CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

African-American literature is literature written by, about and sometimes specifically for African-Americans. Mostly African-Americans are descendants of captive Africans held in the United States from 1619 to 1865. Blacks from the Caribbean Islands whose ancestors immigrated to the U.S., have been traditionally considered as African-Americans, as they shared a common history of Central African roots and of slavery. It is those people who in the past were referred to and self-identified collectively as American Negro, now generally consider themselves as African-Americans.

African-American literature is the body of the literature produced in the United States by writers of African descent. The genre began during the 18th and 19th century with writers such as poet Philis Wheatley and orator Frederick Douglas, reached at early high point with Harlem Renaissance and continues to the present day with writers such as Toni Morrison occupies a dominant position for herself, as she is the only Nobel laureate black female American writer, who ever portrays the alienated individuals
odyssey for attaining the integration of the self by assimilating and
discarding the social values of the community, they live in.

Toni Morrison is one of the most prolific and powerful writers
of African-American contemporary fiction. The 1993 Nobel Prize
winner's works continue to be heavily debated, explicated and
theorized as she continues to write more novels. Due to Morrison's
multilayered, non-linear and dialectic approaches to her writing,
her works evoke endless discussion. In her works she addresses
the position of the African-Americans in the contemporary world.
Born as a black, she always deals with the quest to understand
identity, its formation and potential, its determinant and crises.
She presents the predicament of the loss of sense of belongingness.
In her fiction, Morrison is specially concerned with the way that
African-American Individuals and Communities are expressive or
silent with a dominant culture which historically has been
intolerance of racial difference.

Since her childhood, she had learned from her parents that
racial politics was a reality by which every African-American had to
contend. It is no surprise, therefore, that her novels reflect both the
pessimism that racism produces and the optimism that has
empowered blacks to survive and thrive in spite of racism. For
Morrison, to write about race is not a matter of parading her characterization as a way to depict essential traits and universal experiences of African-Americans, the unified people. It is admitting that race determines, "if not how one perceives the world, them at least how is one perceived by the world."1 Being black, she herself feels the pain of blackness. As she said, “I feel personally sorrowful about black-white relation a lot of the time because black people have always been used a buffer in this country between power to prevent class wars, to prevent other kinds of real conflagrations. if there were no black people here in this country, it would have been Balkanized.”2

For Morrison, all good art has been political and the black artist has a responsibility to the black community. She aims at capturing the something that makes a book black. She thinks that one characteristic of black writers is the "quality of hunger and disturbance, that never ends."3 She believes that the black writer can bring "something unique approximating the profound depths of black music ... to fiction; an ineffable quality ... that is curiously black."4 Her novels bear witness to the experiences of the black community. Her Novel, *Beloved* is inspired by a true story of Margaret Garner, who killed her infants to save them from slavery.
In it, Morrison portrays very effectively the pain and deep frustration of the black community. This novel creates the record of success and popularity and also won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for her.

All of Morrison's novels begin with the Individuals who have an unsatisfactory relation to themselves and other. They lack a true sense of centeredness- a core self and they are drawn to body of others in order to restore the integrity of their own. Boundaries must be blurred before they can remade. As in Beloved, the violent fragmentation of the sense of self-experienced by the characters is a process which initiates their rebirth. Morrison's novels appear to criticize the feminist doctrine of unconditioned freedom. Her fiction characters are struggling for their liberation from being manipulated by a corporate society reeling under the throes of capitalism and thereby save themselves from self-mutilation. They are in dynamic involvement with and at the same time are critically opposed to the system of society in which they live in order to assert their feminine self. In her novels, she explores what she believes to be one of the most damaging components of sexist and racist oppression on black women: the perpetuation by the larger society of a physical Anglo-Saxon standard of female beauty as a
measurement of self worth. She said, "The concept of physical
beauty as a virtue, is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and
destructive ideas of the Western world, and we should have nothing
to do with it. Physical beauty has nothing to do with our past,
present and future."\(^5\)

Each of Morrison's novels demonstrates what the community
can or should offers to its members by the way of identity and
place. And although a protagonist may reject community, their
remains a utopian desire to create an identity with the other in the
hope of alleviating the alienation, loneliness and stasis learned and
felt by the privatized American self. The present study is closely
related to that quest of identity and place, which makes an
individual became alienated from his/her society. Migration does
not leave problems behind, instead it bring them to city which
causes isolation and break with the sense of community. However,
the loss of self drives characters to search for a sense for family or
community as for individual identity. Morrison's work suggests that
one way people feel at home is to feel that they are unified within
themselves by the various determinants of their identity and that
those determinants work in a accord with a collective sense of
themselves as a port of their larger community.
Morrison in her novels demonstrates that the self is always and forever inextricably linked to the community. Due to this phenomena in thought, word or deed, its members return to the community, the neighbourhood, the clan to become shaped or misshaped by their reciprocate influence. She has always placed an individual within the context of the society or rather; the society performed a crucial part in the formation of an individual. One has always been surrounded by other members of the community, therefore, the development of the "I" could only be achieved among others. Morrison invites the contemporary black society to go back to its roots because the black identity is formed in close connection to the historical experience of their predecessors. Her interest in promoting black writers is her desire to participate in the development of a canon black literature in which writers "can get down to the craft of writing ... as black people talking to black people." In her study on the notion of community, Elizabeth Kella declares that whether or not community is associated with "notion of inclusion or separation its representation lies in antiquity." For Morrison ancestry stands for "time people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom. If we don't keep in touch with the
ancestor, ... we are, in fact, lost ... When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself." Reading any novel of Morrison is just like sitting through a History lesson delivered by an ancient story teller. Ghosts, Spirits, mythic characters and magical event drift through her novels as memory suffuses with the present. Point of view change and blend, conversations and slow and easy punctuated with the lyrical vernacular of the earth South. But she does not let us off easy, for each of her novels contains brutal facts of inhumanity and injustice.

Morrison presents the true picture of black life. She deeply feels the losses which Afro-Americans have to experience in their migration from the rural South of urban North from 1930 to 1950. They lost their sense of community, their connections to their past and their culture and being migrated from community. Migration creates desire for home and for own society. They could be captured by the ropes of slavery and bondage. To be free, these individuals have to take risks. Toni Morrison sees men ordinarily regarded as 'bad' men, who leaves their family and refuse responsibilities as free men. These men, who have a nice wilderness and who are fearless and comfortable with that fearlessness and misunderstood and therefore condemned.
Morrison admires them as adventures who refused to be controlled and who are willing to take risks. Because they own themselves, they are able to choose their own way to live their lives. This does not mean that she is advocating irresponsibility and destructive or chaotic behaviour. However, she believes in the necessity of being responsible for one's choice. She observes that freedom is choosing your responsibilities. It's not having no responsibility, it's chosen the ones you want. As Jan Furman further comment on Toni Morrison, "She respect the freedom as she embraces the responsibility."9

What Morrison writes of here is almost entirely foreign, even distasteful to many Americans. Finding and accepting identity within a group, the clan, the neighbourhood, smacks of a conformity that has received endless debunking in white literature and literary criticism. Morrison has recourse not only to black folklore but avails herself equally for other accessible cultural resources, including a range of classical, western myths. Now, a major figure for the teaching writing and research on contemporary American literature, Morrison's place here is richly deserved. Her continuous success made the New York Times call Morrison "the nearest thing America has to a national novelist".
Morrison’s novels demonstrate a different kind of search than other African-American writers can do. Her work consistently shows that identity and place are found in the community and communal experience are not in the transcendence of society or in the search for a single or private self. Morrison's novels resonate with her passion and commitment to racial dignity and equality, but also with her immersion in a fictional world unlike and other. She gives vivid expressions to black bitterness, while at the same time subjecting certain middle-class aspirations based on white achievements to subtle critique. Morrison understands the suffering, the mythology and religion of the black community in a way that few writers do and allow her great gifts of illuminate them.

Morrison’s fiction deals with the theme of alienation that leads to rootlessness and isolation and note of affirmation. As she told to Elizabeth Farnsworth that “isolation carries the seeds of destruction”¹⁰, so, her novels are also closely related to this factor. The study introduces the concept of affirmation in an attempt to create critical-theoretical context instincts of African-American cultural traditions for the reading of Toni Morrison's fiction. An Affirmation is a statement asserting the existence or the truth of something. Each of her novels highlights the struggles of black

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people to rediscover and maintain their connections to their cultural history and mythology. Her works suggest about who the outlaws were, who survived under that circumstances and why, what was legal in the community as opposed to what was legal outside it?

Toni Morrison, raised the currency of black women writers in American literature. She offers a revisionist model for the act of reading that bypasses self-recognition and self-affirmation in favour of self-exploration. Due to the height of her successful work, Mr. Clinton, the ex-present of U.S.A., invited her for a dinner at White House and honoured her by the words: "Through your work, you have stimulated our imaginations, celebrated our diversity, tested our beliefs and connected us to each other and our common humanity." She is undoubtedly, one of America's finest writers.

Morrison’s fiction can be read in two distinct phases. Phase one runs from her first novel, The Bluest Eye, through Sula and Song of Solomon, and culminates in Tar Baby, the second phase to date consists of her historical trilogy consisting of Beloved, Jazz, and Paradise. What characterizes the former is Morrison’s construction of a useable identity as an African-American woman novelist; what characterizes the latter is the author’s working out
the implications that follow from the recognition that identity may be more a construction than a biological essence. It is not sure that the Morrison who wrote the first four novels would have used the phrase “construction of a useable identity” to describe her works instead of “discovery of an authentic identity.” But her work in the second phase suggests a more postmodern articulation identity as a process plural and fluid. With the trilogy, she turns from the transfiguration of biographical material toward a new African-American historiography. While this formulation seems to chart a shift in Morrison’s fiction from modern to postmodern representations of identity, the early novels’ crucial self-reflexive work – the creation of a subject position from which Morrison can confidently speak – means that these novels, even as they thematize authenticity, also can be read through the lens of postmodern identity formation.

Even the most cursory outlines of Morrison biography suggest that class identity was at least as important as racial identity in the first quarter-century of her life. But nothing this perhaps only draws attention to another kind of invisibility, since middle-class white America tends to conflate race and class, equating blackness, poverty, and crime. Morrison’s characters frequently struggle in
this space of collapsed race-class thinking, and her novels tell, in coded form, something about her simultaneous interrogation and construction of such multiple identities. In the opening chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois early in the last century argued the case of African-American double-consciousness; black Americans, rather than experiencing themselves and the world as an identity with its implications of wholeness, unity, and oneness, could only view the world in a doubled fashion since their sense of themselves as American was constantly undermined by the fact of being black. Morrison’s dilemma, a very productive one, may be a tripled or quadrupled consciousness in which class and gender also significantly figure.

Morrison comes of age as a writer drafting *The Bluest Eye* from 1965 to 1969. In terms of racial identity, this means that she is squarely in the period of the “black is beautiful” movement as Morrison herself has noted in the afterword of the Plume paperback edition of *The Bluest Eye* that called on African Americans to rethink their relation to white culture. In terms of gendered identity, Morrison is clearly aware of the feminist challenge to masculinist culture, even though some of that awareness is expressed as a disavowal. And in terms of aesthetic identity, she
comes of age during a period when high modernist fiction had become fully canonical and the 1960s’ Black Aesthetic movement called for a distinctively black voice and a black nationalist identity. Whether acknowledged or not, these historical conditions necessarily must have marked an aspiring black woman novelist. Morrison in fact does at time acknowledge some of these conditions regarding her fictional foregrounding of the processes of identity formation.

Morrison has commented explicitly on the role of African-American autobiography and the role it once played in constructing community. In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” she is critical of the emphasis on the individual in contemporary African-American autobiography, but notes that 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 that 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. She goes on to explain her decision to write novels in terms of what this expressive form does for the class or group that wrote it. Emphasizing the didactic and the informational role of the novel, Morrison argues
that now is a crucial moment of need of the African-American novel, an expressive form that can do the cultural work of constituting the tribe previously done by African-American oral tales, music, and autobiography. Emphasizing the political purpose of the novel, Morrison suggests that she is not interested in indulging herself in some private closed exercise of her imagination that fulfills only the obligation of her personal dreams. The point again is that Morrison novel writing does what good African-American autobiography previously did. In 1983 however, a year prior to the publication of “Rootedness,” Morrison seems to foreclose any possibility of considering her life as context for reading her work. She does not use much autobiography in her writing. Her life is uneventful. She is of the view that writing has to do with the imagination. Strikingly, in order to deny autobiography, Morrison valorizes the very exercise of imagination that she condemns in “Rootedness”.

A third instance provides another perspective, one less extreme in what it avows and disavows. In 1981, Bessie W. Jones opens an interview by asking Morrison if her novels have “autobiographical elements”. Morrison responds:
It is difficult always for me and probably any writer to select those qualities that are genuinely autobiographical because part of what you are doing is re-doing the past as well as throwing it into relief, and what makes one write anyway is something in the past that is haunting, that is not explained or wasn’t clear so that you are almost constantly rediscovering the past.\textsuperscript{12}

Morrison continues at some length to consider specific instances in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* that might be genuinely autobiographical, Beyond the *genuinely autobiographical* - what she says about a specific detail, such as having heard of a woman named Hannah Peace as a child – seems to lie a broader category of how the author addresses those things from the past that haunt. This is, of course, an interesting characterization of writing from the author who would go on to write so compellingly about Sethe’s haunting in *Beloved*, but here the comment linking the motivation for writing to being haunted by one’s past points in another direction. Morrison appears to limit the autobiographical to exact correspondences of specific details, yet at the same time the author’s obsession with revisiting the past suggests another realm of the writing of self. Supplementing the *genuinely autobiographical*
is the *symbolically autobiographical*, since what makes one write anyway is the need to confront self. But here the supplement dwarfs that which is supplemented. Since Morrison casts this haunting past at the central rationale for writing, it would be difficult to mark anything in a fictional world that is not inflected in some way by this autobiographical reclamation.

Morrison’s treatment of an individual’s identity formation, especially as it occurs within a community, points to what is both modernist and postmodernist about her work. In terms of content, what she writes about, Morrison has a modernist concern for authenticity, similar to the concern for authenticity, for example, in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*. Hemingway seeks a community that would authentically enact masculine identity for his wounded Jake Barnes; for Hemingway, Pamplona, Spain, is that site of authenticity. Similarly, Morrison’s recurring explorations of alienated and wounded characters such as Milkman Dead, Jadine Childs, and Sethe Garner take place in the context of their search for a community that enacts authentic black identity. So that Morrison, like the modernists, holds out hope that somewhere out there, there’s still a place where the alienated individual might discover authenticity.
In her critical work, such as *Unspeakable Things Unspoken* and *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison is committed to a thorough exploration of the construction of white identity. In particular, she takes canonical white writer’s figuration of black otherness as crucial evidence for seeing whiteness as culturally constructed. In other words, there is no biological essence that makes an individual white. The message of Morrison’s cultural constructionist position on whiteness is clear. When it comes to white identity, the very notion of authenticity is unauthentic. But although she at times to hold out hope for both authenticity and essence, as her comments on the difference between white evil and African-American evil in a 1974 interview indicate that I know instinctively that we African-Americans do not regard evil the same way as white people do. We have never done that. White people’s reaction to something that is alien to them is to destroy it. Morrison’s instinctive knowledge unmediated by culture fairly and directly essentializes race, and suggests, in effect, that by nature, white people’s evil is worse-more evil-than that of blacks. It is unfair to look at something Morrison said fifteen years prior to her fully worked-through position on the construction of whiteness, so that it might be
helpful to look also at what her 1985 comments on African-American irony suggest:

*I can’t really explain what makes the irony of Black people different from anybody else’s, and may be there isn’t any, but in trying to write what I call Black literature which is not merely having Black people in or being Black myself, there seems to be something distinctive and I can’t put in into critical terms. I can simply recognizes it as authentic.*

But in claiming a distinctive black difference, essence in this instance once again creeps into Morrison’s thinking about race. And it does so in a particularly modernist fashion. African-American authenticity is something, this comment maintains, that exceeds the medium of language, and to attempt to speak of it in critical terms is to register the epistemological limit of thinking race; one simply intuits authentic African-American irony and literature, overleaping the epistemological wall. In short, whiteness may be a construction, but blackness is at least possibly an essence. This tension is thinking the category of race seems almost to reintroduce an inverted version of the fatal drop of black blood, a concept long used in the United States and particularly the South
to enforce notions of white racial purity and to designate the impurity of black blood. But white black blood may have been viewed as impure, it certainly was powerful, since any trace of it could overwhelm all other genetic material. Morrison’s comments on evil and irony seem to play on and perhaps reverse the implications of the fatal drop by suggesting that access to black authenticity is potentially available to the individual no matter how much or how little African genetic material a particular African American has. In effect, the fatal drop of black blood is something Morrison’s fiction does not thoroughly overturn until her most recent novel, *Paradise*, where black racial purity becomes as problem-ridden as dream of white racial purity.

Conservative critics of identity politics tend to overlook that much of white culture itself is already a powerful form of identity politics, so that for someone, such as Morrison. To assert a black essence as something positive serves as a useful moment of reversal that disrupts that way white culture positively marks its sense of its whiteness while stigmatizing black difference. But this kind of affirmative action has its limits. Statements that postulate the essential difference between white and black evil or white and black evil or white and black irony still privilege nature over
culture; such statements therefore exist in a continuum with essentializing racist statements that say that blacks naturally have rhythm, which is a metonymy for the racist notion that African-American have body but not intellect. Morrison’s work ultimately confirms a racial essentialism, but such essentialism at times comes into play, particularly in her earlier novels. It is perhaps Morrison’s enactment of a dialogue between identity an essence and identity as construction that makes her fiction and powerful and poignant as it is.

In Morrison’s fiction we have a modernism partially postmodernized in terms very similar to the cautious engagement that hooks has mapped as the way for African-American writers to think about the postmodern challenge to essence. Morrison works in the space between a modernist desire for authentic identity and a postmodern understanding of the constructedness of all identity. In her more recent works she is able to entertain the possibility of, it not exactly giving up that identity, at least interrogating it more thoroughly. And the way she does this is through a writing practice that may have as much to do with postcolonialism as it does with postmodernism. This is another reason why, whatever questions one may have about Hutcheon’s insistence upon an identity
between postmodern aesthetics and politics, her multicultural and gender-balanced version of postmodern fiction allows for a bridge between the posts of postmodernism and postcolonialism, and certainly helps describe a trend in Morrison’s work from *Beloved* to the present.

Morrison figures the relation between novelist and novel in decidedly psychoanalytic terms- the subject of the dream the narrative is the dreamer the narrative’s producer. If Morrison’s own protocol for interpretation rests in the belief that novel writing is inevitably a record of the novelist’s fears and desires, how does Morrison’s fiction look if we use her insight reflexively as a way to think about her own novelistic dreaming. Might not her fiction also record these figuratively coded moments of longing and terror, perplexity and shame.

The reason that reading Morrison the novelist through Morrison the critic is a compelling strategy is suggested by her own fictional representation of difference within the suggested by her own fictional representation of difference within the African-American community. In this representational space, colorism-prejudice within the black community that is based on skin color-mirrors the destructive power of white racism. In *The Bluest Eye*,

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the light-complexioned Geraldine teaches her son this difference within difference; his mother did not like him to play with niggers. She has explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; nigger were loud and dirty. And by the end of her son’s encounter with Pecola, Geraldine on the basis of her racial thinking has identified the child as “nasty little black bitch”. To be an American for Morrison is to talk and write about oneself through and within a sometime allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an African's presence. As her fiction repeatedly demonstrates, African-American subjectivity is shaped by the dominant American ideology. If Morrison powerfully reads the figuration of blackness in the work of canonical American novelists, how might this canonical African-American novelist use blackness in the construction of her own identity? This does not mean that the ends of their uses of blackness is identical, since Morrison struggles always to move from consciousness to self-consciousness, while white writers in their representations of race largely remain innocent of this motivation.

If we read reflexively Morrison’s understanding of the way the dominant culture colonizes African-American identity, then a
striking instance of such discursively produced identity becomes Morrison’s decision to change her name from “Chloe” to “Toni.” Although Morrison has said that she made the change because people at Howard University found “Chloe” too difficult to pronounce, the question of motive seems more fraught than this explanation admits. Whatever the exact motivation for Morrison’s decision to become Toni, one thing is clear: the question of identity is not a given for Morrison because she rejects her given name. Moreover, she repeatedly refers to this act of self-naming in coded, yet fairly over ways, creating the paradox of the thing that wants simultaneously to be concealed and revealed.

Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* is a story of a little black girl who prayed each night for the blue-eyed beauty of Shirley Temple. The novel is an artistic, often poetic, exploration of the complex relations between individual and community. Using vivid imagery, complex symbolism, and a multi-faceted point of view, Morrison creates a tragic and moving portrayal of the psychological destruction of Pecola Breedlove. The novel argues that Pecola is destroyed by the cultural values she adopts. Pecola has an impoverished sense of self and insufficient self-esteem because she accepts the values of the white community as inadequately filtered
through the black community. The novel is also the story of young Claudia MacTeer, the narrator, who rejects just those values Pecola accepts, who grows up healthy and strong, and who tries, through the telling of Pecola’s story, to understand herself, her community, and most of all, why she survived and Pecola did not.

The narrative point of view of *The Bluest Eye* is complex. Some sections of the text are grammatically and conceptually in the first person. Claudia herself is a character within the story she tells. Other sections of the text are third-person omniscient, suggesting a different narrator, or perhaps the authorial voice. This suggests that the author, but not the narrator, is struggling with the limits of the first-person narrator. When we get to the end of the novel, however, we find that the first-person voice and the third-person voice are the same narrator. This pushes over narrative authority a part of the story and not external to it. The struggle over narrative authority is the narrator’s own.

The novel opens with the version of a child’s beginning reader. The story of Dick and Jane and the green-and-white house is a classic normative statement of white middle-class American culture, which provides the context within which the lives of the Breedloves and the MacTeers are set. At the outset, we see how
form lends content to the novel: At first the story is double spaced and follows the accepted rules of capitalization and punctuation. On the second telling, the lines are a half space closer, the words are closer together, and the capitals and punctuation are dropped. By the third telling, the words are not spaced and the lines are even closer together. With each repetition, this classic American child-reader’s piece gets tighter and tighter and reads faster and faster until it forms a breathless and suffocating mass. It confuses and it constrains.

A significant fact about the novel, is that its narrator does not seek an impartial or objective perspective on the events she recounts. She had found such a perspective and presumably found it lacking. This telling of Pecola’s story interweaves the subjective, presented physically and metaphorically unjustified, with the objective, presented physical and metaphorically justified, and aims for a first-person justified account. Wrenching the notion of justification free from that of objectivity, Claudia wants to tell her own story and she wants it to be justified, to be right.

*The Bluest Eye* is not only a novel of the horror at the heart of a little black girl’s longing for blue eyes. It is also the story of another little black girl who dissects white baby dolls to discover
the charm they hold for others and who for a long time feels pristine sadism for the Shirley Temple of the World. In telling Pecola’s story the way she does, Claudia tells some of her own story too. Recognizing her own unsullied hatred for the little blonde who got to dance with Mr. Bo Jangloes, Claudia later says that I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love her. Claudia scrutinized and sought justification for externally imposed standards, Pecola instead scrutinized herself. Later, Claudia comes to realize that she and her sister differ from Pecola crucially:

*Guileless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfortable in our skins, and enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness.*

The story shows that it does matter, that such acquiescence is destructive. What Claudia’s telling of the story shows, but does not say, is that the internalization of destructive standards can be avoided, Claudia speaks of her own progression of feelings towards white dolls and white girls and of a turning point as yet unreached by her nine-year-old self. Later she learned not to hate the little
white girls who got to dance with Mr. Bo Jangles and whom everybody seems to love. Learning this lesson later meant not having to hate herself.

Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, a contemporary novel about female friendship, offers a view of female psychological development that defies traditional male-centered interpretations of female development and cells out for an expansion of the women-centered paradigm. Both the novel’s subject (minority experience) and its treatment implicitly critique the psychology’s usual focus on the experiences of middle-class white women who are often bound by conventional social relationships. Nancy Chodorow’s theory of the reproduction of mothering, Carol Gilliagan’s work on women’s moral and psychological development, and the continuing work of the Stone Center offer a paradigm through which to perceive the novel, white *Sula’s* exploration of women’s experiences fleshes out the still-emerging psychological schema of these researchers.

*Sula* demonstrates the inadequacy of traditional male-centered psychology’s idea of the self by showing that men raised to be autonomous, contained selves become alienated and unhappy; though the women’s lives do not run smoothly, they are raised to be selves-in-community and, except for Sula, have more fulfilling lives.
In showing these two modes of self-definition, the novel anticipated the findings of women-centered psychology. Nancy Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering* provided the basis that women-centered psychologists have since used to discuss the origins of gender-identity differences between men and women. Significantly, although Chodorow explores individual psychological development, her theory explicitly rests on the social fact of women’s having been the primary caretakers of children. Like Toni Morrison, she sees the construction of an individual, gendered self as the result of inescapable social context.

In *Sula* the moral work of the women caretakers – work ignored or devalued by the male world – sustains both personal and community identity. Yet as the tunnel science suggest, none of the conventional caretaking has prevented damage to individuals or ultimately obliteration of the Bottom community. Unlike Sula, Nel, and Shadrack, many in the Bottom hoped for someone else to save them from the grips of racism and poverty. Thus, conventional caretaking encouraged passivity rather than mature activity: Hoping for abatement of their pent-up anger, the townsfolk crawl into the tunnel-womb, and like Plum in his desire to retreat to the safety of total dependency, they suffocate. However, Nel’s final
synthesis of the two necessary constituents of authentic selfhood, emphatic caring and self-assertion, argues for actual individual growth and potential interdependence among members of a community. Morrison hopes to create a different community, one composed of the readers of her novels. Thus, the exchanges between women-centered psychologists, minority women writers, and readers of both might constitute the speech of a new community.

Significantly, this community is not solely female. *Sula* shows damage done to both male and female characters: the isolated Shadrack and Judge, the conglomerated Deweys, the melted Helene, the lonely Sula. Furthermore, A. Jacks and Nel, the only two successfully integrated personalities, represent both genders. The end of the novel, often read solely as Nel’s recognition of her bond with Sula, in fact also shows as continuing dialogue between male and female points of view: Just before Nel’s recognition, she passes Shadrack the male who reminds her of Sula, just before she articulates her insight, she smells overripe green things, surely a reference to Jude Greeme. Female bonds do not exist in isolation but in a community that necessarily includes men.
It is in *Tar Baby* that Morrison’s critique of dualism – sexism, primarily, but also racism and class distinction – finds fullest realization; however, for her characters, dualistic thinking has long been the enemy. In Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola defines her world in terms of antitheses: there is the prefect, blond, blue-eyed, much-beloved Shirley Temple: then there is Pecola herself, all that is left over. The hatred and violence in her world, she is certain, emerge from the distance between her ideal and her actual, antithetical self. Nel’s tragedy, in *Sula*, is also a product of her determinedly dualistic world view. When she discovers her husband Jude’s infidelity with her best friend, Sula, Nel for the first time is forced to define a self apart from Sula. She falls into the trap of believing that the separate selves must be antithetical, representatives of simply defined polarities of good and evil. Only near the end of the novel is she required to question her tidy morality and finally to recognize all that she has deprived herself of by choosing not to be Nel but rather not Sula.

In *Tar Baby* Morrison stands the world on end remorselessly, attacking dualism on every front. One of her most effective techniques involves her telling us a story we already know very well indeed, the myth of Eden. Morrison recasts the Genesis story in
such a way that its dualism is upset and its moral absolutes evaporate. She also merges the Genesis story with the tar baby folk tales that gives the novel its name. In the conference of these retold stories, Morrison defines a world where our customary definitions do not stick, where human potential is enhanced precisely to the degree that dualism is transcended. How far can dualism be transcended? The novel leaves that question open, but the possibility of self-redemption flavors its conclusion.

The *Tar Baby* story and the myth of Eden are both stories of creation, the creation of human beings, or what passes for them, from such unpromising material as clay or tar. They are also stories about temptation and entrapment, the fall from grace, and redemption. Morrison’s interest in these two overlapping stories lies in part in their adaptability to her critique of dualism. The version of the Genesis story she invokes most sharply is Milton’s, and this adds an edge of ironic humor to the novel. By drawing misogynist Milton this the service of this work, Morrison finds yet another way, a delightfully amusing one, of reminding us that nothing need be what it seems. In fact, all things can be their opposites, no territory is forbidden to the self in the act of self-creation.
Tar Baby echoes Milton’s subject at every turning. The novel’s setting is fully a character, and it is a character, like the others, that shimmers with its abilities to be both A and not-A. The Isle des Chevaliers disturbs protagonist Jadine with its excess: The island exaggerated everything, too much light, too much shadow, too much rain, too much foliage and much too much sleep. By endowing her island with such excess, Morrison can easily make of it both Eden and hell. The first glimpse Morrison gives us of her island puts trees and snakes in the foreground, only the champion daisy trees were serene. After all, they were part of a rain forest already two thousand years old and scheduled for eternity, so they ignored the men and continued to rock the diamond-backs that slept in their arms. The Isle des Chevalier certainly a tropical paradise, like Milton’s, a happy Isle, with its hills and vales so bountiful it made visitors tried to look at them, bougainvillea, avocado, poinsettia, lime, banana, coconut and the last of the rain forest’s champion trees. Yet the island is not all paradise: beneath the hills lies the swamp, Sein de Vieilles: and witch’s tit it was: a shriveled fog bound over seeping with a thick black substance that even mosquitoes could not live near. In this pitchy lake, Jadine will later nearly sink, thinking that perhaps she was supposed to lie
horizontally. The image recalls to the reader that of Milton’s Satan rolling in the fiery Gulf. Her burning legs also enhance that parallel, while at the same time the episode makes of Jadine the tar baby Son will later tell her she is. Jesus, what is that stuff, another character asks. It looks like pitch.

Morrison offers no such formula for cultural stability. In *Tar Baby* the national-historical boundaries that frame’ Janie’s emergence as a heroine are redrawn to reflect a contemporary reality in which apartheid and integration coexist. The fundamental features of African American culture are inscribed in terms of diversity and conflict rather than the heroine’s unity of being. Morrison makes no attempt to resolve the ideological, social, and political conflicts that are embodied in Son’s and Jadine’s love affair. Problems of ancestry and cultural identity in the African American community are not resolvable by apportioning fixed value to folklore. The Tar Baby tale as metaphor of entrapment has one meaning for Jadine and another for Son. It is this ambivalence that becomes that focus of Morrison’s interest in the tale as repository of cultural values. The Tar Baby tale seems to be about masks. Not masks as covering what is to be hidden, but how masks come to life, take life over, exercise the tensions between itself and what it
covers. In *Tar Baby* a folk tale is reinvented as a polyphonic novel, exposing conflicts in the African American community between the inner self and the outer self, between the self and community. The problem of cultural identity is redefined to reflect a changing historical situation, and an ancestral tale becomes a subtext for examining a community’s need for stability and its coexistent need to adapt to historical change.
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