Chapter 7
Conclusion

Toni Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye*, her first novel, in 1970, because she wanted to read her own story, the story of the African American women. She wanted a story that would be individual as well as representative, and valuable as being representative of the larger life, the life of the community at the crossroads of history. She felt that the black women were absent from the narrative space and this wrong needed to be set right. The absence needed to be erased. When she says that whatever she writes has a political intent and a political content, it is partially aimed at suggesting that the gap has to be filled up, and that this process of filling up in and through the fictional space would enable her people to overcome shame and trauma; enable them to dare to speak the unspeakable, to come to terms with the shame and trauma of the black self that subsumes within it the years of slavery, the pain and loss of the Middle Passage, the hopes and betrayals of the Reconstruction and the Migrations, and the cause and consequences of the many displacements, dislocations and disruptions that had torn asunder the African American psyche and culture. Her agenda is that of enabling her people to recover their sense of pride through a recovery of their cultural moorings and relocations in the imaginative creative space of figures and metaphors that both constitute and represent that sense of pride.

The filling up of the gap requires negotiations of the ideologies of opposition that would project the African American culture and selves in terms of the other, of the marginalized. Racial discriminations that had existed
over the centuries also spawned another discrimination in terms of gender. At
the time that Morrison started writing, in the 1970s, there appeared to be a
rather unintended collusion between the white establishment and the Black
Aesthetic movement, which jointly put the African American women in a
position of the dangerously other blaming it and the idea of the African
American family for the unfortunate lot of the African American men.
Morrison’s art begins with the act of confronting the disadvantage in the
community’s search for a productive role in the hostile atmosphere. This study
would like to state that as an ethical and political artist, Morrison has named
and personalized her people in the global scenario where such displaced and
marginalized communities have remained nameless and stereotyped as
mainstream narratives have represented them as history-less and context-less.
Defining her perspective as a novelist at a particular moment of history, she
states:

Silence from and about the subject was the order of the day. Some of the
silences were broken, and some were maintained by authors who lived
with and within the policing narrative. What I am interested in are the
strategies for maintaining the silence and the strategies for breaking it.
How did the founding writers of young America engage, imagine,
employ, and create an Africanist presence and persona? In what way do
these strategies explicate a vital part of American literature? How does
excavating these pathways lead to fresh and more profound analysis of
what they contain and how they contain it? (1)

In her attempt to find an answer to the questions raised by her, to create an
imaginary homeland for her disadvantaged people within the American space,
Morrison establishes through her works the importance of the ancestor as a
cultural signifier for the African Americans as part of their continued struggle
for survival and assertion amidst continued attempts at destabilization and
negation.
Our analysis of the presence of the ancestor as the figure and the idea of the ancestral as metaphors charts the manner in which Morrison attempts to fulfill a political and cultural agenda. Her novels, from *The Bluest Eye* to *Paradise* which have been studied in relation to their cultural context show the manner in which Morrison had engaged herself in the cultural politics of the United States of America in the three turbulent decades since the 1970s. The journey over these thirty years has shown the predicament of the Black women novelists’ encounter with the oppositional voices of the White literary establishment and the Black Aesthetic marginalisation of the Black women as detrimental to the agenda of unified Black cultural voice. Morrison is one of those voices that search for a sense of unity within the Black world without undermining any aspect of the existing reality. Morrison’s search for unity of the Black community aimed at constructing a presence in the literary space, as figure and as metaphor that would exist across differences of race and gender, and time and space. Hence the presence of the ancestor, more so in the form of Esu Elegbara where following African tradition, African American recreations, and the interpretative paradigm of Karla F.C. Holloway and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., come together to facilitate novelistic projections. This projection operates across differences and exists at the borders of time, space, race and gender. Along with the ancestor figures in the novels of Morrison, this multivalent existence is most definitive of the ancestral presence in *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved* and *Paradise*.

In the course of our analysis of the novels of Morrison we have seen the effectiveness of the figure of Esu Elegbara as assuming the role of some sort of an objective correlative absorbing in its presence the feelings, emotions
and the ideological constructions of the African past, the site of memory of the African Americans and the expanding world of the African diaspora of which Toni Morrison is a prominent voice of representation. Esu Elegbara, revived from his/her origins in the African world view and the African cosmos could become, as evident in the novels of Morrison, the representational trope by which a unified African world view could be projected as existing in the contested and contesting Post Colonial literary space as well as the open ended fictional space constructed in the Post Modernist perspective. Morrison’s fictional constructs are the ‘writing backs’ of her community challenging and refuting attempts at silencing by whatever colonial forces that are limiting her people.

The central concerns of the African cosmos that were facing erasure in the Middle Passage subsequently reoccupy the center in the cultural space created by Morrison in her novels through the presence of the ancestor figure and the ancestral canvas created through the structural metaphors. Where Morrison’s art gains its prime position in the development of the African American stamp of the American fictional space is in the interlacing of personae and metaphor. It is here that the structural design noticeable in such novels as *Song of Solomon, Jazz, Tur Baby, Beloved,* and *Paradise* become powerfully evocative of meaning beyond the achievement of other African American novels dealing with or using the ancestor. Such metaphors as water, bones, the calabash, and other signifiers of folk imagination operate within the narrative space both drawing sustenance and providing sustenance to the ancestral figures who are a part of the action either through presence or absence. This feature of Morrison’s art can be traced back to the all
enveloping and defining presence of Africa in its totality in Morrison’s art and vision. For her Africa, the Middle passage or the migrations are not mere indicators of the past, they are the essential present on which the vision of the future can be constructed.

In her theoretical writings we have seen Morrison drawing attention to the novelist’s work as being that of raising the issues and not the finding of solutions, because what is aimed at is the creation within the novelistic space of a space for the reader. She has also referred to the importance of images for her, not so much as symbols but as pictures to create the atmosphere or the setting in which the absent is made present, where the ancestor achieves an existence across time and existential boundaries to become a partaker in the action of the present. The presence of the ancestor is an attempt at opening up the cultural space where the moral and the political issues may be examined in all its multiple and complex intricacies of the debate where the individual and the community are engaged in negotiations with historical forces, which are more often hostile than otherwise. The historical and cultural experiences of the Africans Americans since the first landing of a group of Africans on the shores of America in 1619, has been one of loss – loss of home, family, community, connections, relationships, name, land, and cumulatively, of identity. Paradoxically, since the same time, it has been a story of reclamation and reconstruction, of identity and the community, and African American literature has been a representation of this experience, as noted in the attempts at recovery of the loss, through the presence of the ancestor in the literary texts examined in chapter three of this study. These attempts at recovery constitute
the literary context of novelistic development, which bring to prominence Morrison’s achievement as far as the use of the ancestor is concerned.

Morrison’s works represent the encounters in a highly complex socio-cultural scenario. Her works seem, in a way focused to recreate, reclaim, recover, and remember the lost community from whom the twentieth century African American young men and women have moved quiet a distance away. She was engaged in analyzing the experiences of a generation involved in making choices between two opposite options: American individualism and African emphasis on the primacy of the community and village values. It is the predicament of the diasporic existence that the positioning of the self is always at the point of negotiation between two cultures, the positioning being inclusive; any attempt at exclusivity is bound to be detrimental and would frustrate any developmental programme or process, individual or communal. Morrison laments the inability of or the disinterestedness of her community to face up to the painful yet essential truth of slavery. Here it may be pointed out that the Black Aesthetic movement of the 1960s and the 1970s were united in their opposition to raising of such painful issues and would prefer to lie them low. Morrison’s position was somewhat different. She wanted that African American creative imagination has to engage itself with the past in its totality and without any obfuscation to project the idea of a viable future and a plausible present.

What Morrison problematised in her novels is the lack of willingness on the part of her protagonists to accept their African descent, and the consequent vague pursuit of the self as American. Her narrative space is marked by an incisive contestation between these two cultural identity
projections. An analysis of the novels suggests that this narrative tension remains unresolved. Pecola turns mad; Sula dies a willing death; Nel too is bereft and lonely and is shown as howling in search of Sula, her counterpart; at the end of the novel she is almost as disorganized as Pecola who animal like howls at the twilight hour; Milkman, Morrison’s first male protagonist, though he understands his legacy at the end and is able to find his ancestor and ancestral land and decipher the ancestral words which names him and his family, yet ultimately plunges himself to death, though metaphorically flying off to Africa, the ancestral land, in imitation of the newly found ancestor, Solomon. In Tar Baby, Jadine and Son, not only move away from each other, but exclusively holding on to their oppositional ideologies step into different paths, which are almost parallel lines not destined to met. Jadine moves to Paris where she believes lies her comfortable and secure life, Son-convinced by Therese walks toward the Isle De La Chevalier which though metaphorically is a mythic land is literally synonymous with the hiding hills where the run-away-slaves used to hide. Though in Beloved, Morrison creates an aura of love and romance and a beautiful tomorrow for Sethe and Paul D, the concluding lines of the novel are morose as she talks about the foot steps that come and go evoking the shame and trauma of the slavery past. In Jazz though the entry of Felice into the relationship between Joe and Violet signifies completeness of the familial space, the picture of the future remains incomplete and unpredictable, putting into question the effectiveness of ancestral and traditional cultural values despite the strong and influential presence of the ancestral in True Belle. The cycle of Morrison’s engagement with the ancestor and the ancestral completes its movement in Paradise, in
which we might say, we notice a culmination of all that had gone by in the earlier six novels. *Paradise* signifies upon all of Morrison’s previous novels in that, in it she projects a parallel existence of two communities, who in their exclusivity, develop a hostile relationship and ultimately destroy each other. The novel is organized around the experience of migration and the successive formations of the two communities Haven and Ruby by the 8-Rock Fathers. In the neighbourhood of Ruby exists the Convent, the community of women. The harmony between the two locations is disturbed by the third generation who destroy the community living and harmony projected by the Convent women. In the concluding lines, Morrison represents a mythical figure Piedade, singing a song of harmony and peace, but she is the reminder of the Middle Passage.

A study of Morrison’s novels consecutively, tracing the presence of the ancestor figure suggests that Morrison’s art, so constructs the presence of the ancestor figure as to represent both the advantages of the benevolent, protective, instructive presence as also the failures that arise from the inability to inculcate in both the community and the individual selves of the positive influence. Her novels portray the validity of the problem she raises when she states that total self-reliance, in line with the ideology of avowed Americanness, is detrimental for the African Americans whose traditional value systems demand otherwise, and honoring of the community and community values subsumed in the figure and presence of the ancestor and the ancestral. Though apparently lost in the Middle Passage, Africa and its cultural values survive and motivate forces of resistance and also of recovery that create cultural tensions which provide the necessary oppositions for sustaining fictional construction.
What can be debated is that Morrison herself is unable to reconcile the need for communal living and the inability to do so in an altogether different space and time. She time and again brings up this issue in all her novels but fails to answer or more rightly refuses to answer as she states that a writer’s work is to formulate and project a problem but not to dictate an answer to it. Morrison finds herself in the midst of a socio-cultural space where centripetal and centrifugal forces are both in operation in a churning in which traditional African values, now expanding in the diasporic space beyond the shores of Africa, are in contestation with the forces of individualism driving the world of Western capitalism and the larger indefinite space of globalization. She does not provide the answer for the problems of successful living that she raises, encounters and negotiates, because identity lies somewhere in-between this chaotic sociological and psychological space. Morrison had time and again pointed out that she demands the reader’s participation. The reader has to find the location where identity lies in its momentary existence.

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