CHAPTER 2
QUESTIONING IN THE EARLY NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON

Resisting any monolithic categorization of black identity, Toni Morrison’s writing is very attentive to historical specificity and it urges readers to see “how” identities are constructed socially, temporally and relationally. One of the most compelling and interesting aspects of her fictive narratives is the manner in which it offers ways of imagining the subject in history. Agreeing with Maurice Bloch’s take, the author’s novels offer readers different ways of relating to the past and the future and therefore of “being in history” by shaping cultural memory of the past (229). The body of work that the author has produced most emphatically engaged with questions of history, memory and trauma. This chapter discusses the first four novels by the author, namely The Bluest Eye (1970), Sula (1973), Song of Solomon (1977) and Tar Baby (1981) to explore the way in which these novels function as a form of cultural memory and “how,” in their engagement with the African American past, they unquestioningly, testify to historical trauma. The chapter also focuses on the complex formations of subjectivity in a racialized country and highlights upon the unmaking and remaking of African Americans’ sense of identity, place and space through an understanding of their past informed by a series of traumatic and turbulent migration experience. Toni Morrison, writing in the last quarter of the twentieth century “continues” the tradition that Du Bois’s “vision of haunted historical memory has bequeathed” and the author’s observations about the past and the “need to reclaim it” signal a concern with history in all her novels. It could be ascertained that Morrison’s novels thoroughly focused on specific historical moments and through their engagement with the history of slavery, have distinctively “imagined and memorialized aspects of black history that have been forgotten or inadequately
remembered.” If at all the African American writer’s responsibility is to assume the task of recovering the “presence and heartbeat of the black people” in America, then her novels take that task of recovery seriously, involving “a reconstruction, revisioning and revisiting of the past” (Matus 1-2).

“If there’s a book that you want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it” (Morrison and Diaz “Conversation”), emphasizes Morrison, who confesses that what prompted her to begin writing her first novel was a sense of loss, a void. It was such a harrowing sense of absence and a lack in representations that motivated her to respond to it through writing *The Bluest Eye*. She reiterates: “There were no books about me, I didn’t exist in all the literature I had read…” (Russell 214). The novel is “an imagined history of what it is to grow up black and female in the 1930s and 1940s,” and it strongly responds to the contemporary political movements – the way things were moving too fast in the early 1960-70s America. (Matus 37) America in the 1960s and 1970s was made to confront with self-affirming assertions such as “black is beautiful” and other slogans in the similar line of thought launched forth by the activist of the Black Aesthetic Movement. However, for someone like Morrison, they were too simple to redress the complex and long-prepared effects of valuations based on color and as a result, she forcefully commented on the movement’s assertions of racial beauty by arguing that: “If the best thing happened in the world and it all came out perfectly in terms of what the gains and goals of the ‘Movement’ were, nevertheless nobody was going to get away with that; nobody was going to tell me that it had been that easy. That all I needed was a slogan: ‘Black is Beautiful’” (“Conversation with Gloria Naylor” 199).

Presenting a counter-perspective that scrutinizes the historical backlog of self-devaluation that comfortable assertions of racial pride cannot magically erase,
Morrison admits in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American literature” that her first novel implicitly foregrounds that: “The Trauma of racism is, for the racist and the victim, the severe fragmentation of the self” (214).

In this novel, Morrison created traumatized and troubled characters at a time when the Black Aesthetic movement was calling for positive representations and role models. If one pays attention to the anecdote concerning the genesis of *The Bluest Eye*, to be found in the “Afterword” of the novel, Morrison expresses the anger she felt at a school friend’s utmost wish for blue eyes: “The sorrow in her voice seemed to call for sympathy, and I faked it for her, but, astonished by the desecration she proposed, I ‘got mad’ at her instead” (209). The younger Morrison in this brief narrative responds angrily to her school friend’s wish for blue eyes without which she thinks herself as insufficient. Here the blue eyes are symbolic of a longstanding hallmark of beauty, by white Western standards and the girl’s wish for possessing it reflects upon her sense of deficiency as a black subject without its presence. Gershen Kaufman in the book *Shame: The Power of Caring* states:

> Contained in the experience of shame is the piercing awareness of the self as fundamentally deficient in some vital way as a human being.... Shame is an impotence-making experience because ‘it feels as though’ there is no way to relieve the matter, no way to restore the balance of things. One has simply failed as a human being. (9)

Toni Morrison’s first novel is built around two young women, Pecola Breedlove and Claudia MacTeer and their respective families. The first part of the novel introduces us to Claudia and her sister Frieda preoccupied with a powerful desire to “poke the arrogance” out of the eyes of their neighbor Rosemary Vallanucci for taunting them from within her father’s flashy Buick. For the moment, they inhibit
their urge to “smash the ownership that curls her chewing mouth,” but know that they will beat her up when she comes out of the car, and “make red marks on her white skin, and she will cry and ask us do we want her to pull her pants down” (5). While such a situation suggests a familiar world of childish power struggles based on class and wealth than on race, Morrison will lead us further to demonstrate the way in which these categories also mutually inflect each other.

This part of the novel is not only crucial in the way it showcases Claudia’s anger with her affluent neighbor, Rosemary Villanucci but also on a larger scale “with the pervasive marginalization and devaluation of black subjects in American culture and society” (Matus 41). It could be noted that the opening chapter’s emphasis on the normative white family of the Dick and Jane reading primer demonstrates the power of that devaluation. There are also frequent references in the novel to icons of white beauty such as Shirley Temple and Jean Harlow, Heddy Lamar and Claudette Colbert – the white screen goddesses on whom Maureen and Pauline aspire to model themselves - in addition the pretty faces that sell candies like “Mary Janes.”

Elsewhere it is appropriately claimed that through the stories of Pecola and Claudia, Morrison interrogates how “identity is constructed in young women, scrutinizing in the process aspects of commodity and popular culture, pedagogical strategies and the knowledge they produce, and class and labor relations” (Matus 39). The processes of resistance and submission to a hierarchy of values enshrined and upheld in American culture are analyzed through the two main characters and the author distinctively does this by exploring the relationship between the two. The novel comprises of a series of parallels and points of comparison between Claudia and Pecola that connect the two, consequently, offering us an interesting pattern in which
it articulates the two main emotions with which the novel is concerned – anger and shame.

On the one side of the coin, a mature Claudia looks back on the past and through her memories of childhood, narrates some part of the novel, while on the other side, bound up in a state of permanent dissociation, Pecola can remember nothing and is seen locked in a traumatized childhood. Claudia’s mother may be often angry and tough; nevertheless she communicates a fierce and protective love unlike Pecola’s mother who is more protective of her white charge than her needy daughter. While Claudia’s father throws the child molesting boarder out of their house, unfortunately, Pecola’s father who is the molester of his own child. It is evident in the novel that Claudia’s childhood is filled with “anger” and it produces “resistance to cultural valuations of blackness” (Matus 39) and the emotion of “shame” defines Pecola that ensures silent submission from her part to a diminished sense of self.

According to psychological theorists, to feel shame, is to feel a violation of one’s sense of dignity; it is “to feel ‘seen’ in a painfully diminished sense and the experience of shame is profoundly interpersonal and is therefore, social and cultural” (Kaufman xxi). It is also further emphasized that “The significance of shame lies in its profound impact on personality, psychopathology, and interpersonal relations, as well as its role in minority group relations, minority identity development, national identity development, and international relations (Kaufman xiii). It could be ascertained from Kaufman’s statement that any denial of the need which leaves the subject feeling marginalized, belittled or inappropriate in its desires is potentially a cause of shame. Precisely young Claudia feels overwhelmed and in an incident when she is not well and her mother is angry: “She is not talking to me. She is talking to the puke, but she is calling it my name: Claudia. She wipes it up as best as she can and
puts a scratchy towel over the large wet place .... My mother’s anger humiliates me; her words chafe my cheeks and I am crying” (6-7). Later a grown up Claudia understands the significant demonstrations of her mother’s caring side and this is implied in the sentence: “I do not know that she is not angry with my sickness. I believe she despises my weakness for letting the sickness ‘take hold’” (7). On another occasion, Frieda is whipped because Mrs. MacTeer thinks that she and Pecola are “playing dirty,” when the truth is, Frieda is merely attempting to help Pecola deal with her first experience of menstruation: “Frieda was destroyed. Whippings wounded and insulted her” (22). Mrs. MacTeer is usually angry, but she is also “capable of mending the disrupted interpersonal bridge that produces shame and humiliation in her daughters” (Matus 40) and this is markedly evident when she eventually understands the situation, “she pulled both of them toward her, their heads against her stomach. Her eyes were sorry. ‘All right, all right. Now, stop crying. I didn’t know’” (22). Frieda and Claudia are, therefore, allowed to limit their internalization of shame and let to recover a sense of worth when their mother is capable of making reparation.

American culture in the 1950s and 60s was dominantly resounding with the message that black cannot be beautiful. Claudia’s transgressive urges when unstifled, register to the indoctrination of the dominant culture’s fantasies of beauty and worth. Significantly bell hooks in Killing Rage: Ending Racism explains that Claudia’s anger is readily converted into shame because she does not really understand what makes her feel violent and aggressive (9-20). Through Claudia, the problem of appropriate anger is expressed and it is shown in the way she moves from confessing that dismembering and destruction of white baby dolls to her disturbing desire to perform the same rites of violence to white girls: “the indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. To discover what eluded me; the
secret of the magic they weaved on others” (15). It is observed that referring to her urge for dismemberment as “pristine sadism.” Claudia later admits:

If I pinched them, their eyes – unlike the crazed glint of the baby doll’s eyes – would fold in pain, and their cry would not be the sound of an icebox door, but a fascinating cry of pain. When I learned how repulsive this disinterested violence was, that it was repulsive because it was disinterested, my shame floundered about for refuge. (15-16)

The elder Claudia realizes that her violence is repressive because it negates or even fails to take on the humanity of the other. Later she reflects on how she hates and envies Maureen Peal, a light-skinned schoolmate: “all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The ‘Thing’ to fear was the ‘Thing’ that made ‘her’ beautiful, and not us” (58). In a scene, Claudia and her sister Frieda shout insults at the retreating Maureen Peal, and their “angry faces knotted like dark cauliflowers,” however they at least keep the “Thing” outside of themselves. (57) When one looks at Pecola, unlike Claudia, she stands apart in pain, folded into herself like a “pleated wing” (57) and it is her vulnerability that provokes and angers Claudia here just as, it will enrage her father later in the rape scene. That terrifying weakness is indicated in the incident where Cholly, rather than feel the impotence of anger against the goading white men who interfere his first sexual experience, turns his anger on his young girlfriend. Pecola’s collapse in the face of Maureen Peal’s insults irks Claudia and makes her want “to open her [Pecola] up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine, stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets. But she held it in where it could lap up into her eyes” (57). One observes that Pecola subsides having absorbed the slurs and teasing while
Claudia and her sister Frieda maintain a sense of their own worth by conjuring insults and creatively cursing the powerful Peal.

It is Claudia’s mechanism of directing her anger outward that protects her sense of self. One of the major difference between her and Pecola is that the Pecola internalizes the world’s judgments and actions, but the former resorts to ways like to “spit the misery out onto the street” (57) in order to defend her vulnerability by keeping devaluation external. Later the narrating Claudia admits that while anger may protect the self, it also may project itself on to a target selected because it is poorly defended and vulnerable. When one looks at Pecola, her woundability – her tendency to absorb and internalize – as it is demonstrated in a series of rejections and shames, as, for instance, the boys’ taunting of her at school; the contempt of Geraldine; her mother’s wrath and rejection when Pecola upsets the blueberry cobbler – it is obvious that she responds to castigation or ridicule in silence, simply absorbing the humiliation. Pecola’s most vulnerable location is totally exposed when she is raped by her father, Cholly and this unfaithful incident is reflective of the pathetic situation the girl is in wherein, there is no one to defend the boundaries of Pecola’s home and in extension, her internal spaces as well. Cholly’s rape of his own daughter is only “the last, and the most graphic and literal, an instance of the way in which Pecola internalizes the incursions of the outside” (Matus 44). A closer look at the MacTeer’s family allows the readers to get a glimpse of a protected space, a home where Claudia and Frieda are protected and this aspect is manifested when Mr. Green, the boarder who has been allowed inside the MacTeer’s family home, molests Frieda, her parents forcibly expel him from the house and Claudia’s father hurls a tricycle at his head and her mother hits him with a broom.
It could be understood that although the distinction between inside and outside may uncertainly hold in the material cases of the body or the home, they are however, “unstable fictions when negotiating the conceptual boundaries of self and other” (Matus 45). In the “Afterword” of the novel, Morrison emphasizes that the reclamation of racial beauty in the 1960s made her think about why such slogans as “black is beautiful” were necessary in the first place. (210) Morrison’s first novel also exposes the picture of the African American community that is permeated by standards, self-valuations and aspirations derived not only from the commodity culture which it consumes, but “inherent in the structuring of labor relations and class positions, both heavily inflected by race” (Matus 45). The text also sharply reveals the challenges and the difficulties involved when it comes to the loaded question of maintaining a strong “inside” of self or community against the subtle pervasiveness of racial devaluations.

Through Claudia it is presumably ascertained that an emotion like anger could help an individual maintain clear distinctions between what belongs to the self and what must be kept outside it. Interestingly in Pecola, shame disturbs those distinctions by encouraging self-blame and the culture of shame displaces the focus on external causes letting one feel all diminished—ashamed of the self for something. Pecola’s negotiations with the world, highlight how shame displaces anger more vividly and this is illustrated in the episode where:

Anger stirs and wakes in her; it opens its mouth, and like a hot-mouthed puppy, laps up the dredges of her shame. Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging. Her thoughts fall back to Mr. Yacobowski’s eyes, his phlegm voice. The anger will not hold; the puppy is too easily surfeited. Its thirst too quickly
quenched, it sleeps. The shame wells up again, its muddy rivulets seeping into her eyes. (38)

Pecola’s passage in the novel is from repeated humiliation and shaming to dissociation and madness while Claudia’s from being an angry younger self to the older, memorializing narrator. It is Claudia, who bears witness to Pecola’s movement from a continually shamed and diminished self to the traumatized, lost and divided subject that we see at the end of the novel. One of the most magnificent features of Claudia’s narrative is that it does not only bear witness to the trauma of the incest and rape that Pecola experiences, but also with the trauma of pervasive racism. Expressing emphatically that prevailing definitions of trauma need to undergo serious revision, Laura Brown argues that while trauma is usually defined as an experience of overwhelming or unusual proportions and associated to an event “outside the range of human experience,” such definitions disqualify those who suffer experiences that are statistically speaking, beyond the range of human experience (100). Objecting to the way “normal” traumatic events are defined, Brown explains that we delude ourselves into believing that ordinary life is safe and manageable when the truth is, it is hardly safe for incest victims or for the victims of rape and molestation. She asks “What does it mean … if we admit that our culture is a factory for the production of so many walking wounded?” (103) Her striking metaphor – factory and production – reminds one of Claudia’s metaphors in the opening chapters of the novel of the unyielding earth and the seeds that fail to come to fruition. Brown’s theory of trauma is most notable for, it explores the ways “trauma can be spread laterally throughout an oppressed social group as well, when membership in that group means a constant lifetime risk of exposure to certain trauma” (108). Brown’s conceptualization of trauma could be effectively utilized to perform a different reading of The Bluest Eye
in which the work is observed to represent both the traumatogenic effects of living in a racialised society as well the trauma of incest.

In the last part of the novel, Morrison allows Pecola to bear witness to her suffering in her conversations with her imagined friend, but it could be pointed out that such a dialogue of the split self fails to approximate a therapeutic dialogue involving a teller and a listener who share the burden of the sufferer’s history. Dori Laub’s emphasis on the listener in any testimony to trauma shows the need for sharing, participation and transmission (57) but Pecola’s remains a story incapable of transmission and unfortunately she cannot tell it in the “real” world. As a result, Pecola fails to assimilate and process anything about what has actually happened to her and there is therefore, no reclamation of the past with her. Fascinatingly, the responsible task of bearing witness falls to Claudia, who meditates Pecola’s story, enlisting the reader as “listener” and as well, co-owner of the trauma.

One observes that Pecola silently sustains blow after blow of devaluation and rejection almost entirely throughout the novel and her most expressive moment in the novel is to be seen in her final dialogue as a split self. By making her a silent victim, Morrison paradoxically articulates Pecola’s suffering most powerfully. Pecola’s dialogue with “her friend” at the end of the novel allows us to observe that there is some close questioning about how hideous it was to have someone like Cholly “coming at her.” This is evident when the imaginary friend quizzes Pecola “The second time too?” (159), thereby presenting before us Pecola’s dialogue – an internal debate in which she accuses herself of having in some way enjoyed the attentions of Cholly. Morrison, furthermore, has provocatively made Claudia identify that Cholly loved his daughter enough to “touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her” (163) and also she recognizes that the love of a “free man” – a man without
responsibilities — is “never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover’s inward eye” (163).

There are vivid references to Pecola’s rigid “shocked body,” the silence of her “stunned throat,” the “hollow suck of air in the back of her throat” (128) and other responses to the rape but not accounts of her emotions and responses. Even Cholly, the narrator observes, becomes conscious of Pecola’s wet soapy hands on his wrists, “but whether her grip was from a hopeless but stubborn struggle to be free, or from some other emotion, he could not tell” (128). The absence of “how” the victim felt from the narration of the scene indicates that trauma is therefore an “event without a witness,” because the witness is blocked from remembering herself or himself as a participant in the event (Felman and Laub 75). If exclusion of the self results from memory after a traumatic experience, then, memory of one’s participation, however much painful it may be, is presumed to be a sign of health. Hence the novel takes on a new significance in this light by placing an emphasis on memory and remembering as a condition of growth and health.

It must be acknowledged that Claudia’s ability to remember and bear witness in the novel is its most hopeful aspect. Claudia delights in her narrative and celebrates its capacity to remember and this aspect is visible in a series of specific incidents that she recalls and creates a sympathetic connection to and understanding of her younger self: “The edge, the curl, the thrust of their emotions is always clear to Frieda and me. We do not, cannot, know the meanings of all their words, for we are nine and ten years old. So we watch their faces, their hands, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre” (15). Another time, remembering her father, Claudia recalls “My Daddy’s face is a study. Winter moves into it and presides there. His eyes become a cliff of
snow threatening to avalanche … And he will not unrazor his lips until spring” (47). This description even though, does not include younger Claudia’s feelings; she now understands the burdens her parents must have encountered during the Depression.

Later in her narrative, one gets to see Claudia’s interrogation of memory when she conveys her reminiscences of summer “I have only to break into the tightness of a strawberry and I see summer – its dust and lowering skies” (147). “But” and she says, self-consciously investigating the nature of memory:

my memory is uncertain; I recall a summer storm in the town where we lived and imagine a summer my mother knew in 1929. There was a tornado that year, she said that blew away half of south Lorain. I mix up her summer with my own. Biting the strawberry, thinking of storms, I see her. A slim young girl in pink crepe dress … So much for memory. Public fact becomes private reality, and the seasons of a Midwestern town become the Moirai of our small lives. (147)

Claudia’s meditation here offers us with two ways of understanding the nature of memory. Considering its adaptive and absorptive nature, firstly, it reflects upon the mind that is constantly creative and porous; secondly, that which is permanently imprinted but sealed off from conscious recall. One could infer that the power of memory is to tell the truth and this may probably go beyond accuracy of reportage, however, its power is its ability to create a past, to make a narrative, to put things in time:

The brain is an enchanted loom where millions of flashings shuttles weave a dissolving pattern. Since the mind recreates reality from the abstractions of sense impressions, it can equally well simulate reality by recall and fantasy.
The brain invents stories and runs imagined and remembered events back and forth through time (qtd. in Kolk and Hart 158-82).

One could ascertain that Claudia’s narrative brings the recognition of the above stated nature of the mind that is like anger, is a form of salvation on the one side; on the other side, it has produced an imaginary valuation of self-worth. Claudia observes:

We remembered Mrs. Breedlove knocking Pecola down and soothing the pink tears of the frozen doll baby that sounded like the door of our icebox. We remembered the knuckled eyes of schoolchildren under the gaze of Meringue Pie and the eyes of these same children when they looked at Pecola. Or maybe we didn’t remember; we just knew. We had defended ourselves since memory against everything and everybody, considered all speech a code to be broken by us, and all gestures subject to careful analysis; we had become headstrong, devious, and arrogant. (150)

Claudia’s narrative becomes far more self-conscious as her attention is concentrated more on the state in which Pecola remains frozen. She doubts the processes of memory and this allows her to undergo an interrogation of herself and also, her own motives in the community’s responsibility for Pecola’s fate. Claudia, in the final section of the novel, looks back on Pecola’s life and reflects on her friend’s fate and the way identities are formed relationally, she says “The damage done was total,” (162) recognizing the extent to which Pecola’s vulnerability has been exploited by others and also tells “we felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness … We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty and yawned in the fantasy of our own strength” (163).
Claudia’s closing litany articulates an understanding of both why Pecola stepped into madness and reflects the terms on which she survived. Claudia’s honest self-scrutiny suggests that there is an obvious growth in her and she can see without fraudulent accommodations. Without succumbing to the conformist culture of shame, she can shoulder responsibility and her narrative in the last paragraph of the novel merges with that of the omniscient narrator whose voice was sharply distinct from her at the beginning. While it is the omniscient narrator who recounts “So it was on a Saturday afternoon, in the thin light of spring, he staggered home reeling drunk and saw his daughter in the kitchen” (127), it is Claudia who clearly comments on the tragic fulfillment of Pecola’s desire for blue eyes: “So it was. A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil if fulfillment” (162). By the end of the novel, the apparent closeness of their voices indicates that the wisdom of this omniscient narrator is also Claudia’s.

*The Bluest Eye* therefore, is a novel that critiques on the community’s internalization of self-hatred and offers us an imaginative understanding of the sad infertility of the cultural climate for a thriving African American psyche and it concludes with Claudia’s confession of the responsibility she and others bear for Pecola’s demise which is at the cost of their survival. As John Leonard in *The New York Times* puts it: “*The Bluest Eye* is also history, sociology, folklore, nightmare and music. It is one thing to state that we have institutionalized waste, that children suffocate under mountains of merchandised lies. It is another thing to demonstrate that waste, to re-create those children, to live and die by it. Miss Morrison's angry sadness overwhelms” (“Book of the Times”).
In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth argues that the traumatized carry “an impossible history within them” because they are unable to possess their history (5). According to her, it works on them instead of their working on it by submitting it to the processes of memory, response and assimilation. Toni Morrison’s second novel *Sula* (*1973*) is written round the time of increasing US involvement in Vietnam in which African American soldiers made up a disproportionate number of the casualties. Melissa Walker notes:

in 1973 it would have been virtually impossible for readers of a novel like *Sula* to be oblivious to the public history of years that saw the passing of the Voting Rights Act, the escalation of the Vietnam War, with its disproportionate number of African-American casualties; Lyndon Johnson’s announcement that he would not seek re-election; the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr; increasing outbreaks of urban riots; the election and re-election of Richard Nixon; and the systematic attack on the advocates of black power” (128).

One could agree with Walker, who sees the novel as pointing to the reasons why African Americans have been campaigning for civil rights and offers a history of the 1920s until the civil rights movement. In the novel, Morrison begins her exploration of unassimilated history with the experiences of Shadrack, the young soldier whose exposure to the horror of war in 1919 traumatizes him for life. In a graphic and horrifying visual description, the narrator describes the amount of shock Shadrack must have registered:

Wincing at the pain in his foot, he turned his head a little to the right and saw the face of a soldier near him fly off. Before he could register shock, the rest of the soldier’s head disappeared under the inverted soup bowl of his helmet.
But suddenly, taking no direction from the brain, the body of the headless soldier ran on, with energy and grace, ignoring altogether the drip and slide of brain tissue down its back (8).

When he wakes up in the hospital, he is repulsive about the possible chaos of the world and his body and such a reaction is most expressed in the way he reacts to the food he is served – rice, meat and stewed tomatoes. One is enabled to understand Shadrack’s continuing sense of trauma when the dinner recalls the human stew that he witnessed and his escalating horror is checked because the lumpy whiteness of the rice, the quivering blood tomatoes and the grayish-brown meat are contained in the triangular areas of the tray. The balance created by such containment soothes and transfers its equilibrium to him nonetheless, comforting feel fails to extend to his own body which refuses to keep its usual shape and he is eased to be bound in a straitjacket, for confinement ensures his fingers will be kept under control. After discharge, he recovers some sense of control over his own body when he sees his black face and finds it reassuring:

There in the toilet water, he saw a grave black face. A black so definite, so unequivocal, it astonished him. He had been harboring a skittish apprehension that he was not real – that he didn’t exist at all. But when the blackness greeted him with its indisputable presence, he wanted nothing more. In his joy he took the risk of letting one edge of the blanket drop and glanced at his hands. They were still. Courteously still. (13)

In an attempt to structure human chaos, Shadrack “began a struggle that was to last twelve days, a struggle to order and focus experience. It had to do with making a place for fear as a way of controlling it” (14) and he institutes, National Suicide Day and retires to the shack near the river that belonged to his grandfather. The opposition
between life and death, order and disorder, survival and suicide must be maintained and because of the possibility of this day of killing oneself, one can live other days without feeling the need to do so. It could be ascertained that Shadrack’s National Suicide Day recognizes the overwhelming trauma of loss and despair and also the desire of self-annihilation. The commemoration and the institutionalization of this day in the novel lead to the containment of the death drive. As such, “The people had seen him a year now in between . . . But he never touched anybody, never fought, never caressed. Once the people understood the boundaries and the nature of his madness, they could fit him, so to speak, into the scheme of things” (15). Pierre Nora notes that the folks in the Bottom may feel that they pay no attention to Shadrack, but National Suicide Day becomes a “lieu de memoire” – certainly, a place of memory, a landmark in time and a point of reference in the novel (284-300).

Morrison seems to adopt the context of the war experiences of Shadrack to introduce the aspect of trauma in the novel, also attempting to bring forth, the notion of the madness of trying to maintain order in a world of incalculable death and loss. Matus claims:

But Shadrack’s is not simply the generic trauma case. The specific historical circumstances of his experience are significant: he is a black soldier serving in the armed forces in World War I. the returned soldiers on the train that Helene Wright takes to New Orleans, as well as Sula’s regressed and drug-addicted uncle Plum, are all reminders of the presence of black soldiers in this war. (57)

It could be said that the novel exposes the duplicity of American race relations and registers the pain that African Americans felt when they suffer no exclusions during the war time and particularly, when the situation comes to giving their lives for their country. The social injustice that black Americans had to face during this time is best
described in the novel when we see from Helene’s journey that black servicemen and people have to still travel on Jim Crow cars and also when the Bottom community felt a growing sense of anger at the job exclusions black men experience. The narrator refers to the draining of hope:

The same hope that kept them picking beans for other farmers; kept them from finally leaving as they talked of doing; kept them knee-deep in other people’s dirt; kept them excited about other people’s wars; kept them solicitous of white people’s children; kept them convinced that some magic ‘government’ was going to lift them up, out and away from that dirt, those beans, those wars (180).

Morrison emphatically contextualizes and historicizes the position of African Americans in 1919 by bringing home Shadrack who is presented as a powerful example of the terrors of World War I and is psychically right there in the Bottom’s back yard. One could infer that even though the small world of Bottom appears remote in the novel, it is hardly separated from the outside world. In a town like Medallion that is located on the outskirts, Morrison seems to suggest that so much was experienced by the African Americans and this is most explicitly shown in the way the first chapter begins with the image of the blasted life of one black American soldier and winds up with a chapter consisting of Nel’s blues-like rhapsody:

Jesus, there were some beautiful boys in 1921! Look like the whole world was bursting at the seams with them. Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years old. Jesus, they were fine … They hung out of attic windows, rode on car fenders, delivered coal, moved into Medallion and moved out, visited cousins, plowed, hoisted, lounged on the church steps, careened on the pool playground. (163-64)
The neighborhood’s young men praised here remind us not just of the object of Nel and Sula’s adolescent desire, but at the same time, offer us records of the waste and loss of a generation full of promise yet denied rights and opportunities to work. When later in the novel, Shadrack leads the community to the tunnel that in due course, collapses on them; the novel takes us to witness the most moving lines describing the pain in the hearts of the people:

They didn’t mean to go in, to actually go down into the lip of the tunnel, but in their need to kill it all, all of it, to wipe from the face of the earth the work of the thin armed Virginia boys, the bull-necked Greeks and the knife-faced men who waved the leaf-dead promise, they went too deep, too far … (161)

This part of the novel critiques upon the exclusion of African American men from good work and good pay and mourns the apocalyptic collapse of the tunnel and the death of many of the Bottom’s number. If one links it to the history and inception of the Bottom as highlighted in the preface to the novel, one could observe an interesting parallel between the two. Like the exclusions from work and economic opportunity encountered by African Americans result in the loss of a potential generation, in a note of nostalgia, the narrator registers about the passing of a neighborhood, a community in the preface. The narrator presents a list of places and spaces that will be demolished so that Medallion Golf Course can be constructed. The narrator bears witness to the life that dwelt in Irene’s palace of cosmetology, Reba’s Grill, the Time and a Half Pool Hall. All this is going to make way for the Golf club and what remains is the memory of a certain time and place in history. Furthermore the narrator offers a series of words and phrases like “raze,” “level,” “knock,” “pry loose” that suggest the action of demolition and as well the obliteration of the Bottom is predicted to us.
In a political and historical term, the narrator offers us the ensuing story of the neighborhood’s genesis. In the anecdote of how the Bottom began, it is indicated that land is at stake. A slave is promised his freedom and a piece of land by his white farmer if he performs some difficult chores. In the abstract, the farmer seems to have no problem with freedom “But he didn’t want to give up any land” (5). So, he convinced his slave by manipulating the situation and finally in the story, the slave ends up into taking infertile hilly land at the “bottom of heaven” rather than in the fertile valley. So “the nigger got the hilly land, where planting was backbreaking, where the soil slid down and washed away the seeds, and where the wind lingered all through the winter.” (5) Future generations refer to this tale of origin as a “nigger joke” and the narrator’s account of it allows us to understand and interpret the event as reflecting the pathetic and painful sides of history of victimization that “continues beyond slavery and the founding of the Bottom, beyond the destruction of the tunnel and the demise of the community so that a golf course can be built” (Matus 60).

Capturing a time span of almost five decades that is, from the year 1920 to 1965, Morrison’s second novel (Sula) is filled with accounts of traumatic events that facilitates us with a rich opportunity to explore a wide spectrum of trauma and loss. Apart from Shadrack’s comrade, there are other instances in the novel that accounts for the range of traumatic cases the work has captured and represented. The list contains the amputation of Eva’s leg, which people suspect she has done it to herself to avail insurance, the unexpected, accidental drowning of Chicken Little; Eva’s setting alight of her son Plum; Sula’s self-mutilation when threatened by white boys; the terrible burning of Hannah Peace; and finally the apocalyptic collapse of the tunnel which is practically the same as to a community suicide.
Morrison experiments with anti-conventionalism and most profoundly comes up with the creation of Sula, a woman whose personality in the novel totally diverts away from the conventional expectations of “how” an ideal woman should be like. She is a woman who will not mother, nurture, or take her place in the usual heterosexual social order that characterizes women like Helene Wright and her daughter Nel. Sula could be considered as an imaginative creation of Morrison’s experiment with feminist ideologies wherein, she tries to imagine a self-creation, rebelling from, and at odds with, all the preceding prescription. Morrison has asserted that she wanted to take a woman who is unlike Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye* or Helene Wright (Nel’s mother) and Nel in *Sula* who just folds away many parts of herself by just preparing oneself for marriage and home-making (Asinof “Fresh Ink”). Hortense Spillers notes that in *Sula*, the novelist imagines a woman, who, intends on opening up all parts of herself rather than folding them away, flouts convention and received morality (214).

Morrison cuts Sula free from the conventional responsibilities and definers of an ideal womanhood and provides her a kind of detachment and distance by cutting her loose from feeling and as well to make her in many ways surprisingly evil. In a series of events that unfold in the course of the narrative, one finds Sula coldheartedly disposing her grandmother Eva by placing her in a degraded old home meant for old people. A string of signs is linked to Sula based on the community’s mythology, thereby almost equating her with the devil figure. Morrison has noted in many of her interviews that she is fascinated with the way black communities tolerate evil, learning to live and survive in its presence rather than responding aggressively and anxiously to banish or exorcise it. Nonetheless, the community in *Sula*, more than simply tolerating it, helps to add up in Sula the evil that it perceives and even needs.
Sula’s presence is a need for the community for it challenges its members to explore their best selves and this facet is markedly evident in the novel when, after her death, the sense of relief, hope and order that the people of her community felt is short-lived:

A falling away, a dislocation was taking place. … Without her mockery, affection for others sank into flaccid disrepair. Daughters who had complained bitterly about the responsibilities of taking care of their aged mother-in-law had altered when Sula locked Eva away, and they began cleaning those old women’s spittoons without a murmur. Now that Sula was dead and done with, they returned to a steeping resentment of the burdens of old people (153-54).

If Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* says Matus “functioned as the deficient and ugly other on whom the community could ‘dump their garbage,’ leaving themselves cleansed, Sula is similarly a site of projection, though one constituted not through shame and a sense of rejection, but through her own glorious defiance and self-isolation” (61).

Throughout the novel, there is a reiteration of “how” it is only Sula who can look upon pain and trauma with disinterest. Sula’s strength to live life on her own terms is best expressed: “‘Yes. But my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain’t that something? A secondhand lonely’” (143).

One of the most visible and compelling features to be seen in all of Morrison’s work is the question of the community and its relationship with the individual. As even evident explicitly in her M.A. thesis, Morrison has long been interested in exploring multiple challenging dynamics prevalent in the subject matter of detachment and isolation versus connection and involvement. She concludes her thesis by upholding the notion that isolation is a helpful means for conducting acute
self-analysis and this aspect of her research finding could be connected when we
study Sula’s characterization here. The association between isolation and connection;
the negotiations and relationship between the inside and the outside and how these
states paradoxically inflect identity could be studied through Sula’s personality. In
order to look at the novel that has a subtle kind of lacuna between its part I and II, the
paradoxes of identity aforementioned must be taken into consideration. Sula has been
to college and travelled around for the ten years before she actually returns to
Medallion. Many critics have wondered why there is an unexplained gap between the
two parts in the text since there is no explanation offered as to why Sula makes a
return. It could be assumed that on comparison and relationship, Sula’s identity
depends on her frankly defiant alienation from the community and yet that identity
also depends, as does the community’s sense of itself. Sula’s return is best described
by the narrator:

When she had come back home, social conversation was impossible for her
because she could not lie. … The narrower their lives, the wider their hips.
Those with husbands had folded themselves into starched coffins, their sides
bursting with other people’s skinned dreams and bony regrets. … They had
looked at the world and back at their children, and Sula knew that one clear
young eye was all that kept the knife away from the throat’s curve. She was
pariah, then, and knew it (121-22)

Many commentators have argued that Sula’s conscious disinterestedness
provokes unease and this illustrated when she admits that she is thrilled and
“interested” (78) to see her mother burn and also when Ajax has left her, she
recognizes that she would have liked to tear “the flesh from his face” (136) to get to
the secret of his blackness and beauty. Barbara Johnson’s brilliant reading of the
novel draws our attention to Sula’s puzzling disinterestedness particularly focusing on
the moment when Nel discovers Jude and Sula together. All Nel does is looking at
them in disbelief at the adulterous scene before her and waits for one of them to say
something by way of explanation: “I waited for Sula to look up at me any minute and
say one of those lovely college words like aesthetic or rapport, which I never
understood but which I loved because they sounded so comfortable and firm” (105).
Johnson argues that the novel functions as a test for the reader of readerly aesthetics
or rapport, interest or disinterest in the succession of horrible images, painful truths
and losses, that it articulates and interrogates the readerly response to the horrible
images we see and hence, asks “What is the nature of our pleasure in contemplating
trauma?” (171).

Sula’s determination to live one’s life in one’s own term certainly made her
disregard the usual constraints that socialization involves, but such a disregard for
convention made her pay a heavy price, especially in the last chapters, the novel is
explicit about the pain and suffering that Sula, disinterested as she seems, has not
managed to leave behind. The aspect of Sula that we see by the second part of the
novel seems “to have become a repository of pain – personal, local and cosmic”
(Matus 63). Such an assumption about her could be drawn on the basis of the fact that
Sula perceives even the act of lovemaking surprisingly, as a way to find “misery and
the ability to feel deep sorrow” (122) and seeking out the “eye of sorrow in the midst
of all that hurricane rage of joy,” she locates at the center of “that silence … the death
of time and a loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning” (123). It is then
that she wept:

For loneliness assumed the absence of other people, and the solitude she found
in that desperate terrain had never admitted the possibility of other people. She
wept then. Tears for the death of the littlest things: the castaway shoes of
children; broken stems of marsh grass battered and drown by the sea; prom
photographs of dead women she never knew; wedding rings in pawnshop
windows’ the tidy bodies of Cornish hens in a nest of rice” (123).

Sula’s sense of cosmic grief as evident from the references above draws our attention
towards an incident or rather an accident, a case of specific trauma of her past that
involves the death of Chicken Little. One could ascertain that Chicken Little’s death is
the central symbol of loss in the novel. As the narrator puts forth, with a “bubbly
laughter,” he was there for one moment as Sula swings him, holding him by the
wrists, but he is gone the next moment “The water darkened and closed quickly over
the place where Chicken Little sank. The pressure of his hard and tight little fingers
was still in Sula’s palms as she stood looking at the closed place in the water. They
expected him to come back up, laughing” (61). The effect of Chicken Little’s death is
as if “something” is “newly missing” and at the funeral, the women mourners connect
to the event by identifying with the child as “innocent victim” and are also reminded
of the “oldest and most devastating pain there is: not the pain of childhood but the
remembrance of it” (65). The funeral foregrounds the notion that the boy’s death is a
symbol of Sula’s own childhood hurt.

Chicken Little’s accidental death is one of the key moments in the novel and
is an incident that introduces us to the notion of the pain of losing innocence and also
through Shadrack’s promise to Sula, the permanence of childhood secured and
captured by death. Realizing that Shadrack has seen the accident, Sula runs to his
shack and all she gets to hear from him is the one consolidating word he utters,
“always.” The notion of permanent peace in Chicken Little’s long sleep of water
returns to Sula shortly before her own death. She dies with the dominating feeling of
“being completely alone – where she had always wanted to be – free of the possibility of distraction” (149). The narrator states:

It would be here, only here, held by this blind window high above the elm tree, that she might draw her legs up to her chest, close her eyes, put her thumb in her mouth and float over and down the tunnels, just missing the dark walls, down until she met a rain scent and would know the water was near, and she would curl into its heavy softness and it would envelop her, carry her, and wash her tired flesh always. Always. Who said that? She tried hard to think.

Who was it that had promised her a sleep of water always? (149)

When Shadrack remembers of the exchange that he had with Sula, he promises her not ostensibly the sleep of water, but a stay against change and the “falling away of skin, the drip and slide of blood. He had said ‘always’ to convince her, assure her, of permanency” (157). When he sees Sula’s corpse, he realizes that yet another whose face, he knew has died and finally the hope preserved in his sense of “always” disappears. A heavy sense of despair propels him so much so to the point that he starts doubting whether his suicide day has helped to keep order in the universe. One could undoubtedly infer that Sula’s death sets off the chain of circumstances that leads to the deaths of many of the Bottom’s community members.

In her final conversations with Nel, she says “Being good to somebody is just like being mean to somebody. Risky. You don’t get nothing for it” (144-45). What becomes clear about Sula, having lived life on her own terms, is that she has not avoided pain, but simply objected to order or school her feelings to go with conventional practices. She finds the cult of womanhood that conditions, proscribes and prescribes emotions to be not worth following. In a most shocking declaration, Sula asserts that there will be a time when the world will actually love her:
‘Oh, they’ll love me all right. It will take time, but they’ll love me. … After all the old women have lain with the teen-agers; when all the younger girls have slept with their drunken old uncles; after all the black men fuck all the white ones; when all the white woman kiss all the black ones … then there’ll be a little love left over for me. And I know just what it will feel like’ (145).

Sula’s thought in the stated speech is distinctively about taboo breaking, iconoclasm and moreover, the shattering of social and sexual conventions.

Sula recalls many traumatic incidents apart from that of Chicken Little’s while she lies dying and one of the most horrifying events that returns to her is the death of her mother, Hannah Peace by burning. Although many felt strange and finds Sula’s behavior inappropriate when she enjoys the spectacle and just stands witnessing the terrible sight rather than feeling shocked, Sula later admits “I stood there watching her burn and was thrilled. I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing” (147) and also confirms that Eva has known all along. She is confronted with the truth that she was not just “paralysed” as was “natural,” but was interested but she argues “I didn’t mean anything. I never meant anything” (147). Although quite ambiguous, her lines are reflective of her innocence and that her behavioral pattern to the incident is not spiteful. It could not be denied that Sula also endured pain in the novel and the feeling of loss returns to her in her dreams, particularly, after Nel has visited her for the last time. This is evident when the narrator describes Sula’s recurrent dream:

‘I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing.’ Then she had the dream again. The Clabber Girl Baking Powder lady was smiling and beckoning to her, one hand under her apron. When Sula came near she disintegrated into white dust, which Sula was hurriedly trying to stuff into the pockets … The disintegration was awful to see, but worse was the feel of the powder – its starchy slipperiness as
she tried to collect it by handfuls. The more she scooped, the more it billowed. At last it covered her, filled her eyes, her nose, her throat, and she woke gaggling and overwhelmed with the smell of smoke (147-48).

Delayed reaction and haunting dreams are considered most common symptoms to those who have suffered trauma and Sula’s dream in a way allows her to relive her mother’s death, completing in dream-form the transformation from the burning flesh she witnessed to the white ashes, symbolized in the baking powder and her choking could be connected to the smell of smoke that could literally have made her undergo that experience. Sula’s personality in this novel is far more complicated than it appears and this is proven when she deeply experiences Hanna’s death and still lives with the incident’s traumatic impact at present. It could be asserted that Sula is more vulnerable to pain owing to her unconventional nature.

A sensitive look at Eva’s character in the novel will also illuminate us with other aspects of trauma evident in the text. When we draw a careful comparison between her and others, we will be delighted to explore her strength that allows her to survive through the worst. As an abandoned wife and mother, she faces and overcomes enormous obstacles and her mother-love and subsequent desperate effort is evident in the segment where she practically “unplugs” the constipated Plum, and in the scene when she hurls her one legged self through an upper storey window in an attempt to save her burning daughter. But the same mother-love determines her to decide that she must burn the war-wasted, infantile Plum and henceforth, illustrates that she is a woman of action. While Sula observes, Eva does act. In one of the final scenes, Eva is shown in her nineties and talking with Nel. She apparently stuns her by frankly asking her as to “how” Sula killed Chicken Little. Nel senses her own guilty, self-justifying memories when Eva says: “You watched, didn’t you? Me, I never
would’ve watched” (168). If one remembers the section when she doused Plum with petrol and set him alight, she indeed, did close the door behind her and go to quietly sit in her room. While Sula and Nel simply witnessed, Eva acted and preferred not just to watch. She insists that the method she chose was better than the one Sula and Nel selected and this is indicated when she says: “It’s awful cold in the water. Fire is warm” (168). Nel, feeling rather uncomfortable, asks Eva about who’s telling her all these things about Chicken Little, and is rather stirred by a sense of heavy guilt when Eva answers: “Plum. Sweet Plum. He tells me things” (169) therefore, her own trauma. This encounter alerts Nel to the feeling she had while she witnesses the loss of Chicken Little and at the same time, urges her to tell the truth to herself, to be honest about her feelings, senses and impressions long buried. After confronting with the truth, she realizes that rather than her husband Jude, it is Sula she has been missing. It could well be emphasized that Nel completes a total reconfiguration of self after Sula’s death through the feelings that memory accesses now.

From the discussion of the major events in the novel, we find that *Sula* is comprised of voices echoing with delayed reactions, dissociations, repressed memories and above all, the “psychic discontinuity” of event and affect (Johnson 168). There are a series of moments in the text that contain incidents witnessing that discontinuity – Shadrack’s reaction to the experience of the battlefield, Nel’s response to discovering her husband Jude committing adultery with her best friend Sula, and Sula’s response to the drowning of Chicken Little – to mention a few examples. It could also be highlighted here that indeed many characters in the novel experience the disjunction between the immediate event and the registration of its psychic effects. Eva is the best example to point out, for the narrator describes how Eva feels when Boyboy leaves her and she doesn’t know what she feels and then suddenly it strikes
her that she hates him: “It hit her like a sledge hammer and it was then that she knew what to feel. A liquid trail of hate flooded her chest” (36). There is a fascinating structural pattern that is formed by the accumulation of such delayed effects and Eva’s just one to be pointed out here. Barbara Johnson remarks: “While the chapter headings promise chronological linearity, the text demonstrates that lived time is anything but continuous, that things don’t happen when they happen, that neither intentionality nor reaction can naturalize trauma into consecutive narrative” (169).

Robert Grant offers further input to such an observation by stating that the wrought, “quasipalindromic” structure of the novel is testimony to its concern with delayed effects: “Sula divides precisely into two equal parts and characters introduced and developed in ‘I’ are brought back in ‘II’ in inverse sequence. The novel begins in memory and concludes with Nel’s crucial remembrance of Sula” (95).

Morrison in her second novel also foregrounds most significantly, the act of remembering and it is reflected in the line: “A bright space opened in her head and memory seeped into it” (168). Nel configures a number of long held memories after she confronts with Eva Peace’s indictment of her “watching” the death of Chicken Little. At this point, “All these years … now” becomes a loud refrain therefore placing the significance of the act of remembering in the novel. Invoking the image of the concentric circles in the cries of sorrow that Nel emits for Sula, another instance of a delayed reaction is visible at the close of the novel and interestingly, it recalls an earlier image of loss in the water that closes over the head of Chicken Little. After Sula’s funeral, we get to see a glimpse of lives being profoundly shaken after her death and this is visible when Shadrack and Nel pass each other on the road after the funeral: “The distance between them increased as they both remembered gone things” (174). It could also be inferred that Sula’s death triggers a revisiting of Shadrack’s
original trauma and sooner he realizes that he does not have his heart in National Suicide Day and felt as if everything is reversed. A dismayed Shadrack when he sees Sula: “She lay on a table there. It was surely the same one. The same little-girl face, same tadpole over the eye. So he had been wrong. Terribly wrong. No ‘always’ at all. Another dying away of someone whose face he knew” (158). Unlike in the past, where Shadrack has cared and the community has shut the door in his face, this year, he does not care about the community and they follow him delightedly to their destruction.

It could be pointed out that the wider political significance of delayed memories is manifest in the obvious gap between the closing chapter, “1965” and the opening chapter, “1919” of the novel. Melissa Walker comments on the novel’s structure: “By ending Sula in 1965, some years before the time of the beginning passage of the novel, Morrison invites readers to come full circle and begin again, to re-experience the narrative in terms of Nel’s final question about whether the Bottom and in particular ‘the black people’ in general had ever been a community at all” (128). Walker’s observations are definitely helpful to understand the novel and the defining questions it certainly seems to raise related to African Americans’ understanding of community, its meaning at a very personal and collective level. As one observes, Nel decides that even if it was not a community, it was a place and “now there weren’t any places left” (166).

If one remembers the opening lines of the novel:

In that place, where they tore the nightingale and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood. It stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and
spread all the way to the river. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom. (3)

- the narrator’s description definitely invites the reader to consider the relevance of remembering and re-experiencing the un-remembered past. Morrison’s dedication to the novel has an expression of anticipated reaction: “It is sheer good fortune to miss somebody before he or she leaves you.” Such a view anticipates the notion that we don’t appreciate what we’ve got till it’s gone thereby, reinforcing the value of what is temporarily present. The Bottom in Sula then, represents a part of the fabric of an un-remembered past, which, if not memorialized in its shortcomings, remains “an unassimilated history” (Matus 71). Therefore, one could ascertain that Sula is a novel that explores the pain of missing something, something that is ephemeral and evanescent about the past and yet is significant because it is an instance of the forgotten narrative of African American experience that is the crux for historicizing and therefore, to the future envisioning of community.

Current theories of traumatic testimony challenge the historicizing of the concept of trauma by placing central importance to both language and Western culture. Recently, many thinkers have felt the need to question the privileging of such common assumptions and suggested instead, to explore alternative ways of testimony that recognize a specifically African American cultural heritage. Toni Morrison’s third novel Song of Solomon (1977) recognizes African folklore as a valuable mode of communication and presents us with a form of testimony. Song of Solomon charts Milkman’s search for a coherent sense of identity (Lister 36) and the author makes his identity quest based on a folklore – a form which by definition, is the expression of community – of the common experiences, beliefs, and values that identify a folk as a group. In an article, “Folklore and Community in Song of Solomon”, Susan L. Blake
points out that the association of Milkman’s quest to the African folklore is
Morrison’s way of “drawing our attention to one of the central themes in all her
fiction, that is, the relationship between individual identity and community” (77).

Morrison’s novel Song of Solomon is hugely loaded with precise historical
texture that cannot be overlooked. Characters in the text make casual references to a
wider public history taking place from the 1930s - when Milkman is born, the 1950s
and 1960s and the initial stages of the civil rights movement. Actual events like
Emmett Till’s death (1954) and the Birmingham bombing (1963) relate to the Seven
Day’s policies of revenge in the novel. For instance Guitar furiously shouts: “A kid is
stomped and you standin round fussing about whether some cracker put it in paper.
He stomped, ain’t he? Dead, ain’t he? Cause he whistled at some Scarlett O’Hara
cunt!” (81). Another important factual element that could be considered in reading
this novel is by bringing in the debates initiated to a large extend by the Moynihan
report of the 1960s and also manifested in the 1990s in Louis Farrakhan’s
orchestration of a “million male march” on Washington (Hirsch 71). The adoption of
this report hints us to take into account the ongoing debates about fatherlessness in
relation to African American families. One would observe that there is an aspect of
mythologizing of desertion that runs like a connecting thread throughout the novel.
Many critics have raised the question of male commitment and responsibility to be the
central concern of the text, but it could be argued that Morrison celebrates the flying
African myth in relation to the freedom one gains from the dehumanizing system of
slavery. While the myth is seen as a process of liberating escapade, the author also
recovers the history by inserting a new and favorable spin to it that rather than
pathologise the father who leaves, offers us a consolatory side to the myth.
The myth of the flying African has multiple versions of it. In the Ibo version, the people who arrived in America took one glance at what life would be like there and saw nothing hopeful and walked back over the water to Africa. Paule Marshall draws on this version for his work *Praisesong for the Widow*. In *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*, Virginia Hamilton writes a tale about the power of flight in which a young slave woman successfully flies away with her baby chanting the magic words, “Kum … yali, kum buba tambe” and takes to the air, successfully escaping from the cruelty of the overseer (169). It is fascinating to see how Morrison adapts the myth to showcase her version of the flying African who is the father of twenty-one sons and leaves his wife and family in response to intolerable constraints and pressures prevalent in the system of slavery. The author moves beyond the usual invocation of blues themes and instead offers us a spectacular mode of Solomon’s flight that commands awe and celebration, thereby, laying before a nuanced look on the history of male peripateticism.

*Song of Solomon* then in a way, is a novel about the folkloric song praising Solomon, the flying African that forms the crux of the novel in terms of the illuminating riddling patterns in which the myth functions as a mode of communication like language in providing a testimony about the history of the rich African American ancestry. Marianne Hirsch fascinatingly notes that the novel is about the lost fathers (75) and if one looks at the text from this perspective, then we will observe its interrogation of the history and future of African American men in relation to their own families and to society at large. One could claim that at the novel’s center, there lies two major revelatory incidents of traumatic loss — firstly, Pilate and Macon Dead (brother and sister) witness their father being shot to death by greed-bound white neighbors who want his land; and secondly, the murdered father
himself experienced the traumatic loss of his father, who as legend claims, decided to fly away from his condition of enslavement in America. As the legend has it, he tried taking his son Jake (Macon and Pilate’s father) but dropped the child a few moments after he took off in flight back to Africa. The story of the flying ancestor remains hidden almost till the end of the novel, a riddle only to be solved later exposing an array of the “generational transmission of traumatic effects that hampers all the Dead men, descendants of Jake, who is also known as the first Macon Dead” (72).

Solomon’s flight has multivalent meanings to it and this aspect allows Morrison to celebrate the early marvelous escapade from slavery, yet, registering the pain and mourning of those who were abandoned. The descendants of Solomon are infected by the trauma of the father’s abandonment or death and this is most evident in one case, Pilate’s father appears to her a number of times and on different occasions and utters a few words in the cryptic admonition. Pilate says:

I went cause Papa told me to. He kept coming to see me off and on. First he just told me to sing, to keep on singing. ‘Sing,’ he’d whisper. ‘Sing, sing.’ Then right after Reba was born he came and told me outright: ‘You just can’t fly off and leave a body,’ he tolle me. A human life is precious. You shouldn’t fly off and leave. (208)

All that Pilate could understand and interpret of her father’s utterances is just this that it’s an injunction to return to the bones of the man she and her brother left dead in the cave. It is only later as the narrative progresses that one could infer the actual meaning of the poignant refrain as referring to the central loss of his own childhood, the body that was left when his father flew off. There are many more incidents in the text that highlights the notion that most of the characters in the novel suffers from a kind of distortions in memory and obstacles to interpretation. Another major incident that
could be cited as an instance is the account of the origin of the name Macon Dead. This name as the story goes is born by a slip of the pen and the person, a Yankee clerk at the Freedmen’s Bureau, in charge of recording facts, is held responsible for taking the place of origin as the first name. Not only this, but he carelessly writes the information regarding the condition of the father in the box for the surname and thus in short, the history of naming is that a reckless drunk official has the authority to change the name of a family, ironically the new name emphasizing the death of the father. Milkman tells Guitar about the naming process:

‘Say. you know how my old man’s daddy got his name?’
‘Uh uh How?’
‘Cracker gave it to him.’
‘Sho ‘nough?’
‘Yep. And he took it. Like a fuckin sheep. Somebody should have shot him.’
‘What for? He was already Dead’ (89)

The conversation highlighted above indicates the diluted fashion in which the present generation reads and understand the past. Till this point, one observes that Milkman is bound up with a frame of mind that fails to look at the history of his ancestral line closely. The missing links are not a striking site for him yet to be excavated and as such, his world, representing the America in the 1930s to the 1960s, just glance at the genealogy of the of the ancestors (Dead) from merely a surface level because for him, the father is “already Dead.” This part of the discussion invites one to head on towards conducting an extensive investigation on the trauma of paternal loss while trying to make good in America. The account of the legacy of bereavement and loss underlying the Dead’s family line is more crucial when the lives lost throughout the course of generations, let us confront with a larger social and political scenario in
America. The question of survival for an African American in a racist nation that is caught up in wild fire structures of slavery and other noble forms of exploitation is also raised through accounting and confronting the history of Dead’s ancestors. The two major instances that record different responses to a racist nation which contain traumatic consequences are Solomon’s miraculous flight and becoming a symbol of transcendence, yet, bequeathing a legacy of loss and forgetting; Jake struggles and stands his ground but is violently cut down, again this story leaving his family bereft. It could be certainly claimed that both Solomon and Jake represent black men in America and their struggle to survive by positioning themselves in relation to the prevailing dominant political and social structures.

When Milkman hears from Pilate’s account of her father’s violent death, after returning home, he raises the question of his grandfather’s death to his father and Macon remembers it painfully and the narrator describes the event:

His son’s questions had shifted the scenery. He was seeing himself at twelve, standing in Milkman’s shoes and feeling what he himself had felt for his own father. The numbness that had settled on him when he saw the man he loved and admired fall off the fence; something wild ran through him when he watched the body twitching violently in the dirt. (50-51)

It is only later that Milkman senses the intensity of the impact that the death of the first Macon has caused and apart from his father, who is most affected by it, there is also an entire community of men who took his grandfather as an example of self-improvement and success. When conversing with the men of his father’s generation in Danville, Pennsylvania, he realizes what he is to them:

the ignition that gunned their memories. The good times, the hard times, things that changed, things that stayed the same — and head and shoulders and
above all of it was the tall, magnificent Macon Dead, whose death, it seemed to him, was the beginning of their own dying even though they were young boys at that time. Macon Dead was the farmer they wanted to be, the clever irrigator, the peach tree grower, the hog slaughterer … the man who could plough forty in no time flat and sang like an angel while he did it. (235)

Milkman’s grandfather believes in helping oneself and his attitude is most vibrantly reflected when he says:

We live here. On this planet, in this nation, in this country right here. Nowhere else! … Grab this land. Take it, hold it, my brothers, make it, my brothers, shake it, squeeze it, turn it, twist it, beat it, kick it, whip it, stomp it, dig it, plow it, seed it, reap it, rent it, buy it, sell it, own it, build it, multiply it, and pass it on – can you hear me? Pass it on! (235)

However, the narrator continues: “But they shot the top of his head off and ate his fine Georgia peaches. And even as boys these men began to die and were dying still” (235). If one looks at the feature of the second Macon Dead, he is a heartless landlord, someone who seems to have literally practiced his father’s injunction “rent it, buy it, sell it, own it” deeply by heart. Unhesitatingly, he follows the bourgeois dream and celebrates the symbols of power and success manifested in the keys in his pocket, the luxury Packard in which he takes the family for a joyless ride on Sundays.

Nonetheless, we get to witness the vestigial remains of an emotional life that he still misses intensely on one occasion when he pays secret visit to Pilate’s place at night to be able to listen to her sing along with her daughter and granddaughter: “As Macon felt himself softening under the weight of memory and music, the song died down. The air was quiet and yet Macon Dead could not leave. He liked looking at them, freely this way” (30). It could be inferred from observing this side to Macon Dead’s
Later, Milkman remembers his father and meditates on his life:

And his father. An old man now, who acquired things and used people to acquire more things. As the son of Macon Dead the first, he paid homage to his own father’s life and death by loving what that father had loved: property, good solid property, the bountifulness of life. He loved these things to excess because he loved his father to excess. Owning, building, acquiring – that was his life, his future, his present, and all the history he knew. That he distorted life, bent it, for the sake of gain, was a measure of his loss at his father’s death.

(300)

Even in the case of Guitar Bains, the notion of the loss of the father is a predominant concern and it is evident when he tells Hagar: “My father died when I was four. That was the first leaving I knew and the hardest” (307). Exposing the unsafe working conditions encountered by colored workers, Bains’ account of his father’s traumatic amputation that leads to his death and then the scene he describes about how the children are given a sack of “Divinity” – candy to make up for them for the loss they endure, forever, afterwards made him feel sick in his stomach whenever he sees sweet things. It is later when he admits that it was not the candy but the fact that his mother took forty dollars happily from the sawmill owner with a smiling gratitude and bought the children, peppermint rock with some of the money while his father’s body sliced up into two halves is lying in the coffin which makes him a bitter person. He says with rage: “Don’t let them Kennedys fool you” (181) as a warning to Milkman and expresses his desire to get hold of the gold from Pilate’s place, since he wants to fund it in order to materialize the Seven Day’s vengeful activities.
Many critics felt that the quest motif in the novel is a dominant feature and has drawn much of our attention to particularly understand the take on the father’s trauma and the genealogy of the paternal line, thereby, noting Macon’s journey as an undertaking that allows him to find “an ensemble performance of black historicity enacted by the collective African-American body” (Benston 102). Critical readings of the novel done by Robert Holton (1994) and Melissa Walker (1991) emphasize upon the aspect that Milkman feels “on his own skin,” as if it were the inextricability of personal and public history by following clues that bring him to identify with the fate of his grandfather and great-grandfather. If at all history is “precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (Caruth 24) then, it could be claimed that understanding the trauma of the lost father is also to be aware of the forces of history that have generated the trauma. Henceforth one could assume that the mythological and the personal history associated with Milkman’s family is not simply Dead history and expanding the scope of interpretations, it could be related to the wider history of the African Americans in America in the 1990s. By engaging Milkman in a quest to locate his own paternal, familial past, the novelist allows him to participate in his people’s collective past and this assumption could be highlighted by taking up the scene from the novel in which, Milkman’s deep connection to his ancestor is best expressed: “Down either side of his thighs he felt the sweet gums surface roots cradling him like the rough but maternal hands of a grandfather” (279). Distinctively, Milkman succeeds in his quest and recovers great pride in his heritage that prepares him to meet any challenges and therefore, allows him to achieve a renewed and liberated sense of identity. This is evident in the lines: “My great grandfather could fly! You hear me? Great-granddaddy could fly! … He didn’t need no airplane. … He could fly his own self!” (328).
One observes that the meaning of flight is rich in this novel and if one remembers the incident of Milkman’s birth that happen around the time of Robert Smith leapt from the top of a building, leaving a cryptic note saying, “I will take off” from Mercy and fly away on my own wings. Please forgive me. I loved you all. (3) – it convincingly serves as a meaningful pattern set right at the outset of the novel, introducing the significance of the notion of “flying” or “flying away” in the text. The actual meaning of Robert Smith’s note could not be deciphered until later, when we get to understand his involvement with the Seven Days. The meaning of flight in the novel is not exactly what it seems and Morrison demonstrates this by describing Milkman’s preoccupation and intense desire as a child to fly, to the point that when he finally realizes that humans are not fit for it, he is saddened: “To live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull even to the women who did not hate his mother” (9).

A very interesting aspect of this novel is the creative manner in which the novelist allows Milkman to experience pride and elevation while not losing sight of the tremendous loss encountered by those who are abandoned and left bereft. The traumatic stories of all the women who are wife and mother are also beautifully highlighted, thereby, for every Leap there is a Gulch, a Ryna for a transcendent flyer like Solomon. The distress of those who are left behind is symbolized by the weeping and wailing intonations infused in the quintessential “blue note” in the Solomon myth. It could definitely be said that Morrison uses the famous myth of the flying African both to celebrate and mourn and this aspect is most visible when, for every jubilant moment, the readers also recall the characters who are left to mourn. Discovering that Milkman is the successor of a flying forebear, the readers are also reminded of Hagar and starts seeing her hapless figure as a latter day equal of Solomon’s grounded wife,
Ryna. Milkman’s recriminations about Hagar are related with the line that he hears from the children singing in the playground that bemoans Solomon’s leaving: “And she stood there like a puppet strung up by a puppet master who had gone off to some other hobby. *O Solomon don’t leave me here*” (301). Another time, Susan Byrd, tells Milkman about the history of Solomon and Ryna:

You don’t hear of women like that anymore, but there used to be more—the kind of woman who couldn’t live without a particular man. And when the man left they lost their minds, or died or something. Love, I guess, but I always thought it was trying to take care of the children by themselves, you know what I mean? (323).

It is not deniable that the price paid for Solomon’s triumphant flight or Milkman’s journey to self-understanding is the moaning and bereft Ryna or the broken Hagar respectively. The novel while talking about the question of male responsibility and commitment, also make sure that it celebrates women’s loyalty, love and above all, the fact that they are left but they survive with strength.

Morrison undertakes the challenging task of using the flying ancestor myth to go beyond its conventional story line that pays more imperative towards accounting the story of the abandoned pining woman. All the bits and pieces of information that Milkman accumulates finally pays off and once he is in touch with his history, he feels great pride in his flying ancestor yet, is aware of the greater responsibility he has now with the possession of it. This is evident when suddenly he starts reading the significance of the names of the place related somehow to the tale of his ancestor: “He reads the signs with interest now, wondering what lay beneath the names. The Algonquins had named the territory he lived in Great Water, *michi gami*. How many dead lives and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names of the places in
this country” (329). A newly empowered Milkman sees meaning in the random facts he acquires: “He closed his eyes and thought of the black men in Shalimar, Raonoke, Petersburg, Newport, News, Danville, in the Blood Bank, on Darling Street …. Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness” (330). Milkman feels that there is much more that awaits excavation and possessing some history, in Matus’s words: “It is as if the rekindling of memory, fading, but embedded in oral histories, has animated those dead lives and consequently the Dead fathers come to life in Milkman’s possession” (80).

Interestingly, on the one hand, the struggle to memorialize a dead father motivates Milkman to confront, surrender and soar; on the other hand, the same desire encourages Guitar to grow more desperate and his response to “the Dead” – African Americans who are victims of racial terror – is to transform himself into the Sunday man for the Seven Days. Guitar’s obsession to vindicate the dead and the casualties of racism becomes a maddening preoccupation, so much so to the extreme point that he doesn’t even hesitate to kill his erstwhile friend by the end of the text. Milkman is conscious of this fact and this is proven by the following lines:

Either Guitar’s disappointment with the gold that was not there was so deep it had deranged him, or his ‘work’ had done it. Or maybe he simply allowed himself to feel about Milkman what he had always felt about Macon Dead and the Honore crowd. In any case, he had snatched the first straw, … to prove to himself the need to kill Milkman. The Sunday-school girls deserved better than to be avenged by that hawk-headed raven-skinned Sunday man who included in his blood sweep four innocent white girls and one innocent black man. (330-31)
We get to hear a narratorial judgement here that equates Guitar with a predatory hawk, someone who is capable of trying to strangle his close friend, Milkman while all his friend does is surrender to the earth and gain new energy and power to resist in return. At the close of the novel, we see that Milkman “leaped” into the “killing arms of his brother” with a hopeful note: “If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it” (337). By drawing a sharp contrast between the two friends, Morrison represents her cultural vision of looking at history and the different ways of dealing with it. Milkman could be seen as an incarnation of his flying ancestor, Solomon and this brings us to reflect upon the way in which the novel also calls attention to discuss the fate of Hagar and Ryna, Lena and Corinthians (Milkman’s sisters), his mother, Ruth Foster, and Pilate, his aunt and comment on the position and representation of women in relation to man as visible in the text. The epigraph of the novel is “the fathers may soar/ and the children may know their names” and its condensed meanings make perfect sense when it is associated with the liberated men in the novel, but it is highly questionable that the response of women to soaring, flying, leaving fathers also enhance the depth the text carries. Presumably, on his return from the quest, Milkman has altered his sense of self in relationship to his ancestral history. It is at this point in the novel that we get to see a sensitive side to Milkman who berates oneself for Hagar’s unfaithful death and finds himself responsible for it and also it occurs to him that all the women in his life have given him much and it is him, who has failed to give them a credit they deserve. There is a visibility of a ray of hope when Milkman, representing the present generation appreciates the position of women and their importance, thus, this aspect slightly moving away from the law of the Dead father that seems to preach that women are to love, suffer, wait and bear the pain of being abandoned.
It could be highlighted that the novel also pays a condensed account about the aspect of intermixing in African American genealogy and hybridity visible in the character, Sing (Pilate and Macon’s mother) who as Milkman comes to know of through Susan Byrd and her friend Grace Long is a Native American. She is representing the figure of a forgotten mother who is marginally significant in terms of the manner in which, unlike Jake, she is not remembered by her children and what remains of her is the significance of her name “Sing”, reminding one of the “song” of the Solomon. Of all the women characters in the novel, it is remarkably only Pilate, who stands out as an exception. It is through her figure that one sees a celebration of the matrilineal ideal and as a freestanding woman, she has wider knowledge and ways of seeing the world thereby, sharply drawing contrast to the bourgeois values Macon lives by. She is independent and her life seems to be governed by a free, wild scheme of life whereby, she along with the other women in the household do wonderful singing and relish the excitement of a simpler life. Even then Pilate’s line fails to survive and stand strong; her descendants becomes more self-possessed and less independent – Reba lives for pleasure and Hagar is more like a doomed figure and her grieving side seem to remind us of Ryna. Many critics felt that the novel, although allows Milkman to raise the Dead fathers through a meaningful quest and the possession of paternal history, nonetheless it overlooks the side of the maternal history that is left aside. The hopeful note however is, at the novel’s end, Milkman declares: “There’s got to be at least one more woman like you”, emphasizing that “Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly” (336). One can say that the ancestor links the present with the original migration across the Atlantic in this novel.
The recognition to “sing” the “song” of the Solomon on Pilate’s request and the act of singing the mythical song of the ancestor by Milkman is symbolic: “but he couldn’t ignore the urgency in her voice... he sang for the lady, ‘Sugargirl don’t leave me here/ Cotton balls to choke me/ Sugargirl don’t leave me here/ Buckra arms to yoke me’” (336). With the novel ending with both Pilate and Milkman, surrendering to the air and soaring, the notion of flight/fight comes together to celebrate the rich envisioning of the African American culture. Morrison describes the novel as more “expansive” than her previous novels and indeed the issues in the novel demand a different kind of stage of the, as she says, “enclosed world[s] of Sula and The Bluest Eye (Watkins 46). The novel concludes with an open, reciprocal exchange between a man and a woman and this opportunity of reciprocity between genders is captured magnificently in the novel’s title, which recalls one of a book of the Old Testament, which recalls the Song of Songs, also known as the Song of Solomon. Thus the novel generously celebrates the possibility of finding identity through connection and it is only through listening to the women that Milkman learns to expand. Song of Solomon therefore, powerfully captures Milkman’s journey across space and locations that is clearly evident in the way the author literally and symbolically makes him a migrant figure. He journeys back to different places (locations) in the deep South in his quest to locate the missing links associated with the history of his ancestors. It could be said that the notion of flight in the novel is indicative of the rich relationship African Americans have with the idea of space and hence is a metaphor implying migration.

Toni Morrison continues with her exploration of the powerful pull of the past in her fourth novel, Tar Baby (1981) which is set in the 1980s on a Caribbean island called Isle des Chevaliers. The major events of the novel occur in the magnanimous
house, L’Arbe de la Croix and follow the lives of those who live and work there. The text has Valerian Street, the owner of the grand house who inherited his wealth from his ancestors – famous for their candy factory; Margaret, his wife and a former beauty queen and finally, Sydney and Ondine, the married couple working as the butler and the cook in the house. Anniina Jokinen in “The Inauthentic Far Baby” expresses that it is a novel about contentions and conflicts based on learned biases and prejudices. These biases exist on a race level, gender level, and a class level. (Rev.)

The setting of the novel evokes issues connected with location, the pangs related to dislocation and the problems of relocation. The introductory description of the island allows us to link the place with slavery and settlement and describes “an island that, three hundred years ago, had struck slaves blind the moment they saw it” (8). It is indicated that the land was cleared by importing labourers from Haiti at the beginning of its colonial history and the story of the apocalyptic trauma of human interference endured thereon by the physical landscape is well expressed:

The End of the world, as it turned out, was nothing more than a collection of magnificent winter houses on Isle des Chevaliers. When laborers imported from Haiti came to clear the land, clouds and fish were convinced that the world was over…. Wild parrots agreed and raised havoc as they flew away to look for yet another refuge. Only the champion daisy trees were serene … so they ignored the men and continued to rock the diamondbacks that slept in their arms. It took the river to persuade them that indeed the world was altered. That never again would the rain be equal, and by the time they realized it and had run their roots deeper, clutching the earth like lost boys found, it was too late. The men had already folded the earth where there had been no hollow, which explains what happened to the river. (9)
The image of the subjugation of natural landscape is powerfully evoked by using striking verbs like “forced,” “evicted” and adjectives such as “exhausted,” “ill” and “grieving”. The island is inhabited now by wealthy men like Valerian Street, owner of winter houses on the island and who “voluntarily exiled from Philadelphia”; Dr Michelin, the dentist, who “had been run out of Algeria” (15). From the reference that is made in the novel to the French colonial tax that Valerian must pay, we know that the island is apparently not independent yet; both Valerian and Dr Michelin find comfortable exile on the Isle des Chevaliers. Even then it is observed in one scene when Valerian’s toothache drives him to rush to Dr Michelin’s place at 2.00 a.m. and Sydney bangs the door. “The dentist roared out the second floor window. He had been run out of Algeria and thought his door was being assaulted by local Blacks – whose teeth he would not repair” (15). It is clear to us from this episode that there is a certain subtle working of race relations in the island wherein, the non-black settler is preoccupied with the colonizer’s fear and there is a lingering fear and disbelief towards the non-whites.

Jill Matus points out that there is a dynamic aspect of “here” and “there” scheme running throughout the novel in which Morrison adopts a French colonial island as the setting that allows her to “import” her American characters to a “here” in order to observe more keenly “what” they bring with them from “there” (92). It is understandable that such a setting facilitates the novelist to move beyond the boundaries of the United States to investigate “the cultural divisions that exist within the diaspora” and to throw light to the parallel past which have shaped African American and Caribbean peoples and also, the shared characteristics of different national colonizations. (Hawthorne 97-107) The island functions as a meeting ground, a perfect place for histories to confront and also a welcome destination for many who
are like fugitives. Many characters in the text that arrive to this island seem to be on a run and are desperately trying to escape or get away from certain circumstances. As, for instance, the opening chapter of the novel shows the fugitive status of Son, who stowed away on Margaret’s boat and in another occasion, the narrator poses questions as to why Jadine, in spite of her fame, success and above all, three marriage proposals in Paris suddenly, decides to leave and come to the island: “A lucky girl – why leave the show? cable to old relatives? Write a cheesy request-type, offer-type to a rich old pushover and split to Dominique on whatever Air France had to offer when everything on her shopping list was right there in Paris?” (47).

Craig Werner notes that the title of the novel powerfully invokes the ancient African American folktale of the tar baby created by Brer Fox in order to trick the Brer Rabbit into capture. (155) In the light of this tale that revolves around the theme of capture and a witty escaped, one recalls Son, who is enchanted and captured by the beauty of Jadine (tar baby) and is stuck for some time with her but at the end, he runs “lickety-split. Lickety split. Looking neither to the left nor to the right …” (306) like the Brer Rabbit. Many critics suggest that there are other complicated possible meanings of “tar baby” that hint at one time in which the very words are used to refer to black children and in particular to black girls. Morrison explains in one interview: “‘Tar baby’ is also a name, like a nigger, that white people call black children, black girls, I recall” (122). If one recalls Sydney who is a proud aunt declares: “Whatever. My face wasn’t in every magazine in Paris. Yours was. Prettiest thing I ever saw. Made those white girls disappear. Just disappear right off the page” (40). Sidney is proud of Jadine and her popularity and success that in some way seems to reclaim the insulting label “tar baby” by upholding the notion of black is beautiful. But it is little later that the image of the milk stirred into the chocolate paste by Sidney invites the
readers to question her assumption because it is highly possible that Jadine is big, successful and popular in France because she is “beige” rather than black. (Willis 184-85) There is a repeated description of Jadine as “light-skinned,” “yalla” and “whitened” by her education and material aspirations only indirectly suggesting us that she is accepted in a high-class white society owing to the way she has moved so far away from her racial roots. In fact, the association of Jadine with the term, “tar baby” is rather to remind us of her deracination than her blackness. One sees that Jadine is offered many alternatives to question her sense of authentic identity, but at the same time, the choices presented by Morrison never make a judgment on Jadine. The author, in addition adds that the connotation of the label “tar baby” has other interesting associations:

I found that there is a tar baby in African mythology. I started thinking about tar. At one point, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things. It came naturally out of the earth; it held together things like Moses’s little boat and the pyramids. For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together. (LeClair122)

Taking stock of the African American tradition and history, the novel set in the early 1980s also takes into account the rising debates from the feminist manifesto that remains blind to economic and race relations and brings to our attention, a claim that arise from race relations and the perspective of economic that again is indifferent to feminism. The forcefully driving question like what black women need to remember and preserve in the traditions of their foremothers is raised in the text. The notion of women defining themselves in relation to prevailing feminist critiques of patriarchal constructions of gender is also foregrounded. Morrison dedicates this work to “Mrs. Caroline Smith, Mrs. Millie McTyeire, Mrs. Ardelia Willis, Mrs. Ramah
Wofford, Mrs. Lois Brooks – and each of their sisters, all of whom knew their true and ancient properties.” One observes that the phrase “true and ancient properties” is reiterated throughout and in addition to this; the epigraph drawn from the I Corinthians offers a plea for unity in the face of divisive forces: “there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (I Corinthians 1:3). By evoking her own house through the allusion to “the house of Chloe”, Morrison remembers the members of the house of Chloe and as seen in her dedication and epigraph, attempts to produce “a sense that the house preserving its true and ancient properties is in a position to assess and report on the community contentions” (Matus 92). One observes that right from the title of the text to the dedication, and the epigraph, the novelist lays a solid ground that would allow her to raise the question of a female tradition through the predominant concerns in the novel, again highlighting dislocation and the urge to relocate.

One of the problematic issues in the novel seems to be Jadine’s equation with the concept of the “new black woman,” which is under-explored while the novel’s concern towards her remains to inextricably link her dilemma to that of Son. The narrator puts forth “One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hand” (269); further adding a question that’s directed to Jadine: “Culture-bearing woman, whose culture are you bearing?” and then a corresponding question is asked to Son: “Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? (269) Marilyn Sanders Mobley rightly points out that the text overlooks Jadine’s complaints about Son and even though one sees lengthy debates between the lovers, the novel, however tolerates and supports Son’s position leaving Jadine doubly orphaned (290).

Morrison draws on the Afro-Caribbean myth of the blind horsemen, who are believed to be galloping apace for centuries of repression and containment: “They are
naked and are blind too… their eyes have no color in them. But they gallop, they
race those horses like angels all over the hills where the rain forest is, where the
champion daisy trees still grow.”, in order to facilitate Son with a future by joining the
chevaliers and it is suggested at the novel’s end: “He threw out his hands to guide and
steady his going. By and by he walked steadier, now steadier. The mist lifted and the
trees stepped back a bit as if to make the way easier for a certain kind of man. Then he
ran. Lickety-split” (306). One can ascertain that Son has a strong sense of identity
owing to his deep loyalty to a sustaining past and this ensured his escape from
anything that hampers him. Son’s position in the novel could probably stand for ideals
like anti-colonialism anti-capitalist with a loyalty for fraternity while Jadine’s for
feminism infected with capitalist consumer values. This contention between Son and
Jadine forms one of the central concerns in the novel:

She fell asleep immediately when first she lay down, but after an hour she
woke rigid and frightened from a dream of large hats. Large beautiful
women’s hats like Norma Shearer’s and Mae West’s and Jeanette
MacDonald’s although the dreamer is too young to have seen their movies or
remembered them if she had. Feathers. Veils. Flowers. … Hat after lovely
sailing hat surrounding her until she is finger-snapped awake. (44)

Jadine, in the course of the novel suffers from a number of dreams and visions
somehow hinting at the fact that they can be the manifestation of ambitions and hopes
as well as, of unresolved problems. Shortly after she arrives on the island, she
encounters her first dream that unnerved her and is suggestive of her sense of
insecurity that is biting her from a subconscious level. Morrison often uses striking
symbols to comment on the production of mainstream ideals of beauty and desire in
her works. Like in The Bluest Eye we saw a candy with a Mary Jane face on its
wrapper or here, the hats—both could be significantly related to the notion of screen idols used to sale dominant definers of acceptable beauty. In a way, Jadine’s dream is representative of her sense of confusing sense of self identity reflected in the numbers of hats that are parading and she is confused about what hat she is wearing. While Jadine’s dreams signify her sense of inauthenticity, far from being disturbed, Son’s are complacent with images of nurturing South, where “women in white dresses minding the pie table in the basement of the church” welcome him into their homes (119).

Before Son and Jadine meet, one notices that Son “used to slip into her room … and he had thought hard during those times in order to manipulate her dreams” and tried “to insert his own dreams into her … so that when she woke finally she would long as she had longed for nothing in her life for the sound of a nickel nickelodeon …” (119). Son’s wish expresses a desperate desire to colonize Jadine’s dreams and a longing to make her share his dream of a romanticized South thereby, illuminating us about the two different competing worlds both belong to and this is definitely shown when he realizes: “But now she was not sleeping; now she was awake and even though she was being still he knew that at any moment she might talk back or, worse, press her dreams of gold and cloisonné and honey-colored silk into him and then who would mind the pie table in the basement of the church?” (120)

It is suggested in the last scene of the novel that Jadine is done with dreaming and this is seen when the author equates her to the queen of the soldier ants: “Straight ahead they marched, shamelessly single-minded, for soldier ants have no time for dreaming. Almost all of them are women and there is so much to do—work is literally endless ….. There is no time for dreaming” (290). Jadine’s resolution as seen here highlights a world she chooses that is like an “organization so tight and sacrifice so
complete there is little need for males and they are seldom produced” (290). In this world, there is no place and space for males except for one moment of impregnation which lasts her a lifetime. The narrator then comments after describing the queen’s (Jadine’s) world: “That is all. Bearing, hunting, eating, fighting, burying. No time for dreaming, although sometimes, late in life, somewhere between … she might get wind of a summer storm one day” (291) and even though there is a suggestion that Jadine will pursue her dream relentlessly, the narrator, however, puts forth: “Still it would be hard. So very hard to forget the man who fucked like a star” (292). The notion of female independence offered in the novel is problematic in the sense that its status is made to be intricately linked with a sense of losing control, or sexuality or even to point out, a white patron or inflected by “white culture.”

In another of her dreams, Jadine sees a vision of the night women: “This was not the dream of hats for in that she was asleep, her eyes closed. Here she was wide-awake, but in total darkness looking at her own mother for God’s sake and Nanadine” (258). The crowd of black women who visited her in her airless room in Eloe on the one side, seems to represent the ancient true properties of nurturing black womanhood and on the other side, disapproves of her way of being a woman and competes with her for “femaleness.” The narrator says: “The night women were not merely against her (and her alone – not him), not merely looking superior over their sagging breasts and folded stomachs, they seemed somehow in agreement with each other about her, and were all out to get her, tie her, bind her. Grab the person she had worked hard to become and choke it off with their soft loose tits” (262). On their return from Eloe, she realizes that her fight with Son is not actually with him, but is literally with the night women: “the mamas who had seduced him and were trying to lay claim to her. It would be the fight of their lives to get away from that coven that had nothing to
show but breasts” (265). The heavy presence of the night women vision intensely chastises Jadine: “And their breasts they thrust at her like weapons were soft, loose bags at the tip with a brunette eye” (261). Apart from the night women, Jadine’s sense of authenticity is challenged by other characters in the novel, the most striking being Therese, who is constantly hostile toward Jadine and defines herself in relation to her breasts; who delights in and mothers Son and is the one who instigates Son to forget Jadine: “Forget her. There is nothing in her parts for you. She has forgotten her ancient properties” (305). Indeed Therese shows Son, that he has a choice to join the chevaliers: “‘Hurry,’ she urged him. ‘They are waiting,’ … ‘The men. The men are waiting for you.’ … ‘You can choose now. You can get free of her. They are waiting in the hills for you’” (306).

Susan Willis enquires that if it is “possible for social minorities to enact memory and recovery of history in culture without simply bowing to the dominant culture’s requirement that all marginal groups be authentic” (182). In discussing the question revolving around Jadine’s position and its authenticity so distinctly visible in this novel, it proves beneficial to bring into our consideration Willis’s argument that: “Morrison’s treatment shows that authenticity has no real attachment to people’s histories and experiences but resides in the dominant culture’s ideological stereotypes” (182). Although it could be put forth that Morrison’s representation of black women is just raising the question of authenticity and is not at all prescribing a particular way to assert authenticity; however, it is hard to neglect the text’s censure of Jadine who is the only woman in the text to question prevailing crystallized stereotypes of black women. Therefore the repeatedly used notion of “in touch with her ancient properties” throughout the text is a problematic label since, in touch with “which” aspect of the ancient properties is a far more ambiguous situation that
remains unexplained throughout and is open for further discussion for authentic interpretations.

The incident at the swamp of Sein de Vieilles allows us to witness a clear instance of Jadine’s unwillingness to blacken her(self) by joining with women who know their “sacred properties” (10). Initially the narrative appears to praise Jadine for her witty survival tactics, as evident in her flexibly with the tree, only to critique her for not desiring to be tarred later:

The young tree sighed and swayed. The women looked down from the rafters of the trees and stopped murmuring. They were delighted when first they saw her, thinking a runaway child had been restored to them. But upon looking closer they saw differently: The girl was fighting to get away from them. The women hanging from the tress were quiet now, but arrogant – mindful as they were of their value, their femaleness; knowing as they did that the first world of the world had been built with their sacred properties; … they wondered at the girl’s desperate struggle down below to be free. To be something other than they were. (183)

Elliott Butler-Evans rightly points out that Jadine’s ambition and values detach her from the old ways, but also notes that images of the women representing those old ways are highlighted in ambivalent ways and also the manner of the nature and specificity of the old ways themselves remain largely unexamined by the author (162).

The text also highlights Son’s resistance to white colonialist domination. Even in Son’s frantic search for Jadine at the end, the striking image of Alma Estee in her synthetic wig, the color of dried blood is brought in as a technique to foreground the island girl who is a victim of American consumer culture and apparently looks like a
“bougainvillea in a girdle, like a baby jaguar with lipstick on, like an avocado with earrings” (299). Son’s immediate response on seeing Elma “‘Oh, baby baby baby baby,’ he said, and went to take off the wig, to lift, tear it, throw it far from her midnight skin and antelope eyes” (299)—reasserts the fact that Morrison uses figures like Elma or Hagar from *Song of Solomon* to warn the readers against American consumer values and ideals defining standards of beauty. To a certain extent, the novel confers Son, the position of a crusader who joins the chevaliers “to dispossess himself of American history, or rather, to go back to an originary moment of trauma for the slaves and the land to which they were brought in order to find a sustaining cultural memory of resistance” (Matus 102).

The novel engages with the notion of nurture and betrayal and exposes the truth that it all started in a small space under the sink where Michael used to hide to get away from the sense of betrayal he felt and the gap between him and his parents widens from there to be never like before again. Valerian fails to confront the familial history and avoided knowing the secrets just as he avoids confronting the larger implications of capitalist, colonialist and patriarchal history. Michael’s absence and silence in the novel is very pivotal since it is his anticipated arrival at Christmas and the actual disappointment of his non-arrival that stirs the disruptive memories and desires of many characters in the text. Michael never appears, but still is influential and the motive behind many main turn of events that happen in the course of the narrative. As, for instance, Valarian admits the interloper Son in his house because: “Valerian believed that was part of the reason he invited the black man to have a seat, the forepresence of Michael in the dining room. His smiling face at him from the bowl of peaches was the winsome two-year-old under the sink and the thirty-year-old Socialist” (143-44). It could be argued that it is through Michael’s possible visit that a
climate of reliving and retrieving memory emerges and this is seen when Valerian remembers his son’s need for “soft” in the darkness:

When he was just a little thing I came home one day and went into the bathroom. I was standing there and I heard this humming—singing—coming from somewhere in the room. I looked around and then I found it. In the cabinet. Under the sink. He was crouched in there singing... When I’d pull him out, ask him what he was doing here, he’d say he liked the soft. He was two, I think, two years old, looking in the dark for something—soft. Now imagine how many soft, cuddly things he had in his room. (76)

In this novel, sinks and laundries are symbolic representations of spaces identifying safety. While Michael feels “safe” under the sink, Valerian in his childhood found peace in doing the laundry. On one of his musings about a traumatic experience in his childhood: “Valerian was in his greenhouse staring out of the one glass window imagining what was not so: that the woman in the washhouse was bending over a scrub board rubbing pillow slips with a bar of orange Octagon soap” (142). He remembers as to how that washerwoman saved him from drowning in the realization of his father’s permanent absence by putting him to scrub the pillowslips. While Valerian moans for his loathsome innocence of Michael’s abuse, the narrator accounts: “He was satisfied with what he did know. Knowing more was inconvenient and frightening. Like a bucket of water with no bottom. If you know how to tread, bottomlessness need not concern you” (242-243) thereby, throwing light upon Valerian’s personal side that avoids painful and overwhelming knowledge. In a similar way in which he fails to hear the message mailed to him from a small boy underneath the sink, he remains willfully ignorant about his relationship with his servants, Ondine and Sidney. Jadine, his attitude to his “trophy wife,” - the effects and
consequences of his business ventures. Peter B. Erickson notes that Valerian’s sin of omission is pitted against Margaret’s of commission and emphasizes rightly, that her unconscious “marking” of her child’s “creamy and delicious” flesh alludes to the social and political practices that advocate and perpetuate gender, class and race relations under capitalism and patriarchy. (295) One could infer that through Margaret, the text raises question as to how under such circumstances a woman can be “good enough for a child; good enough for a man – good enough even for the respect of other women” (281). Ondine admits that Margaret, married when she was little more than a girl, after Valerian saw her float by, a beauty queen in a pageant is discouraged by her husband to socialize with the servants if Valerian had not kept her “stupid and idle” (279) and allowed her to socialize with the servants. The powerlessness that overpowered her sense of existence after marrying a powerful patriarch only resulted in making her unconsciously vent her frustration and powerlessness on her powerless young son. Margot Gayle Backus puts forth that the child (Michael) could be a metonymy for Margaret’s own fragmented and objectified body and hence, in hurting her baby son, literally considered to be lashing out at her husband’s control. (438) Ondine has disliked Margaret for years, even though she kept her secret, but eventually, she understands Margaret’s action and says: “She didn’t stick pins in her baby. She stuck em in his baby. Her baby she loved.” She further states: “Now she’s the master, not him?” (279) The fact that Margaret understands her behavior and later lives with a burdening sense of guilt and emotional trauma illustrates that her maternal abuse must be understood only in the light of power relations.

Barbara Christian writes: “It is a simple story becoming increasingly complex, mythic, beyond solution, yet teaching me a lesson I need to know” (‘Toni Morrison:
What’s so powerful, and subtle, about Morrison’s presentation of the tension between blacks and whites as John Irving admits, is that she conveys it almost entirely through the suspicions and prejudices of her black characters and uncovers all the stereotypical racial fears felt by whites and blacks alike. Like any ambitious writer, she’s unafraid to employ these stereotypes - she embraces the representative quality of her characters without embarrassment, then proceeds to make them individuals too (“Morrison’s Black Fable”)

In our discussion of the first four novels by Toni Morrison in this chapter, it is henceforth established that there is a sharp questioning of the crystallized stereotypical constructs based on racial and gender lines in the works. One finds that the novels present true indictments of the process of cultural revisionism, of redefining history and historical memory, and of confronting the past in innovative and provocative ways to meet the continuing need to explain and “inscribe the self” in a world which has historically denied the existence of that self, aggravated by migration across space and time. Hence, it could be concluded from the study of the first four novels that movements across spaces and locations complicate the construction of selves across time.