Chapter - 3

Depiction of the Sufferings of Women

Black women in America have been victimized by a number of factors like racism, sexism, and capitalism. They suffer not only at the merciless hands of the white race, but also suffer due to the cruelty of the men of their own race. Hence, a black feminist perspective pervades contemporary African-American literature. The status of the black women writers is no longer relegated below the status of the males. Instead of being secondary to the literary dominance of the black males, the literature of the black women is quite expansive and liberating. Unlike in the past, when women were supposed to be seen but not heard, the women of today, are recognized writers in all fields and genres. Their perspective is faithful to the actual horrifying experiences of black women in America. As a result, one can perceive in their writings, a woman-to-woman approach rather than a woman-to-man approach.

Toni Morrison is perhaps, the most sophisticated novelist in the history of African American literature. Her literary works have been valued amazingly high. She describes aspects of the lives of the blacks and especially of blacks as the people as they are. There are many writers who are willing to describe the ugliness of the world as ugly, but the uniqueness of Toni Morrison lies in revealing the beauty and hope beneath the surface of black America.
Combining the aims of the Black Freedom movement and Women’s Liberation, she seeks to produce literature which is irrevocably black. But the artistic excellence of Toni Morrison’s fiction lies in achieving a perfect balance between writing a truly black literature and writing what is truly universal literature.

The history of human civilization has many messages to convey to its progeny. It has left behind, many traces - both happy and unhappy footprints on the sands of time - many monumental edifice, still to feel proud of, innumerable imperial achievements to boast of, and many scientific inventions to pat on its shoulders… Nevertheless, the human history has its ugly face too - The face of Slavery. This shameful face infuriates sensitive souls like Toni Morrison. Being an Afro-American herself, she can well realise what slavery means, and the ensuing pain, it has inflicted upon the native blacks by the white Americans. This painful realisation has its impact and reflection on her literary works.

The condition of slavery, even after slavery was abolished in the United States, still persisted and ruled the roost. Slavery had much more to do with sexism than it did with racism, and that legacy has lived long after the days of literal slavery have come and gone. Apt are the words of Collins when he says in his work, ‘Black Feminist Thought’,

Enslaved Africans were property, and they resisted the dehumanizing effects of slavery by recreating African notions of
family as extended kin units. Blood lines carefully monitored in West Africa were replaced by a notion of an extended family/community consisting of their black brothers and sisters. For black women, the domestic sphere encompassed a broad range of kin and community relations beyond the nuclear family household (Collins 49).

In addition to the black male sexist domination, the black women had to cope up with and suffered a lot to live in a white racialized society. Across the ocean, African American women endured and experienced the same fate. The black man who suffered a lot of humiliation in a segregationist white society, brought home his bitterness and frustration only to make his wife and children his scapegoats. The African American mother received heavy beatings on trivial grounds and daughters are sometimes raped by their own fathers.

Toni Morrison, one of the most `significant writers, represents the female psychological conditions among African Americans. She could not have chosen a better historical issue than slavery to analyze women's victimhood. Slavery is defined by Gilbert in his work ‘The Mad Woman In The Attic’ as "a patriarchal institution in which both slaves and wives - and especially slaves who function as wives and wives who function like slaves - a reused and abused" (S. Gubar and S. Gilbert 482). The comparison between wives and slaves is significant enough to suggest both sexist and racist oppression. Sometime s women seek and find solace
in motherhood but for the black slave it is instead a source of other greater sorrows.

The most painful and dreadful period in the history of the blacks has been the enslavement of Black people by the White Americans. Toni Morrison has chosen *Beloved* as a dedication to this violence on the black race. Baby Suggs, the black matriarch of the novel has lived sixty years as a slave. Apartheid was institutionalized. From then on, racial barriers were reset and black people had to leave and settle in the townships. A series of acts were legalized among which was the Immorality Act which forbade sexual intercourse between white women and black men in order to keep the race pure. Another act which deepened black people’s victimization was the Migrant Labour law which stated that white families could for instance have a single maid at home but once she got married, she had to have a pass and leave for the townships after her work.

Indeed, black men have been restricted to menial services and women to housekeeping. Education is found unnecessary if not illegal for black people. In fact, male slaves are considered and even called not men but boys. It is as if slavery had stripped them off their manhood. Actually, it has been the same in almost all the black communities oppressed by white people.

Just as the black males suffered from victimhood and slavery, black females also suffered from oppression and their responses to it form the central theme of
the novel *Beloved*. Toni Morrison brings a very rich, and complicated novel, *Beloved* in which slavery and its repercussions are brought into focus, examined, and reassembled to yield a story of tragedy and redemption. The concept of slavery has been the basis for many literary works especially in *Beloved*, with particular emphasis on the physical, mental, and spiritual violence characteristic of the practice of slavery in the South.

Morrison's thematic concern throughout composition is with the issues of African-American female identity in the contemporary world. Her novels offer complex analysis of problems within the African-American community, power dynamics between men and women, and issues of racism between black and white America. Morrison's primary interest lies with the inexplicable and bitter experiences of African-American women, whose quests for individual identity are integrally intertwined with their community and their cultural history. Her fictions are self-consciously concerned with myth, legend, storytelling, and the oral tradition, as well as with memory, history, and historiography, and have thus been recognized as postmodern narratives. Morrison's narratives are conscious of African cultural heritage as well as African-American history, thus demonstrating the importance of the past to the struggles of contemporary African Americans.

The maternal bond between mother and kin is valued and important in all cultures. Mothers and children are linked together and joined physically, by womb and breast; and emotionally, by a sense of self and possession. Once that
bond is established, a mother will do anything for her child. In the novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison, describes a woman, Sethe, whose bond is so strong that she goes to great lengths to keep her children safe and protected from the evil that exists in the society that she lives in. She gave them the gift of life, and the joy of freedom also. Determined to shield them from the hell of eternal slavery, she took drastic measures to keep them away from such humiliation. But, in doing so, the bond which was her strength became her weakness also, destroying the only thing she loved.

*Beloved* unmasking the horrors of slavery, and depicts its terrible impact on African Americans. The story is perfect for all who did not experience nor could imagine how it was to be an African American in America in the 1860's. *Beloved* lends a gateway to understanding the trials and tribulations of the modern African American. The novel has many things that occur that are very striking, most of which have to deal with the treatment of the African Americans.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a novel, which unfolds to the world, the inhuman cruelties that result from slavery. Morrison depicts the African American's quest for a new life while showing the difficult task of escaping the past. The African American simply wants to claim freedom and create a sense of community. In *Beloved*, the characters suffer not from slavery alone, but suffer from the impact of slavery also. They endured immense pain while reconstructing themselves, their families, and their communities.
Throughout the novel, Morrison utilizes colour as a symbolic tool to represent a free, safe, happy life as well as involvement in community and family. She also uses colour to convey a character's desire for such a life, while at the same time uses it to illustrate the satisfaction and fulfilment that the characters enjoy only after achieving this new life. Paul D's experience is one example of Morrison's use of colour as a symbol. Paul D asks a Cherokee man how to get North, thus conveying his desire for a free, safe, happy, new, and magical life. The Cherokee man replies, "Follow the tree flowers." Here is where the colour comes in. When one thinks about or describes flowers, their colours are always of paramount importance. In his journey North, Paul D "scanned the horizon for a flash of pink or white...[or] blossoming plums" (BL 113). By having Paul D search for colourful flowers, Morrison illustrates Paul D's desire for a life full of safety, enjoyment, and freedom.

Her novels often employ elements of magic, fantasy, and the supernatural, such as the ghost of a dead child who appears in *Beloved*. *The Bluest Eye*, her first novel, is set in the 1940s and addresses issues of race and beauty standards through the figure of Pecola Breedlove, an eleven-year-old African-American girl who dreams of having blue eyes and long, blond hair. After Pecola is raped by her father and becomes pregnant as a result, she descends into insanity and insists that she has the bluest eyes in the whole world. Morrison's next three novels, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Tar Baby*, are generally regarded as a trilogy. *Sula* centers
on the powerful bonds of friendship between Sula Peace and Nel Wright, who meet as girls and maintain their friendship into adulthood. This bond is ruptured, however, when Nel finds her husband in bed with Sula. In *Sula*, Morrison explores the importance of female friendship in the formation of individual identity, which in reality is often superseded by women's relationships with men. According to legend, these Africans, captured and enslaved in America, escaped their bondage by flying back to Africa. *Tar Baby* is set on the Isle de Chevaliers in the Caribbean, in contemporary times. With the character of Jadine Childs, a successful fashion model and student of art history, *Tar Baby* examines the dilemmas of assimilation and cultural identity among middle-class African Americans. Morrison's subsequent three novels, *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*, are often loosely grouped as another trilogy, each set in a different period of African-American history. *Beloved* takes place during the post-Civil War era, with flashbacks to the years of slavery in the South; *Jazz* is set during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s; and *Paradise* is set during the Civil Rights era of the 1960s and 1970s. *Beloved* combines elements of magical realism with the tradition of the African-American slave narrative in the story of Halle, a former slave struggling to raise her children in the post-Civil War era. Halle once killed her own infant in order to save it from a life of slavery, and the ghost of this dead child comes back to haunt her home as an adolescent girl called Baby Suggs. *Jazz* concerns a romantic triangle between a woman named Violet, her husband Joe, and an eighteen-year-old girl named Dorcas, whom Joe
falls in love with. Joe's passion for Dorcas ultimately results in his shooting and killing her. Enraged by her husband's betrayal, Violet goes to the girl's funeral and cuts the face of the corpse with a knife.

An erring black woman once caught, was submitted to the worst tortures. In fact, the security of the Blacks was made precarious since the Fugitive Slave Law was adopted in 1850. It legalized the kidnapping and enslavement of any black person anywhere in the United States. The abolition of slavery however, resulting from the victory of the North during the Civil War hardly changed anything: Horrifying are the experiences, when one observes the following lines, in the novel *Beloved*,

Eighteen seventy-four and white folks were still oil the loose.
Whole town wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one y ear alone in Kentucky; four coloured schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults: black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken. He smelled skin, skin and hot blood. (BL 180)

Actually, skin colour has predetermined the relationships between Blacks and Whites in America or anywhere else like in South Africa. In this country for instance, a series of acts have been officialized after the adoption of Apartheid in
1948. Among them, one can mention the Immorality Act 1957 which forbade sexual relations between different races.

It is apt recalling here, the words of Collins, when he explains the practice of mothering and working as the slaves from West Africa

Before enslavement, African women combined work and family without seeing a conflict between the two. In West African societies women routinely joined child care with their contributions to pre-capitalist political economies (Collins, 49).

It is indeed disheartening to note that the bodies of slaves, male and female, were considered a property. They were utilized for the purposes of increasing the wealth of white slave owners by their physical labour in the cotton, indigo, or rice fields of the South. As a result of this objectification of slave bodies, there was no question as to their human rights, to the limits of suffering a human body can endure. Thus, the psyche of male and female slaves were distorted to the possible extent. The bodies of women, in particular, were objectified, because their offspring would supply additional slave bodies for the increase of capital for their slave owners. There was little consideration for the lives of slave mothers, and their personal care during or after pregnancy, and the general well-being of their health.
The kind of disjunction felt between mother and child in Seth’s story is particularly traumatic because both were slaves and Sethe had lost her mother in a literal sense before the age of twelve. Sethe floundered between a literal lack of knowledge of her mother and the isolation she experienced as a slave in South Carolina where her mother had been a slave.

In *Beloved*, women like Ella have endured all atrocities, killing, kidnap and rape of women. Her puberty was spent in a house where she was shared by father and son, whom she called "the lowest yet." It was "the lowest yet" who gave her a disgust for sex and against whom she measured all atrocities. A killing, a kidnap, a rape--whatever, she listened and nodded. (BL 257)

The hard physical treatment she has been subjected to has left her with scars and she has developed a disgust for sex. She has almost acted like Sethe's own mother who has delivered various times but has thrown the babies away because she has been raped by the crew of white Americans. Sethe is the only one she has kept with her because she is the child of the black man.

Lacan, a critic, believed that children formulate various images of themselves based on their interactions with the other people in their lives and in the formulation of various narratives about themselves in that part of the mind he termed the “imaginary.” Sethe’s construction of herself began after witnessing her
mother’s death and after her removal to a plantation in Kentucky called Sweet
Home. As a young woman in her teens, Sethe found herself the property of the
Garners, the owners of Sweet Home. The five male slaves there all possessed the
last name of Garner, a fact that suggested their dehumanization by their owner. In
other words, they were indistinguishable as human beings, signified only by the
last name of their owner. Sethe did not possess this last name, nor did her mother-
in-law, Baby Suggs. Quite differently, Mr. Garner, promoted an unorthodox
attitude toward the slaves who worked for him. He wanted the male slaves to think
of themselves as men. This attitude would suggest to his neighbours that they were
decent human beings. Garner dealt with them in a relatively fair and equitable
way.

He boasted to other plantation owners that his slaves were different—they
possessed a civility that marked them as men of a noble nature. One of the four
male slaves, Halle, worked out an arrangement with Mr. Garner whereby he would
work seven days a week for five years in order to purchase freedom for his mother,
Baby Suggs. His mother, having endured the brutality of slave owners all her life,
could hardly comprehend the great pains taken by Mr. Garner to take her to Ohio
and to arrange a place for her to live when the day of her freedom arrived.

Sethe was fortunate in having the Garners as owners, because she did not
have to work in the fields as her mother had been forced to do. She was able to fill
a much-needed domestic role in the Garner household as an assistant to Mrs.
Garner, where she served as cook, housekeeper, seamstress, and nurse to Mrs. Garner in her last illness. It is possible to view Sethe’s childhood and early adulthood from the perspective of Lacanian analysis. It suggested possible avenues for her to have a future that was, if not devoid of slavery, tolerable and productive. It suggested that she desired to be the love-object of the Other in her life, in this case the mild-mannered white people with whom she had reached adulthood and whom she tried to emulate.

Morrison says of Sethe early in the novel, “Sethe had the amazing luck of six whole years of marriage to that “somebody” son who had fathered every one of her children” (BL 23). Even before Sethe had contemplated marriage, Baby Suggs had made sure that Sethe had a noble impression of motherhood. In other words, with very little effort on her part, Sethe had the good fortune to have a marriage with a man she loved, three children whom she adored and another one on the way, along with a life-style that reflected the kind of stability valued in white European families. It appears early in the novel that she took this good fortune for granted, never believing that her function as a mother would be disrupted. In fact, the investment of her life as the wife of Halle, the mother of three children and another on the way, and the daughter-in-law of Baby Suggs expanded her growing sense of the value of her own subjectivity.

Sethe was described by people who knew her as a woman of remarkable stillness and stability. They also suggested that she was calm and deliberate in
difficult situations, and further, suggested that she had cultivated the kind of practical rationality that would allow her to survive even in a hostile culture. Her daughter Denver knew her as a quiet, queenly woman, the kind of woman who could look danger in the face and not flinch, the kind of woman who, when the ghost in her house in Cincinnati had thrown the dog into the wall so hard that it broke two of his legs and dislocated his eye.

She is so bold that “she had taken a hammer, knocked the dog unconscious, wiped away the blood and saliva, pushed his eye back in his head and set his bones (BL 12). It is her calmness and stillness in her soul that led her to the choice of Halle as a husband and led her to view her position as a mother as a meaningful vocation for her.

Paul D was right to suggest later in the novel that it was dangerous for a woman to love her children as much as Sethe loved her children. Sethe loved her first girl-child with an extraordinary passion, perhaps because she wanted to give her a better life than she had experienced. After Paul D finds Sethe after eighteen years of enslavement and wandering, he notes the intensity of Sethe’s love for Denver, her second daughter. He has been troubled by Denver’s question to Paul D about how long he was going to hang around. Apt are the words of Morrison when she commented as follows,
For a used-to-be slave woman to love anything that much was
dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love.
The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a
little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack,
well, maybe you’d have a little love left over for the next one (BL 45)

The ghost almost convinces everyone in the household that she is the very
corporeal presence of the murdered child. At most, however, she is a
remembrance, a fleeting presence, a reminder of the cruelty of death. Denver is
convinced at first because the ghost resembles her lost sister and because this
presence knows all about the family. But when Denver observes Beloved rubbing
Sethe’s shoulders the way Baby Suggs used to do, she perceives a forcefulness
that almost chokes Sethe. Denver understands at this moment that this is a spirit of
evil sent to torture Sethe.

Paul D understands that this is not the bodily presence of Beloved when
she moves him psychologically into the cooling house so that she can have sex
with him every night. He understands her power but is unable to resist her as a
sexual object. For Sethe, however, the return of Beloved means that she can erase
some of the pain she inflicted upon herself by killing her child.

She can at least fantasize what it might have been like to know the growing stages
of her lost child. Sethe says to herself:
Beloved, she is my daughter. She is mine. She comes back to me of her own free will and I don’t have to explain a thing. I didn't have time to explain before because it had to be done quick. Quick.

She had to be safe and I put her where she would be. But my love was tough and she back now. I knew she would be. Paul D ran her off so she had no choice but to come back to me in the flesh. I bet you Baby Suggs, on the other side, helped. I won't never let her go. I'll explain to her, even though I don't have to. Why I did it.

How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. When I explain it she'll understand, because she understands everything already. I'll tend her as no mother ever tended a child, a daughter.

Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children. I never had to give it to nobody else-- and the one time I did it was took from me--they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby. Nan had to nurse white babies and me too because Ma'am was in the rice. The little white babies got it first and I got what was left. Or none.

There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be Without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for
it, and to have so little left. I’ll tell Beloved about that; she’ll understand. (BL 200 - 201)

Morrison’s sensual writing arrests the attention of the reader throughout the novel. Baby Suggs’s endurance of the nastiness of life suggests that the maternal body in this story is devalued. Her eight children had six fathers. And Morrison explains that the nastiness of life to Baby Suggs was the freedom that slave owners took to play checkers with her children.

There are many graphic representations of the horrifying experiences that Sethe had endured at the hands of the white masters. The bodily injuries that Sethe endured before she crossed the river into Ohio and freedom are among the most graphic and repulsive images perpetrated on a woman’s body. One shudders at the physical deformation of Sethe’s back after School teacher’s sons beat it with a leather whip. Six months pregnant with her last child, Sethe was snatched by Schoolteacher, the replacement for Mr. Garner after his death, because he had discovered a plan by the Garner slaves to escape to freedom.

Sethe was taken to the barn, where Schoolteacher’s sons pressed all the milk out of her breasts, much as they might have done to a cow. Then, after Sethe told Mrs. Garner about this heinous act, the sons out of spite, had beaten her to the core, until it was nothing but bloody flesh. The fact that her feet had also been beaten and mangled so that she could not run bears ample testimony to the inhuman treatment that the slave owners give to their slaves. The concept of
motherhood is something which should be held high, worshipped and respected irrespective of caste, creed and colour. It is the only thing that has crossed all the barriers of continents and culture. It is in fact, highly unfortunate that this sacred state of motherhood is devalued and dehumanised.

Sethe’s miraculous escape in spite of this profound suffering and this murderous assault on her body was a testament to the stillness of her soul and her mental strength. She reached the edge of the river at night, only to realize that her baby was going to be born. With no one around, Sethe lay in the grass and presumed that she would die there. But when a young woman, Amy Denver, heard her moans, she stopped to see what was wrong with her. Discovering her bloody stumps of feet, the stage of her pregnancy, and her bloody back, this young woman half carried Sethe to the lean-to of an old barn, mumbling all the way, She said,

It's a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk--it's red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom. What God have in mind, I wonder. I had me some whippings, but I don't remember nothing like this. Mr. Buddy had a right evil hand too. Whip you for looking at him straight. Sure would. I looked right at him one time
and he hauled off and threw the poker at me. Guess he knew what I was a-thinking. (BL 79)

But with Amy Denver’s help, Sethe did not die but was delivered of a baby girl, whom she named “Denver” in honour of the woman who saved her life. Baby Suggs, an older slave woman who had finally obtained her freedom, was broken in body but very much alive in spirit. Sethe had shared a space with her in the slave quarters. Sethe admired this woman, who talked little but loved big, and in Baby Suggs, Sethe had a near-perfect model for a mother. Baby Suggs gave Sethe advice when Sethe needed it, and as the other female slave who had almost earned her freedom, she made plans with Sethe. Sethe had the opportunity of sharing life and learning wisdom from her mother-in-law.

In Ohio, Baby Suggs preached in the clearing, a gathering place for the community of freed slaves. Baby Suggs did not preach about invisible grace or unattainable happiness on earth. Her words were heard by all who had settled into the community of black freed slaves.

Here 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. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your
hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face, cause they don’t love that either. You got to love it… (BL 88)

This kind of preaching connects the most basic concerns of religion with the most basic concerns of the body, because on the bodies of slaves are engraved the marks of dehumanization. Baby Suggs herself, old and crippled, defies her bodily infirmities in order to preach holiness to the freed slaves in Cincinnati. It is apparent in the novel that Sethe had a kind of self-determination to be a good mother, and the horrors of her mother’s fate she pushed out of memory. With Mrs. Garner as an accepting, affirming mother-figure, Sethe had relished the domestic tasks that she performed, and she had brought a sense of cheerfulness to all the slaves with her desire to love her work and to be creative.

It may be said that, with Mrs. Garner as a kind owner, and with Baby Suggs as a model of motherhood, her subjectivity constructed what she believed a good mother would be, and she sought the tools she needed in order to actualize her dream of living creatively in the world. She exulted in a kind of measured freedom, and with her body and mind she felt a sense of plenitude, a feeling of having enough personal freedom and a cultivation of her ingenuity to know the satisfaction of being a mother and she described it when she finally made it to the free black community in Cincinnati.
It is also apparent in the novel that Baby Suggs had the most profound influence on Sethe’s perception of motherhood. Baby Suggs modelled black motherhood in the West African sense of other mothers. That is, everyone in the community had a responsibility for the care and growth of children, even if the children were not the biological issue of the same woman. The caring for the children of others fostered a sense of community among both African people and white Europeans. There was an unwritten imperative that all of the children of a community belonged to the community as a whole.

This sense of community is well evident in the reflections of Patricia Hill Collins when he writes of this African tradition in her book ‘Black Feminist Thought’:

Motherhood— whether blood mother, other mother, or community other mother—can be invoked by African American women as a symbol of power. Much of black women’s status in African-American communities stems not only from actions as mothers in black family networks but from contributions as community other mothers. (Collins 132).

In the novel Beloved, Sethe relies on her mother-in-law Baby Suggs to help her with childcare. Baby Suggs loves and nurtures Sethe’s children as if they were her own. When Baby Suggs is granted her freedom, she takes Howard, Buglar,
and Beloved with her in the wagon to cross the river into Ohio. She bargains for a house where she and the children can live until Sethe and Halle, who plan to escape from the Garner plantation, may join them there. Baby Suggs is the sole mother for the children for two months.

Baby Suggs had earned the title of “holy” for her unorthodox religion. Her conviction is that God intended people to love and care for each other. As Morrison describes it, “Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart” (BL 88). And she celebrated her body and the bodies of all the freed slaves. This may be the most significant contribution of Baby Suggs to her daughter-in-law—her ability to celebrate the slave body.

It is highly disgusting to note that the white owners observed the actions of his slaves, as a man would inspect his cattle. The Schoolteacher kept a notebook in which each page had two columns: “Human” and “Animal.” When Sethe saw his notebook and comprehended his sadistic obsession to inspect his slaves using these two categories, a harsh and fierce anger seethes within her. Her consciousness became flooded with both horror and guilt—horror that such a man as Schoolteacher would record the movements of all his slaves, and guilt that made Sethe question her own sense of humanity.

Sethe was determined to be all that she believed that being a mother entitled her to be—not just a breeder of children for a white slave owner to use as beasts of
burden, and certainly not a slave woman whose body wore out from debilitating physical labour. Sethe was determined to keep all the children that were hers and to love them the way Baby Suggs had taught her to love. She wilfully forgot that slaves were property, that the rights of ownership which white people so prized gave her no right to claim her children as her own.

Sethe had the daring to perceive her body as a miracle of health and delight in living, to see herself as a loving, caring mother, to believe that she could be the delight of her husband for the duration of their lives together. Without being aware of it, Sethe had claimed her subjectivity as her own—her emotions, desires, hopes for the future, her daily thoughts, her conviction that she would know freedom. She was well on her way to what psychologists might term a meaningful construction of the self.

Sethe valued her body as few slaves had had the opportunity to do. Sethe’s life and the workings of her mind, her discourse, were those of an extraordinary slave mother, a mother determined to have some control over her life and the lives of her children. But when Sethe realized that Schoolteacher perceived all the slaves as mere animals, there began to grow in Sethe’s mind and consciousness, an intense anger, most of which she kept hidden to her own peril. She willingly closed off a part of herself that would have allowed her to nurture and teach Denver as Denver grew up. And she tried to kill all of her children when Schoolteacher came to Ohio to take her back to Sweet Home, a privilege that slave
owners in some states were allowed by law. This murderous obsession on Sethe’s part killed a part of the freedom of her mind to adjust to tragedy and to recover from it in positive ways. In closing off a part of herself, she could not have access to her own subjectivity for years to come.

What she could neither understand nor articulate was the complete objectification of a slave woman’s body by the white men who enjoyed “playing checkers” with slaves, as Baby Suggs had called it, moving people around as if they were objects. Sethe could not know or understand that Schoolteacher, like most white men and slave owners of his era, could not value the body of a pregnant slave woman because to him, she was not a woman but a piece of property. She was not a mother, only the breeder of more slaves.

Sethe, in Toni Morrison’s Beloved, could not know or begin to understand that as an African woman, she was not valued as a woman, much less as a mother, because the colour of her skin signified darkness and evil, one that a white man could understand only in terms of her function as a slave.

Curiously, in her own way, Sethe functions as a mother goddess of another kind: one who assumed the prerogative of choosing life or death for her children. Toward the end of the novel when Sethe is trying to justify her attempts to kill her children, she wants Beloved to understand why, but because Beloved is already gone, Sethe verbalizes it to herself in this way:
That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean... (BL 251)

After Sethe’s attempt to kill her children and her success in killing Beloved, she enters a phase of self hatred and contempt that paralyze her actions and her thought. After Sethe had succeeded in killing one of her own children so that this child would not be possessed ever again by Schoolteacher or any other slave owner, she closed off her emotions. Her two sons had run away when she grabbed the axe to try to kill all of her children. Baby Suggs, knowing that Sethe would embrace her baby and, in so doing, release her hands from the axe, placed Denver in Sethe’s arms so that Sethe could breast-feed her.

Onlookers could only stare in alarm at what Sethe had done. Schoolteacher and his sons walked slowly away. Baby Suggs went to bed to contemplate colour. And Sethe went to work every day as a cook in a restaurant in order to feed her family, but there was little access to her own subjectivity during this period in her life when she was as good as dead.
In this phase of her life, her murdered child, Beloved, comes back to the house outside Cincinnati to make life hell for Sethe. Everyone with whom Beloved comes in contact recognizes that she is the adult/child whom Sethe believed was put to rest forever. When Sethe understands that her dead child has come to life again, she quits her job to stay with her day and night, not realizing that the person she thinks is Beloved is an incubus come back to haunt and torture Sethe. She demands an exclusivity of Sethe that leaves all the other phases of Sethe’s life null and void. She seduces Paul D; she is spiteful to Denver; she plays games with Sethe and eats with Sethe until both are gorged with food and, simultaneously, with a kind of self-indulgent self-love that fills Beloved’s stomach so that she is pregnant with the consumption of Sethe’s self.

All of Sethe’s family are seriously affected by her attempt to kill her children. And the white people surrounding this family have no real way to understand or to connect with Sethe. Baby Suggs gives up trying to explain the plight of the slave and goes to bed to contemplate color for the remainder of her life. Baby Suggs had understood the suffering of a slave mother, and she had been like a mother to Sethe. But there was no remedy for the murderous actions of Sethe, and Baby Suggs simply isolated herself to die by absorbing herself in the most comforting indulgence of her mind: the contemplation of colour. Colour could not fight back; it could not condemn or threaten; but it could bathe the imagination in the beautiful.
The novel, however, has an ending that promises hope. Throughout the turbulent years of Sethe’s life and her period of abjection, Denver was growing to be a young woman, and she experienced her own subjectivity as a creative, healing presence. She selected a clearing of trees where there was absolute quiet and peacefulness; there she nurtured herself. She had a realistic understanding of her mother and of her ghost-sister and of Baby Suggs and Paul D. Denver had an open mind and a realistic temperament that allowed her to understand her mother’s self hatred and, at the same, it allowed her to nurture not only herself but her mother as well.

In the novel, the reader is also allowed entrance into the subjectivity of Baby Suggs, who had been crippled in body by her slave owners and disenchanted with her own experience of raising children and trying to nurture them in a slave culture. She had seven children, but she had no way of knowing where they all were. She had been freed by Mr. Garner, a white man who understood kindness.

The characters who constitute the “family” that was begun as a slave family with Mr. and Mrs. Garner, contribute each by their own thoughts, musings, emotions the broken narratives of all their lives. They constitute an “inter subjectivity” that allows each of the slaves the memories of their lives together, some gratifying and some horrifying.
But their inter subjectivity also allows them the will and determination to value the sense of community that had been built with their slave-lives. For Sethe, this meant the stubbornness to cling to life and to the lives of her children; for Baby Suggs, it offered a momentary redemption in a life of misery; for Paul D, it offered the possibility that, if he could find her, he and Sethe could have a life together.

Black womanhood was a very awkward state during slavery in the United States. It is apt recalling the words of Barbara Christian when he says that black women "could not achieve the standard of womanhood, they were biologically females, with all the societal restrictions associated with that state" (Barbara Christian 71).

The same notion is echoed in the novel Sula, when one reads about black slave women, who are neither white nor male, all freedom and triumph is forbidden to them. Their colour classifies them within the inferior race and their biological sex confines them in the lowest status. As females, they are considered brainless by most black men.

The black woman lives motherhood as the most painful moment in her life as a slave. Baby Suggs has understood it too late. It is well obvious from the life of Baby Suggs which is recorded in the following lines:
It made sense for a lot of reasons because in all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby's eight children had six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children. Halle she was able to keep the longest. Twenty years. A life time. Given to her, no doubt, to make up for hearing that her two girls, neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye. To make up for coupling with a straw boss for four months in exchange for keeping her third child, a boy, with her--only to have him traded for lumber in the spring of the next year and to find herself pregnant by the man who promised not to and did. That child she could not love and the rest she would not. "God take what He would," she said. And He did, and He did, and He did and then gave her Halle who gave her freedom when it didn't mean a thing. (BL 23)

Enslavement of fellow human beings is at its deplorable heights when one notes that her eight children are fathered by six different men. Baby Suggs
compares the life of a slave with a giant checker-board and discovers the nastiness of life.

All her children were sold in early infancy so she finds Sethe’s act too proud and egocentric. For Baby Suggs, Sethe has underestimated her luck. She has her whole family with her and has the chance to see her offspring grow up whereas she has vague memories of her own children, who were sold. Motherhood is something which every mother relishes and cherishes till her last breadth. When she is denied off and grabbed away this natural privilege, life has no meaning for her. Tears really well up in one’s eyes on reading the recollections of Baby Suggs:

I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody’s house into evil.” Baby Suggs rubbed her eyebrows.”My first-born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? (BL 5).

In fact, Sethe in her need to unify her family is caught by her slave owner. She refuses to let him sully them as he has done to her, so she kills her third child, a baby girl and hurts the two elders.

But Sethe has made up her mind, she will not let the white men sully her children like they have already done with her. When she first plans to escape, the School teacher finds out her motive and she is whipped without any concern for her pregnancy. She refuses to ponder later on, on the following fashion:
That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty bet all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing--the part of her that was clean. No undreamable dreams about whether the headless, feetless torso hanging in the tree with a sign on it was her husband or Paul A; whether the bubbling-hot girls in the colored-school fire set by patriots included her daughter; whether a gang of whites invaded her daughter's private parts, soiled her daughter's thighs and threw her daughter out of the wagon. She might have to work the slaughterhouse yard, but not her daughter. (BL 251)

In fact, Sethe has been herself dirtied so much that she cannot like her own self anymore. She uses a metaphor "and they took my milk" to reveal her rape by School teacher's nephews. When their uncle discovers that she has denounced them to Mrs Gamer, he inflicts pain upon her. The cruelty is well evident in the following lines "...open her back and when it closes, it makes a tree" (BL 17). To spare the baby, they dig a hole for her belly. From then on, Sethe 's unique concern is to "put her babies where they would be safe" (BL 163). Sethe 's motherly love
leads her to kill her daughter. She does not reflect as an individual but as a mother first. It is also the reason why she has agreed to let the engraver use her sexually ten minutes to carve a word "Beloved" on the headstone.

She thought it would be enough, rutting among the headstones with the engraver, his young son looking on, the anger in his face so old; the appetite in it quite new. That should certainly be enough. Enough to answer one more preacher, one more abolitionist and a town full of disgust. (BL 5)

Indeed, motherhood during slavery has been so much undervalued that Sethe’s reaction has surprised the whole community. During the Reconstruction period as well, resulting from black male authoritative oppression, women who were a little bold and self-assertive were not relished and accepted by the male dominated society. Even if they are bold like Sethe, the society branded them unfeminine. Appropriate are the words of Collins when he remarked "aggressive, assertive ... are penalized. They are abandoned by their men, end up impoverished, and are stigmatized as being unfeminine " (Collins 75).

The newly black male authority considers femininity as deeply related to and associated with soft and obedient ways. Their manhood has been denied for centuries. Hence they need inferior beings under their yoke. Sethe remarks as follows:

They encourage you to put some of your weight in their hand,' as
soon as you feel how light and lovely that is, they study your scars and tribulations. after which they do what he has done:

run her children out and tom lip the house (BL 22).

Actually, Sethe ‘s "breast” stand for her womanhood. She has been victimized first and foremost by her exclusive love for her children. During all this time, she has bowed under her responsibilities as a mother. And the fact is that she has considered them very seriously. Sethe’s womanhood is violated by the rape she has lived . Sethe is convinced that if Halle had not been her husband but instead her son, he would not have let them sully her. But the point is that according to her, Halle has been "more like a brother than a husband”. Like Paul D, he has looked at her "not loving or passionate , but interested, as though he were examining an ear of corn for quality" (BL 25)

Actually, it is as if slavery had stripped black women of their femininity. Amy Denver for instance addresses an old woman "old nigger girl" and Paul D himself calls Sethe "girl” whereas she is about forty. Hence, the black woman is not only victimized because of her gender but this definite status is denied to her.

So, women have suffered from undervalued status in a society ruled by patriarchal white or black leaders. Such victimization has sometimes been carried out not only by male but also by female counterparts or the social system itself.
Hence, sufferings resulting from racial oppression and gender victimization, have had great psychological impacts on women.

People's psychological profile is generally shaped by the experiences they have gone through. In *Beloved*, women's sufferings from racial segregation and gender objectification have slipped in the psychological field. Apt are the reflections of Barbara Christian when he says, "sexism and racism are systems of societal and psychological restriction that have critically affected the lives of women". (Barbara Christian 71).

Indeed, white and male rudeness and inhuman treatment of women has led women to end up murderous like Sethe. Sethe for instance, instead of letting her children return to Sweet Home and then live later, the atrocities of slavery, has chosen to kill them one by one before killing herself. She kills her baby girl before being stopped and injures her two sons. This audacious act highly reflects the socio-psychological conflict in the background. This results from the contradictory cultural imperatives of European colonialism and African traditions. Beloved and Sethe are both very much emotionally impaired as a result of Sethe’s previous enslavement. Slavery creates a situation where a mother is separated from her child, which has devastating consequences for both parties. Often, mothers do not know themselves to be anything except a mother, so when they are unable to provide maternal care for their children, or their children are taken away from them, they feel a lost sense of self. Similarly, when a child is separated from his or
her mother, he or she loses the familial identity associated with mother-child relationships.

Sethe has conserved some traits of her original traditional African culture which highly values motherhood. But the foundation of slavery is the denial of a human status to black people. In coming at 124, Schoolteacher is just taking back a "breeding nigger with her foal and three pickaninnies" (BL 227). In fact, Schoolteacher compares her to a "horse" (BL 149). Sethe is considered an animal. As far the baby she is expecting, it is designated by a term used for animals: "foal". Thus, her reaction against white people is for Schoolteacher, not out of motherly love but madness. The baby girl, who will come again eighteen years later, is the actual characterization of Sethe's psychological torments.

Indeed, after the murder, when she returns from prison, part of the community has avoided her company and the other one has found her retiring within herself too proud and the attack against the baby misdirected. Thus, her deed pursues her, years later, and she has not yet been integrated into the community. Then, Sethe longs for pardon and self integration. So, Beloved has come in time because she acts in the words of Harris, as a psychological catalyst:

Psychological catalyst for the three central (living) characters.

The healing ritual in Beloved can be broken down into three stages.

The first stage is the repression of memory that occurs front traumas
of slavery; the second stage entails painful reconciliation with
these memories; and the third is the clearing process, a symbolic
rebirth of the sufferers (Harris, 39).

Memories are central in the novel. When Paul D and Sethe meet again, they
recall life in Sweet Home before Schoolteacher at such a point that Denver asks,
"how come anybody run off Sweet Home can't stop talking about it? Look like if it
was so sweet you would have stayed" (BL 13). In the same way, she clings to
Sethe's memories about her own birth and the role Amy Denver has played in it
because it is "all about herself" (BL 77). But she loses patience whenever Sethe
recalls events that occurred before or after her birth. In fact, all of them prefer to
avoid dealing with the killing episode. They prefer to erase it from their story even
if it is still present in their consciousness.

Actually, Sethe wanted freedom for her life, but as far as one is dead and
two gone, she denies herself the right to freedom. She feels guilty and refuses
either to love or to be loved by anyone. Right are the observations of
Weisenberner, when he passes comments about the psychological slavery of Sethe
in his work, "Beloved - A Tree On Her Back".

Through her attempts to lessen her guilt and difficult past, she
ironically worsens it, and works her way into a psychological
slavery much more terrifying than the physical slavery which
she experienced at Sweet Home. (Weisenberger 5).
Truly enough, Beloved embodies Serhe' s conscience because she needs to punish herself for having killed her daughter. As a matter of fact, Sethe' s conscience does not allow her at all to devote her attention to another one. Denver remarks that her mother is no more the strong and queenly woman, she used to be, instead, she is all day long worrying very much:

Whispering, muttering some justification, some bit of clarifying informations to Beloved to explain what it had been like, and why, and how come. It was as though Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And helped it out. (BL 252)

Her difficulty when she has to confess her deed to Paul D, her circling the subject reveals her difficulty to forget the past. She feels deeply the need to explain and recall the murder to Beloved to free her consciousness, and convince her daughter that she was right.

However, Beloved's characterization has served as a dash between the characters past and future. Only the reincarnation of Beloved helps Sethe to re-live her memories, straighten and exorcise her errors and forgive herself. Two main events have re-inserted Sethe in the community and relieved her by the same. First, the whole community, informed by Stamp Paid and led by Ella, has awakened to help her defeat the past's ghost. And then, more importantly, Sethe has at last
understood that she had misused her fury. It was Schoolteacher who should be attacked but surely not her innocent babies.

In the same way, Denver has discovered her right place in society. Up to eighteen, she is still "pushing out the front" of her mother's dress "provided she can get in it" (BL,11). She has turned physically into a full grown woman but still acts girlish because she does not know the difference because of her isolation. It is Sethe’s psychological victimization which has led her to set out and seek help; introducing herself in society and further, womanhood. She has not had broad contacts with the community. Though a baby girl when the murder occurred, she is submitted to psychological victimization as its consequences. She is as innocent as Baby Suggs but both have suffered from slavery's aftermath psychologically. Thus, Morrison has shown that when one is victimized by the system or other people, one needs the help and love of one’s community. But if she owes safety to love, Sethe's sorrows instead are caused by strong and exclusive love for her children. After her baby's killing, she retires in herself and refuses to forget. She has suffered psychologically the result or racial and gender victimhood.

In Beloved, Toni Morrison weaves the main theme around the history of slavery in the U.S. Although slave history is covered in textbooks, it is most often presented from the point of view of white males. The intimate lives of slave people are rarely discussed, for the historian has no insight into this side of slavery. Since slaves seldom knew how to read or write, there are no written accounts of their
history; instead, the ex-slaves and their descendants passed down the tales of slavery through storytelling, which have been largely ignored in history books. In this novel, Morrison gives slave history from the perspective of ex-slaves, especially from the point of view of Sethe.

The key theme of the novel is the need for people, particularly ex-slaves, to deal with their painful pasts in order to heal themselves. To develop this theme, Morrison tells the story of Sethe, a female ex-slave, who kills her child in order to save her from the misery of slavery that she has endured. Although she does not spend much time in jail for her crime, she spends most of her life paying for the murder. She is ostracized by the community, haunted by the ghost of her dead daughter, and driven by the painful memories of what she has endured as a slave and inflicted on her children. Lacking mother love herself, Sethe sets out to heal her wounds by being a perfect mother.

Unfortunately, slavery defines Sethe and her children as property, which carries a price tag. As a result, Sethe cannot raise and nurture her own offspring, for she is needed to do back breaking labour on the plantation. When she and the children escape from Sweet Home, she can still not nurture or love them properly, for she has no knowledge or experiences with child raising. She thinks that in trying to kill them she is caring for them, for she believes that the after life has to be better than a return to slavery for them.
Throughout the novel, Sethe defines herself by her relationship with her children. As a result, she is filled with a sense of failure. Her oldest daughter comes back as a ghost to haunt and torment her. Her two sons leave home after Baby Suggs dies, for they do not trust Sethe. Her youngest daughter fears her, for Denver believes she is capable of killing again. Sethe must deal with her past in order to understand her relationship with her children. She must come to terms the horror and pain of what she has endured as a slave child and a slave adult. The presence of Paul D in her life helps her face the past. When he returns to nurse Sethe back to health, he gives her a future by telling her that she alone is her own best thing - not her children or her past. As a result, Sethe begins to put her history behind her and look to a future with Paul D.

Morrison provides Sethe's healing process to her readers as a model of healing for the nation. She seems to recognize that the U.S. is, much like Sethe, trying to bury the traumas of the past, not giving them voice and a chance for healing. America does not like to acknowledge the truth about slavery. Americans do not like to think about slave women who were continuously raped and abused by the white slave owners, about slave children who were not permitted to be raised by their parents, or about runaway slaves who were burned alive at the stake or lynched and left to rot on the ropes that killed them.

The nation is also like Sethe's community, which abandoned her when she was most in need of help and treated her action as a mental aberration rather than a
predictable result of her trauma; they chose to label her as immoral and insane rather than blaming the sickness and immorality of the system of slavery that produced her violence. Still today, much of white America labels the black populace as lesser human beings. The novel clearly makes the reader think about the past and deal with it. Although Beloved is painful, it can also be healing.

Racially exploited, sexually violated, and often emotionally humiliated for years or decades, certain black female characters within four of Toni Morrison’s novels make violent choices that are not always easily understandable. The violence, sometimes verbal, but more frequently physical is often an attempt to create unique solutions to avoid further victimization.

Thus, violence itself becomes an act of rebellion, a form of resistance to oppressive power. The choice of violence often rendered upon those within their own community and family redirects powerlessness and transforms these characters, re-defining them as compellingly dominant women. However, their transformation often has multidimensional repercussions for them and those with whom they have chosen to be violent.

Black female characters within Toni Morrison’s novels are often scarred—physically and/or emotionally—by the oppressive environments around them.

Ranging in age from children to adolescents and adults, these female characters choose violence to find an escape—a disruption of the multifaceted
oppression they have suffered within a white patriarchal society where black women are tormented and subjugated by social and racial domination, exclusion, and rejection. Their choices of violence often rendered on those within their own community or family redirects that powerlessness and transforms it. Wreaking havoc on societal expectations for their behaviour and thoughts, these violent actions establish a new vision of African American femininity and femaleness. These female characters, all flawed but also all attempting to manage situations far beyond their control, choose violence. In doing so, they transform from powerless subordinates into dominating forces, even though that transformation often has multidimensional repercussions for them and those with whom they have chosen to be violent. As young girls, mothers, and grandmothers, they act in unsanctioned ways, forcing a redefinition of what black femaleness and black motherhood can and should be, especially under oppressive conditions. Through multiple generations of violent patterns reflecting the viciousness of racist society around them, children learn violence and become violent themselves, and violent mothers may find themselves unmothered by murdering their own children, depicting a repetitive ghastliness within Morrison families.

And yet these female characters remain powerful, dominant, and intriguing. They face horrendously oppressive circumstances and create new endings to them, which their oppressors can hardly believe. They redirect their powerless positions, transforming themselves into hauntingly forceful girls and women. They choose
their own destinies, even if those futures are often lonely or tragic. Thus, these violent females provide a new understanding of violence and its relationship to personal power and community.

*Jazz* begins with a recap of Dorcas's murder and Violet's attack on her corpse. The couple that kills and then defaces the young girl seem immediately to be evil and immoral characters but surprisingly Morrison goes on to flesh them out and to explain, in part, that their violent acts stem from suppressed anguish and disrupted childhoods. Morrison traces the violence of the City characters back to Virginia, where generations of enslavement and poverty tore families apart.

Subtly, Morrison suggests that the black on black violence of the City carries over from the physical and psychic violence committed against the race as a whole. She interweaves allusions to racial violence into her story with a neutral tone that lets the historical facts speak for themselves. Further, her descriptions of scenes are often filled with violence, as she discusses buildings which are cut but a razorlike line of sunlight. Even her narrative is violently constructed with stories wrenched apart, fragmented, and retold in a way that mirrors the splintered identities of the novel's principal characters.

The novel begins in the midst of the love triangle between Violet, Joe and Dorcas. Violet and Joe are unhappily married and living together in an apartment in Harlem when Joe falls in love with a seventeen-year old girl named
Dorcas. Joe and Dorcas meet when Joe comes to Dorcas's aunt's house to sell ladies cosmetics, and their affair lasts from October of 1925 to the first of January 1926. Joe talks with Malvonne, an upstairs neighbour, and negotiates the use of her empty apartment so that he and Dorcas can meet there. This arrangement continues for several months and neither Violet nor Alice Manfred, Dorcas's aunt, have any knowledge of the affair.

Although Joe brings Dorcas presents every time they meet, eventually Dorcas begins to get tired of the older man and starts going out with younger boys, attending parties with her best friend Felice, and making up excuses so as not to meet with Joe. When Joe finally confronts Dorcas about this, she cruelly tells him that he makes her sick and that he should not bother her any more. Dorcas prefers the attentions of a popular and good-looking young man named Acton, with whom she dances at a party on New Year's Day. Dorcas knows that Joe has not gotten over her and will come looking for her, so she is only half-surprised when he tracks her down at the party and sees her dancing with Acton.

Joe, however, brings a gun and shoots Dorcas in the shoulder. Dorcas tells the alarmed witnesses not to call an ambulance, even though she would survive if she allowed someone to help her, and she consequently bleeds to death. Everyone knows that Joe shot Dorcas and rumor of their affair begins to spread in the community after the young girl's death. Violet appears unexpectedly at Dorcas' open-casket funeral and slashes Dorcas's face with a knife. Several weeks later, she...
begins to visit Dorcas's mourning aunt, Alice Manfred, and the two women begin to develop a friendship as a result of their shared tragedy. In the spring, Joe mourns Dorcas's death and he and Violet patch things up in their relationship, mediated in part by their new friendship with Dorcas's best friend, Felice.

As the narrator tells the story of Violet, Joe, and Dorcas in Harlem she follows a stream of associations and digressive details to create a complex web of people, places, and stories extending back to the late nineteenth century. Violet grew up in a poor household in Virginia with her mother Rose Dear. Her grandmother, True Belle, came from Baltimore to live with them when Violet's father abandoned the family. Soon afterwards Violet's mother, Rose Dear, committed suicide by throwing herself into a well. Joe also grew up in Virginia.

He was orphaned at birth and raised by adoptive parents. As a young man he wondered about his birth mother's identity and tied on several occasions to find her. His mentor, a hunter named Henry LesTroy and called "Hunters Hunter," hinted to Joe that his mother was the local mystery, a crazy homeless rover named Wild. When Joe finally tracked Wild down in the woods he asked her to confirm somehow that she was indeed his mother. Wild responded with a hand gesture that Joe could not make out, leaving him to question his own identity. Joe and Violet met in a town called Palestine where they were working the fields. They got married and moved to Harlem, which is referred to simply as "the City" throughout the novel.
In the course of telling Joe and Violet's story, the narrator recounts the stories of periphery characters such as Vera Louise Gray and her son Golden Gray. The narrator shows the connections between the characters, focusing on the perspectives and experiences of individuals and sometimes allowing them to narrate their stories in their own words. Golden Gray, the mixed race child of a white woman, Vera Louise, and a black slave, Henry LesTroy, was raised by his mother and True Belle in Baltimore. He believed all his life that he was a white adopted orphan, but when True Belle told him the truth about his father, he set out for Virginia to confront Henry LesTroy. When he arrived near Vienna, Virginia, Golden Gray spotted Wild hiding alongside the road. When she turned quickly and knocked herself unconscious, he decided to take her with him to his father's home. Wild was very pregnant and gave birth to Joe when they arrived at Henry LesTroy's house. Golden Gray never returned to Baltimore after this incident but lived with Wild in the woods, totally apart from civilization. These stories about Harlem and Virginia are recapitulated and fleshed out several times throughout the novel in flashbacks and digressions.

The absence of mothers also reflects the absence of a "motherland," as the African-American community searches for a way to make America its home, despite the horrors of dislocation and slavery. The mother also signifies a common cultural and racial heritage that eludes the characters as they struggle to define themselves. The word "mama" rests on the tip of the characters' tongue and is an
unconscious lament for a lost home or feeling of security. During one of Violet's visits, Alice Manfred blurts out "Oh, Mama," and then covers her mouth, shocked at her own vulnerability. Dorcas also refers to her mother out of nowhere as she lies on her death bed, thinking, "I know his name but Mama won't tell." Morrison's narrator, ever-present in the lives and histories of her characters, doubles as a kind of mother for the text, tending to the community of black Harlem.

With its shape-shifting, omnipresent narrator, *Jazz* immerses its reader in the psyche and history of its African-American characters. The book attempts to mirror, from an anthropological and fictional standpoint, the concerns of this community and the roots of their collective search for identity. The narrator does not travel far from the self-contained universe of black Harlem and does not focus on the lives of any white characters, save for Vera Louise Gray. The legacy of slavery reverberates throughout the story and the influx of blacks to the City reflects a distancing from this past.

Almost all of Morrison's characters migrate to New York City from other parts of the country in an attempt to escape economic and social prejudice and in search of a new start in Harlem. The motif of migration goes hand in hand with the numerous allusions to birds and recurs frequently in the narration of the characters' histories. Malvonne's nephew, William the Younger, exemplifies a constantly shifting and itinerant black population with his sudden departure from New York for "Chicago, or was it San Diego, or some other city ending with O." His young
restlessness indicates an inability to establish roots or a connection in one place and echoes the "homelessness" of Morrison's principal characters.

The absence of a strong parental presence in Jazz ties together many of Morrison's characters and connects their shared sadness to one cause. Raised by aunts, grandparents and adoptive parents, Violet, Joe and Dorcas all experience a feeling of displacement, and feel that they are handed over with no control. Unable to control the fact that they are orphans and placed in homes without any choice in the matter, characters are relocated in a way that resonates with the paternalistic adoption of slaves. Their true parents would be the tie to a history and would provide an identity for the characters. Thus, the lack of parents creates the characters' sense of displacement and their obsessive desire to find a stable and complete identity.

Set in New York City in 1926, the novel centers on the lives of a married couple, Joe and Violet. Joe is one of the few faithful men in his neighborhood - - until he has an affair with the 18-year-old Dorcas. Fearing he will lose her, Joe kills Dorcas, making his already suffering marriage intolerable.

But Morrison's story is not one of sensational infidelity and sex. Instead she explores the effect that individuals' upbringing and history have on their everyday lives and relationships. Jazz is a novel about people who take control of their lives, overcoming the passivity that could keep them slaves to their
environment and history. Morrison celebrates the ability of two people who turn their relationship and their lives around.

Morrison notes Blacks' well-founded fear of white people, the hypocritical but popular rigid religious morality, and the eroticization of male power taught by society -- all integral parts of Black urban life in the 1920s and very relevant today. While most of her characters are unwilling to learn new ways to live and take control of their lives, Morrison's main characters change their lives against strong social pressure and her novels carries the note that people create history and need not be pawns to passing circumstances.

The story of eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove, the tragic heroine of Toni Morrison's haunting first novel, grew out of her memory of a girlhood friend who wanted blue eyes. Shunned by her town's prosperous black families, as well as its white families, Pecola lives with her alcoholic father and embittered, overworked mother in a shabby, two-room storefront that reeks of the hopeless destitution that overwhelms their lives. In awe of her clean, well-groomed schoolmates, and convinced of her own intense ugliness, Pecola tries to make herself disappear as she wishes fervently, desperately for the blue eyes of a white girl. In her afterword to this novel, Morrison writes of the little girl she knew: "Beauty was not simply something to behold, it was something one could do. The Bluest Eye was an effort to say something about that; to say something about why she had not, or possibly
ever would have, the experience of what she possessed and also why she prayed for so radical an alteration. Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing.

Nominated for the National Book Award, this rich and moving novel traces the lives of two black heroines -- from their growing up together in a small Ohio town, through their sharply divergent paths of womanhood, to their ultimate confrontation and reconciliation. The one, Nel Wright, chooses to remain in the place of her birth, to marry, to raise a family, and to become a pillar of the tightly knit black community. The other, Sula Peace, rejects all that Nel has accepted. She escapes to college and submerges herself in city life. When she returns to her roots it is as a rebel, a mocker, and a wanton sexual seductress. Both women must suffer the consequences of their choices; both must decide if they can afford to harbour the love they have for each other; and both combine to create an unforgettable rendering of what it means and costs to exist and survive as a black woman in America. Hailed by critics for its stunning language and its original, honest depiction of the black way of life after the Civil War, *Sula* is a lyrical blend of myth and magic, as real as a history lesson, and as enchanting as a fable.

Racial pride and repudiation are the central themes in the novel *Tar Baby*. Perched in his lovely home on a Caribbean island, Valerian Street, a wealthy retired businessman, savours the good life in the company of his younger wife,
Margaret, his loyal servants, Ondine and Sydney, and their beautiful, sophisticated niece, Jade, for whom Valerian has been a financial and emotional mentor.

Preparations for the Christmas holiday are underway in this tropical setting, and the days take on a lazy, decadent rhythm until they are disrupted by the sudden appearance of Son, a dreadlocked, muscular fugitive who has been using the house as a hiding place. Bold and secretive about his past, Son confronts each of the members of the household, questioning relationships that have been taken for granted, and stirring up feelings of resentment as well as hidden secrets that serve to shatter the fragile balance that had allowed this "family" to exist in resolute acceptance of their accustomed roles and identities. In the midst of this turmoil Son and Jade fall passionately in love, escape to New York, and then travel south to Son's hometown in Florida. Son's yearning to reconnect with his family's roots clashes with Jade's wilful rejection of the black way of life, and the couple must come to terms with their conflicting identities and their intense mutual attraction.

At the center of Morrison's fifth novel *Beloved*, which earned her the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, is an almost unspeakable act of horror and heroism: a woman brutally kills her infant daughter rather than allow her to be enslaved. The woman is Sethe, and the novel traces her journey from slavery to freedom during and immediately following the Civil War. When we first meet Sethe she is living in Ohio with her youngest child, Denver, and with the ghost of Beloved, the
daughter Sethe buried. When Paul D., an old friend and fellow slave from Kentucky, turns up at her doorstep, Sethe allows herself the luxury of romance and physical affection. Paul D. expels the ghost -- Denver's only companion -- from the house. Soon, when a strange woman shows up claiming the name of Beloved, she is welcomed by everyone but Paul, and it isn't long before she rids her new home of this troublesome man. In the weeks that follow, Beloved takes over the house, providing Denver and Sethe with nourishing and much needed company. Soon, however, this imposing guest finds her way into Sethe's guilty conscience: she wants Sethe to repay her for the life her mother took from her.

When Sethe's indomitable spirit begins to waver, it is up to Denver to save her mother from her sister's wrath. Woven into this circular, mesmerizing narrative are the horrible truths of Sethe's past: the incredible cruelties she endured as a slave, and the hardships she suffered in her journey north to freedom. Just as Sethe finds the past too painful to remember, and the future just "a matter of keeping the past at bay," her story is almost too heart wrenching to read. Yet Morrison manages to imbue the wreckage of her characters' lives with compassion, humanity, and humour. Part ghost story, part history lesson, and part folk tale, *Beloved* finds beauty in the unbearable, and lets us all see the enduring promise of hope that lies in anyone's future.
Toni Morrison's novel, *Jazz*, set in 1926 Harlem, where Joe and Violet Trace have moved to escape the hardships of segregation in the South. A "case man" for the Cleopatra Beauty Products company, Joe is dapper and successful. Violet, an unlicensed beautician, cuts and curls out of her kitchen for pocket money. Though their early years were hard, the couple found happiness in their intense love for each other. But on Lenox Street in their comfortable apartment, Joe and Violet have found prosperity, and lost each other. Violet no longer speaks to her husband, preferring instead the company of the birds she keeps in the front hall, one of whom she's trained to say, "I love you." In her attempts to assuage her intense desire for a child, which she keeps from Joe, Violet sleeps with a doll. Frustrated at the thundering silence of their apartment, and the cessation of their lovemaking, Joe conspires to find "a nice woman to keep company with." And so eighteen-year-old Dorcas enters their lives, and the triangle that forms leads to murder, redemption, and reconciliation.

Its streets throbbing with the music that represents both artistic freedom and moral decline, Harlem in its renaissance offered the black community the opportunity to savor the rewards of financial gain, to flourish in the celebration of black intellectual and creative accomplishment, and to move away from the horrors of the previous decades. But the past has a life of its own, and every character in this capacious novel has his or her own ghosts to contend with. Suffused throughout the novel, like the spirit that cannot be erased by forgetting or quelled...
by prosperity, is the voice of Jazz, "the dirty, get-on-down music the women sang and the men played and both danced to, close and shameless or apart and wild." It follows Joe through his obsession with Dorcas, and provides solace to Violet as she tries to patch their lives back together. In the end it accompanies the two as they find their way back to love.

Morrison feels deeply the losses which Afro-Americans experienced in their migration from the rural South to the urban North from 1930 to 1950. They lost their sense of community, their connection to their past, and their culture. The oral tradition of storytelling and folktales was no longer a source of strength. Another source of strength, their music, which healed them, was taken over by the white community; consequently, it no longer belongs to them exclusively.

The individual who does not belong to a community is generally lost. The individual who leaves and has internalized the village or community is much more likely to survive. Also, a whole community--everyone--is needed to raise a child; one parent or two parents are inadequate to the task. The lack of roots and the disconnection from the community and the past cause individuals to become alienated; often her characters struggle unsuccessfully to identify, let alone fulfill an essential self.

Ancestors are necessary: they provide cultural information, they are a connection with the past, they protect, and they educate. The ancestor is "an
abiding, interested, benevolent, guiding presence that is yours and is concerned about you, not quite like saints but having the same sort of access, none of which is new information." The ancestors may be parents, grandparents, teachers, or elders in the community. Morrison believes that the presence of the ancestor is one of the characteristics of black writing.

Morrison places her characters in extreme situations; she forces them to the edge of endurance and then pushes them beyond what one thinks human beings can bear. These conditions reveal their basic nature. One sees that even good people act in remarkable and in terrible ways. Also, this "push toward the abyss" reveals what is heroic.

Morrison shows understanding of and, often, compassion, for characters who commit horrific deeds, like incest-rape or infanticide. This trait springs in large part from her attitude toward good and evil, which she distinguishes from the conventional or Western view of good and evil. She describes a distinctive view which, she claims, blacks have historically held toward good and evil:

It was interesting that black people at one time seemed not to respond to evil in the ways other people did, but that they thought evil had a natural place in the universe; they did not wish to eradicate it. They just wished to protect themselves from it, maybe even to manipulate it, but they never wanted to kill it.
They thought evil was just another aspect of life. It's because they're not terrified by evil, by difference. Evil is not an alien force; it's just a different force.

She shifts the boundaries between what we ordinarily regard as good and what as evil, so that judgments become difficult. This reflects the complexity of making moral judgments in life. Her villains are not all evil, nor are her good people saints.