Summation

Toni Morrison is one of those rare authors whose works have achieved a great critical acclaim and commercial success. She is both a Nobel Prize Winner and a best-selling author, the focus of dozens of recent doctoral dissertations and a popular icon. The secret of Morrison’s success lies in her ability to transcend perceived oppositions. Her fiction, for example, makes ideological as well as aesthetic statements. Often probing emotionally and politically charged subject matters such as slavery and racism, Morrison has a large number of readers from diverse backgrounds. Her works can be both accessible and technically complicated, drawing upon conventions of classical literature as well as vernacular culture.

Morrison tells stories that many do not want to hear, and her means of telling often leaves readers spellbound. The horrific becomes beautiful, the pitiable becomes infused with dignity, and the hidden is brought into limelight. Hers is an art of cultural memory that speaks to readers from a variety of perspectives.

She refutes the hierarchical order shaped by the concepts of centre and periphery and questions the ideology on which the order is based. She is simultaneously engaged in the project of constructing an Afro-centric perspective, and evolving an African-American poetics.
Exploring the complexity of black female experience in white America, Morrison attempts to resolve the contradiction inherent in her African-American identity. Conscious of her own marginalization within the context of the mainstream, she starts valuing her peripheral existence. Titled as a 'Black Woman Writer,' Morrison claims to concerned, above all, with the idea of 'a black community'—what such a community once meant, how it has changed, and how, despite those changes, it is and should be maintained.

Naturally, her novels are an exploration of the meaning of blackness—what it means to be black in white America, to be a black woman in a white male hegemonic society to believe in an indigenous African culture in a world that endorses only Eurocentric culture, and to strive for visibility in a society in which blackness signifies invisibility. They record the triumphs and complexities of black life from the painful past of slavery to the frustrating, racist present.

The lives of African-American women have been critically affected by racism, sexism, and classism which are systems of social and psychological restrictions. The racist, sexist, and classist structure of the American society compartmentalizes its various ethnic groups, denigrates the coloured as inferior and characterizes males and females as centre and margin respectively. Just as blacks as a group are relegated to an underclass by virtue of their race, women are relegated to a separate caste by virtue of their sex. Black women have been
victimized not only by racist and sexist assumptions but also by class exploitation which is, perhaps, the greatest source of oppression of blacks in America. The basic myth of racism is that the white are more intelligent and more virtuous than the black by the mere fact of being white. Furthermore, whiteness is automatically equated with beauty and culture, and blackness with ugliness and slavery.

Sexism mutilated the backs and minds of African-American women and, what was worse, defiled their sexual beings and scarred them psychologically. Thus, to be black and female is to suffer from the twin disadvantages of racial discrimination and gender bias. The double aspect of blatant white racism and black male sexism have hurled black women headlong into the dismal abyss of geometric oppression. If the dominant racist group has condemned them through an abusive ideology, black men, by virtue of their phallic superiority, have held black women as their scapegoats, victimizing them in every conceivable way. Black women suffer not only because they are black and female but also because they are economically poor. The ideal concept of woman in American society is not just racist and sexist but essentially classist. And poor, black women, who could hardly approximate the norm, are discriminated against and dehumanized.

Though concentrating exclusively on the voicing out of African American experience in her fiction, Morrison reaches out to the entire world, but more specifically to the third world countries like India. Besides the commonality of the third world consciousness, there is another factor that brings Morrison’s
writing close to Indian experience- the issue of double oppression raised by the
dalit women. The problem of double marginalization caused by the systems of
caste and gender oppression in India is closely akin to the the race and gender
oppression in America. Like the African Americans, the Indian dalits -the
scheduled caste, the scheduled tribe as well as the other socially and economically
oppressed sections of Indian society, including women, irrespective of their caste,
and economic status-are a marginalized group, a segregated sect of the society.

The fact that Dalits are treated in India as sub-human beings and are given
the most humiliating jobs coincides to a considerable degree with the
dehumanizing treatment given to blacks in America. One can discern that the
system of untouchability and low social status given to Dalits impose a double
burden on them as on the Africans in America. Thus, the novel Karukku by
Bama, bears ample testimony to the inhuman treatment given to the Dalits. Both
Toni Morrison and Bama seem to be dealing with socio-psychic interaction with
reference to their specific problems of social situation. Although Toni Morrison
takes great pride in her black identity, values her ethnic heritage and inscribes her
community, her artistic genius enables her to reach out to the entire world.

The novel Karukku is a sincere attempt to tell a story that is so furious
about the ill-treatment given to the oppressed in the name of class and caste. It
seeks to expose the plight of thousands of Dalits. The author also finds that several
of her own people have internalized the inferiority that is imposed on them by the upper class. She wants her novel to be a two-edged sword, while on the one hand, it challenges the oppressors who have enslaved and disempowered the Dalits, while on the other hand, it reiterates the need for a new society with ideals such as justice, equality and love. The author believes that a lack of unity among the Dalits will make it easier for the upper castes to subjugate them.

Thus the novel, *Karukku*, is not merely a militant voice seeking to liberate the Dalits from oppression, but the language used in the book is that of the Dalits. This, in itself is a form of overthrowing of established conventions for writing, as dictated by the upper castes. The novel gives an identity to the Dalits by proudly recollecting the cultural significance of being a Dalit in the remnants of memories. The book therefore becomes the harbinger of an awakening and reiteration of the Dalit’s freedom to question rebel and re-interpret.

Toni Morrison’s works are always symbolic of the shared human condition, both engaging with and transcending lines of race, gender and class. The novels of Morrison do more than inform us of what kind of life or lives black people in America lead. What they seek to do is to make us view experiences from the black perspective. Her novels are critiques of beings, and as such suggest strategies for survival in a world where the individual confronts tangible, immediate threats as well as impersonal and abstracts hazards by fellow human beings.
Her novels which mirror the triple perspective of the black American women, bring much of the American experience out of the marginal shadows and help give American literature as a whole a more complete and finer dimension.

Toni Morrison’s novels artistically document the author’s awareness of and concern for the historical conditions of oppression of African people in America, thereby revealing her heightened consciousness of the inter relationship of race, gender, and class. Although all the three of are present in her novels, the emphasis on them varies from novel to novel.

Toni Morrison examines the problems of race and gender before exploring class contradictions within the race. At the beginning of her writing career, she thinks that racism is the main source of oppression of blacks in white America because of her low level of gender and class consciousness. Then, becoming aware of the indispensability of the sexuality of American racism, she finds that sexism is equally oppressive. Finally, she realizes that racism and sexism are by-products of capitalism-the economic system of slavery.

In Toni Morrison’s first novel, The Bluest Eye, the focus is on racism. She probes deep into the effects of beauty standards of the dominant culture on the self image of the African female adolescent. The novel The Bluest Eye attempts to show the terrible consequences for blacks internalizing the values of a white culture that both directly and indirectly rejects them. Although Morrison’s class
analysis is immature in this novel, Morrison is at least conscious of a limited role that economics plays in the exploitation of African people.

Toni Morrison belongs to a group of writers in America—Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bambara, Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor—for whom writing is a liberating tool, a subversive strategy and an artistic mode for self-expression. Combining the aims of the Black Freedom Movement and Women’s Liberation, Morrison seeks to produce literature which is irrevocably and indisputably black. Toni Morrison explores the distortion of black reality by the dominant group for its vested interest. She refutes the hierarchical order shaped by the concepts of centre and periphery and questions the ideology on which the order is based. She is simultaneously engaged in the project of constructing an Afro-centric perspective, and evolving an African-American poetics.

Exploring the complexity of black female experience in White America, Morrison attempts to resolve the contradiction inherent in her African-American identity. Conscious of her own marginalization within the context of the mainstream, she starts valuing her peripheral existence. Morrison claims to be concerned, above all, with the idea of 'a black community'—what such a community once meant, how it has changed, and how, despite those changes, it is and should be maintained.

Naturally, her novels are an exploration of the meaning of blackness—
what it means to be black in white America, to be a black woman in a white male
dominated society. Her novels unveil a society which values only Eurocentric
culture, and further her novels pen picture a society in which blackness signifies
invisibility. They record the triumphs and complexities of black life from the
painful past of slavery to the frustrating racist present.

The lives of African-American women have been inexplicably affected
by racism, sexism, and classism which are the systems of societal and psy-
chological restrictions. The racist, sexist, and classist structure of the American
society compartmentalizes its various ethnic groups, denigrates the coloured as
inferior and characterizes males and females as centre and margin respectively.
Just as blacks as a group are relegated to an underclass by virtue of their race,
women are relegated to a separate caste by virtue of their sex. Black women have
been victimized not only by racist and sexist assumptions but also by class
exploitation which is, perhaps, the greatest source of oppression of blacks in
America. The basic myth of racism is that the white are more intelligent and more
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Sexism mutilated the backs and minds of African-American women and,
what was worse, defiled their sexual beings and scarred them psychologically.
Thus, to be black and female is to suffer from the twin disadvantages of racial discrimination and gender bias. The double aspect of blatant white racism and black male sexism have hurled black women headlong into the dismal abyss of geometric oppression. If the dominant racist group has condemned them through an abusive ideology, black men, by virtue of their superiority, have held black women as their scapegoats, victimizing them in every conceivable way. Black women suffer not only because they are black and female but also because they are economically poor. The ideal concept of woman in American society is not just racist and sexist but essentially classist. Black women, who could hardly approximate the norm, are discriminated against and dehumanized.

Race, gender, and class—the three main sources of oppression of blacks in white America—are not separate entities, but are closely linked with each other. They are so organically connected that one must understand their interrelationship in spite of their ever-shifting appearance. Racism and sexism can be understood as by-products of capitalism.

Toni Morrison's novels faithfully document her awareness of and concern for the historical conditions of oppression of African people in America, thereby revealing her heightened consciousness of the interrelationship of race, gender, and class.

Although all the three elements are present in all her novels, the
emphasis on them varies from novel to novel. Morrison examines the problems of race and gender oppression before exploring class contradictions within the race. At the beginning of her writing career, she thinks that racism is the main source of oppression of blacks in white America because of her low level gender and class consciousness. Then, becoming aware of the indispensability of the sexuality of American racism, she finds that sexism is equally oppressive. Finally, she realizes that racism and sexism are by products of capitalism— the economic systems of slavery.

Although the novel *The Bluest Eyes* is basically concerned with the contradictions fostered by racism, sexism, and class distinctions affecting the black girls in White America, Morrison, at this stage of her literary career, considers racism the African's primary obstacle. Eleven-year-old Pecola poor, ugly, black girl who longs to have blue eyes in the poignant, wistful hope that this will bring her the love she longs for and also somehow alleviate the multiple miseries of her hate-filled, quarrelsome, violent family, ironically named Breedlove. Pecola becomes the victim of one after another in a chain of black people including her own mother and father who have been twisted and perverted by the false and often vicious standards of the white world. Pecola suffers not only as a black, but also as a female. If, as a racial being, she is forced to relinquish her individual, cultural ways, as a female gender, she is made to subordinate her femininity and remain subsumed in the orbit of patriarchy. Although her class analysis is immature in this novel, Morrison
is at least conscious of a limited role that economics plays in the exploitation of African people.

In Morrison's second novel, *Sula*, the thrust is on gender. It is the intriguing story of Sula Mae Peace, an acutely sensitive and defiant woman. As a young girl, she startles the community with her extreme emotional impulses and grows into a strange, strong, and independent woman. She rejects behavioural standards of all kinds and attempts to rely solely on herself. Even though the focus of the novel is on gender bias, the racial issues, the origin of the Bottom with its roots in slavery are interwoven into the fabric of the novel throughout. The issue of class is only incidental, the thrust being on sexism. The switch in the thematic emphasis suggests that Morrison, at this stage of her literary career, considers the lack of individual rights on the part of black women in America as the primary cause of the African's oppression.

To conclude, the novel *Sula* picks up where the novel *Bluest Eye* ends. It reflects the process that is trademark of her novels. The novel *Sula* searches for self identity, not group identity, a change that mirrors the developmental stages of the consciousness of the African masses. This search for identity only leads some Africans to see themselves in isolation from the community that has shaped, protected and nurtured them.

Morrison's increased class consciousness is reflected in her ability and
commitment to explore the cause-and-effect relationship between class, race, and
gender as evidenced in her fourth novel, *Tar Baby*. Morrison has sufficiently
matured by now to understand that the fundamental cause of the African
oppression is the exploitative economic systems of capitalism. The two
protagonists in *Tar Baby*, Son and Jadine are sharply divided in their attitudes to
the dominant ruling class as well as to their own traditional culture. They must
struggle together to resolve their own class interests in order to unite.

Morrison's emphasis in the novel is, therefore, on class struggle against
capitalism. Racism and sexism, although equally oppressive, are treated as by-
products of capitalism. Eradication of capitalism paves the way for and ensures
eradication of racism and sexism. Eradication of the plight of African people
demands not individual but collective class struggle. But, the materialistic Jadine
and roots-bound Son do not struggle together. Jadine's quest for psychic
wholeness is unsuccessful because of her acceptance of the values and mores of
white culture without question, rejecting her own African-American heritage. A
conscious, socialist-oriented Son tries unsuccessfully to politically educate the
selfish, capitalist-oriented Jadine. His failure to do so is in part due to his own
seduction by the capitalist way of life. Their solutions to the common problem
they face are individual and not applicable to the concrete realities of everyday
life. Thus, *Tar Baby* projects only individual class struggle against capitalism
which is finally rendered fruitless.
Recognizing that Capitalism is the primary target against which the blacks must struggle, and, what is more, understanding that capitalism is but the gentleman's form of slavery, Morrison proposes in her widely acclaimed and most conscious novel *Beloved*, that collective class struggle against capitalism is the only viable solution possible for the African people in America. Gender oppression in the novel is not a visible problem that exists between African men and women, but one that exists within the context of the economic relationship between master and slave. Like gender oppression, race oppression is examined as a consequence of the economic exploitation of African people.

Based on the most oppressed period of slavery in the history of African people, the novel *Beloved* dramatizes a haunting synthesis of the past and present experiences of an escaped female slave, Sethe, tracing the heroine's quest for meaning and wholeness both in slavery and in freedom. Through flashbacks to past tragedies and deeply symbolic delineations of continued emotional and psychological suffering, the novel explores the hardships endured by former slave woman, Sethe, and her family during the Reconstruction era. It is Morrison's goal in this work to demonstrate that collectivism is the first step in eradicating the national oppression and class exploitation of African people. To drive home the dire need for collective action for the survival of African people, she juxtaposes isolated struggle with collective struggle and selfish individualism with in-
dividualism conditioned by social responsibility. Toni Morrison uses the novel
*Beloved* as a vehicle to propose solidarity as the solution for African people.

After affirming collective class struggle against capitalism in *Beloved*
Morrison seems to have realized that the problem of gender oppression, peculiar to
women, can be solved only through gender solidarity. Hence the thematic
emphasis on the unity of women in her latest novel. *Jazz*, adds a new dimension to
the solution for the African dilemma. Just as African people as a whole must bond
themselves together to survive and to progress, so also must African women—the
most exploited adult sector in the African community—help one another in order
to live healthy and wholesome lives.

Morrison's purpose in the novel is to make fiction do what the music does
whereby she exploits the mode of jazz to depict the experience of black
community during 1920s known as the Jazz Age. Just as the musical mode of jazz
is known to have used familiar material to express various sentiments, uniting
performer and audience, the fictional mode of jazz, used in the novel, establishes
quick contact between the characters and the reader. The novel traces the path to
the understanding of the self. Violet, a wronged woman, comes to in her
relationships with other black women—Dorcas, Alice, and Felice. Although it
begins with Violet's inability to understand Dorcas, she finally does through her
interaction with Dorcas' aunt, Alice, and her friend, Felice. Defining themselves
through bonding on various levels—physical, intellectual, emotional, and psychic—with other black women, these black women seek their own identity. In nurturing each other, teaching and learning from each other, each black woman in the novel becomes a mother for the other.

A close study of the interrelationship of race, gender, and class in the novels of Toni Morrison reveals the emergence of an evolutionary pattern. One can perceive a progressive, thematic and structural development in her works. She uses each novel as a framework for investigating and exploring various problems and for offering solution to the African's dilemmas. In each of her, Morrison explores some aspect of oppression afflicting African people. Each successive novel reflects her growing understanding of the nature of the African's oppression. As her narrative structure develops, she learns to shape her theme artistically so as to provide accurate presentation. One can perceive the string that runs through and connects novel after novel as one picks up where the other leaves off thematically and structurally.

One can perceive a thematic and structural unity not only in her individual novels, but in her very canon as a whole. Each novel moves forward to a new concern, but without having completely left behind the previous ones. Thus, the movement is both linear and circular.
Toni Morrison comes to the readers as an ethnic, cultural feminist celebrating the strengths of black women against the heavy odds of racism, sexism, and classism. Morrison exposes the damage that sexist oppression both inside and outside of the ethnic group, has had on black women. But, at the same time, she does not advocate, as a solution to their oppression, an existential political feminism that alienates black women from their ethnic group. Morrison is more concerned with celebrating the unique feminine cultural values that black women have developed in spite of their oppression.

However, in her novels she goes much deeper into the very roots of racism, sexism, and classism, and in a subtle way, she exposes the ideological basis of these pernicious social evils. And to bring them out effectively she digs out the legends, myths, folk stories and folk songs of African-Americans. Thus, Morrison's role, as ethnic, cultural feminist, has been to alleviate the prejudices and misconceptions and to seek ways to reinforce the values that racism, sexism, and classism would take away from the beauty, the work, and the cultural values of Black women.

She turns her gaze to the problems within the black community as she relentlessly exposes intra-racism, black male brutalities, female sexual abuse, and incest. Thus, without directly denouncing white society, she valorizes the black community. By indirection Morrison avoids the polarization of black and white
humanity—one as inherently good and the other as irrevocably corrupt—thereby allowing all people to vicariously experience a rebirth. Thus, Morrison brilliantly succeeds in her attempt to elevate through fictional art the reclaimable and beautiful in the human condition.

Though a product of her times, Morrison is a visionary capable of shelving her personal accomplishments to uncover the ashes behind the smoulder. Morrison's multi-layered vision has been shaped by her complex relationship to literary traditions. As a black woman writer, Morrison is a double outsider in the patriarchal white culture—a position which allows her to criticize both the white and the black worlds. It results in the complex, literary and moral texture of her novels.

Morrison's richly textured fiction also reflects her special and unique vision—a vision which is neither white nor black, it is, in fact, a black woman writer's distinctive feminine vision. Her vision, as Jung has defined in "Psychology and Literature," is "a real experience. It is not something derived or secondary—. It is true symbolic expression— this is, the expression of something existent in its own right'. It is this real experience which has been defined by the Nobel Prize Swedish Academy as an essential aspect of American reality in Morrison's fiction.

One has to bear in mind that Toni Morrison is not a historian or a sociologist but she is essentially a fictional artist. She writes fiction, acting as a mediator of
the real world rather than its mimic. She presents an ideological representation of the African-American social reality.

Though concentrating exclusively on the articulation of African-American experience in her fiction, Morrison reaches out to the entire world, more specifically to the third world countries like India. Emerging as it does from a specific political, economic, social and cultural experience, Morrison's work has considerable interest for the Indian people. The African-American experience and the post-colonial Indian experience have many similarities. The tendency of the colonized to imitate the colonizers' viewpoint seems to last much after attaining freedom. The inclination on the part of Indians to validate their thoughts and ideas with reference to western ideology reveals a need to reassess themselves and to reclaim their own heritage and culture as precisely is the case of African-Americans.

Besides the commonality of the third world consciousness, there is another factor that brings Morrison's writings close to Indian experience. It is the issue of double oppression raised by the Dalit women. The problem of double marginalization caused by the systems of caste and gender oppression in India is almost the same as the race and gender oppression in America. Like the African-Americans, the Indian Dalits — the scheduled caste, the scheduled tribe as well as the other socially and economically oppressed sections of Indian society, including
women, irrespective of their caste and economic status—are a marginalized group.

Furthermore, the slavery experience in the United States has some relevance to the system of bonded labour in India, more particularly in Andhra rural areas. Hence, there is a the possibility of looking for a comparison between American literature based on slavery and Telugu literature based on bonded labour. Kalipatnam Rama Rao's magnum opus, Yajnam, bears an apt comparison with Morrison’s masterpiece Beloved. Just as Beloved deals with psychic consequences of slavery, Rama Rao's Yajnam deals with the mental agitation created by bonded labour, "Kambaritanam," Both Morrison and Rama Rao seem to be dealing with socio-psychic interaction with reference to their specific problems of social situation. The fact that dalits are treated in India as sub-human beings and are given the most humiliating jobs coincides with the black predicament in America to a considerable degree.

One can discern that the system of untouchability and low social status given to Dalits impose a double burden on them as on the black Africans in America. The protagonists of the two novels—Sethe of Beloved and Seetaravudu of Yajnam are placed almost in the same situation. Both of them escape from the cauldron of slavery almost in similar situations. Sethe murders her daughter, Beloved, preferring death to bonded labour. Showing the headless body of his son
to his father, Seetaravudu says why he preferred death to "kambaritanam" (bonded labour) for his son. Thus, both Morris son's Sethe and Rama Rao's Seetaravudu are held up in an inescapable psychic state which is the outcome of their socio-economic oppression.

Morrison takes great pride in her black identity, values her ethnic heritage, and, more importantly, inscribes her community. Her artistic genius enables her to reach out to the entire world. Just as James Joyce's fictional work can never be reduced to anthropological treatises about the Irish, Morrison's work is always highly symbolic of the shared miserable human condition transcending lines of race, gender, and class.

The novels of Morrison do more than project us of what kind of life or lives black people in America lead. What they seek to do is to make us see the inexplicable horrible experiences they experienced from the black perspective. In her novels plot, character, action and language convey, through a circular development, not only the way black folk live, but a way for anyone to live. Her novels are critiques of being and as such suggest possible strategies for survival in a world where the individual confronts tangible, inhuman threats as well as impersonal and abstract hazards. Toni Morrison has done perhaps more than any other novelist to foster the authentic, inclusive national literature she has called for. Her five novels that mirror the triple perspective of black American women, bring
much of the black American horrifying experience out of the marginal shadows and help give Black American literature as a whole, a more complete and finer dimension.

It is not just in the field of literature that Morrison has become the touchstone, as the winning of the Nobel Prize suggests. She has indeed, become the symbol of African-American, of human struggle against various kinds of oppression, and above all, of the global longing for liberation.

In this way, after six novels—*The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon, Tar Baby, Beloved,* and *Jazz*—most carefully and consciously written in the course of twenty-two years, Toni Morrison comes to terms with both the dilemma of confronting African people in America and a part of the solution that must be embraced by them. The novels make clear the facts that blacks in America suffer from a crisis of the African personality arising from a three-pronged oppression of race, gender, and class. Each successive novel reflects her growing understanding of the nature of solution to the African dilemma. The novels also make clear that the primary obstacles of the Africans in America is not so much racism or sexism as capitalism in all its disguises. It is further made clear that the solution to the African's plight lies not in individual, but in collective class struggle against capitalism and in gender solidarity. Furthermore, Morrison crystallizes the strategy of political education through communication which ushers in the solution -
collective struggle. Thus, Morrison's novels reflect a thematic and a structural evolution that coincide with her own growing class consciousness.

Starting with the issue of race as the primary form of oppression of the African people in *The Bluest Eye*, next demonstrating that woman's individuality is rewarding only if it is achieved within the context of the community well-being in *Sula*, and then recognizing Capitalism as the primary target against which African people must struggle in *Tar Baby*, Morrison proposes solidarity—collective class struggle against capitalism—as the only viable solution possible for African people in *Beloved*, and gender solidarity—women bonding—as the solution for gender oppression in *Jazz*. Thus, the evolution from *The Bluest Eye* to *Jazz* is really one of maturation and clarification rather than revolution.