a cover and limited to type. Nevertheless, it had to have- for want of a better word- a sound, a very special sound. A sound made up of all the elements that distinguished Black life (its peculiar brand of irony, oppression, versatility, madness, joy, strength, shame, honor, triumph, grace and stillness) as well as those qualities that identified with all of mankind (compassion, anger, foolishness, courage, self-depiction and vision)” (Morrison, ‘Black Book’ 43).

Through her characters, Morrison establishes the sense of social responsibility. Pilate in Song of Soloman feels a social responsibility and connection. Not only as a writer but as an artist Morrison is a committed social activist (Bloom 1). In Beloved, the character of Baby Suggs speaks of social responsibility through her role of an “unchurched preacher” who “opened her great heart to those who could use it” (102). The experiences of slavery make Baby Suggs concerned with “every black man, woman and child who could make it through” purgation. Baby Suggs works as a preacher but in a different way, not telling her followers to “clean up their lives or to go and sin no more” (102-103). Instead, Baby Suggs tries to make the black community aware of their existence, to value their eyes, their hands, their mouth, their face, their neck, and most importantly, their hearts. “Self-recognition is inextricably tied up with self-love, and this is precisely the message of the sermons that Baby Suggs preaches to her people in the Clearing” (Schapiro 14). Morrison, as a detached observer describes Black community’s life, introspects it and reports the diminishing elements of it with a purpose of social amelioration.
7.4 Singing Folklore and Celebrating Culture

Dalit writers attempt to discover their own roots, and trace their own culture to nourish their community as against imposed values by the dominant culture. The presence of folklore in Dalit literary tradition characterizes one medium used by them in response to the oppression they face. Apart from it, the singing of folklore declares a proud Dalit identity and reinforces the acceptance of their culture to the mainstream culture. As in the writings of Bama, Shivakami, Daya Panwar, Baby Kamble, Limbale, Kumud Pawde, Valmiki, Rao, Nagbhushan and Dhasal, there is an effort to preserve their folklore, and remember and revive their myths through the depiction of real life experiences of the village life. Their texts are filled with the examples of rituals, story-telling, proverbs, oral language and register of the community. Bama informs in Sangati, “Even if there’s no kanji to eat, the women can never be stopped from singing loudly and ululating” (17). She sings the folklore sung during the ritual of the coming of the age of Mariamma,

“The mountain wind can touch her if she bathes in the river
The chill wind can touch her if she bathes in the pond
So bathe her in water that is drawn from the well
And wash her hair in a tub made of illuppai flowers.
Shake her hair dry and comb it with gold
Toss her hair dry and comb it with silver,
Comb her hair dry with a golden comb,
And women, all together, raise a kulavai” (Sangati 17).
Baby Kamble in The Prisons We Broke presents folksongs:
“Zalubai zalu, a flock of birds
Have flown away, out of sight.
Weep not, oh poor brother of mine.

Zalubai zalu, what’s left behind

Is a reflection in the mirror.

Weep not, oh poor sister of mine” (93).

The social commitment of Morrison provokes her to use Black myths, folklore and African oral traditions. Morrison also calls her work “village literature” and “Peasant literature for my people” and believes that good novels ought to “clarify the roles of that have become obscured…and they ought to give nourishment” (qtd. in Taylor-Guthrie 120-121). Her works authenticate the plea for substantiating and enriching an African American folk culture that has long been effaced by both external as well as internal dynamics. Her Song of Soloman illustrates an African American folktale (of flying ancestor) to negate the loss of the folklore tradition and to redeem it that frames one of the basic elements of African American culture. The character of Junior, in the novel Love, shares the symbolic representation of African culture, mythology and tradition with Sula in Sula, Pilate in Song of Soloman and Son in Tar Baby. Morrison gives “faint limp” as Junior’s distinctive feature of appearance which brings in the image of African mythological figure Legba (Morrison, Love 13). What Christine thinks of Junior links her to the spider from African folklore, “Heed is doing something secret with an able-bodied spider [Junior] to help her” (Morrison, Love 169). Cynthia Davis observes that in an effort to explore Black myth and folk, Morrison lends the quality of being myth to her work. As her skillful “combination of social observation with broadening and allusive commentary gives her fictions the symbolic quality of myth”. She further adds that, “the search for a myth adequate to experience is one of Morrison’s central themes” (323). Morrison herself explains; “Let me give you an example: the flying myth in Song of Solomon…it is about black
people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts. I don’t care how silly it may seem. It is everywhere – people used to talk about it, it’s in the spirituals and gospels. Perhaps it was wishful thinking – escape, death, and all that. But suppose it wasn’t. What might it mean? I tried to find out in *Song of Solomon*” (qtd. in Taylor-Guthrie 122). This effort to examine the cultural myths connects to the wish to explain and broaden reality of them, and brings her work closer to a distinctly Afro-centric literary approach. To accomplish this, her style contains various components of “African modes of storytelling” which present “a way of bridging gaps between the Black community’s folk roots and the Black American literary tradition” (Wilentz 61).

Morrison sings an African folklore in *Song of Solomon*;

“O Solomon don’t leave me here,
Cotton balls to choke me
O Solomon don’t leave me here
Buckra’s arms to yoke me
Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone
Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home” (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 303).

### 7.5 Deviating from Traditional Literary Genres

Apart from using their indigenous folklore, and oral tradition, Dalit writers do not follow the framework of traditional literary genres. Fiction, myths and real life over-lap in their works and invent new form of writing like testimonial/testimonies. Similarly, Morrison’s writings exceed traditional framework of story or plot. Her novels do not follow the linear structure of plot rather “her fictive world is mythic, legendary-full of complicated stories about ordinary people who have survived and
prospered in an extraordinary and almost miraculous way inside the maelstrom of American racism and sexism” (Oza 1524). Morrison as a folktoralist and myth-maker is the perfect author to enrich her fiction with oral culture, rich in poetry including gospel music, blues and rap, thereby using the survival techniques in her writing.

7.6 The Presence of Ancestors as Legacies of Past

The presence of ancestors in life is one of the defining themes of Morrison’s writings which establish a connection to Black and Dalit culture. Eva Peace in Sula, Pilate in Song of Solomon, Baby Suggs in Beloved, True Belle in Jazz, Therese in Tar Baby, the ‘tree woman’ and the ‘night women’ who haunt Jadine – all these ancestral figures in her work are not just parents but they “are a sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and provocative, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (Morrison, “Rootedness” 343). Interestingly, like Morrison and Dalit writers- Bama, Limbale, Kamble and Pawde- celebrate the presence of the grandmothers in their narratives: grandmother figures are assigned the role of the archives of the history of the community. They play an active role in the life of the community. The grandmother of the narrator of Sangati is a lively personality deemed as the highly respected member of the community. Serving the community as midwife, she has a story to say about the birth of each child in the community. In Morrison’s Beloved, Baby Suggs is a grandmother figure who finds the same respect in her Black community. “A self-proclaimed preacher, Baby Suggs draws upon the beauty of nature to make the community of ex-slaves recognize the beauty in them” (Robinson 91). She exercises the nurturing and healing influence on those scarred by slavery, including Sethe, the mother figure in the novel. “She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. ‘Here,’ she said, ‘in this here place, we
flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it” (Morrison, *Beloved* 88).

In Bama’s *Sangati*, the grandmother shares her seemingly infinite store of stories through imparting the narrator (her granddaughter) the ways and beliefs of their community and this process of educating takes place frequently. In case of the humiliation of Mariamma, Patti (grandmother) expresses the helplessness, “Whether it is right or wrong, it is better for women not to open their mouths. You just try speaking out about what you believe is right. You’ll only get kicked and beaten and trampled on for your pains. And it isn’t just here that it happens, you know. It’s the same throughout the world. Women are not given that kind of respect” (Bama, *Sangati* 29). However, Patti, in these words, relates what she has experienced in her life clutched in the grip of subjugation and patriarchy. The grandmother enacts as the torch-bearer for the women of the community, in the time of need, whether it be a matter of child birth, ill-health, and maltreatment of women, subjugation, or domestic violence. She inscribes in the narrator’s consciousness the value of solidarity among women and makes them learn the techniques to resist with togetherness. Baby Kamble’s mother is seen as leading the women of her community in the liberation movement and convinces her community not to eat dead animals. In Limbale’s *The Outcast*, the forfeit and sacrifice of Dalit women is recalled through his grandmother, Santamai’s character. Like most of other Dalit women in the vicinity, Santamai used to collect dung for making cakes of dung to sell them. She feeds her grandson first and keeps the frame of her body with leftover food. As Sethe in *Beloved* finds her haven in the home of the grandmother figure Baby Suggs, Masamai, the mother of the narrator, finds shelter at Santamai’s place, “Only a mother and the earth can accommodate and stomach everything” (37).
7.7 Language, Diction and Form

In Dalit aesthetics, there is an evident disregard for form, content and style. Dalit authors have formed their own form, language and style along with content. Bama uses the spoken language of her people in her work. She says, “[e]very dominant literature should be inverted. This process of inversion can be seen in the Tamil oral tradition---the folklore. There are traces of the agony and ecstasy of the Dalits, the direct and emotional outbursts, the collective identity, the mockery and caricature of the immediate oppressors, the supernatural powers of oracle and the mythical heroism: these are the several elements for the construction of a conscious Dalit literature” (Bama, “Dalit Literature” 97-98). Bama uses the native language of her community in her narratives. The use of oral folk language helps her to create the air of her community. The language of Dalit writers is “woven into the proverbs, aphorisms and mythic sayings of the common folk” (Nayar 377).

Morrison explains conditions of the Blacks and their aspirations for freedom and justice using a kind of language which reflects their social reality and brings the life and blood of Black culture in the view. Morrison says, “The language, only the language…it is the thing that black people love so much—the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. It is a love, a passion. Its function is like a preacher’s: to make you stand up out of your seat, make you lose yourself and ear yourself. The worst of all possible things that could happen is to lose that language. These are certain things I can’t say without recourse to my language” (qtd. in Rickford 4). The use of colloquial language in different aspects in Morrison advantages her work to make her stories characterizing the time and place in which the stories and characters are positioned. Interestingly, Morrison’s use of such language connects her work to Dalit aesthetical component- use of their
community’s language by Dalit writers to pose a challenge to the traditional aesthetics. She has been successful in procreating Black cultural environment in Jazz, Tar Baby, Sula, The Bluest Eye, Paradise and Love through deploying Black vernacular language. The novel Love presents the non-linear mode of narrative technique, special feature of Morrison’s novels, as it moves between past and current with division of the plot among different time period. As a critic, she has spoken out rightly in the favour of Black indigenous way of expression.

8. Dalit Literary Ethos and Feminist Discourse(s)

The talk of Dalit discourse is, unquestionably, incomplete without taking into account Dalit feminist discourse cause Dalit women and their plight forms an inner circle in the arena of Dalit literature. The Dalit Feminist discourse locates the place of Dalit women in the peculiar socio-economic milieu. Anupama Rao evaluates the place of Dalit women and finds her as “thrice-subjugated as women, as Dalit women, who perform stigmatized labour” (11). Yadav opines that, “The awareness regarding the position of dalit women as a special case within the overall dalit movement, along with the recognition of dalit women as essentially women who shares some of the feminist concerns with main stream feminism, have been the distinctive features of rising dalit feminism” (41). Dalit Women Writers have registered their protest against the male dominated citadel through their writings. Sharmila Rege in ‘A Dalit Feminist Standpoint’ indicates the lacuna of Dalit movement, “The Dalit Panthers did make a significant contribution to the cultural revolt of the 1970’s, but both in their writings and their programmes, dalit women remained firmly encapsulated in the roles of the ‘mother’ and the ‘victimized sexual being’” (Rege 91). Cynthia Stephen therefore strongly advocates the need to develop their ‘theory’ and ‘praxis’ and puts forth that, “we need a new language to define this state of being. We therefore coin the term
Dalit Womanism to better define and understand our lives” (Feminism). Now, many distinctive and established voices of Dalit women in Dalit Writing, have been expressing their distinct female sensibility. Dalit women’s stand and the trauma of Dalit women have been voiced by several Dalit women writers Bama (Karukku, and Sangati), Urmila Pawar (The Weave of My Life), Baby Kamble (The Prisons We Broke), Sivakami (The Grip of Change, and The Taming of Women) and Kumud Pawde (Antasphot).

In the definition of feminism/womanism, what has been said for the Black feminism can be applied to Dalit feminism that one can see the complementary nature of one's personal life in relation to one's political life. The personal is political and this idea of Dalit womanism finds an innate expression in Morrison’s writings persistently. She herself says, as mentioned earlier also, “The work must be political. It must have that as its thrust…The best art is political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time” (Morrison qtd. in Heinze 9).

9. Conclusion

The study has sought to explore the corpus of Morrison’s writing and establish its similarities with Dalit literary texts written by select Dalit writers. In this course, the study has found that the Morrison’s work carries various identical elements with Dalit literary ethos and Dalit women discourse. Her work, both fiction and non-fiction, with a purpose of social justice, political integrity and commitment has crossed the provincial boundaries of her nation. She is located in the world literature as a literary icon appealing to entire humanity. The trait of her writing being inter-cultural and inter-national has firmly established her value in the Indian literary context.
Works Cited


