CHAPTER-1

INTRODUCTION
African-American literature is the body of literature produced in the United States of America by the writers of African descent. It can be traced with writers like Phillis Wheatley, Lucy Terry, Jupiter Hammon, William Wells Brown, Victor Séjour, etc. Phillis Wheatley became the first prominent African American poet who published her book *Poems on Various Subjects* in 1773. Her poetry “was praised by many leading figures of the American Revolution, including George Washington” (Andrews 16). The women writers started writing prose and poetry. The early black female writers were influenced by religious teachings, personal experiences, historical events and their surroundings. They were also darkened by slavery. Literary history took a turn after the “high point of slave narratives” (Andrews 14). Harriet Jacobs, a former slave, in her slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) writing under the name of Linda Brent, reveals the physical, sexual and mental abuses undergone by female slaves. The eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century, black women writers wrote during the darkest time of black history. At that time, they themselves were going through the sufferings, hardships, and tragedies. They defined the constraints of their race, sex, class, and the institution of slavery. Slave narratives can be broadly categorized into three distinct forms: tales of religious redemption, tales to inspire the abolitionist struggle, and tales of progress. The tales written to inspire the abolitionist struggle are most famous because they tend to have a strong autobiographical motif. Two the most well known are Frederick Douglass’s autobiography and Jacobs’ own narrative. Like Jacobs, Douglas wrote *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, an *American Slave* (1845). Later he revised and expanded his autobiography as *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). Slave narrators such as Douglas Brown and Jacobs wrote with a keen sense of their regional identity as Southern expatriates. They formed a field where collective African-American identity could be presented free of the constraints of slavery. Slave narratives written by only slaves in bondage provided, a horrifying portrayal of their dehumanized
subjugated lives. Since some of the slave narratives were published by white editors or addressed to white audience, they were denied the right to articulate their horror of slave experiences. The slave narratives were also written by slaves who escaped to North, which was historically, a slave free state and encouraged by abolitionists who were anti-slavery. Sojourner Truth is one such woman slave who escaped to North in search of freedom. She gave voice to her narrative entitled *Narrative and Book of Life* (1878). In this slave narrative, she delineates the multiple oppressions of a black slave woman, her loss, her denial and her traumatic life as a woman.

From Reconstruction to the end of the century 1868-1899, crossing their way from darkness of slavery illiteracy, the African American women writers began to emerge as novelists, poets, short-story writers, etc. With their writings they began to reshape their race and tried to reform their condition. The first African-American novel published in the United States was Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859). It was rediscovered and republished by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in the early 1980s. He labelled the work ‘fiction and argued that it may be the first novel published by an African-American’ (Moira 119). A genre of African-American literature that flourished in the mid 19th century is the Slave Narrative of fugitives from the South. The cruelties of life under slavery got penned by slaves and are found in the works like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe. As historical sources, slave narratives document slave life primarily in the American South. In 1840s and 50s they depict the strife and struggles of blacks. From a literary standpoint the narratives of former slaves comprise one of the most extensive and influential traditions in African-American literature and culture.

After the end of slavery and the American Civil War, a number of African American Authors continued to write. Non-fiction writer like W.E.B. DuBois wrote about the condition of African Americans in the country. Along with
DuBois, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, etc. gained attention. The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s saw the flowering of literature and arts. While the Harlem Renaissance, based in the African American Community in Harlem in New York City, existed as a larger flowering of social thought and culture – with numerous black artists, musicians, and others producing classic works in fields from jazz to theatre – the renaissance is perhaps best known for the literature that came out. The migration produced a new sense of independence in the black community. 1940s to 1960s made a powerful impression on the empowerment process of the blacks. It was also the time of American Civil Rights Movement (1955-1968). “…just as Black activists were publishing to end segregation and racism and create a new sense of Black nationalism, so too were Black authors attempting to address these issues with their writings” (en.wikipedia.org). It also empowered the growing American Civil Rights Movement, which made a strong impression on black writers during the 1940s, ‘50s and ‘60s. Just as Black activists were pushing to end segregation and racism and create a new sense of Black Nationalism, so too were writers attempting to address these issues with their writings. One of the first writers to do so was James Baldwin, whose work addressed issues of race and sexuality. His novel *Go Tell it on the Mountain* examines different issues. Richard Wright, whom Baldwin called the greatest black writer, too addressed issues of black. His novel *Native Son* (1940) depicts the struggle of a black man struggling for acceptance in Chicago. Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* later followed and won National Book Award in 1953. The Civil Rights time period also saw the rise of female black poets, most notably Gwendolyn Brooks, who became the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize.

Beginning in the 70s, African American literature reached the mainstream as books by Black writers continually achieved best-selling and award-winning status. African American writers were also accepted by academia. Slave
narrators such as Douglas Brown and Jacobs wrote with a keen sense of their regional identity as Southern expatriates. They formed a field where collective African-American identity could be presented free of the constraints of slavery. African-American writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Alex Haley, etc. have been recognised by the highest awards. They have contributed on their own in forming or shaping the history of America as it is. The large overview of the history has its mark with African-American writers who delineate or depict their view of history. Critics view the African-American history with varied issues like African-American culture, racism, slavery and equality. African-American writings have tended to incorporate oral forms, such as sermons, blues, rap, gospel music, etc. Before the American Civil War (1861-1865) the literature primarily consisted of memoirs by people who escaped from slavery. It included accounts of life under slavery and the path of justice and redemption to freedom. With 20th century “non-fiction works by authors such as W.E.B DuBois and Booker T. Washington debated whether to confront or appease racist attitudes in the United States” (Andrews 15). In different terms African-American literature can be defined as the “writings by people of African descent living in the United States” (Carr 10-11). Their literature represents the African-American Experience from their own point of view.

From the historical context of slavery, it is important to note that close to two million slaves were brought to the American South from Africa and the West Indies during the Atlantic Slave Trade. In the antebellum South, slavery provided the economic foundation that supported the planter ruling class. Despite the oppression of this system slaves emerged in numerous antebellum slave narratives as means of resistance. As historical documents, the slave narratives chronicle the evolution of white ruling class in the South. Selling in tens of thousands the narratives stressed how the African-American survived in
slavery, subtly resisting exploitation, occasionally fighting back and escaping elsewhere in the North. The brought slaves were sold on an auction block.

They were subordinated by the Whites and in due course of time these slaves were deprived of the language, symbols, beliefs, traditions, religion, and institution they once had in Africa. The White masters used them as commodities, bringing them down to the level of subhuman beings. They became the victims of racism, and served the needs of white capital masters. (Alladi 18-19)

Gradually the African-American literature began to be defined and analysed. Alex Haley’s *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* etc. made a giant impression on the literary world. One of the contemporary and a landmark in the African American literature, Toni Morrison, emerged as one of the most prominent African-American writers of the 20th century. Morrison helped Promote black literature as a New York editor in the 60s and 70s. Writing in the last quarter of 20th century, Toni Morrison continues the tradition that DuBois’s vision of haunted historical memory has bequeathed.

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 is a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure, so that the presence and the heartbeat of the black people
have been systematically annihilated in many, many ways, and the job of recovery is ours. (Davis 224-5)

Along with Toni Morrison the other noteworthy writers emerged such as, Toni Cade Bambara, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, etc. Some works of these eminent writers have been made into films as well. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) novel has been made into a film by Oprah Winfrey in 1998. Alice walker’s *Color Purple* (1982) has been turned into a film by Steven Spielberg in 1985. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston was turned for TV adaptation in 2005. While it was turned into a film, it did avoid the controversial themes of race, gender, and power. Throughout the American history, African-Americans have been discriminated and have faced racist issues. A community which has experienced a long period of socio-economic exploitation in the past years cannot forget it, even though after making some progress.

Most African-American writers carry the burden of their race in their art and literature. They also try to highlight how the dominant ideology of racism, the class exploitation and the cultural hegemony of the Whites are responsible for their plight. (Kashinath 19)

Earlier the racist society and the effects of it had a strong impression on the minds of black people- the descendents of the African race. In some people “it causes insanity, destructiveness and anarchy, while in some it breeds sanity, balance and constructive behaviour” (G.Laxminarasaih 07). Some constructive,
well known, legendary figures though have tried to scale heights in the racial world. There have been a couple of notable blacks who have come out of the racial gorge confidently, like Harriet Tubman, who had the grit to fight against all odds of slavery. Martin Luther King Jr., who played a very prominent role as a leader in the African-American Civil Rights Movement, George Washington Carver, who had to take pains to pursue his education because he was Black. He is known for inventing peanut butter and other products. Michael Jordon, an African-American icon in sports, Will Smith, Oprah Winfrey, Rosa Parks, etc. all pitted their best in a white supremacy society. Last but not the least Michael Jackson has made his mark in the racist society in his time.

African American Literature exists both inside and outside the American literature in the sense that though it has been marginalized but it is an integral part of the mainstream literature. With notable achievers like, Jamaica Kincaid, Gayl Jones, Randall Kenan, etc. it has reached new heights. Maya Angelou read a poem at President Bill Clinton’s inauguration; Rita Dove won a Pulitzer Prize and served as a Poet Laureate of the United States, and even lesser known poets like Thylias Moss, James Emanuel, Natasha Trethewey, etc. have also been praised for their innovative work. Edward P. Jones won the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *The Unknown World*; his novel is about a black slaveholder in the antebellum South. On the whole even after such wide-scale literary encompassment, African American literature is still at times looked as the literature of the minorities. It has been relegated to a different level. Even though African Americans have long claimed an American identity, during most of United States history they were not accepted as full citizens. As a result they were part of America while also being outside it. But African American literature exists as its own entity. As a result, new styles of storytelling and unique voices are created in isolation. The benefit of this is that these new styles and voices can leave their isolation and help revitalize the larger literary world.
This artistic pattern has held true with many aspects of African American culture over the last century, with jazz and hip hop being just two artistic examples that developed in isolation within the black community before reaching a larger audience and eventually revitalising American culture.

Toni Morrison, the Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize winning author has contributed in the making of African-Americans as people and not faces. She was born in February 1931, in Lorain, Ohio. Morrison credits her parents George Wofford and Ramah Wofford with instilling in her a love of reading, folklore and evidently her roots. Her father had reasons to escape racial oppression in Georgia and relocate in the North. In contrast, Morrison’s mother was a gentler, less confrontational parent to young Chloe Anthony Wofford, who would become world-renowned Toni Morrison, 1993 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. A voracious reader, she graduated from Lorain High School with Honours and went up to Howard University. She wrote her thesis on Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner. Later her marriage to Harold Morrison lasted few years. Morrison has worked as Professor and Editor. At Random House she edited works for authors like Toni Cade Bambara and Gayle Jones. Morrison authored her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970). According to her, her first novel sold for racial reasons: Random House wanted a black writer in its stable. After four years she wrote *Sula* (1974) which continues her demarcation of the black woman’s world. *Song of Solomon* (1977) shows her vision of collective unconsciousness and wisdom sprung from surviving. It was awarded 1978 National Books Critics Award. *Tar Baby* (1982) followed it and Morrison became the first black woman championed in a cover story for *Newsweek*, which heralded her as the top black writer in the United States. In 1987, her master work *Beloved* was published. It probed the pains of a mother slave and act of infanticide. She was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for this novel. *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1997), *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012) and *God Help the
Child (2015), all followed suit after this glorious recognition of Toni Morrison. Her works have been widely received as major landmarks in the African-American literature. Also she has to her credits- Children’s Literature, Short fiction, Plays, Libretti, Non-fiction and Articles. She has been a recipient of numerous awards, prizes, nominations and honours. But the outstanding one is yet again (after the Nobel Prize) the ‘Presidential Medal of Freedom 2012’ by the President of the United States-Barack Obama, who happens to be the first African-American to hold the office and Toni Morrison, the first African-American to win the Nobel.

In the lineage of African-American writers Toni Morrison stands out for her eminent writings. Her world mingles past and present and ‘all things are seemingly possible’ (Crayton 09). Currently Morrison is world’s most renowned and respected African-American novelist. Her subjects vary in different time zones or eras. The Bluest Eye (1970) traces a black girl’s quest for white values. The protagonist, Pecola Breedlove, aspires to acquire ‘Blue Eyes’ which again is believed to be a symbol of the beauty as that of Shirley Temples’ in the novel. The quest for blue eyes culminates in madness and in the process destroys Pecola. On the one hand Toni Morrison depicts the Macteers family with an inner strength to withstand the poverty and discrimination of a racist society and to provide an environment in which their children can grow. Pecola’s family, on the other hand, is without those resources. Thus Morrison “reveals how white Eurocentric standards of beauty and self play havoc with the lives of these girls” (Kashinath 36).

Sula (1974) projects the complexity of relationships. Female bonding, black community unlike the white’s life it is the black’s life, so on and so forth is taken up in this second novel of Morrison. Sula is the main black female character, the iconoclast.
Morrison’s focus shifts to the African-American woman as an individual, struggling towards freedom and selfhood. Sula hates the traditional norms of feminine respectability like family, marriage, children, parental care, sexual mores and the concepts of a steady job. She hates to see a woman only as a wife, mother and daughter. In Sula Morrison attempts to show the individuality of an African-American woman, struggling for emancipation and identity”. (Arya 13)

*Song of Soloman* (1977) has a more focal point of class in relation to race and gender. Toni Morrison deals with initiation and quest for family roots, which, in turn, are linked to the search of African-American cultural heritage. The protagonist is a black male called Milkman Dead. The novel moves beyond the intimacy of the enclosed communities found in her first two novels. *Song of Solomon* “gives an interesting example of the manner in which equations of power and the levels of class, gender, and race operate in a literary work” (Arya 13).

*Tar Baby* (1981) speaks what is left unspoken in Morrison’s earlier novels. Morrison does not connect the issues of class, race and gender with the earlier times or periods. Morrison places them in the contemporary context. The two central characters Son and Jadine are sharply divided in their attitudes, views towards the ruling class as well as their own culture. The novel in all exposes the conflicts that result from the cultural encounter between the colonizers and colonized.

Toni Morrison’s masterpiece *Beloved* (1987) ultimately gave her the much acclaimed Nobel Prize. It is based on slavery and a real case of female
foeticide by Margaret Garner (a runaway slave). The history that is ‘alternate’ as Morrison believes is given ink to. The novel is based on the most oppressed period of slavery in the history of African-American people. *Beloved* dramatizes a haunting amalgam of past and present experiences of an escaped female slave Sethe and her quest for wholeness in slavery and freedom. The novel explores the strife and struggles of Sethe and her family during the Reconstruction era. The role of community, collectivism, plays a major part in the eradication of racial oppression and class exploitation of African people.

On a socio-psychological level, *Beloved* is the story of Sethe Suggs’ quest for social freedom and psychological wholeness. Sethe struggles with the haunting memory of her slave past and the retribution of Beloved, the ghost of the infant daughter that she killed in order to save her from the living death of slavery. On a legendary and mythic level, *Beloved* is a ghost story that frames embedded narratives of the impact of slavery, racism, and sexism on the capacity for love, faith and community of black families, especially of the black women, during the Reconstruction period”.

(Bell 46)

In *Jazz* (1992) Toni Morrison adds a new dimension to the remedy for the African issues and questions. Morrison’s purpose in this novel is to make fiction do what music does – bond and help the black community per se`. She exploits the popular 1920s’ music mode of Jazz to depict the experience of the black community. The novel depicts the path to understanding of self, Violet, a wronged woman, comes to in her relationships with other black women – Dorcas, Alice, and Felice. Defining themselves through bonding on various
levels – physical, intellectual, emotional and psychic – with other black women, these black women seek their own identity.

Continuing the trilogy with *Beloved*, *Jazz*, is *Paradise* (1997). All the three works explore the themes from African-American history. *Beloved* deals with slavery; *Jazz* with urban life in the Jazz era; and *Paradise* is set in contemporary times. It is a work in which African-American women of various ages and varied backgrounds find freedom and happiness in a convent. The place is Oklahoma, far away in isolation. It is again a ‘far away’ from a racial and sexually oppressive society. But unfortunately it is short-lived ‘Paradise’. The patriarchal society does not allow this kind of paradise to exist and is all out to question, threaten, its existence. The dominant ‘Ruby’ is all for the extinguishment of this kind of living.

*Love* (2003) is Morrison’s novel in the non-linear style. It is a kind of tangled web with lives of several women and their relationships to the late Bill Cosey. Morrison jumps back and forth throughout the story, not fully unfolding until the very end. Morrison delivers a vivid and stirring account of the turmoil that ensues when young women are deprived of the parental – but mostly paternal – love and guidance that is their birthright. With this novel she targets her female and black audience, sketching African-American characters and brings the flashbacks of Civil Rights Movement. *Love* brings the importance of communication, self-esteem, education, soul-searching, relationships, etc. which are universal. Here she transcends gender and race.

*A Mercy* (2008) again takes the reader back to the times of slavery. It revolves around a slave, Florens, on a plantation in Maryland. The owners, Jacob and Rebekka are relatively humane – along with other characters which create the wilderness a more brutal part of the society that they live in. Morrison’s lyricism infuses the shifting voices of her characters as they take
hold of the reader and does not let go until the wrenching finale of crescendo at the end of the page. The novel also focuses on the Eden-like quality in the beauty and richness of the new world though diseases like measles and smallpox runs rampant. Morrison examines the concepts of freedom and slavery in every man (and woman), not just within the context of the African-American experience. She examines the power of literacy is by no means a right. Biblical themes are present with America as the Promised Land. The variability of love is demonstrated through the relationships in the novel – relationships between mother and child, between husband and wife, between two males and between lovers. Finally acts of kindness and humanity – large and small – run through the story, showing that it is not so much God’s mercy that rescues us as much as it is our mercy to one another.

*Home* (2012) the tenth of Morrison’s novels encompasses the pre-civil rights era south, where blacks were treated as ‘dogs’. It (*Home*) revisits the theme of the prodigal son. The protagonist Frank Money returns from the horrors of Korean War. He has no intention to return to Lotus, Ga., and the hometown he has always loathed until he receives a letter about his sister, Cee. The novel speaks about Frank’s journey home to rescue his beloved sister and save his self in the process. Frank is a modern Odysseus returning to a 1950s America mined with lethal pitfalls for an unwary black man. As he journeys to his native Georgia in search of Cee, it becomes clear that their troubles began well before their wartime separation. Together, they return to their rural hometown of Lotus, where buried secrets are unearthed and Frank learns at last what it means to be a man, what it takes to heal, and – above all – what it means to come home.

*God Help the Child* (2015) is Morrison’s eleventh novel. It tells about a young girl with a blue-black skin, Lula Ann Bridewell. Her parents neglect and abuse her because of the color of her skin. Ironically calling herself as “Bride”,

14
she turns into a heads-turning beauty. Bride dresses in whites only in order to highlight and reflect her. As a child her mother “Sweetness” punished her for her failure of marriage. Her husband Louis could not bring himself to love a child as dark skinned as Bride. The novel though reminds of the child abuse in *The Bluest Eye*. But all in all, *God Help the Child* celebrates characters who achieve selfhood in spite of childhood suffering.

Toni Morrison’s writings take the task of re-construction, re-visioning and re-visiting of the past history.

Against the systematic ‘systematic annihilation’ of the presence and heartbeat of black Americans, Morrison’s novels constitute a resurrection of witnessing, staking out and identifying those who have come before is, as she says, just one part of the process, and it is a part with which Morrison’s fiction is abidingly, even increasingly, occupied. Her later novels, *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992), have been even more thoroughly focused on specific historical moments than her earlier ones, and, through their engagement with the history of slavery and early twentieth-century Harlem, have imagined and memorialised aspects of black history that have been forgotten or inadequately remembered. Bearing witness to the past, Morrison’s novels can also be seen as ceremonies of proper burial, an opportunity to put painful events of the past in a place where they no longer haunt successive generations”. (Matus 02)
The writings of Morrison present the ‘alternate history’ which has a different layer along with the documented history. But her history is very attentive to historical specificity. She offers ways of imagining the subject in history. Her novels offer readers different ways of relating to the past and the future and therefore of ‘being in history’ (Bloch 229). The subtle depiction of interwoven historical layered texts reminds readers that there is a past to remember and recollect. In doing so, Morrison ‘challenge versions of the American past that have excluded or overlooked African-American collective memory’ (Matus 03). While Morrison’s fiction is absolutely rooted in black traditions; it is of course never simply a mouthpiece or vehicle of propaganda promoting some vague notion of “Black worth.” While the author obviously participates in the ongoing African American struggle for genuine emancipation and equality, her novels never blindly endorse the forms that that struggle have taken. Her approach to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, for example, or the Black Power movement of the 1960s is one of analysis and critical engagement rather than wholehearted celebration. She looks behind and beyond the prevailing myths of black history as well as white. Morrison proceeds to claim a special status for the ‘imagination’. It pierces the areas that seem erased from history.

The process of remembering and coming to turns with memories of past, evident pre-eminently in Beloved and Jazz – the first two part of a trilogy of novels charting the history of African-Americans – is also a concern in her earliest work, The Bluest Eye (1970), whose narrator is wrestling with childhood memories and her implication in the tragic fate of Pecola Breedlove”. (Matus 17)
In Morrison’s view, history can never be over or end. It is an ongoing process with effects on the present and which shapes the future. She says that if there is to be ‘any kind of lasting illumination the focus must be on the history routinely ignored or played down or unknown’ (Morrison x.). The question that one needs to ask here is – what is the relation of history (and its traumatic effects) to fiction? Morrison uses the narrative forms which speak of the repressions, hallucinations and discontinuities associated with trauma. Her characters are haunted by history, suffering from trauma, memory dysfunction and unresolved losses. Many critics have raised the question of traumatic experiences that characters undergo in relation to slavery and its effects on the mind or psyche. The potential danger as a ‘victim’ implies the African-Americans as victims, as whole, of the institution of slavery per se. But then on the other hand, ‘under traumatic circumstances – generations of slavery, oppression and racism – a rich culture of resistance, survival, and heroism and celebration may exist’ (Hooks 216-17). In order to explore further and dive deep into the intricate patterns of Morrison’s novels, it is important to revisit or glance back into the history – the history of African-Americans in the United States. As Melvin Drimmer suggests;

“Amerika, du hast es besser”, wrote the aged Goethe and Americans have agreed. America was created as a paradise, a garden supposedly free of the problems that afflicted the old world. Yet we have been unable to reconcile America’s original sin, Negro racism, with the image of the paradise. (Drimmer 75)

When we glance through the history of America we find it full of barbarism, violence and bloodshed against African-Americans. It is generally
agreed that for the first time a large number of blacks were brought to Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619. And since then the history of enslavement began. The white created complicated cultural and legal system in order to justify discrimination against the African-Americans. According to them Africans-Americans were “without souls, a strange exotic new kind of creature” (Kashinath 02). The status of the Negro was that of servants. They were maltreated and persecuted by the whites. The African American race was ghettoized, persecuted, and viciously outlawed from all avenues of decency, hope, progress and livelihood. The racial inferiority of the African-Americans and hence the discriminatory principles against them were supposedly proved through various studies. As Barbara Christian explains:

The characteristics of Blacks’ racial inferiority, which Jefferson had so impressionistically discussed in the 1790s, were, by the 1830s, buttressed by scientific argument. Ethnological writers such as Richard Colfax, Samuel Cartwright and Josiah Nott detailed the physical deficiencies of the Negro, his cranial characteristics, his facial angles, and concluded that intellectually the Negro was incapable of being the equal of Whites. Their utterances quickly became a racist ideology in the United States. This school of thought also had polygamous tendencies, however that is, many ethnological writers believed the different races of men had different origins and that God created many pairs of the human race”. (Christian 186)

The African-American women were in a much serious condition. There state was grim and totally oppressed. They were twice oppressed – first being a
woman and second being a black. One would even go further and add third as ‘poor’. Likewise, the triple enslavement of a racist, patriarchal and a classist society forms. African-American women suffered in silence and mute. They were marginalized to say the least.

From time to time in America various individuals and groups besides Negros have been victims of prejudice, discrimination, injustice, persecution, and outright murder … But it has been the Negro woman, more than anyone else, who has borne the constant agonies of racial barbarity in America from the very first day. She was brought in chains to the soil. The Negro woman through the years has suffered (and endured) every sexual outrage (with all of the psychological ramifications) that a democratic society can possibly inflict upon a human being. The sexual atrocities that the Negro woman has suffered in the United States, South and North, and what these atrocities have done to her personality as a female character, is a tale more bloody and brutal than most of us can imagine”. (Hernton 123)

The African-American women had to undergo a worst kind of exploitation; the white male dominancy took gruesome levels and made these women their sexpots. The African-American woman was abused and beaten. They were sexually exploited to the extent that they were branded with hot irons. The white owners used letters of their names and branded the black women on their cheeks or insides of their legs so as to establish their ownership. They were the breeding pots and were defined in terms of their capacity. Those ‘who did try to oppose were cruelly beaten, lynched and burnt alive’ (Arya 05).
Their bodies were used and exploited for procreating more and more slaves. Looking carefully at this issue from a historical angle, one must consider the relationship between the white men and black women. During the period of slavery the issue of sex and miscegenation were crucial, in that they were pivotal points on which the entire social and cultural life of the plantation existed. In the black woman, the white man/master found somebody whom he could use without making any commitments. This led to continuous use and abuse, also to the cunning creation of a certain paradox – that the seemingly ignorant and innocent black woman was full of clever wiles with which she enticed the white man into her bed. The dilemma of miscegenation was an accepted fait accompli, since the mercenary planters saw in it something beneficial to their economic well-being. And therefore the white men treated them less as humans and more like chattels. Each new child was looked upon as a means of improving economic condition by the whites. Drimmer gives a picture with clear clarity in his words:

She [a girl about twenty years of age] … is very prolific in her generating qualities, and affords a rare opportunity for any person who wishes to raise a family of strong, healthy servants for… [his] own use… (Drimmer 75)

Not only the African-American women were forced to breed, their physical recuperation was a thing of far. They had to come back to the work soon after childbirth and the rapaciousness of the whites forced them to do both a man’s work and woman’s work. Their children were brought to field and the black woman was given little breaks to nurse them. The black women lived in continuous fear of losing her child to some other slave owner in transaction.
Whites forced African-American women to be servants of their women and wet nurses for their children while their own children were neglected. The poor black woman slave was thrust under by a capitalist society which saw her as an inexpensive commodity, and therefore utilized her to the utmost, without any sense of guilt. ‘Not only white but African-American men also discarded them, so they were “black among blacks” and “slave of the slaves” (Arya 06). During Slavery African American Women were supposed to nurture their families and protect their family members in the absence of their husbands, a responsibility which they managed well. As they had to be tough and strong in order to look after their families, African American men began to think of them as masculinised, castrating, domineering, and unfeminine. The abolition of slavery by law mitigated their agony to some extent. However, it could not eradicate all their pain and sufferings. Even after the abolition of slavery they continued to be ill-treated by the whites. African-American men became sharecroppers, and African-American women were taken as housemaids of the whites. White men were free to sexually exploit them still. They characterized them as “loose”. They labelled blacks as “lewd, lascivious and wanton” (Christian 183). African-American men started to emulate the norms of white men. On the obvious level, he had some amount of sympathy for her; he also had a great weight of helplessness pressing down on him which prevented him from aiding her. On the psychic level or reality, he felt unwanted and inadequate. The creation of the “loose woman” image corroded the black man-woman bond. To the black man his woman appeared to prefer the white man. As a result they themselves joined hands with their victimizers and started to despise their own women. Hence African-American women became desperate to prove their value as human beings.
“[T]hat man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriage, or over mud puddle, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arms! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I would work and eat as much as a man – when I could get it _ and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children and seen them most of all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?” (Lowenberg and Bogin 235)

It is the latter half of the nineteenth century that the long awaited momentous awakening came. Women started to protest against patriarchal hegemony and male domination. Feminism broadly refers to this movement which fights for the parity of all women with men. It protests against the prevalent disparities and inequities and strives to break from the stultifying male ideology. The feminists tried to break away from all that was at disparate level. Their movement was one for economic, social and gender inequalities. Many women writers wrote about this. One of the most prominent writers who became well known with A Room of One’s Own (1929) was Virginia Woolf. She advocates gender equalities and was very conscious of the discrimination practised against women in education. French feminist Simone de’ Beauvoir claimed that ‘humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but in relation to him’ (Beauvoir 16). Kate Millet in Sexual Politics (1970) suggests that patriarchy is the sole cause of women’s subordination and subjugation. Elaine Showalter’s A Literature of Their Own (1977) examines British women authors since the Brontes from experience of women’s point of view. Whereas
the American feminists like Clara Thompson, Byatt, etc. criticized ‘Freud’ for considering women as inferior to man by concept of ‘phallic disparity’. The forgoing discussion shows that women in all cultures have suffered under patriarchal hegemony. But the condition of African-American women was the worst. ‘…the life of African-American woman was more miserable, since she had to experience more pain and anguish than other groups of women. She was the triple sufferer, a victim of racism, sexism, and classism’ (Arya 13).

African-American women realized that the feminist movement did not address their issues and felt rejected. The African-American was not gender oppressed, but the African American men were Black but not female, and the white female were female but were not black so they did not understand the plight of African-American women. It is only African American women who had to confront the twin problems of being black and being vulnerable women. So the agony was on the part of African-American women who were in the most vulnerable position. Having been marginalized by both, the white women’s movement and the African-American male liberation, the African-American female became aware of their own identity and work. Before the Civil Rights movement only two literary traditions were in vogue, the White American tradition and the African American male tradition. Since 1970s the African-American women’s literature tradition also gained requisite and added a whole new dimension to the African-American women and their issues. The words of Toni Morrison befit this as ‘Puri’ quotes: “We have spoken of Renaissance before, but this one is ours, not somebody else”. (Puri 156)

The problems before the African-American women manifold. They vehemently opposed issues of inequity, segregation, racism, and sexism. They stepped ahead to prove themselves by fighting their own case. In literary fields,
the African-American women writers made a vital contribution. Before abolition of slavery some white writers wrote about the plight of African-American women but lacked the depth of their plight. Even the African-American male writers mimicked white writers but they too lacked the African-American women’s experience or perspective. So the African-American women came forward to represent their cause and prove their potential by securing their rights too.

On account of black and female, African-American women authors found it difficult to get their works published. These specimens of talent and wisdom were marginalized such as – Paul Marshall, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Alexis De Veau and Toni Morrison. All these writers followed the path of their pioneer, Zora Neale Hurston, who instituted a new age for the African-American women writers in the 1940s. These writers continue their quest for self. Nothing can stop them; their works reflect their desperate search for self – identity”. (Arya 21)

Earlier African American women authors such as Frances Harper, Jessie Fauset, Ann Petry and Nella Larsen presented in their writings African American women characters, which they believed, would be liked and admired by white readers. Writers like Frances Harper (in Iola Leroy) has been appealing for justice to African Americans who were being executed, burnt, raped and deprived of their rights as citizens. She wishes to draw the attention of white readers by making a lady-like version of the heroine, Iola Leroy, whom the whites could admire although she is black. During Harlem Renaissance another African American woman author named Jessie Fauset wrote in order to
influence the white reader. Both the writers, Harper and Fauset, were conscious of the white American mindset regarding African American people. Nella Larsen also presented a category of female characters that would be approved by the whites. In *Quick sand*, Larsen’s heroine, Helga Crane, mimics the white norms so much that she almost becomes an alien in her own community. Ann Petry too creates female protagonists who wish to pass for whites. But there is a remarkable exception to this trend in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937). It marks a radical change in African American women’s novels. Hurston’s heroine becomes the prototype for female characters like Shug in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Sula in Morrison’s *Sula* and Eva Carada in Gayl Jone’s *Eva’s Man*. Hurston is also the first African American woman writer who draws on folklore, myth and history of African American people. All her heroines discover their self-fulfilment through community, the search for symbiotic relationship between man and woman, African American sorority, and the importance of fidelity in interpersonal relationships. Unlike Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen, she neither presents the crude bitterness against the white society nor employs the “passing” theme (Arya 23). The language of her fiction also differs from her contemporaries. Her literary themes and concerns are closely interwoven with her real-life experiences. Her female protagonists constantly strive for self-esteem and emancipation. In its radical envisioning of the self as central and its use of language as a means of exploring of the self as female and black, *Their Eyes were Watching God* is a forerunner of fiction of the 70s and 80s.

creatures into self-conscious rebels who meet the challenges of the world and seek to define their identity within the context of their own culture.

A vast change came over the writings of African-American women due to Civil Rights Movement of 1960s. For a long time, African Americans intentionally tried to forget their bitter history. But this period brought a new dimension to the African American literary traditions. The writers of this time became anxious to relate their past to the present. Here the terminology “womanism” got coined by Alice Walker and explained in detail within her work *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens* (1983). Walker maintains that ‘womanism expresses women’s concern better than ‘feminism’. In her own words:

1. From *womanish* (opposite of “girlish”, i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious). A black feminist or feminist of color…

2. *Also*: a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility … and women’s strength. Sometimes *loves* individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female …


4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.
Walker’s *Meridian*, one of the most celebrated novels, reflects her strong belief in the black womanist tenets. Interestingly the first part of the novel describes Meridian’s initiation into adulthood and the beginnings of her search for her black woman self. Meridian’s quest for black womanhood finally turns into a concern for the benefit of the entire African American community. The novel creates an image of the African American woman in all her complexity, diversity and depth. Thus, by the mid 70s African American women writers such as Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara and Toni Morrison have provided space for the problems of African American women in their literary writings.

Toni Morrison belongs to this convention of Alice Walker and others. Her novels raise the issues of racism, sexism and classism. She looks at these issues as interlinked and her novels are based on these although each work and its focus vary. For Morrison and her black female characters vary in thematic way, her treatment of their problems have different magnitude. They have depth and they emerge as individuals striving for their identity and self. Toni Morrison fills her corpus with the dominant themes such as construction of a composite black feminine self, reconstruction of black womanhood, celebration of black women’s sexuality and so on. Morrison’s novels shape Morrison’s future as a writer. The following chapter of this research provides in-depth analysis of *The Bluest Eye* as a picture of racial oppression. Though the novel is based on a small black girl against the backdrop of racial scenario, it echoes the legacy of slavery, its multiple layers of discrimination and a wounded black psyche. Over forty years after its publication, *The Bluest Eye* remains an important and confronting work. The novel’s central concerns of racial segregation, inequality of opportunity, and loss of identity are still relevant today.
In October 1995, hundreds of thousands of African-Americans rallied in Washington, D.C., to take part in the Million Man March. The march was aimed at encouraging African-American men to improve their families and communities. Many of the crowd voiced their anger at what they perceived as the unequal treatment of African-Americans. The United States has achieved significant progress, but there is still work to be done before true racial equality exists. Until this happens, Pecola and the Breedloves’ haunting story will remain powerfully relevant.”
(Colson 48)

In conclusion, it is difficult to conceptualize American history or compartmentalize it in an unemotional way. Though history is based on facts and figures, it is hard not to feel the effects of history. The most affecting period has been the ‘slavery period’ right from the sixteenth to nineteenth century. With the institution of slavery, it is impossible to give accurate figures as for how many slaves were brought from Africa to make the United States (especially the South) into a flourished land. Some historians estimate around six to seven millions during eighteenth century alone. Slavery provided the economic foundation that supported the dominant planter ruling class. It is after the Civil War that the Southern ruling class was compelled to restructure as well as reconstruct the economic system. For millions of African-Americans, the end of slavery brought hope for unprecedented control of their own lives and economic prospects. However, most black southerners found themselves drawn into an exploitative share-cropping system that prohibited their becoming property owners with a chance to claim their share of the American Dream. The rural black masses and the post-reconstruction South were gradually subjected to a cradle – to – grave segregation regime.
In terms of literary contexts for slavery or slave the historical documents of slave narratives took form and played a major role in documenting the evolution of white supremacy in the South from eighteenth century slavery through early twentieth century segregation. They form the eye – witness accounts or I-witness accounts, revealing their struggles, sorrows, aspirations and triumphs in compellingly personal story – telling. Usually the antebellum slave narrator portrays slavery as a condition of extreme physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual deprivation, a kind of hell on earth. Impelled by the faith in God and a commitment to liberty and human dignity, the slave undertakes an arduous quest for freedom that climaxes in his or her arrival in the North. Over the centuries the place of African-Americans changed in American society. At the turn of the twentieth century writers like W.E.B DuBois and Booker T. Washington debated whether to confront or appease racist attitudes in the United States. Though today the African-American literature has become and accepted as an integral part of American literature with books such as *Roots* by Alex Haley and his *The Saga of an American Family*, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, a Pulitzer Prize winner, and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, achieving both the best – selling and award – winning status, which made Toni Morrison stand out among many. It earned her ‘Nobel’ for literature in 1993.

Morrison’s writings depict that ‘experience’ of being African-American and which provides an alternate history – a history which is not documented and yet is a part of the black history on the whole. That ‘felt experience’ of a black person can only be so much discussed. Morrison explores it to the core. A number of angles present Morrison’s writings/novels as a whole. Racism, culture, sexism, issues of freedom, horrors of slavery, justice, oppression, dehumanization, search for roots, maternal roles,
abounds the novels of Morrison. Joyner quotes Morrison’s words; “writing is about danger for me; its like life – you can go under”.
(Joyner 06)

Many critics and reviewers have tried to place Morrison. Because of her subject matter she was proclaimed a black writer or an African-American writer and at times a woman writer. For her choice of settings she was named an Americanist inheriting the questions examined by William Faulkner or Ernest Hemingway. Because of her style she was a Modernist working with experimental form. Because she exploited the marvellous and the supernatural she was a magical realist. All the above proves that Morrison is all these but also ‘herself’. Her novels are unique and can be rightly termed as ‘Morrisonian’.

“I refuse to let them off the hook’, she said in 1988, ‘about whether I’m Black woman writer or not, I’m under a lot of pressure to become something else. That is why there is so much discussion of how my work is influenced by other “real” writers, for example white Southern writers whom I’m constantly compared to.” (Joyner 07)

Morrison’s subject is always related to the ‘Funk – the traditional values. Toni Morrison’s observations about the erasure of the past and the need to reclaim it signal a concern with history in all her works. She takes the task of recovery seriously. Recovering the ‘presence and the heartbeat of the black people’ in America. Her later novels Beloved and Jazz have been thoroughly focused on specific historical moments than her earlier ones, and through their
engagement with ‘history of slavery and early twentieth century Harlem, have imagined and memorialized aspects of black history’ (Matus 03).

The following chapter would focus upon effects of racism, the hard life of the blacks in the Great Depression period, exacting white standards, African-American women’s psychological dilemmas, oppressions and trials. The struggle starts from the very first novel of Morrison for personal and racial identity. The characters in the novel strive hard to come at par with the white standards. At a time when the Black Aesthetic Movement was calling for positive representations and role models, Morrison created troubled and traumatised characters. Her insistence on making the reader share through Pecola the trauma of racism and its effects was a way of signalling the far-reaching range and insidious nature of those effects and their causes. The body of the novel contains hatred of Breedlove family for each other, the racial predicament and Pecola’s psychological traumas. Pecola is also a symbol of the black community’s self-hatred and belief in its own ugliness, whereas the narrator Claudia presents the perspective with clarity. She is a messenger of suffering but also of hope. Morrison has turned this novel not into a straight, simple, one story but into contradictory and interlocking stories. Characters tell stories to make sense of their lives and these stories have tremendous power for both – good and evil. The novel raises many questions and troubling issues as how Morrison shows via the character of Pecola the hostility of the society as a whole. How does racial self-hatred manifest itself in the characters like Maureen Peal, Geraldine, and Soaphead Church? What role does social class play in the novel? How does the backdrop of Southern life reflected in the novel? How can Cholly Breedlove commit the unimaginable crime of raping his own daughter? All these and many more evoke a kind of inquisitiveness in the reader and make the reader plunge deeper and deeper into the layered visions of Morrison’s writings.
REFERENCES


**WEB SOURCES**

http://www.en.wikipedia.org

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American_Literature