Chapter 1

Introduction

Toni Morrison is today the most prominent novelist articulating the voice of the marginalized, the predicament and aspirations of the African Americans, a voice which posits itself in contestation with the tendency of the majority literary establishment to silence the minority articulations. Born in 1931 as the second of the four children of Ramah (Willis) and George Wofford, Toni Morrison graduated from Cornell with an M.A. in English, and in 1989 became the Robert Goheen Professor of Humanities at Princeton University. She has also been a Senior Editor with Random House, New York City, and played the role of a guardian in shaping and maturing the role of many African American writers such as Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis and Andrew Young. The first African American writer to win the Nobel Prize in literature, Morrison has, till to date, published eight novels: The Bluest Eye (1970), Sula (1973), Song of Solomon (1977), Tar Baby (1981), Beloved (1987), Jazz (1992), Paradise (1998), and Love (2002). This study engages itself in a critical analysis of the first seven novels. Morrison has also published a play Dreaming Emmett (1985). An important non-fictional critical work is Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992). She has also edited Race-ing Justice, Engendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality (1992) and jointly with Claudia Brodsky Lacour, Birth of a Nation’ hood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O. J. Simpson Case (1997). Significant among her critical articles are “City Limits, Village Values:

Morrison’s fictional world revolves round the painful, yet undeniable memory and history of the African Americans as they negotiate the experiences, across centuries and generations, of displacement, humiliation and erasure. Slavery, her people and her community are at the core of her thematic concerns. She proclaims in “Rootedness: the Ancestor as Foundation”:

If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn’t about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligations of my personal dreams – which is to say yes, the work must be political. (1)

The political in the work derives from experience that is both personal and collective as being that which conjoins the psychological and the sociological in its response to the world of the African Americans. The political perspective takes its origin in the cultural, in what she had learnt from her family, from her parents and her grandparents and from her personal interaction with the world around, white and black. The encounter with the white world has not been a positive one: “My childhood efforts to join America were continually rebuffed. So I finally said, ‘you got it. America has always meant something other to me – them. I was not fully participant in it.”(2) Racial prejudice was the dominant feature determining the relationship between the whites and the blacks. In responding to this contestation between
the black self and the white other, the novel becomes a weapon for fighting the battle of assertion and racial pride, for forcing the other to listen:

... the novel is needed by African-Americans now in a way that it was not needed before – and it is following along the lines of the function of novels everywhere. We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological and archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new information has got to get out, and there are several ways to do it. One is in the novel. (3)

There was a time when African American articulation was oral and to that extent limited in the range of communication. Now that the oral has been replaced by the written, the new articulations require a change in perspective; the novel for Morrison becomes an arena for postcolonial writing back, for giving voice to that which has remained unspoken.

In the construction of the narrative space, memory and history are for Morrison the constituting elements, as constructing the cultural perspective. She positions the narrative on the border between the past and the present, where both interpenetrate and make valuable and meaningful each other. The novel for her is an embodiment of a process aimed at achieving cultural totality, a wholeness which enables the self and the community to resist erasure, in the case of the African Americans a discourse to reconstruct that which was lost in the Middle Passage and the migrations. It becomes for her a location of a sense of identity and the contestation involved in constructing it, a construction which requires a hurdling of space and time in inculcating, in the contemporary world of the African Americans, a pride in the self, overpowering the debilitating historical experience of negation and cultural obliteration. The figure of the ancestor and the evocation of the ancestral quite naturally become a core element in the fictional construction. About ancestor
or the presence of the ancestor in the narrative space, Morrison states: “You know there are a lot of people who talk about the position that men hold as of primary importance, but actually it is if we don’t keep in touch with the ancestor, that we are, in fact, lost.” She continues: “When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself. I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don’t always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection. To say, see – this is what will happen.” (4) According to Morrison, African Americans, in creating a sense of identity have to take a stand against the American ideology of total self-reliance. The African way of life, wherein lies the root of African American culture had all along been more communal than individual. The African American self would fall apart totally if it rejects connectivity, particularly with the knowledge and wisdom that derives from the collective experience of the community, of which the ancestors are the timeless carriers. The world view has to be one of inclusion, connecting the past and the present, the natural and the supernatural, the real and the magical, to constitute the inclusive whole, on which a productive and secure future might be built. The inclusive vision is to be reflected in the construction of the narrative text through the presence of the ancestor as the success or failure of the political agenda of the writer would depend on that. Morrison states:

... it seems to me interesting to evaluate Black literature on what the writer does with the presence of an ancestor. Which is to say a grandfather as in Ralph Ellison, or a grandmother as in Toni Cade Bambara, or a healer as in Bambara or Henry Dumas. There is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom.

How the Black writer responds to that presence interests me. Some of them, such as Richard Wright, had great difficulty with that ancestor. Some of them, like James Baldwin, were confounded and disturbed by the
presence or absence of an ancestor. What struck me in looking at some contemporary fiction was that whether the novel took place in the city or in the country; the presence or absence of that figure determined the success or the happiness of the character. It was the absence of an ancestor that was frightening, that was threatening, and it caused huge destruction and disarray in the work itself. That the solace comes, not from the contemplation of serene nature as in a lot of mainstream white literature, nor from the regard in which the city was held as a kind of corrupt place to be. Whether the character was in Harlem or Arkansas, the point was there, this timelessness was there, this person who represented this ancestor. (5)

Morrison was disturbed by the predicament of the present: the experience of the present was one of displacement, dissipation and disintegration; hence a search for the timeless, as a constituent of the narrative space. The imperative was to construct a figure that could signify connection across time, as a reconstitution of that which had been lost, left behind in the process of displacement, but that which is always present in the mind’s eye as contributing to the idea of a cultural homogeneity. Morrison postulates an ideology based on such a figure’s presence, aware of the differing stance of Richard Wright or James Baldwin who would have preferred the ghost to lie low.

Morrison would like her novels to set right such traces of imbalance, would speak the yet unspoken, and fill the absence. In one of her conversations she states:

...not only that I grew up with both cultures, but the one that came to my aid in times of crisis was always one that was not the majority culture, when you are thrust back into small places. What I could find useful was almost never things I learnt in school. What one learns in school is a different kind of education that would make it possible for you to work and talk to certain kinds of people, but it was frequently quite the opposite of, certainly unlike, the education one received in the community. Those are the things that interest me... And it keep me fiddling around in my books with the past, because I have to clear that up before I can go forward into anything more contemporary. [my emphasis] (6)
Formal education in the contemporary American instructional structure to which the blacks are now exposed does not facilitate the construction of such positive cultural forces or values. For that one has to go to the community and its memories. Unfortunately even the literature created by the majority dominant establishment is unable to provide the needed. Ralph Ellison was very critical about it. In *Shadow and Act* he writes:

... it is unfortunate for the Negro that the most powerful formulations of modern American fictional words have been so slanted against him that when he approaches for a glimpse of himself he discovers an image drained of humanity. ... Despite their billings as images of reality, these Negroes of fiction are counterfeits. (7)

It is either total absence, as laments Morrison, or a distortion as experienced by Ellison. The writer’s job, according to Morrison, is to make available in the fictional text a reconstructed proper and whole black self, structured on the basis of a proper reading of history from the point of view of the black, negotiating and not wishing away the fractures and fissures which had forced their way in since the Middle Passage. It is not just a one-book task, it carries on across a writer’s works. Her creative concern is with a certain type of women’s voice:

Women who don’t have to block what they know; keep secret what they feel; who welcome their own rage and love because it has voice, place, point and art – and the art is hers, not somebody else’s. She wears on her head the “hat” she made – not one she bought made by somebody else. . . . I am not alien. . . . I can tell, because 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, listens to Gloria Naylor and anybody else she wants to. She cannot lie. Doesn’t know greed or vengeance. Will not frown or pontificate. There is no room for pupils in her eyes. She is here now, alive. I have seen, named and claimed her – (8)
It indeed is a highly poetical way of stating the novelist’s task of creating a concrete fictional presence out of that which has been lost in the graveyard of time but which can be and is politically imperative to be resurrected. In the process of resurrection, Morrison proposes a canvas that includes the black individual, the family and kinship relationships, the community, the neighbourhood, and across time and space the ancestor and the ancestral. She widens the scope of the narrative space to embrace the psychological and the sociological, to lay the base to engage with the historical. This, according to Morrison, is the political act and the art of the African American artist:

... the reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance because while you can’t really blame the conqueror for writing history his own way, you can certainly debate it. There’s a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure, so that the presence and the heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways and the job of recovery is ours. It’s a serious responsibility and one single human being can only do a very very tiny part of that, but it seems to me to be both secular and non-secular work for a writer. You have to stake it out and identify those who have preceded you – resummoning them, acknowledging them is just one step in that process of reclamation – so that they are always there as the confirmation and the affirmation of the life that I personally have not lived but is the life of that organism to which I belong which is black people in this country. (9)

‘Reclamation’, ‘resummoning’, ‘confirmation’ and ‘affirmation’ are the task of the novelist against ‘obfuscation’, ‘distortion’ and ‘erasure’ meted out by the majority voice. In another interview in 1988, Morrison further elaborates on the African American novelist’s art in the context of the erasure and suffering related to the Middle Passage:

The gap between Africa and Afro-America and the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the past and the present does not exist. It’s bridged for us by our assuming responsibility for people no one’s ever assumed responsibility for. They are those that died en route. Nobody knows their names, and no body thinks about them. In addition to that, they never survived in the lore; there are no songs or dances or tales of
these people. The people who arrived – there is lore about them. But nothing survives about . . . that.

There is a necessity for remembering the horror, but of course there’s a necessity for remembering it in a manner in which it can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive. The act of writing the book, in a way, is a way of confronting it and making it possible to remember. (10)

The past, particularly that related to the Middle Passage, has to be remembered, but in a manner that is not grotesque or destructive, but that which uses the tools of imagination to be creative towards a positive response, positive for both the individual and the community.

In the process of remembering and literary articulation in the form of the novel, Morrison acknowledges the importance of the autobiographical, as is evident in the slave narratives, but only when it is representative:

The autobiographical form is classic in Black American or Afro-American literature because it provided an instance in which a writer could be representative, could say, “My single solitary and individual life is like the lives of the tribe; it differs in these specific ways, but it is a balanced life because it is both solitary and representative.” (11)

When the life of the individual and that of the tribe come together, the concern shifts to what Morrison calls the interior life. In “The Site of Memory” she refers to the interior life of her father and grandparents and states:

. . . these people are my access to me; they are my entrance into my own interior life. Which is why the images that float around them – the remains so to speak, at the archeological site – surface first, and they surface so vividly and so compellingly that I acknowledge them as my route to a reconstruction of a world, to an exploration of an interior life that was not written and to the revelation of a kind of truth. (12)

The parents and the grandparents, specifying the ancestor transcend the limits of the autobiographical, assume the state of an enveloping aura, are decipherable in images, and constitute the many routes in which they may be reached to reconstitute in fiction the past and its channels of communication with the present. The whole creative process may be traced back to the
traditional African belief in which man, nature and the super nature constitute a continuum. For the Africans, particularly the Yurobas, the continuum is subsumed in the figure of the ancestor. It is also a figure that combines in it the human, the spiritual, the land, and the environment, to create a holistic sense of totalized existence, not easily understandable to the western mind.

In this context, the ancestor assumes very special position both in life and in literature. According to Shanna Greene Benjamin, African cosmology postulates:

For the Yuroba of Nigeria, in West Africa, ancestors are everywhere: in the earth, in the air, and within one’s children. Their presence links souls of the present with souls of the past. Their lessons transcend both time and space – enriching their descendents with a perspective full of other world wisdom applicable to this world. They are deities or family members who have passed on, yet remain accessible to the living. They are the ancestors. (13)

Benjamin further elaborates on the position of the ancestor by pointing out that West African cosmology visualizes an intricate link between two worlds, the material and the spiritual, and presents the view that the “ancestors live on a spiritual continuum between worlds and generations.” (14) Physical death does not signify total closure or break, as Western cosmology would argue; the West African would structure a holistic existence where the ancestor is the presiding presence across dimensions. For him this ancestral presence may be evoked primarily through the community elders who act as a mediator between the people and their ancestors, some sort of an Esu figure as we shall see in the formulations of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in The Signifying Monkey. Benjamin further states: “Morrison modifies this use of the ancestor and transforms it into a layered literary device that explores the manifold ways in which characters relate to their ancestors and, by extension, their
communities,” (15) The three levels at which, according to Benjamin, Morrison engages with the ancestor in her narrative space are “ancestor as familial history, ancestor as collective history, and ancestor as ancestral stories.” (16) Apart from the variations that she plays on the canvas of her plot and character at the three levels mentioned above, the ancestor and the idea of the ancestral operate as metaphors in the texture of the novel to create the sense of a narrative construct steeped in the ancestral presence as resistance to imposition and erasure. This study intends to analyze and examine the seven novels of Toni Morrison, from The Bluest Eye to Paradise to chart out and understand the use she makes of the ancestor in achieving her political agenda as an African American novelist.

Morrison’s novels have drawn significant critical attention, many of which deal with the role of history and memory in her works. Among the book length studies, Trudier Harris, in Fiction and Folklore: the Novels of Toni Morrison (1991) examines the foundation of the novels in the folktales and the structure of oral narratives that had survived in the African American community. Harris regards Morrison’s art as genuinely representative of the folk. Highlighting the political, Denise Heinze in The Dilemma of ‘Double Consciousness’ (1993) examines the thematic concerns of Morrison in the light of the Du Boisian notion of ‘double consciousness’. In the same vein of thematic analysis, Karen Carmean in Toni Morrison’s World of Fiction (1993) argues that “self-discovery” is Morrison’s central theme. She also draws attention to the political bias in Morrison’s novels. Jan Furman in Toni Morrison’s Fiction (1996) attempts a feminist reading of the novels upto Jazz highlighting the presence of a concern with social and family violence.
Another work which uses a feminist approach is Barbara Hill Rigney's *The Voices of Toni Morrison* (1991), in which French feminist theoretical standpoints are made use of to examine what is referred to as Morrison’s pursuit of a black feminist aesthetic. Jill Matus, in a book entitled *Toni Morrison* (1998) explores Morrison’s negotiations of historical trauma, exploring how the novels function as a form of cultural memory. In one of the more recent studies, *Quiet as it is Kept: Shame, Trauma and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (2000), J. Brooks Bouson analyses Morrison’s representation of matters of race by using the theoretical framework suggested by psychoanalytic studies of shame and trauma.

A significant point to be noted is that most of these works are concerned with thematic studies and are not focused enough to understand the use of figures and metaphors as defining the technique determining the narrative space as a cultural entity, particularly with reference to a significant cultural trope like the ancestor and the ancestral. Some insight is available in Madhu Dubey’s *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (1994), where she examines the black women writer’s differences with the nationalist programme of the 1960s and 70s. The book contains a significant analysis of the role of the ancestor in Morrison’s *Sula*, in the context of the contestation between the community and the individual self. Dubey’s reading suggests that *Sula’s* rejection of the community with its emphasis on the traditional ancestral role is to a great extent responsible for the chaos in her life and in the community that is generated by her.

Among the collection of articles on the novels of Morrison mention may be made of three; these are works that testify to the possibility of reading
the works from varied critical and theoretical perspectives. *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison* (1988) edited by Nellie Y. McKay, contains some illuminating articles on *The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon*, and *Tar Baby*. The article by Trudier Harris, “Reconnecting Fragments: Afro-American Folk Tradition in *The Bluest Eye*” is of particular relevance in its projection of the role of the community and M’Dear as a positive force imbibing within herself the world of the ancestor. Similarly, Genevieve Fabre in “Genealogical Archeology or the Quest for Legacy in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*” provides revealing clues for an analysis of the role of the ancestor in the novel. Another important collection of essays is *Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches* (1997) edited by Nancy Petersen. In this work, the theoretical perspectives of the post-modern and the post-colonial are used for close readings of the novels. Post-modern perspectives also determine the approach in the essays collected in *Toni Morrison* (1998) edited by Linden Peach for the Macmillan New Casebook Series.

There are quite a few journal articles dealing with Morrison’s use of history and memory as part of her narrative technique. Important among them are “History, Memory and Language in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” by Rebecca Ferguson; “A Blessing and a Burden: The Relation to the Past in *Sula, Song of Solomon, and Beloved*” by Deborah Guth; and “Counter-Memory, Mourning and History in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” by Susan Comfort. An important critical essay which examines Morrison’s art in relation to Africanist thoughts and aesthetics is William Handley’s “The House a Ghost Built: Nommo, Allegory, and the Ethics of Reading in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”, where the Africanist idea of the magic power is used as the context for critical analysis.
It can be noticed that critics have engaged with the role of history, memory, and the past in the novels of Morrison, but there has not yet been any systematic and holistic study of the novels of Morrison to examine the nature of her creative imagination in the light of her proposed critical paradigm focusing on the presence or absence of the ancestor figure or the ancestral trope. This dissertation intends to examine what use Morrison herself has made of the ancestor in her novels. The critical approach is not bound by any exclusive theoretical position; it may be regarded as eclectic making use of suggestions available in Morrison’s own statements and the critical practice enunciated by Karla F. C. Holloway and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. In “Site of Memory”, Morrison defines her narrative art in relation to history and memory in the following words:

My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over “proceedings too terrible to relate” . . . Moving that veil requires, therefore, certain things. First of all, I must trust my own recollections, I must also depend on the recollections of the others. Thus memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant. Zora Neale Hurston said, “Like the dead-seeming cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me.” These “memories within” are the sub-soil of my work. (17)

The tearing of the veil and reaching the memories within requires a profound act of imagination, which in its turn requires “fidelity to the milieu” out of which the writer writes and in which the “ancestors actually lived”. The novelist’s art, according to Morrison, is “a kind of literary archeology”:

... on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image - on the remains - in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of a truth. By “image”, of course, I don’t mean “symbol”; I simply mean “picture” and feelings that accompany the picture. (18)
Morrison's narrative art can thus be regarded as a stringing together of pictures and extrapolations from them through imaginative enquiry to trace the feelings inherent in them. The ancestors and the ancestral are also evoked in the same manner as presences in the narrative space and as points of entrance to the interior life. She further says –

the images that float around them – the remains so to speak, at the archeological site – surface first, and they surface so vividly and so compellingly that I acknowledge them as my route to a reconstruction of a world, to an exploration of an interior life that was not written and to the revelation of a kind of truth. (19)

The truth Morrison is in search of is one that lies in charting a route back from the present to the past, from the individual self, through memory and history, to a wider communal self, which includes also the ancestor, as the African tradition would.

About critical approach to black cultural texts Ralph Ellison said: "Perhaps the ideal approach to the work of literature would be one allowing for insight into the deepest psychological motives of the writer at the same time that it examined all external sociological factors operating within a given milieu."(20) Critically analyzing a literary work as a cultural text with emphasis on both the psychological and the sociological is also part of the paradigm that one might construct using the arguments for cultural analysis evident in the writings of Karla F. C. Holloway and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Holloway's theoretical framework in her critical discussion about "the nature" of connection and exploration "of the literary commonalities between cultures separated by history" i.e., diasporic black women writer's works, depends on a three-tier critical perspective which she defines as - revision, (re)memberance
and recursion. In elaborating this three-tier complex and critical literary frame, she states,

In the case of revision, the narrative is propelled towards inversion – a restructurings of traditional (i.e., western) modes of organization. (Re)membrance – spelled with the parenthetical (re) to emphasize the bodying suggested by “membrance” as well as the restorative aspect of the prefix – acknowledges a spiritual point of origin that for these works was oral and poetic at a time when oracy and poetry were not distinct modes of expression but were intimately linked. In addition, a (re)membered text privileges way of organization that supports the process of memory as an accurate and appropriate means towards figuring one’s history. In this way, those black and female voices that have been excluded from Western historiography tell and (re)member their own stories using their own means of recovering these experiences. The focus of a recursive text is to layer ways of memory and discourse and the mythic figures within language and culture until each is folded into the other. Recursion is generative activity that depends on a succession of events. Multiplied texts have figurative dimensions that continually reflect other, deeper dimensions. Their language and their imaginative visions suggest a certain depth of memory that black women’s textual strategies are designed to acknowledge. (21)

Morrison’s work, examined through the frames constructed by Holloway indicates a complex and critical study where her texts follow this patterning – revision, (re)memberance and recursion. Morrison consistently insists that her writing is politically invested, imbibed in aesthetic qualities and that it is ideally committed to ‘her people’. Certain characteristics that Morrison has “identified as authenticating a piece as ‘black’” are -

a participatory quality between a book and reader; an aural quality in the writing; an open-endedness in the finale that is agitating; an acceptance of and keen ability to detect differences versus a thrust toward homogenization; acknowledgement of a broader cosmology and system of logic in touch with magic, mystery, and the body; a functional as well as aesthetic quality; an obligation to bear witness; service as a conduit for the “ancestor”, uses of humor that are frequently ironic; an achieved clarity or epiphany and thus a tendency to be prophetic; and an ability to take the “tribe” via art through the pain of a historical experience that has been by race to a healing zone”. (22)

Morrison’s creative agenda is therefore to (re)member a (historical) past appropriated by the convincing desires and designs of the Colonizers; and in
remembering, her narrative ‘revisions’ (i.e., challenges) the thematically and characteristically stereotyping of the colonized and follows the way to/of recursion as she states -

You have to take the authority back; you realign where the power is. So I wanted to take the power. They were very inventive and imaginative with cruelty, so I have to take it back – in a way that I can tell it. And that is the satisfaction. (23)

Virtually, all of Morrison’s novels touch upon this pattern framed by Holloway, in her reclamation of the past - assimilation of her people in playing the village community role which is fast losing grounds as she states that now blacks “can choose (my emphasis) whether or not they wish to be black”, and in asserting the “importance of the need for African Americans to be informed of the danger of killing their ‘ancestors’”.(24) Morrison’s call is to reappropriate the past of her people by establishing the African cosmology that she does through the presence of the ancestor – an African worldview of the living and parallel existence and reality of the dead. According to her “the retention of the ancestor requires the reconciliation of village responsibilities” by individuals who are dislocated, displaced and continually faced with the tampering of history and past giving rise to queries “Who am I”? ; people who need to trace their history back, reclaim their identity and a world view which could authenticate their being as blacks with a past and a history defined in their sociological terms: as Morrison states: “I know I can’t change the future but I can change the past. It is the past, not the future, which is infinite. Our past was appropriated. I am one of the people who has to reappropriate it.” (25) In her effort to counter obfuscation, distortion, denial and erasure, Morrison tells her own stories, using her own means in an act of recovering
and in bodying these experiences, as suggested by Holloway, she acknowledges a spiritual point of origin – the ancestor or the ancestral. Similar to Holloway’s critical perspective, Morrison uses the ancestor and the ancestral as a presence that mediates between history and memory. Morrison’s texts (re)member goddesses (Esu), trickster figures, and various personae of the cultural diaspora. The creative world of her texts is part of a community that is simultaneously present and past, temporal and detemporalized. As suggested by Holloway the presence of the ancestral figure can be traced back to black African culture, to an African descent that can establish and redefine the black status within the human community. It is a figure that serves as the ground where Africa meets Afro-America – a speaking voice that fills the discontinuity in history. According to her, the African American women’s text features the presence of a meditative ancestor. Holloway states:

As a metaphorical construction intersecting these texts (black women’s works), the ancestor characterizes the shared textual/cultural histories that collect the writing of African – American women. Still, the author’s use of the ancestral metaphor is stylistically different in each of these stories. Sometimes the presence is meditative and instructive, sometimes it is meditative and condemnatory, sometimes it is meditative and silent. However, because she serves as a recursive touchstone for the simultaneous existence of and revision in the idea of mediation, the ancestral presences constitute the posture of (re)membrane. She is the linking of gender and culture that pulls these writer’s works together. She accomplishes mediation in the connection of her figurative and metaphorical presence to the textual strategies of (re)membrane, revision, and recursion. (26)

The most significant argument in Holloway’s enunciation is that derived from the proposition that “the ancestor’s voice mediates the restructuring of the community” and that the ancestors presence “is figuratively expressed as either a being in the work or as an essence of its mythic world.”(27) These two features of Morrison’s texts are the focus of our critical enquiry.
The defining quality of African American literary texts has been summed up by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in the following statement: “Whatever is black about black American literature is to be found in this identifiable black Signifyin(g) difference.” (28) He asserts that all black literary texts signify upon each other, In discussing this process of black signifyin(g), he records the presence of a central figure who may be traced back to the traditional African culture as Esu Elegbara. In the African American he can be traced as the trickster figure – the Monkey who is Esu’s pan-African cousin. The monkey trickster figure came into being just as Afro-American culture grew out of the remnants of the African culture brought by the slave who survived the dreaded Middle Passage. Esu Elegbara penetrated and survived with the space of American culture through oral narration, myths and songs that the slaves dared not to obliterate. It survived in their music, work songs, and religious songs and in the various stories narrated orally as community narrative. Thus was created a multi-hued culture that later came to be known as African American culture. In the hardship of slavery, where they were denied a home, family, relationship, and above all a traditional guardian, who could soothe them, the search for re-membered ancestor became important for their survival. Esu is the ancestor, the guardian:

In enslavement, black followers of Esu represented him as the liberator of the slaves and as an enemy of the enslavers, “killing, poisoning, and driving mad their oppressors”. Esu, then, assumed a direct importance to the black enslaved, while retaining his traditional functions. The importance of Esu is affirmed by representations of the figure of Esu in both New World and Old World black literature.” (29)

According to the Yuroba myths of Esu Elegbara and the Fon myths of legba, this ancestor figure is ageless, spaceless and genderless. As stated by J. E. and D. M. dos Santos -
Being result and issue, he (Esu) inherits the nature of all the ancestors. He exhibits the characteristics of the male ancestors, the Egun Irunmale, as well as those of the female, the Iyam-mi Aje. By compounding their morphologies, he partakes indifferently of either group and can circulate freely between them all. (30)

This ancestor figure is the topos –

Which functions as a sign of the disrupted wholeness of an African system of meaning and belief that black slaves recreated from memory, preserved by oral narration, improvised upon in ritual – especially in the rituals of the repeated oral narrative – and willed to their own subsequent generations, as hermetically sealed and encoded charts of cultural descent. (31)

Consequently, Esu Elegbara is the ancestor that survived the Middle Passage as the slaves carried him deep within them to the Western world – as a guardian who could not be obliterated, and that the slave chose, by acts of will not to forget. “Esu’s discourse, metaphorically, is double-voiced”. (32) Esu, the ancestor, who is both language and its interpretation becomes the ‘pathfinder’ for the slaves, for it is Esu’s discourse that they fell upon to escape from slavery – a dual language which can be deciphered by the Africans but remains either meaningless or with an altogether different meaning for the slave masters. This dual language was the subtlest weapon of the slaves that helped them in escaping from their master’s hold.

Gates, Jr. traces the presence of this ancestor in black American literature that he calls ‘black signifyin(g)’. Esu Elegbara figures and refigures as the trickster figure in black mythology in Africa, the Caribbean, and South America. As a trickster figure it repeatedly appears and reappears in black cultures and hence can be looked upon as a repeated theme or a trope. Esu occupies a distinctive place in black oral narrative tradition as the mark of ‘blackness’ of African American literature. He represents the speaking black voice in writing. In recovering black experience, Morrison’s narrative space
becomes a ‘(re)vision’ in which the “speaking voice”, the oral narrative tradition of telling stories, is refigured as the presence of the “written voice”. This is facilitated by the fact of Esu being timeless, ageless, and genderless, and hence capable of inheriting the nature of all ancestors. A study of Morrison’s novels based on the critical paradigm that may be derived from Gates, Jr.’s arguments reveals a similar presence cutting across time, space, and gender: figures who operate simultaneously in the Old and the New fictional world between which Morrison negotiates. This figure operate as the surviving African descent establishing and redefining history and memory for the African Americans in their defiance of attempts at erasure. In the narrative space mapping the Middle Passage he exists as the figure bridging the gulf in time and space. In the restating and reinterpreting memory, Esu serves as the imaginary home, the space where Africa meets Afro-America: “For the African-American, retrieval is not possible. Instead, recovery means an act of spiritual memory rather than physical possession.” (33)

The use of the grandfather or the grandmother figure in African American fiction, especially in Morrison’s works can be related to the idea of African family, where the family comprises of the grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, children, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers and cousins. As an idea, the family goes even beyond: “those persons forming the family comprised all the living descendants of the same ancestor, female in the matriarchal system and male in the patriarchal system.” Again the religion, of the Africans “can most accurately be described as ancestor worship. The Africans believed that the spirits of their forefathers had unlimited power over their lives.” (34) In her narrative space Morrison recreates the importance of
these familial connections as contributory to the meaning of the ancestral and also preserves those that add to the value of African American life. One step beyond the family is the idea of the community enlarging beyond the immediate presence in terms of time and space. With the idea of the ancestor and the representative figure of Esu coming together to constitute the depiction of the African American community, the representational paradigm of Gates, Jr. turns out to be significantly effective in understanding Morrison’s art. The narrative almost becomes an objectification of the collective voice of the new home of the Africans in the African diaspora in America and around it. And to trace the structure of this voice, the critical approaches implied in the positions taken by Holloway and Gates, Jr. become the most viable critical tool for the reader. Facing the danger of erasure or getting trapped in the constructions of the white literary critical and cultural establishment as the ‘other’, the ‘imaginary homeland’ pieced together by Morrison or any black writer is a complex cultural entity, the unraveling of the strands of which requires critical perspectives which in themselves take note of the complex cultural canvas, as do those formulated by Holloway and Gates, Jr. Hence their effectiveness in achieving the goal of this study.

The dissertation in the next chapter proposes to survey the idea of the African cosmology as it prevailed in the African homeland and the remnants or the modified structures of it as it exists in the African American society across the experiences of slavery, reconstruction, and migration to build up the context in which the ancestor and the ancestral find their place in African American culture, mainly the literary texts, including those of Morrison. In the third chapter, the presence of the ancestor in some important African
American novels is examined to constitute the literary context in which the art of Morrison may be evaluated as far as the use of the ancestor as a defining quality in concerned. It may be remembered that it is Morrison herself who has commented that the use of the ancestor is one significant marker in the assessment of the achievement of the African American novelist. The next chapter, the fourth, examines the seven novels of Toni Morrison, to map the presence of the ancestor figures in line with the idea that their presence and their relation with the other characters determine the course and quality of life of both individuals and the community. The fifth chapter continues the analysis of the novels to trace the structural metaphors that evoke the cultural presence of the ancestral and create the multi-layered context in which the role of the ancestor figure plays the drama of interaction with the other characters. In the sixth chapter an intertextual study of Morrison’s narrative space is presented where the novels are related to what can be regarded as a seminal African American fictional text dealing with the idea of the ancestor and the ancestral, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, read in the light of Gates, Jr., emphasis on one African American text signifyin(g) on another. The concluding chapter, the seventh, sums up the findings of the analysis and the close readings of Morrison’s texts read from the perspective of her use of the ancestor in the textual space to make an assessment of Morrison’s narrative perspective and art.
References:

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15. Ibid.
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18. Ibid, 2294
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25. Ibid., XIII-IV
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