I said something I didn’t know I knew. About the "dead girl." That bit by bit I had been rescuing her from the grave of time and inattention. Her fingernails maybe in the first book; face and legs, perhaps, the second time. Little by little bringing her back into living life. So that now she comes running when called - walks freely around the house, sits down in a chair; looks at me.....She cannot lie. Doesn't know greed or vengeance. Will not fawn or pontificate. There is no room for pupils in her eyes. She is here now, alive. I have seen, named and claimed her - And oh what company she keeps.

- Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor:
  A Conversation
Conclusion

Less than Perfect or Better than the Best?
Ambiguities and Paradoxes of Female Selfhood

Through a comprehensive examination of Morrison’s work, previous chapters explored the lives of women whose only crime is their colour, and who must suffer because they are born black in a world where only white is cherished and considered human or worthy of attention. Such women, throughout history and in contemporary society, in life and in literature, have traditionally been overlooked, undermined and stereotyped. They have existed only on the periphery of society - inhabiting marginal worlds, playing servile roles. Gloria Wade-Gayles has perhaps provided the best description of the African American woman’s position in white American society. She contends that there are

three major circles of reality in American society, which reflect degrees of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle in which white people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow space, in which black people, regardless of sex, experience uncertainty, exploitation, and powerlessness. Hidden in this
second is a third, a small, dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation and vulnerability. These are the distinguishing marks of black womanhood in white America....Black women are thus confined to both the narrow space of race and the dark enclosure of sex. This 'double jeopardy' has created a complex, painful, and dehumanizing reality in which they have struggled for freedom and selfhood....And yet their unique position in American culture is often ignored or minimized in studies of the impact of race and sex on American values, lifestyles and economic groupings.¹

From her very first book, Morrison's attempt has been to pull such women out of the anonymity of existence and place them at the nucleus, the throbbing heart, of literature. She reiterates this aim in an interview with Christina Davis: "I was interested in finally placing black women center stage in the text, and not as the all-knowing, infallible black matriarch but as a flawed here, triumphant there, mean, nice, complicated woman, and some of them win and some of them lose. I am very interested in why and

how that happens, but here was this vacancy in the literature that I had any familiarity with and the vacancy was me, or the women that I knew.”

Morrison's writing is a protest against American literature which has traditionally portrayed only the trials and tribulations of fragile white heroines, the daring exploits of white heroes, and coming to age stories of naughty white boys and girls. Though these works have historically been the acknowledged and uncontested masterpieces of the world, critics are only now coming to understand that such literature may have unwittingly and inevitably done injustice to a certain class of people or, rather, to people of a certain colour. In the pages of these worthy books, blacks have existed as mere props to assist and entertain the key characters, as accessories to enhance and elevate the general appearance of the fair protagonist. Morrison's work, however, pulls black characters out of the drudgery and stereotype of Nigger, slave, mammy, by placing them in key positions and meaningful roles. It endows them with respectability and honour by allowing them to take control of their lives, assume responsibility for the self, and

---


3 In her own book of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), Morrison cites examples from such novels as *Moby Dick* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* to show how the presence of blacks remains marginalised and their contributions, unacknowledged.
make choices that suit them best. It gives them an opportunity to become subjects in a world that has only treated them as objects so far. (The point is not that a person’s depiction as Nigger, slave or mammy is in itself degrading - but that such characters have always been presented as dehumanised, unimportant, and inferior to everybody else). Though she writes with the aim of retrieving a rightful place for black American women in literature, Morrison never elevates or glorifies her heroines beyond believability. She does not write about infallible, morally upright, virtuous women who can do no wrong. Her pen rather creates characters who, at their worst, have committed murder and adultery, have lied and cheated when necessary, and have often been uncaring, stubborn or resentful. In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison says, “I want my work to capture the vast imagination of black people. That is, I want my books to reflect the imaginative combination of the real world, the very practical, shrewd, day to day functioning that black people must do, while at the same time they encompass some great supernatural element.” Morrison creates characters who resemble normal black people, and are as prone to mistakes as the next person. They seldom move along clearly divided “good” or “bad” lines, but rather, by virtue of their very humanness, exhibit

---

shades of gray. What makes these heroines different, however, is the way they face and survive the test of time and circumstances. As these characters tread the paths of life, they find themselves in peculiar situations, but when they emerge from their extraordinary predicaments, they gain a certain startling knowledge either about themselves or about the world around them that somehow ennobles them, and at the same time makes them aware of their weaknesses. Though the doors to acceptance often slam shut in the faces of these women, most of them manage to find their way to respectability and honour.

If one ignores the publication dates of the books and concentrates, for a moment, only on the time during which each novel is set, it will be clear that through *Beloved*, set in the 1870s, to *Tar Baby*, set in the late 1970s, Morrison explores the lives of black people in white America over almost a century, and shows how little has changed over how long a span of time. She demonstrates that enslavement continues in subtle ways long after slavery has technically been abolished. Though slavery, as the main theme, appears only in *Beloved*, it recurs in various forms in all the novels along with other related themes. *Jazz*, for example, is set in the 1920s, but from its pages it is clear that African Americans are treated in a manner that goes beyond racism, and demonstrates
that a form of slavery still lingers in subtle and understated ways. Morrison portrays its existence in the professions to which black people are confined, in the land they cannot own, in the houses and neighbourhoods they cannot live in, and of course, in the violence to which they are subjected simply because of the colour of their skin.

*The Bluest Eye*, set in the 1940s, too portrays attitudes which transcend racism, and are evidenced in all the privileges which white people enjoy but blacks are denied - again because of the colour of their skin. Because the majority culture does not wish it, members of the minority culture cannot enter Lakeshore Park. Because the white employers do not like it, Pauline's husband cannot visit her at work, and so the list goes on. In a disturbing flashback scene, *The Bluest Eye* also traces Cholly's failed sexual initiation back to a return to slavery. His treatment at the hands of white men can be viewed as a re-enactment of slavery because the will of the "superior" is once again imposed upon that of the "inferior," and the black man is coerced into behaving according to the wishes of the white man. In *Sula* the Bottom is a literal gift of slavery. It is both the white man's condescending contribution to black well-being, and at the same time a mockery of it. It suggests the majority culture's compulsive ordering of the minority culture's universe. It reiterates the fact that black people must learn to live
according to the priorities set by white people. Even as late as the mid 1960s, neither city planners nor the government make any attempt to relocate the inhabitants of the Bottom even though they know that both temperature (extreme cold) and topography (sloping land) make it impossible for anything to grow in the entire area. To make matters worse, capable black youth are also denied work on the new railway line in favour of white men.

In *Song of Solomon*, the callousness that accompanies slavery is witnessed in the process of the naming of the Deads. While making Macon, Senior's, papers, a clerk writes the name of the place (Macon) where the father's first name should have been, and his status ("dead") where the last name should have been. Hence, Macon Dead is born. A member of white society entrusted with a specific job related to the minority community thus makes a mess of it because he does not wish to make an effort to know the correct name of the person concerned. Such an attitude again recalls the era of slavery when slaves were never called by their proper names - but were yelled and shouted for like animals. Disregard for a person's name implies a denial of his heritage, and a negation of his identity. It also reinforces the idea of a person as a possession - to be called or summoned according to the idiosyncrasies of the owner. With *Tar Baby* the theme of slavery literally comes full circle.
Valerian and Margaret Street can easily be equated with the Garners, and Sydney and Ondine with Sethe and Halle. The Garners are literal slave-owners while the Streets are slave-holders by implication. The Garners allow Halle to purchase his mother's freedom just as the Streets sponsor Jadine's education in return for the work Sydney and Ondine do for them. Though the Garners are comparatively decent, even they do not bother to find out Baby Suggs's real name as long as she is with them in the capacity of a slave. The Streets, similarly, call the daily help by the descriptive yet generic names - Yardman and Mary. All the examples mentioned above suggest a return to slavery because they symbolise a repudiation of the individual will, and a lack of concern about the well-being of a particular group of people. They demonstrate that the dominant culture has snatched from the members of the minor culture the right to choose, the right to make a decision about their lives. Even though people like Sydney and Ondine are free to leave - just as the slaves were after the abolition of slavery - only dismal prospects await them because the opportunities are extremely limited, and the general atmosphere has not yet become conducive to their survival or well-being.

In the entire range of her work, Morrison demonstrates that the effects of slavery - whether direct or indirect - strike at a
person’s capacity to love naturally, normally, appropriately. This distortion of love occurs in varying degrees in all the books. It affects maternal love, paternal love, fraternal love and romantic love - the consequences of which continue to influence the central characters in one way or another throughout life. From her first novel to her sixth, Morrison demonstrates that the absence of parental figures, or the anomalies in their love for the children, result in characters who grow up with skewed sensibilities. In The Bluest Eye, for instance, Pauline - riddled by her own complexes and insecurities - raises Pecola in an atmosphere of resentment and loathing. Since she aspires to the unreachable standards of white society, and wishes to emulate the heroines she sees on the movie screen, she fails to teach her daughter to appreciate her African looks, and to believe that more important than looks are personality and character. Pecola thus grows up with feelings of inadequacy and severe lack of self-confidence - continuing to believe that she is ugly and unworthy because she is black. She also carries the burden of her mother’s disgust and hatred around for the rest of her life - ultimately going mad in the hopeless quest for beauty and, through it, love. Pecola suffers not just on the maternal front but at the paternal level as well. Cholly rapes her on the kitchen floor one morning, and performs an act which becomes as difficult to justify,
and as problematic in consequence, as Sethe's act of infanticide and Eva's murder of Plum. Pecola's father thus harms her physically, forcing her body to conceive the child it is not ready for, whereas her mother ruins her emotionally - drilling into her tender mind cruel facts no child's mind should be forced to accept. Though most critics see in *The Bluest Eye* a bleak criticism of the education system, it can equally be viewed as a criticism of the black American family akin to that of the Breedloves. Morrison, however, does not criticise blindly, but rather traces the disillusionment and fragmentation of the African American family unit back to the repercussions of the general black experience in white society. Pauline is depicted as a typical victim of white entertainment culture - a woman so much in awe of the images on the movie screen that they seem real and ultimate to her. Cholly's attitude, on the other hand, can be traced back both to the lack of parental love in his own life, and a direct and embarrassing confrontation with members of white society. Abandoned on a junk heap by his mother, and rejected for a card game by his father, the only love he ever received was from his aunt who looked after him until her death when he was fourteen years old. During Cholly's first sexual encounter, he was discovered by two white men who forced him to finish the act before their eyes - admonishing him to "make it good, nigger" (*The Bluest Eye* 116). At
that moment, the hatred that should have been directed toward the two men, found its target in his partner Darlene - whom Cholly began to loathe on the spot. This pattern repeats itself throughout Cholly's life, and his family members constantly become targets of misdirected hatred. This is Morrison's subtle way of demonstrating that the aggression arising out of the frustrations of daily life is transferred to or taken out on the family members of the aggrieved. The contrast to the Breedlove family is provided by the MacTeer family where the mother tends to her sick daughter carefully, and the father, in an act of protective love, throws out the boarder who tries to finger Frieda. Though poor, Claudia nevertheless feels secure in the love of such a family and, by trying to relish her blackness, perceives life differently from Pecola.

Morrison's next book Sula contains extreme examples of both the finest kind of maternal love, and a mother's love at its most destructive. When her husband deserts her, leaving her penniless, Eva places one of her legs under a moving train to collect insurance money to feed her starving family. The same Eva sets fire to her son Plum's sleeping body when she realises that he has surrendered to the world of drugs. At another level, Eva's daughter Hannah changes forever the course of Sula's life when she casually tells her friends that she likes Sula but does not love her. She generally
leaves Sula alone to do whatever she wants. Helene Wright, on the other hand, interferes persistently in Nel's life. She does not allow her to think or act independently - or even to make friends of her own choice. Though Nel initially adores her mother, her attitude undergoes a complete change when Helene turns “custard” (Sula 36) in front of a white man. After this episode, Nel becomes as distant from her mother as Sula from hers. Both girls live in women dominated households, and father-figures are conspicuously absent from their lives. In Song of Solomon, Ruth is as ineffectual a mother as she is wife and woman. Though she has two daughters and one son, she does not play a significant role in any of their lives. Her prolonged nursing of Milkman, rather, places her as an object of ridicule in the eyes of the community, creates an embarrassing situation for the entire family, and forces upon Milkman a name to contend with for the rest of his life. Even more ironic is the fact that her persistent feeding of him neither sustains nor nurtures him, and he grows into a directionless, uncaring, selfish man. It is only Pilate's influence which convinces him of the authenticity of the traditional African experience, and changes him into someone who upholds the values of the civilisation and culture that gave birth to him. Both Lena and Corinthians are, unfortunately, denied this association with their aunt. Like Pauline, Ruth too is
influenced by white culture - but unlike Pauline who is hypnotised by show biz, Ruth is impressed by elitist white social values, and raises her daughters accordingly. She and Macon both turn the girls into objects to be admired by white society and envied by the black community. Ruth's disinterest, and Macon's cruelty do not allow the girls to develop normally, or to make their own choices in life. It makes the path of romance very difficult for Corinthians, and leaves Lena an unhappy woman - without purpose or meaning to her life.

In *Tar Baby*, Jadine is depicted as an orphan who does not have biological parents. Ondine, the mother figure in her life, initially encourages her to go after the white American Dream, but later regrets the fact that she failed to inspire familial and communal responsibility in her, and did not teach her to be a good daughter. Sydney, the only father figure in her life, has neither power nor authority over her because he is, in a way, socially inferior to her. She sits at the table with the Streets during meal times, and Sydney waits at the same table - quietly and tactfully serving the food. It is Valerian Street who can be said to play a partly paternal role in Jadine's life - because he provides the necessary funding for her education. Valerian's patronage, combined with the expectations of Sidney and Ondine, however,
only result in making Jadine more confused. She is convinced that her future lies in the direction in which Valerian points, but Sydney and Ondine beckon from the opposite direction. It is ironic that while Valerian and Margaret take an active interest in Jadine, both are essentially absent from their own son Michael's life. Valerian, in fact, only learns through Ondine years later, that Margaret used to torture Michael physically when he was an infant. The portrayal of this fact allows Morrison to demonstrate that it is not only the black family unit where violence occurs - that the same shameful episodes happen in white homes too, but are mostly subdued. The white world is not as pure and untainted as one is led to believe. In Beloved, the estrangement between parents and their children occurs as a direct consequence of slavery. The family unit is first fragmented when Halle witnesses his wife's rape and loses his mind. He is thus unable to meet her at the spot from where they had decided to run away, and Sethe never sees him again. She is thus forced to raise her children without the love and support of a father. When Schoolteacher follows her all the way to Ohio, Sethe is compelled to murder her infant daughter to prevent an almost certain return to the slave plantation. She and Denver suffer the extreme consequences of this action for nineteen years. Sethe has to undergo the triple trauma of killing her daughter, of watching her
return to demand retribution, and of losing her again forever. She can only take comfort in the fact that a new, self-confident and dignified Denver is born out of the ghastly experience. In Jazz, Rose Dear's life is suddenly shattered when her house is raided by rioting white men. The result of this violence and aggression is such that it severs her relationship with her daughters permanently. By dispossessing Rose Dear of her property and sense of security, white society renders her incapable of nurturing or guiding her children through life. Violet suffers greatly as a consequence of this experience. Because she has seen her mother thus humiliated and stripped of every bit of self-respect, she grows up with a number of insecurities and apprehensions which continue to trouble and traumatise her during the most crucial years of her life. Her husband Joe, also separated from his mother, continues to seek her like a madman throughout life. The other heroine most affected by racial violence is Dorcas whose father is lynched, and whose mother burns alive when her house is set on fire by white men. This denial of both maternal and paternal love endows Dorcas with an "inside nothing" (Jazz 38) which compels her to pursue a series of lovers - none of whom can give substance and meaning to her life.

In Beloved, Jazz and The Bluest Eye, the absence or distortions of maternal and paternal love are directly related to
white aggression; in *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby* they result from other factors, but are just as painful nevertheless. In Morrison's work, the father's contribution to the family (in terms of positive input) is nil. The fathers she depicts are for the most part away from home and out of touch with the family - like Nel's and Violet's, dead or missing like Sula's, Jadine's and Denver's, or violent and aggressive like Pecola's and Milkman's. Men like Mr. MacTeer and Pilate's father are rare - but they lend their daughters enough support which, combined with other factors, significantly alters the course of their initiation into society. Pilate's father dies when she is very little, but his influence on her life is especially remarkable. Even as a grown-up woman she continues to look to him for guidance - convinced that he comes to her in the form of visitations, carrying cryptic messages. Parents are important in a character's life because they signify the vital but fragile link to the ethnic past. They are capable of nurturing or destroying, of healing or harming. They determine a character's priorities in life, and the way the children will develop. Morrison indicates that the heroines who fail in life, or those who have the wrong priorities do so due to a lack of parental support. Parents represent the much revered ancestor that Morrison talks about.\(^5\) Whereas previous chapters

outlined the effects of race and gender consciousness on the heroines of each novel, the paragraphs that follow will present a comparison and contrast of the main female characters in Morrison's books. These women, some of whom are just beginning their lives, are also the future of multi-ethnic America.

Pecola is the genesis, so to say, of Morrison's genre of the race-conscious tragic heroine. Young and vulnerable, she represents the ultimate in victimisation - by family, society, and the community. In her figure merge the shattered hopes and dreams of a new generation, and the disillusionment felt by an entire race. The other heroine most similar to her is Hagar. A grown-up Pecola, she too seeks love through the vehicle of white defined beauty, but whereas Pecola seeks only platonic love from family and friends, Hagar desires a romantic relationship with her cousin while denying its incestuous nature. Pecola's obsession with blue eyes mutates into Hagar's obsession with hair. Pecola seeks fulfilment and attainment of the white ideal through food, drink and, ultimately, desperately, through divine help with the assistance of Soaphead Church. Hagar does it through clothes and cosmetics - immersing herself in the materialism propagated by consumer culture. For both girls, the lack of such ingredients of beauty as blue eyes and blond, straight hair signifies a lack of love, and is

responsible for their failure in life. Hagar dies a physical death whereas Pecola dies a mental death. Not much different from Pecola and Hagar is Violet. As she tries to come to terms with her husband's rejection, she blames her plight on not being white, light, and young - and, by implication, being black, fat and old. Violet's story, however, is one of resurrection and renewal, while the stories of Hagar and Pecola are those of death and degeneration. These differences in the fates of these heroines with similar pre-occupations seem to suggest that Morrison wishes to trace the reasons back to the quality of maternal guidance in the lives of these women. Pecola goes mad due to extreme neglect, whereas Hagar dies as a result of over-indulgence. Though Reba and Pilate cater to every single whim and desire of Hagar's, they fail to teach her the values they themselves hold most sacred - contempt of white materialistic culture, and appreciation and emulation of the African way of life - handed down to them through generations. It is only when Hagar lies dying after having been rejected by Milkman, that Pilate desperately tries to convince her that she is beautiful because she is black. These words of wisdom, however, come too late. No power on earth can now convince her of the beauty of her hair (and, by implication, her African features) because devastating experience has taught her otherwise. Violet, on the other hand, moves from being a hysterical and complex-ridden woman to one
who learns to be proud of all her features, and confident about her ability to deserve love and respect. She learns to accept herself as she is. She gains this mature perspective through interaction with Alice who gently nudges into bloom the self-confidence that had been lying latent inside her. Alice thus succeeds in playing the maternal role at which both Rose Dear and True Belle had failed.

The next group of heroines may be labelled as the educated race-conscious heroines - those black women who have stepped out into the white world, and left their houses and communities to go to college. Sula, Corinthians and Jadine belong to this category, but the stories of all three suggest that their education has played no significant role in their lives. For a class of people normally deprived of it, a formal education traditionally guarantees respect, an elevation in social status, and economic prosperity - but Morrison's heroines are denied these benefits. Sula, instead of earning the respect of the community, is labelled a pariah, and ostracised by the inhabitants of the Bottom. She shows no inclination toward exploiting the potential of the mind, but indulges only in exploration of the self - an activity which requires no grounding in formal education. She makes no attempt to find work, but merely lives off her considerable inheritance - once again demonstrating the uselessness of education in her life. Only the
formal, literary words she uses with Nel once in a while indicate that she has been to college at all - and at the same time make a mockery of it.

The case of Corinthians is only slightly different. Though she studies at one of the best colleges for women, and even spends a year in France as part of the all-round American educational experience, she has no academic or professional goals. She returns from college only with high expectations of finding a man of wealth and status for a husband, but her hopes are soon dashed when all such men reject her. She eventually ends up in a relationship with Porter - a poor, uneducated yardman - several rungs below the Deads in social status. Morrison, however, indicates that this relationship is more satisfying and meaningful than any she could have had with the kind of man she and her parents wanted for her. Just as her education does not help her on the personal front, it fails her professionally too, and her half-hearted search for a job leads her to work as a maid at the house of an eccentric white poetess. Once again, in an inversion of traditional values, Morrison demonstrates that this job, generally considered lowly and demeaning, gives Corinthians what years of elite academic learning and travelling could not - a sound sense of self, economic independence, and some kind of purpose or meaning to life.
The heroine next in line is Jadine. Viewed superficially, she gives the appearance of a woman to be envied. Even better educated and more widely travelled than Corinthians, she also possesses what Pecola, Hagar and other disillusioned black women can only yearn for: a beauty that not only emulates the white ideal but also bewitches the most discerning of blue eyes. She not only succeeds in attracting both white and black men, but also has the admiration of professors and employers alike. Though parentless, she gets immense love from her aunt and uncle, and abundant financial support from the Streets. Her case can be most sharply contrasted with that of Pecola's, whose parents abuse her, whose teachers hardly notice her, and who has to watch out for every cup of milk she drinks at the MacTeer house - no matter how noble Mrs. MacTeer's intentions. Jadine's exclusive education has, however, nothing to do with any of her achievements. She is a model by virtue of her figure and looks - not because of any outstanding quality of her mind. She has both money and status because she is a popular model and moves around in elite circles - not because she has a masters degree in Art History. Even when she realises that she is becoming too old to model, she just considers opening a modelling agency. It does not even cross her mind that she can start a workshop or training program for art appreciation - thereby
putting her own education to good use, and passing on some kind of knowledge to others. Other than the fact that her professor has promised to find something for her to do (if the need arises), there is no indication that she is going to use her education in any way in the near future.

Throughout her novels Morrison has constantly tried to show that the education system created and controlled by the majority culture teaches nothing of value to the minority culture because it acknowledges neither their presence nor their contributions. Sula idles away her years - a living and sad proof of the fact that education only instructs but does not inspire. Corinthians spends the best years of her life doing menial work because the courses she had taken in college have become outdated and are not sufficient for getting her a decent job. This is Morrison's firm way of indicating that such an elitist education is only superficial and ephemeral - and not lasting like the values taught by the ethnic culture. Jadine boards the flight to France with only a hazy notion of finding something suitable to do there - but the indication is that her choices are pretty limited. The only heroine who stands slightly apart from these three is Denver - who waits on the threshold - about to enter college. Morrison, however, suggests that her educational experience will be very different from that of other
characters because she will go to college as an active young woman rather than a passive one. As discussed in the chapter on *Beloved*, she will not blindly absorb all that is taught, but will probably bring her own critical perspective to it, and perhaps even alter the system somewhat. Her sensible approach to education will perhaps lay the foundation for much needed modifications in the present method of instruction - especially if she goes on to become a teacher, and has an opportunity to redesign the system. Once this task is accomplished, even black women and other minorities will be able to enjoy all the traditional benefits of a sound education. When Denver goes from working as a maid to becoming a teacher, she will automatically earn more respect and admiration from the community, and will have the potential of contributing to its well-being in various ways. Her social and financial status will also improve considerably. Though Morrison does not state it explicitly, implicit in her portrayal of Denver is the hope that when the right balance is brought to the education system, it will be better able to reflect the multi-ethnic nature of America, and accommodate the specific needs of all sub-cultures so that both the majority and minorities may benefit from it fully.  

— Though her focus is different from mine, Cynthia Dubin Edelberg provides a fairly comprehensive examination of the theme of education in the novels of Morrison in her essay "Morrison's Voices: Formal Education, the Work Ethic and the Bible," *American Literature* 58 (1986): 217-237.

---
Just as Morrison's heroines can be grouped according to their priorities and educational backgrounds, they can likewise be examined according to the fate that awaits them at the end of each novel. Hagar and Sula die physically, Pecola dies a mental death, and Jadine dies spiritually. Though Pecola and Hagar waste away because the standards to which they aspire continue to evade them, Sula and Jadine suffer in spite of the fact that they do achieve their goals to a certain extent. Throughout her life, Sula follows her favourite pursuit - and spends all her time discovering her self. She rebels against all accepted norms, and takes pride in both her independence and individuality. Jadine, too, is individualistic in a way. She makes a difficult choice when she decides to return to France in pursuit of professional goals - instead of accepting the love and security offered by Son. Neither Jadine nor Sula find happiness because they are essentially selfish, and do not think beyond their own selves. Just as Sula places Eva in a nursing home, Jadine rejects Sydney and Ondine's plea to "daughter" them. Sula is contemptuous of all the customs and traditions held sacred by the Bottom community, and Jadine obstinately rejects the Eloe culture to which Son introduces her. Though both heroines are to be lauded for the determined pursuit and achievement of their goals (as the chapters on Sula and Tar Baby have done), Morrison ultimately
presents them as failures because her novels do not glorify selfish individuality. She firmly believes that individual accomplishment must be balanced with concern for the family and community, respect for ethnic values, and a willingness to share both triumph and failure, happiness and sorrow. Morrison essentially wants to know whether her female characters have the power to carry the race forward, or whether they are like cacti stems that have lost the ability to hold water, and will shrivel in the dryness of the white desert.

The heroines whom Morrison depicts as successes, in whose lives the flame of hope and happiness flickers and tries to keep alive, are those who view themselves as part of the black community instead of separate from it. Their personal achievements are not materialistic or concrete - but abstract and value-oriented - like the gaining of a certain knowledge, the development of self-confidence, and a happiness that comes from within because something considered lost has been regained. Claudia, Pilate, Corinthians, Sethe, Denver and Violet belong to this category, and achieve in varying degrees the kind of success mentioned above. Even when she is very young, Claudia considers an intimate family experience as the best Christmas gift - as opposed to the selfish desire for dolls and toys that other children prefer. With an insight
beyond her years, she also shows concern for the community -
demonstrated first by her anxiety about the future of girls like
Pecola, and then by her reflections upon the fate of the black
community if the criteria for beauty and worthiness continue to be
determined by the majority culture. Claudia's approach is,
however, practical because she realises what the limits are, and
identifies the practices that must be shunned, and those that have
to be accepted. She thus grows up to be a balanced individual and,
by telling Pecola's story to the world, is able to expose the harsh
circumstances under which African Americans have to live.

Pilate may be viewed as the most successful of all of
Morrison's heroines, and perhaps one of the most finely drawn
characters in American fiction. She lives by her own set of values,
but is not self-centred or selfish like Sula and Jadine. Her reverence
for family and community are evidenced in the serious attention
she pays to the words spoken by her dead father, and the way in
which she extends all possible help to other people. Her greatest
failure lies in her inability to teach Hagar the values she herself
holds sacred, but she makes up for this defeat by instilling in
Milkman a desire to discover his true self by tracing his roots and
learning to appreciate his cultural and ethnic heritage. She dies
more enriched than she had lived because Milkman's quest also
clarifies for her the meaning of her father's words which she had persistently misunderstood before. Though pale when compared to Pilate's achievements, the story of Corinthians is one of success too. Her victory lies in her willingness to shun the material comforts of her luxurious house, and begin a life of hardships with Porter for the sake of love. Her acceptance of Porter also indicates that she has discarded the false values of the white world drilled into her by Ruth and Macon - in favour of the sustaining values of the black community - the people with whom she will now establish contact.

Sethe's success lies in her ability to overcome the repression of memory - thus accepting the reality of her slave past, and acknowledging the act of infanticide. She also allows Paul D to convince her of the value of her self by finally conceding that she is her own "best thing" (Beloved 273). Denver's victory is best exemplified in her effort to overcome the fear of the outside world, and seek a job for the sake of her mother's well-being. Sethe overcomes her pride, and Denver her shyness to accept help from the black community, and become a happy part of it once again. Violet's story is one of optimism and hope because her friendship with Alice allows her to overcome her feelings of jealousy and inadequacy, and gives her the confidence to shun the majority community's ideal of being white, light and young. Once she
accepts herself as she is, she not only develops feelings of happiness and self-worth but also embarks on a more meaningful relationship with Joe. She is also to be lauded for not becoming selfish, and for sharing her success with Malvonne and Felice - thus involving the community in her good fortune.

It is thus clear that Morrison's writing is an attempt to encourage African Americans to retrieve the black soul that has been lost in the materialism of white America. The female characters who finally emerge victorious are those who allow African culture and heritage to play a vital role in their life, and maintain a link with the black community. Such a connection is crucial because it gives them options other than those provided by the dominant culture. It allows them to counter the pressures of white society by giving them the confidence to follow their own code of behaviour - regardless of the milieu in which they live. While Morrison's work makes clear what the priorities of the modern African American woman should be, it also raises certain disturbing questions. As citizens of contemporary America, do these women belong only to a black community rather than larger society with its own multi-ethnic populations and white Americans? In one country, why must the ideals of success, beauty and worth as defined by a specific group clash with those defined by another? Are the heroines
who fail looking for fulfilment in the wrong places, or are they merely women who are just ahead of their time? Is it because these heroines are women of the world that they become strangers to the very community to which they belong? Why, when love is not enough, does hatred fill the spaces of desire? Much as Morrison resents and disapproves of it, a sociological and cultural perspective must be brought to her work in order to answer these questions.

Morrison has herself said in an interview that "a black artist for me, is not a solitary person who has no responsibility to the community. It's a totally communal experience where I would feel unhappy if there was no controversy or no debate...no passion that accompanied the experience of the work."\(^7\) Novels with such pertinent themes, therefore, must necessarily spill over into the realm of sociology because literature is not only influenced by but also shapes individual perspective and cultural reality. It draws, not on empirical data but traverses the terrain of the human heart and soul to discover the apprehensions that lie there, and to think of ways to alleviate the stress of present circumstances. Morrison's work is her way of fulfilling her responsibility to the community. Norris Clark writes that Morrison's novels "do not merely protest against the white oppressor, nor do they only emphasize the 'blacker than thou' attitude of many

---

\(^7\) Toni Morrison, Davis 418-419.
contemporary black writers. Instead,...she incorporates the black man's sense of oppression and his ways of dealing with it. She juxtaposes the fictions of society, black and white, with the realities of living as a black American." Some of the stories address distressing problems which cannot be solved by the government alone. The need rather is for a unity which must be brought about in spite of the diversity of America. The ideas of the majority culture must, at one time, take a back seat, and the tradition of domination and exploitation must give way to one of acceptance and understanding. Even at a global level, the concepts of colonialism must step back and clear the way for the emergence of other, diverse views - more in keeping with the nature of an ever-changing world.

Morrison's stories are, in fact, local stories with global focus - which is why the cultural specificity of her work never takes away from its strange, universal appeal. Since every country in the world has majority or minority populations divided along racial, religious or class lines, it is easy for each individual to find her own experiences reflected in those of Morrison's heroines. Even though other characters in literature have fought for a separate identity, have sought to find their essential selves, Morrison's work is different because she does not glorify rebellion against the

---

community. Each woman must seek to create an identity or define herself as part of the ethnic community - with her own racial memories which must never be forgotten, and her own link with history which must never be severed. Though her fiction does not tell tales with perfect, "happily-ever-after" kind of endings, Morrison's women give hope to both majority and minority cultures by demonstrating that survival is possible even under inimical circumstances. Such has been the power and beauty of her prose, in fact, that a cult seems to have evolved around her. This popularity is evidenced not only in the number of articles, essays and theses that appear on her work each year, but also by the number of websites that have sprung up all over the Net. Not only is Morrison reigning over the present literary scene, but is fast becoming queen of cyberspace as well. It would be appropriate to conclude by saying that she is one of the most sought after writers today because of her capacity to envision, anticipate, and provide solutions. In a world full of redundant ideas, her books make a statement for much-needed change at both local and global levels.