In a world where colours are important, black, white, yellow, red and brown are not just bold strokes that constitute works of art or help determine fashions of the Season. They are, unfortunately, shades that define race and identity and have, for centuries, formed the ugly basis of hatred and violence, persecution and prejudice, supremacy and subjugation. It is precisely this politics of colour, its cultural and social connotations, that Toni Morrison has magnificently captured in her novels. Of all African American authors writing today, her work stands out because of its comprehensive and multidimensional approach to the black experience in white America. It was only fitting then that the 1993 Nobel Prize Citation lauded her by describing her as a writer “who, in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality.” Basing on these words, this thesis seeks to show that Morrison's work not only reflects American social reality, but also helps shape it by highlighting the present multiracial nature of society, and thus encouraging it to think long and deeply about its future so that the attitudes of both black and white Americans toward one another
and toward each other may change for the better. By creating characters symbolic of the kind of people found in mainstream America, Morrison demonstrates that the awareness of skin colour leads to the development of a certain race or colour consciousness in each heroine. This consciousness can be either positive or negative. When it is positive, it manifests itself in a certain pride the women feel in their inherent Africanism, and leads them to place great value on their black selves. This allows them to exist as confident, nurturing individuals helping others to find meaning in a hostile society permeated by the values of the dominant culture. When it is negative, however, it inspires in the characters a wish to obliterate their inherent blackness and run after elusive goals while searching for a meaningful relationship, true selfhood or genuine identity. This focus on "blackness" does not, however, take away from the universality of the texts. Morrison captivates the reader's attention by depicting heroines caught in the rigmarole of everyday life. Each aspires to a goal, and finishes with a greater understanding of life and its complicated issues. Each heroine is aware of a revelation at the end, and changes because of her experience, attitude, or flaws. The second focus of this thesis, therefore, is on Morrison's redefinition of the word "tragic," and her creation of characters who can easily be viewed as contemporary tragic heroines. These heroines do not have much in common with their classical sisters,
but they do demonstrate an occasional error of judgement or “hamartia,” undergo suffering, and experience revelation. Their origins and experiences are such that they become identifiable not just to Americans or African Americans but to majority and minority cultures the world over. They articulate concerns that reflect the pre-occupations of the contemporary woman, and are often trapped in circumstances or dilemmas women all over the world find themselves in. The pain that each heroine experiences is varied and diverse from that of others, yet is excruciatingly private and immensely universal at the same time. This thesis attempts to show that each heroine's unmitigated awareness of being black in a white world both determines and shapes her perception of life, and renders her tragic.

Chapter one provides an episodic reading of The Bluest Eye to show how children first become aware of their class, colour and social status, and what effect this race-consciousness has on their development as individuals. It also explores certain pertinent questions related to Morrison's portrayal of Pecola. Claudia's case is examined in juxtaposition to that of Pecola's, and the differences in their attitudes toward life, love, and the self are highlighted. The chapter also explores the race and class related reasons behind Pauline's development as a woman who mercilessly neglects her own home, but goes willingly to work for a white family who, she
feels, truly appreciates her worth. It stresses the fact that Pauline, as a minority, has no voice or authority of her own and must constantly refer to an essentially white association in order to gain the credibility that ought to come naturally to a citizen of the country. The last few paragraphs examine *The Bluest Eye* and the characterisation of Pecola in terms of literary technique to support the study's secondary focus on Morrison's creation of race-conscious characters who can be viewed as contemporary versions of classical tragic heroines.

Chapter two studies Morrison's second novel *Sula* - exploring the physical, mental and emotional quest, growth and development of two black girls who are intimate childhood friends. The friendship and closeness that brands them inseparable during adolescence is, however, broken once the two mature and begin living life according to individual priorities. Nel represents the good that conventionalism implies whereas Sula stands for the unconventional that is interpreted as evil. Sula's race, class and gender consciousness develops as a consequence of her rebellious attitude, and Nel's because of her conformity, and it is mostly because of these varying predilections that the two grow up separate, apart and incomplete. In terms of social obligations, Nel delivers what society expects, but Sula does not - yet both are equally unhappy. One becomes a victim of her circumstances
because of her passive nature, and the other becomes a pariah because of her tendency to rebel and retaliate. Though most critics read a deep-seated pessimism in the novel, contending that the black woman does not even exist for white society so her struggle to create an independent self - which will be recognised and respected as such - is negated, this chapter takes a more optimistic view. It proposes that both Pecola and Sula are somehow ennobled by their quests because they represent millions of other women who have embarked on similar journeys. Sula becomes a contemporary tragic heroine because she voices the concerns of women at odds with society, women in search of a self, women who shun the hypocrisy of convention to claim their own genuine identity and values. Her *hamartia* is manifested in her stubborn independence and refusal to connect with other people. Her struggle is ultimately meaningful because Morrison creates in her a character who foreshadows minority women of the future. These are women who will emerge out of repressed or strict backgrounds and learn to combine the quest for self with respect for the community even as they integrate modern culture with their ethnic backgrounds to create well-developed personalities capable of both material and spiritual success - no matter how adverse the circumstances of their lives.
Chapter three focuses on the brilliant cast of female protagonists in *Song of Solomon* – women who contribute significantly, but in varying measures, to Milkman's development from a headstrong, chauvinistic, arrogant, materialistic young man to a mature person who finally comes to appreciate the richness of his African background as well as the worth of his ancestors, and makes both an integral part of his identity and selfhood. Even as these women lead Milkman toward an understanding of his true self, the search for their own identity and purpose in life, the craving to understand who they are, and what they desire becomes, eventually, the deciding factor between life and death, self affirmation and self negation, ecstatic joy or desperate misery. It decides, ultimately, who finds meaning in life and whose years on the earth are a waste - and why. The chapter provides a comparison and contrast of the characters of Pilate, Corinthians, Lena, Hagar and Ruth Foster Dead to show that the women who define themselves in terms of their ethnic heritage and larger community do not need to validate their existence by the presence of such externals as the compulsory love of a man, a craving for material wealth or the desire to be beautiful by majority standards. It suggests, ultimately, that the women who deride their blackness or try not to acknowledge it fail in life - like Hagar and Ruth. Those who view it with pride from the beginning or learn to respect it
later, find in it their greatest strength and their happiest reason for living - or dying.

Chapter four reads *Tar Baby* as a novel in which Morrison depicts the struggle within the soul of one woman - Jadine - to reconcile her black origins with her upbeat white lifestyle. It traces the course of Jadine's developing race and class consciousness through her interaction with other characters - both black and white, but more specifically through her short but extremely involved and passionate relationship with Son. It also shows that the places Jadine visits or lives in - the Caribbean Islands, Eloe, Paris, and New York City - also have a direct impact on the formation of her sensibility. The concept of choice is examined as significant because the options that the characters choose either lead ultimately to unpleasant tensions between various generations and classes, or help resolve them. Over and above these class wars and class crimes, however, Morrison's work depicts the dilemma of the contemporary African American woman as she stands today. Though Jadine starts out as a particularised individual, her character takes on a certain universality once she begins the tug-of-war between her 'biological' and 'adopted' culture. Her choices, and the self-revelation that follows them, make her tragic in nature. Her *hamartia* is her inability to take advantage of the fact that she is both African *and* American, to make the best of both worlds, and to
bring about the right balance between these two modes of life. The chapter makes clear that Tar Baby is not just a failed love story - the unsuccessful saga of a promising romance gone wrong. It is, at bottom, the sad and unfortunate tale of two great cultures - African and American - so intricately bound together, yet unable to sustain a separate but integrated identity.

Chapter five examines Morrison’s fifth novel Beloved to highlight the painful and traumatic repercussions of slavery on various generations of women and men represented by Baby Suggs, Sethe, Denver and Paul D. Though it demonstrates that psychological imprisonment and self denial continue for both male and female victims of slavery even after they are physically freed, the chapter lays greater emphasis on tracing the course of the development of Sethe’s and Denver’s consciousness of themselves as independent and free women worthy of self respect. For each woman, the journey from utter fragmentation to gradual wholeness is both painful and enlightening. It entails remembering and confronting past horrors which at first appear best forgotten. Sethe, for example, must grapple and come to terms with two categories of memories (pre-freedom and post-freedom) which belong to two different geographical locations, but are as intricately linked as the threads of finely woven lace. Denver, likewise, must overcome fear of the outside world, and brave the memories of the condemning
glances and contemptuous words that had greeted her during her first tentative efforts, as a child, to establish contact with society. This chapter suggests that it is ultimately Sethe who emerges as a contemporary tragic heroine because her quest for physical and emotional freedom, combined with her fierce determination to protect her family from slavery, lends a certain nobility to her character. Her story becomes both private and universal because it is identifiable not only to former slave women but to all men and women who have lived through traumatic times and are victims of repressed memories. Sethe's *hamartia* is her inability to come to terms with her past - to relate to her daughters the terrible events of her enslaved life and the death of young Beloved. She, however, reaches a kind of equilibrium when she is finally able to speak the unspeakable upon the insistence of Paul D and Beloved. This equilibrium initiates the process of the healing of her fractured psyche.

Chapter six examines *Jazz* in terms of Morrison's portrayal of the four stages of Violet's development from a scared, deprived, uncertain teenager to a confident middle aged woman who finally decides to take full responsibility for and control of her hitherto shattered life. It views Violet's story as a story of the renewal of hope, and a reaffirmation of life through continuing faith in the self. Violet becomes a contemporary tragic heroine because she
represents the modern African American woman who fights hard to live a decent life, to make both ends meet, and to hold on to what she has. Though her concerns (for a happy home and loving husband) may seem limited and narrow to the casual reader, the author suggests that they are most significant because the entire image of the self depends on their acquisition. Since the black sisterhood plays such an important part in the novel, the chapter also examines Morrison's portrayal of Alice, Felice and Dorcas - all of whom contribute in one way or another toward the development of Violet's consciousness. The author also shows, however, that each woman's own sensibility too develops out of the repercussions of living in a racist society. In terms of technique, the chapter demonstrates that the subtle metaphor of jazz music as a way of life for African Americans runs throughout the text in both form and content, and lends a deeper meaning to Morrison's work.

The conclusion to the thesis sums up the key points discussed in various chapters, and provides a comparison and contrast of Morrison's main female characters by dividing them into categories based on their characteristics or backgrounds, their desires or flaws, the degree to which they have been educated, and the fate that awaits them at the end of each novel. It also draws attention to the fine thread of slavery running across all the novels by demonstrating that each book shows a subtle continuation of
slavery which strikes at a person’s capacity to love naturally, normally, appropriately. The conclusion acknowledges that while Morrison’s work makes clear what the priorities of the modern African American woman should be, it also raises certain disturbing questions concerning all contemporary women belonging to minority cultures. It reiterates, finally, that the power and beauty of Morrison’s prose have made her one of the most sought-after writers today - not only because of her capacity to envision and anticipate - but also because in a world full of redundant ideas, her books make a statement for much-needed change at both local and global levels.