Commenting on the manner in which ‘Signifyin(g)’ manifests itself in African American literature, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., states: “This colorful, often amusing trope occurs in black texts as explicit theme, as implicit rhetorical strategy, and as a principle of literary history”. (1) Gates explains:

The metaphor of a double-voiced Esu Elegbara corresponds to the double-voiced nature of the Signifyin(g) utterance. When one text Signifies upon another text, by tropological revisions or repetition and difference, the double-voiced utterance allows us to chart discrete formal relationships in Afro American literary history. Signifyin(g) then, is a metaphor for textual revision. (2)

Taking a clue from Gates, Jr.’s theory of (black) signifyin(g), this chapter studies Morrison’s novels as signifyin(g) upon Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952) by “tropological revision or repetition and difference”. In defining “metaphorical signifyin(g)”, Gates, Jr., argues:

In the metaphorical type of signifyin(g), the speaker attempts to transmit his message indirectly and it is only by virtue of the hearers defining the utterance as signifying that the speaker’s intent (to convey a particular message) is realized. In third party signifying, the speaker may realize his aim only when the converse is true, that is, if the addressee fails to recognize the speech act as signifying. In (the signifyin(g)) Monkey toast, the monkey succeeds in goading the lion into a rash act and because the lion does not define the monkey’s message as signifying . . . . The import of the Monkey tales for the interpretation of literature is that the monkey dethrones the lion only because the Lion cannot read the nature o’ his discourse . . . . The monkey and lion do not speak the same language; the lion is not able to interpret the monkey’s use of language, he is an outsider, un-hip, in a word. In other words, the Monkey speaks figuratively, while the Lion reads his discourse literally . . . For his act of misinterpretation, he suffers grave consequences. (3)
Morrison’s signifyin(g) texts do represent such tug of war or clash between the Monkey and the Lion and this is a revision or repetition and difference upon Ellison’s text, *Invisible Man*, which too represents such a pull.

Morrison’s characters, like the Invisible Man, are cultural orphans who function as the Lion, unable to interpret or who misread the Monkeys – the ancestral mother/father’s words and hence either suffer grave consequences or ultimately succeed to revise and read properly the valuable language/information of the Monkey, the ancestors. Morrison’s Pecola, Sula, Milkman (though he succeeds in the end), Jadine, Joe-Violet, the community of *Beloved* (which envies the Monkey – Baby Suggs and turns down her word and love), the 8-rock men of Haven are cultural orphans – the Lions who are unable to interpret and understand the words of the Monkey – their ancestor, Esu – both a messenger and the god of communication. In this act, Morrison’s texts signify upon Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, where his protagonist, the invisible man, a cultural orphan, remains all through invisible, both to the whites who despise him and to the blacks whom he fails to understand; he is the Lion. Ellison’s protagonist is unnamed and invisible because people refuse to see him. This text represents his search for identity; denied both by society and himself. Ellison’s text itself is signifyin(g) upon this idea as his narrative ultimately turns out to be a story of the protagonist’s expulsion from his Eden of illusion. *The Bluest Eye* signifies upon *Invisible Man* as Pecola like the Invisible Man remains or believes that people – both white and black – refuse to see her; and the text literally represents Pecola’s search for her identity, denied both by society and herself. Both are victims of the society, black and
white, and their failure to define properly their selves entraps them in a world of self-created illusion.

Ellison's Invisible Man contributes to his own invisibility by performing the role of the Lion who is unable to read properly the message of his grandfather, the trickster Monkey. He misreads the recurring voice of his grandfather, who on his deathbed tells the boy that he had been a spy all his life. "I want you to overcome 'em to death and destruction, let 'm swaller you till they vomit or bust wide open." (Invisible Man, 17) Though the meekest of men, the Monkey had spoken of his meekness as something dangerous. This is essentially the ancient African strategy of absorbing the conqueror in order to keep one's own identity. But ironically, the Lion, invisible man, is seen throughout the narrative as being fearful of upsetting white domination, and the meaning of the Monkey's riddle becomes a key problem. The greatest obstacle in the Negro's search for identity arises out of the incompatibility of individual values with that of the community, which thinks in terms of the collective as opposed to the particular. Throughout the narrative the hero stands between submission and rebellion, between two conflicting necessities. Within the paradox of acceptance - rejection, the world becomes one of infinite possibilities. Hence, the protagonist is neither accepted fully by the whites nor blacks but remains all through invisible in a world of darkness. The alternate strategies offered to the Negro by Ellison, to submit or to rebel, reflect the traditional ambivalence of the African Americans, a repetitive thematic concern of Morrison's narrative.

Morrison's texts signify upon Ellison's thematic conflict between historical forces and embedded ancestral strategies or energies of survival.
Morrison’s Pecola appears to be a revision on Ellison’s Invisible Man by insisting that Pecola’s tragic plight stems primarily from her inability to achieve a positive reading of blackness in an urban setting dominated by pervasive white standards. Pecola, like Ellison’s protagonist, suffers the ignominy of being perceived by the black community as a white folk’s nigger, as an Afro American who is influenced and controlled by a white perception of reality. Perhaps the most explicit signification of Pecola’s self-division is manifested in the relation of Morrison’s text to the Afro American literary tradition which can be read as a revision of Ralph Ellison’s conceptualization of the Afro-American psyche. Pecola, like Invisible Man, clearly loses the battle to obtain visibility – to conflate in her person blackness and Americaanness.

The projection of the shadow of blackness by Morrison’s characters, their unquestioning acceptance of American standards of beauty and morality, suggest that they have, indeed, bleached their black selves in a flood of white Americanism. Theirs are not merged, but hopelessly divided selves, selves that attempt an erasure of blackness. In her exploration of divided and ‘funk-rejected’ characters, Morrison both revises and seems to refigure instances from Invisible Man. Her texts are signifyin(g) upon Ellison’s major thematic concern, which is implied in the novel’s structure, in that the black lives are contained within the framework of the values of the dominant culture and subjected to those values. The Afro Americans have all internalized those values and to that extent they have become instruments of their own oppression. The central and recurring representations in the text point out that
the black Americans participate in their own oppression, mainly through being
the very instrument of it.

Morrison’s *Sula* is a split self. Her moral torpor sets her apart, not only
from other people’s code, but also from meaningful connection with them.
The interwoven stories of Sula and Nel with their mixture of wild blood and
tamed spirits, suggest that the limiting boundaries of race, class, and gender
preclude all but a few narrow avenues of selfhood. In this text, the nascent self
is represented as split: either suffocated into a repressive virtuousness, like Nel
Wright or drawn to pursue unconventional values in the community’s terms
and sensations that mimic real feeling but lead instead to literal immolation as
in the case of Plum and Hannah, or emotional isolation as with Sula. Nel’s
wail at the end of the narrative, a howl that was stuck in her throat since she
lost both husband and friend years ago, wordlessly expresses the sadness of
the Bottom community and the inequities of the world itself. But Eva is the
Monkey, the enigmatic figure, who is an ambiguous agent of both good and
evil and who by being sheer trickster outlives all three of her children as well
as her sole grandchild, Sula. Sula, being the Lion, succumbs to the life she
willingly creates for herself, a life of isolation and alienation and therefore
ends up by embracing death.

In *Song of Solomon*, the larger divisions within the self is represented
through relationships between generations and contrasts between families. The
complementary families in the novel are the self-negating family of Macon
Dead and the life-affirming family of his sister. Pilate Dead, born
posthumously to her mother and orphaned in early childhood as her father was
shot dead by whites who had an eye on his property, feels cut off from other
people by her circumstances. Yet unlike Invisible Man, Pecola or Sula, her very separateness has led her to acquire a strong sense of her own self. Pilate enlarges the boundaries of Milkman’s suffocating world by introducing him to the sky, “so that from then on when he looked at it, it . . . was intimate, familiar, like a room that he lived in, a place where he belonged.” (Song of Solomon, 210) Eventually Milkman discovers the truer family history through this Monkey (woman) who, though she lives in the present, is vitally in touch with the past. The Lion, Milkman, split between the ‘dead-life’ offered by his father and a ‘life of promise’ offered by the Monkey Pilate sets off on a journey that ultimately is a long voyage in the land of the ancestors. The guiding force of the journey is Pilate’s dozen:

Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home. (Song of Solomon, 49)

This song of the Monkey upon which Milkman stumbles, becomes his guide and he is able to decipher the dozen, the riddle, sung by the children which includes names of people, his people, names of places named after his people, which offer him the final clues he needs to reconstruct the whole message, to resurrect dead lives and fading memories. As Milkman begins to decipher the children’s song, he finds in it the narrative of his family. It is the folk talk of the flying African, Solomon, who one day discovers his magical powers and uses it to fly from slavery back to his African home. A black man with a white heart, the Lion undergoes tests and trials and becomes the experienced trickster Monkey, cunning and violent: “you want my life? . . . You need it? Here . . . .For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrender to the air, you could ride it.” (Song of Solomon, 337)
The structural pattern of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is that of a quest for identity. The protagonist changes his identity as he passes from one stage or group to another. The rites of passage take the hero through several stages in which he acts out his various and conflicting sub-personalities. Morrison’s narrative in *Song of Solomon* signifies upon Ellison’s pattern as Milkman travels back in space and time – a journey, full of pitfalls and trials. At each level, Milkman, like the Invisible Man, the more he probes, the more he finds differences rather than the expected identity. To succeed in his quest, he undergoes rituals that will strip him of his false culture and prepare him for authentic knowledge. Milkman’s act of identification with Solomon, who is his ancestor, is simultaneously an act of differentiation, for unlike the Invisible Man, Milkman flies into history and responsibility rather than out of it; Ellison’s protagonist denies his responsibility by going into hibernation. In the process of his quest, Milkman creates the meaning for his own name. From being the one who sucks nourishment and life from others, he becomes the provider, giving Jake his home and name; Pilate, freedom from guilt; and Guitar, the life he needs to take. His riding the air implies both play and control, and perhaps control through play, and is thus life affirming even in the moment of death. Milkman, who initially searches for gold, the profit from the land of his origins, which ironically he wants in order to be free from the dictates of his father and for creating an identity of his own, is a revision on Ellison’s Invisible Man, who wants to be educated and pleasant to the white community. Morrison’s technique is of repetition and difference, for while Ellison’s Invisible Man remains invisible and devoid of the sense of self both to his ancestral people and to the whites, Milkman, achieves intelligence and
cunning, understands the language of the Monkey, and finally discovers his real name and his roots in the land which enable him to fly beyond it to greater truth.

Morrison’s Jadine, like Ellison’s Invisible Man, remains all through invisible and is unable to establish her authentic self both in the white and the black community. Jadine is a revision and repetition of the Invisible Man for both rely on the whites to be educated and pursue a successful career that could help them in establishing their identity in the white world. Both deny their African lineage as it might turn into a quicksand in their run for a successful career. Both Invisible Man and Jadine are lulled into somnolence until one is awakened by his grandfather’s word and the other by the sight of an authentically beautiful African woman, who invalidates her by spitting at her. In both cases at the end of the narratives, each is disillusioned but fails to be reborn, fails to acquire an authentic self, at once acceptable to the blacks and would be acceptable to the whites through playing cunning trickster roles.

In Beloved, Baby Suggs is the trickster Monkey who saves and shelters run-away slaves, guides and feeds them as well as teaches them to love each other; love their ‘own flesh’ which is despised by the whites. But ironically the community on 124 Bluestone Road performs the role of the Lion and is unable to decipher the riddle of the Monkey and turn their back to it, and thus call upon themselves the severe consequences of Sethe’s killing of her own child – i.e., despising their own flesh, becoming an instrument in their own destruction as does the Invisible Man.

Ellison’s narrative can be seen as a series of initiations in which the hero passes through several stages and groups of identification. With a slave’s
genealogy of shame to mark and mock him, and with no family traditions save his ex-slave grandfather’s secret roles as traitor and spy and agent provocateur, he enters the world ‘no freak of nature or of history’ but born of parents who are, if not unknown, then unnamed and otherwise unnecessary to his ritual progress. With his grandfather’s riddling counsel still to be deciphered along the way, and the word-magic (dozens) of his native oratorical powers to sustain him, he moves away from the seemingly stable and naturalistic world of the rural South. He embarks on a journey ‘up’ North geographically but ‘down’ existentially into a nether world of human and mechanical monsters and misleaders who preside over surreal forms of establishment and antiestablishment chaos. In his search for a place in the world, he finds himself unceasingly embattled, alone and displaced. Outside the maze of misnamings that his treacherous allies lay before him, he remains nameless. Morrison’s Jazz both revises and refigures events from Invisible Man. She revises Ellison’s world of flux and contradiction where identity itself is strategy more than entity and where selfhood is a synonym for improvisation – and thus the world of Joe, Dorcas and Violet is called Jazz.

Morrison’s Joe signifies upon Invisible Man, for, though as a New Negro, Joe experiences moments of pride in the city world of Harlem, as also felt by Ellison’s protagonist when he delivers a speech and picks up the rewards from the whites, he also, like Violet, remains haunted by his shame-ridden past. Like Invisible Man, Joe remains troubled by his past, and he too is a mother-haunted person. Morrison makes Joe go through the same confusion about naming as we notice in Ellison’s novel; the protagonist is unnamed and born of parents, if not unknown yet unnamed; in the case of Joe, when he finds
it necessary to have a surname, he picks up the word Trace, as if to signify that he represents parents without a trace. *Jazz* revises and refigures events from *Invisible Man* as the text chronicles Joe’s repeated creations of new social identities. As the middle-aged Joe reviews his life, he marks the emergence of the first version of himself by his self-naming – calling himself Joseph Trace – and the emergence of his second self by his relationship with Hunters Hunter, who trains him to be a man – a hunter – so that he can be independent and provide food for himself no matter what happens. Joe changes for the third time in 1893 when his home in Vienna, Virginia, is burned to the ground like as in *Invisible Man* when there is a blast in the paint factory. Morrison revises upon Ellison’s protagonist who is made to run off with a piece of paper which says “Keep This Nigger-Boy Running” (*Invisible Man*, 32) as Joe too, emboldened, buys some land, foolishly believing that whites will allow him to keep it. “They ran us off”, he recalls, “with two slips of paper I never saw nor signed” (*Jazz*, 126). Joe’s fourth change occurs when he and Violet move to the city and Joe takes up various menial jobs, like the Invisible Man, who changes for the fourth time when he joins the ‘brotherhood’.

*Paradise* signifies upon the tripartite structural pattern in *Invisible Man* – self, thread, and mask – which allows him to maintain a connection between formlessness (of self and world) and order (of the public mask operating within social form). The connecting thread can be manipulated from either end: one may chose the mask by which he makes his way in the world and thus participate in constituting his reality, or one may accept the mask he is given, in which case his strings are being pulled by a power that remains hidden “out there”. Though Invisible Man at first fails to see the connection
between Tod and the dancing dolls, he later finds the “fine black thread” that had made them move. This connecting thread, moreover, had been “invisible”, and these two characteristics – connectedness and invisibility – are the central qualities of the phrase Invisible Man later misinterprets, “the thread of reality”. Morrison’s 8-rock people who found the all black town, Ruby in 1949 represent the pain of intra-racial shaming, showing the intergenerational transmission of racial wounds and the damaging impact of the colour-caste hierarchy on the collective black identity. Signifying on the idea of Ellison’s mask – where one does accept the mask he is given, in which case the strings are controlled by a power that remains hidden to the self – Morrison is signifyin(g) on the idea of ‘power’ as in Paradise she explores the troubling issue of internalized racism by describing how the dark-skinned families of Ruby construct light skin as a stain and view light-skinned blacks as impure and corrupt as the “dung” (Paradise, 201) they want to exclude from their paradise.

Morrison’s depiction of the raid by the nine Ruby men on the Convent is inspired by such a ‘power’ that they misread or misinterpret like the Invisible Man as “the thread of reality”. As Morrison in Paradise brings to light the destructive mechanisms by which the ‘powerful/masked’ patriarchs of Ruby destroy the women of the Convent – who thus become the community’s scapegoats – it illustrates the causes and consequences of given racial mask and social shaming: that is, the dismissive and inherently dangerous othering of people considered different. Morrison’s text signifies upon Ellison’s, but both the texts are unable to realistically resolve the cultural
fears and anxieties that fuel the narrative as it explores the terrible legacy of intraracial shaming and conflict within the African American community.

References:

2. Ibid., 88
3. Ibid., 85