Chapter Four
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Toni Morrison is the greatest Black woman novelist of America world who prominently emerged on literary scene in the 1960s. She wrote about matters such as White racism, women, social realism, politics and suffering. She became successful in writing symbolically about race and women. Also she has emphasized the relation between the work of art and its political relevance. Morrison was born in the town of Lorain, Ohio, USA, in 1931. Her father was a shipyard welder and her mother sang in the church choir. As the South in America was very unfriendly towards the Blacks, her parents moved to North, particularly to Ohio, hoping that the environment would be friendlier towards them. Morrison attempted to create a literary form based on Black American oral traditions.

Morrison has played a major role in crafting a purely African American literary language which employs a shifting perspective and fragmentary narrative, whose voice is close to the characters’ consciousness, in close resemblance to the works of Virginia Woolf. Morrison certainly studied Woolf’s writings in college along with other writers such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. In addition to using some of the stylistic devices of Virginia Woolf’s writings, Morrison mingles some of the features of her culture such as folklore and music for writing her Works. Morrison also speaks about African and African American culture, and a conflict between these two cultures. In this regard, Judylyn S. Ryan proclaimed that:
Toni Morrison’s fiction displays an extensive concern with the erasure of African cultural consciousness and cultural history, and the persisting cultural illness which this erasure precipitates. The cultivated lack of cultural historical consciousness, and the displacement of “peoplehood” which it engenders, is a central theme in several of Morrison’s novels....

Toni Morrison’s student life was extraordinary as she was a very bright student. In 1949, she graduated with honours; then, she attended Howard University, in Washington D. C. where she studied English and the Classics, and wrote for or performed actively in theatre. She received her B. A. in 1953 and changed her name from Chloe to Toni. In 1955, she attended Cornell for her Master degree. She taught for Texas Southern University for only two years and returned to Howard University in 1957. In 1958, she met Harold Morrison but they were married only for six years. In 1964, they were divorced and Toni spent the next twenty years as an editor at Random House Publishing Company. During the years of her marriage, she wrote *The Bluest Eye*, her first novel. It was published in 1970.

*The Bluest Eye* details the life of a woman who goes mad for becoming beautiful. From 1971 till 1972, she worked as Professor of English at University of New York at Purchase and maintained her post at Random House.
She received the Nobel Prize for Literature, and was the world’s first Black woman recipient of this great prize.

Morrison uses the element of aesthetics in her novels. Her novels focus on political, cultural, and racial elements. She attempts to use aesthetic element in her writing to show Black misery and desolation. The discussion about aesthetics has been continuing from old times. Marc C. Conner explained that:

Toni Morrison’s writing emerges from a complex array of aesthetic and cultural traditions, yet the overwhelming tendency in Morrison scholarship — a tendency fostered by Morrison herself — has been to ignore or even to deny diverse influences. The great anxiety in Morrison scholarship, and unquestionably in Morrison’s own critical writings, is the question of originality, of indebtedness.²

Morrison has accomplished much in the way of narrative style with four of her first novels and has earned accolades from readers for them. Collectively, these four books are most impressive because Morrison has endeavoured to use a unique and different narrative style in each one of them rather than simply following an older tradition. It seems, each of Morrison’s novels is different from her other novels in structure, its total effect and artistic craft. She has summarised the techniques of writing aptly in a 1983 interview with Nellie McKay, and has shown as follows her sensitivity towards the craft of writing novels.
A writer does not always write in the ways others wish. The writer has to solve certain kinds of problems in writing. The way in which I handle elements within a story frame is important to me. Now I can get where I want to go faster and with more courage than I was able to do when I began to write…. It seems to me that from a book that focused on a pair of very young black girls, to move to a pair of adult black women, and then to a black man, and finally to a black man and a black woman is evolutionary. One comes out of the other.  

Many writers and novelists would agree with Morrison; novels must evolve, and can. Morrison demonstrates as follows her insight into the genre in another piece entitled “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”:

...My sense of the novel is that it has always functioned for the class or the group that wrote it. The history of the novel as a form began when there was a new class, a middle class, to read it; it was an art form that they needed. The lower class didn’t need novels at that time because they had an art form already: they had songs, and dances, and ceremony, and gossip, and celebrations.  

Her novels are concerned extensively with the erosion of African culture, its history and its consciousness. This was shown clearly in her novel *Song of Solomon* and it is present also in *Tar Baby*. As it
will later on be seen, the awareness of African culture in *Tar Baby* is presented and argued fervently by a character in the novel namely Son. *Tar Baby* is further conscious of Black heterosexual relations. In her interview with McKay, in 1982, just a year after *Tar Baby* was published, she exclaimed:

...“there is a serious question about black male and black female relationships in the twentieth century. I just think that the argument has always turned on something it should not turn on: gender. I think that the conflict of genders is a cultural illness....”

Like any art form or literary genre is discussed in criticism, Morrison’s novels and expressions have also been critically evaluated. The type of criticism that will be discussed in this chapter is Black feminist criticism.

**Black Feminism**

Two prior movements to the Black feminist movement were the White Women’s movement and the Black Liberation movement of the 1960s. In both these movements, Black women were sexually and racially mistreated. Most members of these movements were not exactly either sexist or racist, but powerful members made life for Black women unbearable. Even in feminist movement, they were mistreated; and White women were not willing to admit to their racism. Black men in the Liberation movement overemphasized White sexploitation of Black women to explain their disapproval of
interracial relationships. Some members of Black community also made sexist remarks which were accepted without any criticism.

Thus, Black women of those days had two options: the former was to remain in the other movements and attempt to educate men about their needs; but it was not exactly a desirable option. The latter was to start their own movement. However, few Black women in the early 1970s thought of themselves as feminists or were willing to identify themselves as such.

Black feminist writers focused in their writings not only on racism but also on sexism, heterosexism and class oppression. Furthermore, they wrote mostly for Black women readers since they felt that they would only waste time and effort trying to inform White oppressors about their needs. They desired to develop critical and feminist consciousness and dialogue which appealed to their experiences.

In conclusion, the movement was intended to address sexist, racist and class influences on Black women in the United States. Though the effectiveness of this movement is not uniform between the Women’s movement and the Black Liberation movement, the Women’s movement has made attempts to address the issue recently through training, seminars etc. Feminist theory at present includes racial, sexual influences, an analysis of class influences as well as an analysis of gender bias.
Among the most eloquent and objective women critics of Black feminist theory is Barbara Christian. Christian comments perceptively on Toni Morrison’s writings from feministic point of view as below:

…Toni Morrison’s work is earthy fantastic realism. Deeply rooted in history and mythology, her work resonates with mixtures of pleasure and pain, wonder and horror. There is something primal about her characters. They come at you with the force and beauty of gushing water, seemingly fantastic but as basic as the earth they stand on. While Paule Marshal carefully sculpts her characters, Toni Morrison lets hers erupt out of the wind, sometimes gently, often with force and horror. Her work is sensuality combined with an intrigue that only a piercing intellect could create.6

Christian is not the only woman critic to acknowledge Toni Morrison as a successful writer. The following statement from another woman critic, Gurleen Grewal, reveals equal admiration for Morrison’s novel:

Juxtaposing the provincial with the metropolitan and charting various geographies of class, Tar Baby depicts the struggle over cultural definitions and identifications in a postmodern world. In Tar Baby, Morrison allows the reader to see the African American crisis of identity and alignment in colonial and postcolonial terms. Located between the two metropolitan capitals of New York and Paris in the French Caribbean, controlled by American and French capital and built by Haitian labor, the small
island of the Isle de Chevaliers serves as the setting for the characters’ diasporic departures and arrivals....

**Black Feminism and Toni Morrison**

It seems, the Black feminist movement of this decade has influenced Morrison’s works. Further, it seems there is a conflict between politics and aesthetics in African American literature. About this, Marc C. Conner says:

...This conflict is present at the very heart of African-American writing throughout this century, and the African-American novel in particular, at least as early as the Harlem Renaissance, has been explicitly anxious about its position between the political and aesthetic realms....

Morrison’s writing was usually associated with the racial and political ideology related to the Blacks. Likewise, prejudice, intolerance and restriction emerge in Morrison’s works. In her novels she seems to be talking not just about Black culture, but she also deals with American culture too. On this point, Morrison states that her work:

...“should not even attempt to solve social problems, but it should certainly try to clarify them....”

Morrison added in her interview saying:

It seems to me that there’s an enormous difference in the writing of black and white women.... Black women seem
able to combine the nest and the adventure. They don’t see conflicts in certain areas as do white women. They are both safe harbor and ship; they are both inn and trail. We, black women, do both. We don’t find these places, these roles, mutually exclusive. That’s one of the differences.¹⁰

Barbara Christian in her essay, “Layered Rhythms: Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison,” compares Morrison with Virginia Woolf and says:

Although from different cultures and times, you and Virginia did face problems as women writers. While Virginia had to “kill the angel in the house”… you, Toni, had to “kill the mammy in the Big House.” Virginia was responding to the fact that women were not expected to write, and when they did write, their tone “admitted that [they] were only women or protesting that [they] were as good as any man”… When women wrote, they were still expected to write in specific ways about specific themes — that is, within the romance genre — about love, marriage, manners…. But you, Toni Morrison, could not in 1953, in spite of society’s stereotype of the black woman as a mammy, know about any African American women writers of any substance.…¹¹

Morrison’s writings feature the topics of African American history, experience and identity but periodically they also discuss about gender, patriarchy and class differences.
The Bluest Eye

Any discussion about Black female’s body, historically, refers to Black slavery. Slavery was the first abuse against the Black women. Black females historically suffered oppression, abuse, misery, and tyranny because of race and gender. They are victims of both sexist and racist oppression. Black females were never supported and protected by their males unlike the White females who were protected by their males and cultural standards to facilitate them to comfortably reach the adulthood. They were physically raped in a social environment controlled by White community standards. The Black women, under these terrible and awful conditions, survived and recovered situation of their life. Violence against African American women has had a significant influence on American society which has been greatly unjust towards the Black community in general and towards Black females in particular. In this era of sexual abuse of Black women, female body itself is threatened both by White male and Black male. They were raped by their masters.

In the early mid-twentieth century, many Black women and men migrated to the North in order to escape the severe racist living conditions in the South. Hope for better conditions of life was the only expectation/possibility for which Black women liked to continue living. The move to the North and the urban centres within North were hardly what Black women expected it to be. Barbara Christian quoted Florette Henri’s statement as follows:
Black women, of course, had made that migration to the city looking for a new life and found that the substance remained the same, though the apparel looked different. Instead of being house-keepers, cooks, and cotton pickers, they became domestics, garment factory workers, prostitutes — the hard bottom of the labor market.\textsuperscript{12}

The Black Power movement of the 60s in the United States had a lot of influence on Morrison’s \textit{The Bluest Eye}. Morrison in this novel reveals that blackness is not the only problem for the Black girls and women, but there are also equally pressing problems like Black poverty, powerlessness and loss of self-respect which is another significant difficulty for the Black community and more so for Black female. Actually, in this novel Morrison concentrates on the encounter between Black identity and White cultural values in American society.

Pecola Breedlove is the central character (or, in other words, a protagonist) of \textit{The Bluest Eye}. She is an eleven-year old Black girl who is physically ugly, financially poor, emotionally unstable and socially disrespected. It is shown in \textit{The Bluest Eye} that Pecola’s parents, like millions of other Blacks, also travelled to the North in search of better living conditions and job opportunities. The novel analyzes the main theme of Black feminist literature of the 1960s and 1970s which was the Black woman’s body as a centre of the Black feminist discourse. The novel opens in a situation which looks like tuition given to kids and it is also a sample of the idyllic “Dick and
Jane” primer. And it is written in the style of school books. It also introduces the Breedlove family to the readers as below:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play….\textsuperscript{13}

In this regard Marc C. Conner stated:

...The house is simultaneously a respite and a jail; like the community, for which it stands as synecdoche, the house seems to promise rest and comfort, but it provides neither, especially for Pecola.\textsuperscript{14}

As one can see during the course of his reading of the novel, while the house of White people is unified and happy, Pecola’s family is beset by the tragedy of losing their house when her father, in a drunken mood, burns it down and forces everyone to live outdoors.

Among African American women writers, Toni Morrison has produced praiseworthy and diverse body of work including novels, short stories, essays, criticism etc. She developed Black women characters in her novels. Her writings portray the struggle of Black people in general and of Black women in particular throughout history with the issues of identity and race. The Black woman illustrates her identity, her
relationship to men, husband, children, society, and history of American society. Morrison admires the struggle of Black women throughout history to maintain an essential spirituality and creativity in their lives and their achievements serve as an inspiration to others. She speaks of the Black female experience more powerfully because, she seems to think that this experience goes beyond the boundaries of race, colour and class. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. thus mentions Barbara Christian in his analysis:

...Reading Morrison’s early novels as “fantastic earthy realism,” Barbara Christian notes the various elements that help Morrison dramatize the sometimes destructive effects of community on young Black girls struggling toward womanhood. 

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison challenges the Western, particularly the White, standards of beauty. As the title of the novel shows, there are some interesting perceptions about standards of beauty. She also explains that if whiteness is used as a standard of beauty, then the value of blackness is decreased. The lack of love from the Black males towards Black females and children in *The Bluest Eye* is one of the most significant themes. Morrison’s emphasis in *The Bluest Eye* is on racism. Moreover, she expresses influence of racism on the Black community and family also. She examines how Black females react to the so-called White standards of beauty prevalent in the American society. In his study of Toni Morrison’s stance on the issue of beauty, David Ron stated as follows:
Every black person in America is forced to struggle against a standard of beauty — and by implication (beauty is never just beauty), everything else, from goodness to worthiness of love — that is almost exactly the opposite of what they are … and the consequences can be deadly.

The novel suggests that the oppressive standard of beauty peddled by movies and advertisements ravages white self-esteem as well … but it isn’t just a matter of degree. Low self-esteem is an entirely different creature than self-hate.⁴

Morrison, in this novel, focuses on the effect of change in the status of women in American community. There are two Black communities in *The Bluest Eye*: one in the South and the other in the North. In *The Bluest Eye* Black women characters are seen to be suffering to conform to Western, (in fact, White) standards of beauty. Therefore, the characters in this novel can be interpreted as being assaulted by another culture’s values.

The land occupied by African American community is the same as the one occupied by the White community. Morrison wrote about Black experience, especially about the experience of Black females within the Black community. *The Bluest Eye* is her first book which talks about a victimized adolescent Black girl who is obsessed by the White standards of beauty. In this novel, Morrison deals with Black
women's experience in America, their struggle for finding their personal as well as their cultural identities.

Pecola prayed for blue eyes every night. She believes that if she has blue eyes, they will make her look beautiful and she believes that if she looked beautiful, someone will love her and the behaviour of others would also be different, favourable (positive) towards her. Also, perhaps, her parents' behaviour would be different with her in particular and with everybody in general. Maybe they will not fight with each other in front of her. She had prayed for one year enthusiastically without losing her hope. She sat for a long time in front of a mirror and looked in the mirror to understand what is the secret of ugliness which made her different from others, the Whites, and which made her teachers and classmates scorn her. She lives in such circumstances in which love is an adjustment effected by money, violence, dishonesty, psychological disturbances, societal disaffection etc. Morrison depicts some of these psychological upheavals as below:

...Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike. She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk. The first letter of her last name forced her to sit in the front of the room always.... She also knew that when one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy, or wanted to get an immediate response from him, she could say,
“Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove!” and never fail to get peals of laughter from those in earshot, and mock anger from the accused. (BE, p. 34)

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is looking for beauty and her identity. She wants not only to be beautiful, but also some kind of an ideal of beauty for other girls. Barbara Christian points out:

...The beauty searched for in the book is not just the possession of blue eyes, but the harmony that they symbolize: ...

Black women in American society not only suffer lot of discrimination at the hands of White people only, but they are also the victims of their Black men. They are made to live in misery and trouble from the White people (especially White men) and Black people (especially Black men) as well. Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* is rejected not only by White society but is also rejected by Black society as she is ugly. In Pecola’s family sexual abuse and menace come from inside the family itself.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison deals with Black women’s repression due to their blackness as it does not conform to the White standards and ideals of beauty and the so-called sophistication of the Whites. *The Bluest Eye* makes one of the most powerful attacks yet on the relationship between Western standards of female beauty and the psychological oppression of black women....
Moreover, Black men emotionally and sometimes physically abuse Black women and even Black children and there is hardly any respect for Black women and Black children by their own community itself. As L. E. Sissman noted —

Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* couldn’t be more different. She is dealing with children, not men; she is dealing with the forties, not the present; she is dealing with the black subculture, not the military one. But the biggest difference is that she is dealing with people to whom no ultimate glory is possible....

So all those Black people in this novel who are seen to be abusing other Blacks, and particularly women, have to face oppression, insults, sexual assaults and so on and so forth.

In *The Bluest Eye*, a woman is battered by White men and also by Black men especially by their father or husband or an intimate male partner. Pecola’s parents physically assault each other. In this novel Morrison protests against violence towards Black women (including childhood sexual abuse), violence from an intimate partner, sexual assaults, domestic violence, sexual misconduct towards women and children, and sexual interference. Black women realize their situation and restrictions of the society put on them; however, they have positive role in their families. They look after their family, love their husbands, children and tolerate all troublesome behaviour that comes from other cultural standards and makes them appear as inferior beings in the society.
Pecola prays for having blue eyes with the hope that they would change her life. Her prayer for blue eyes symbolizes a desire for meeting the repeated messages of White cultural superiority. She believes that the only way she can escape from this situation is to become beautiful through acquisition of blue eyes. She shares a bedroom with her brother and lives with her disabled mother and her drunken father. She is raped by her father and resultantly becomes pregnant. Her rape by her alcoholic father symbolizes the most prominent type of sexual assault against Black females by Black males and this is also the most tragic illustration of Black women’s abuse as shown in the novel. She is an innocent child, but, very unfortunately, she is made to suffer from oppression of hers by the Whites as well as by her kith and kin like her father which is seen in the fact that she is made a victim of rape and domestic violence by her own father. Pecola doesn’t know the meaning of love and also she could never control her body. Her sexual experiences are of just being raped by her father.

Morrison shows that Black women suffer fatal types of violence even from their close family members (relations). Abuse of and sexual assault to Black females in this novel come from both Black and White males. *The Bluest Eye*, among other important themes, is also a narrative of incestuous rape. In this novel Pecola’s story ends tragically. Generally each woman in this novel suffers some attack on her integrity and female dignity.
Pauline Breedlove, Pecola’s mother, is an unimpressive and helpless character and she is happy to indulge in religious activities and domestic discipline. The relationship between Pauline and Pecola as mother and daughter respectively in the novel is quite pale and diminishing.

Pecola Breedlove thinks that three prostitutes, China, Poland, and Maginot Line, play some kind of a revolutionary role because these prostitutes represent the unsettling of domestic respectability. China and Poland signify the European and Asian fronts of World War II, Maginot Line refers literally to the failed French border fortifications and metaphorically to the tendency to focus on the wrong front to which historian Sidney Lens calls *The Maginot Line Syndrome: America’s Hopeless Foreign Policy*. In *The Bluest Eye*, Poland, China and Maginot, are associated with beauty:

...The three whores are striking and they are associated with beauty: “Poland singing — her voice sweet and hard, like new strawberries.” They are associated with the Black English oral tradition and are controllers and extollers of the power of the spoken word. The whores’ conversation is very aural....

Poland, China, and Maginot Line — the three prostitutes — live in an apartment above the Breedloves. According to Elliott Butler-Evans, ‘the three whores “are almost totally unrelated to the novel’s dominant focus.”...’ These three prostitutes are the only females in the novel who could manage themselves and control their body.
In spite of all types of violence, injustices against them, Black women prefer to be silent because they see that they are a part of racist and unjust system which they can hardly change for the better on their own. Morrison in this novel reveals the hard reality of domestic violence towards Black women. In short, Black women’s suffering under the conditions of slavery, domestic violence, sexual abuse and racism are some of the major themes of the novel.

In other words, throughout the novel, Morrison seems to be appealing to her readers and to the Black community to act against violence, rape, sexual abuse, and racism to which Black women are very unfortunately and very frequently subjected.

At the end of novel, Pecola — a young Black girl, a victim of incest talking to herself in a mirror about her imaginary blue eyes — believes that she has received the blue eyes. When Pecola looks into the mirror, she encounters the agonizing physical reality of hers as she looks at herself from White standards of beauty. She obtains her blue eyes in her mind only and finally she goes mad. Soaphead Church “gives” her blue eyes. Soaphead’s major role is to give Pecola the final push towards craziness. He accepts her request for blue eyes and writes a letter to God. Before requesting for blue eyes, Pecola visits Soaphead Church and he doesn’t say anything but just gives her one of his cards. Soaphead Church is a child molester, a man abandoned by his wife years before his arrival in Lorain and his encounter with Pecola.
...“If you are overcome with trouble and conditions that are not natural, I can remove them; Overcome Spells, Bad Luck, and Evil Influences. Remember, I am a true Spiritualist and Psychic Reader, born with power, and I will help you. Satisfaction in one visit. During many years of practice I have brought together many in marriage and reunited many who were separated. If you are unhappy, discouraged, or in distress, I can help you. Does bad luck seem to follow you? Has the one you love changed? I can tell you why. I will tell you who your enemies and friends are, and if the one you love is true or false. If you are sick, I can show you the way to health. I locate lost and stolen articles. Satisfaction guaranteed.” (BE, p. 137)

Soaphead Church has Pecola perform a violent task — poison his landlady's dog — in order to get the eyes.

Patrick Bryce Bjork quoted ‘Barbara Christian’s comments as follows:

“...Pecola’s story does not follow “the usual mythic [cycle] of birth, death, and rebirth, from planting to harvest to planting. Hers will proceed from pathos to tragedy and finally madness.”...”

The myth of rebirth is prevalent in agricultural societies from Africa to Asia based on the observation of the cycle of growth. But Pecola’s story is a deviation of this myth since she does not encounter a renewal but a deterioration. In an interview with on the issue of Black females, Toni Morrison stated:
I think black women are in a very special position regarding black feminism, an advantageous one. White women generally define black women’s role as the most repressed because they are both black and female, and these two categories invite a kind of repression that is pernicious. But in an interesting way, black women are much more suited to aggressiveness in the mode that feminists are recommending, because they have always been both mother and laborer, mother and worker, and the history of black women in the States is an extremely painful and unattractive one, but there are parts of that history that were conducive to doing more, rather than less, in the days of slavery. We think of slave women as women in the house, but they were not, most of them worked in the fields along with the men....

Claudia MacTeer who is the narrator of the novel seems to use the language quite powerfully —

...These characters may not appear to be the “traditional” models of correctness and beauty, but in Morrison’s novels beauty is perceived through a different lens, the lens of language. These non-traditional characters become the griots of Morrison’s fictional worlds, caretakers of knowledge, guardians of history.

While remaining unfocused, Morrison’s music moves from the mourner’s bench to a ‘jook’ joint and then to an uptown club in the
city. But her central focus (theme) is the Black community. Morrison herself explains:

“If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write), isn’t about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything.”

Although Morrison’s thematic concern is the relationship of an individual with her/his community, her aesthetic concern is the ‘sublime’. It is the domain of the unspeakable, unrepresentable, awesome, awful supernatural and even inhuman elements in the world. *The Bluest Eye* presents the fundamental pattern of Morrison’s early novels: an isolated figure, cut off from the community, undergoes a harrowing experience, an ontologically threatening encounter with what is variously described as the unspeakable, the otherworldly, the demonic — that is, the sublime. In this encounter with the sublime, these characters are excluded from a general gathering of the community in beauty and harmony and are condemned to fragmentation, psychosis, and ultimately death.

Thus Morrison’s work reveals an aesthetic progression that is simultaneously ethical as well. This progression is defined by a cohesive and nurturing sense of love, which Morrison herself has stated is the best, perhaps only, hope for healing a devastated world: “Love,” she has stated, is the metaphor most in need today: “We have to embrace ourselves”…. Thus Morrison’s work is an ongoing and passionate effort at healing the divisions that quite literally haunt the scarred individuals and fractured
communities of late twentieth-century America; it is an effort to heal sublime wounds and to constitute beautiful worlds.\textsuperscript{26}

In \textit{The Bluest Eye}, Toni Morison has strongly criticized the White (Western) concept of physical beauty conceived as virtue. She was straightforward, simple and direct in her choice of words, telling the reader(s) what she thought of this idea without mincing her words. One notices words such as ‘pernicious’, ‘destructive’, and ‘Western world’, which suggest that she is looking at the idea and the world as an outsider. Interestingly, the word ‘White’ is wisely omitted.

“The concept of physical beauty as \textit{virtue},” Toni Morrison wrote in 1974, “is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the Western world, and we should have nothing to do with it”\textsuperscript{27}

But there is the ironic paradox that the beauty industry, which Morrison condemns at first, provides her with a path into beauty mediated by touch and fantasy. Throughout her novels, there are constant reminders of the African American’s relation to beauty, particularly as something manufactured and exchanged. In her reaction to western ideas of “physical beauty as a virtue” we find that —

Morrison is opening up alternate routes to the beautiful, specifying the diverse senses through which beauty reaches us, other than the visual. In other words, she is not so much interested in sociology as in aesthetics….\textsuperscript{28}
Through the voice of narrator Claudia, Toni Morrison expressed her disgust and impatience with the concept physical beauty as virtue. Beside Claudia, as mentioned, Morrison uses Pauline Breedlove, Pecola’s mother, who has the tendency to look at others’ faces and rate them according to a scale of absolute beauty gleaned from constant cinema-going. Pauline fails as a person and as a mother. She measures herself, as well as others, according to this cinematic scale of beautiful and ugly, White and Black.

Morrison’s scenes of cosmetics in the novel may both materialise beauty by portraying the required handiwork and spiritualise it through the use of the imagination. She makes this distinction more obvious, in a comical way, by using China’s changing hair style:

“China had changed her mind about the bangs and was arranging a small but sturdy pompadour. She was adept at creating any number of hair styles, but each one left her with a pinched and harassed look. Then she applied makeup heavily. Now she gave herself surprised eyebrows and a cupid-bow mouth. Later she would make Oriental eyebrows and an evilly slashed mouth.”

Generally, the discourse on aesthetics gives the visual faculty an objectivity and autonomy. Its range is vast and is considered authoritative. Conversely, tactile sensation is localised and would seem to be lowly by comparison.
Beauty takes place in Morrison’s novels when some act of imagination makes the body’s unforeseen beauty suddenly apparent. Thus for Morrison, the experience of beauty is much more subjective and dynamic than its visual, static dimension would suggest. Beauty is ultimately improvisational, an unaccountable, unpredictable response. And beauty is narrational, for Morrison is uninterested in any notion of beauty unmediated by fantasy, story-line, the contingencies of context. Aesthetic theories ordinarily distinguish the object from the beholding of it.30

We have stated that Morrison uses a shift in perspective as part of her novelistic style. During the course of her narration, she shifts from one perspective to another as suits her story — e.g., from the beautiful as one model to the sublime as another — and these bear their influence upon both the individuals and the community at large.

The shift from the sublime to the beautiful in Morrison’s work carries aesthetic, ethical, political, and philosophical implications, all of which bear upon the complicated relationship between the individual and the community....31

In The Bluest Eye, fear of being homeless works the Black community’s greatest fear, and it also has its relation to Pecola. Pecola Breedlove is a rather unstable character of the novel. She has no specified place, and she floats on the peripheries of the
community she longs to enter like a wraith looking for its missing body. She is constantly outdoors, never able to integrate herself into the community, always left on the peripheries, literally moving from house to house searching for a fixed place of comfort and security. Pecola has become homeless because her drunken father has destroyed their home, “...and everybody, as a result, was outdoors.” (BE, p.11)

Morrison illustrates the dimension of Pecola Breedlove’s estrangement from her community and from her schoolmates also. They jeer at her for being Black, for her father’s nakedness and other matters which may anticipate her rape by her father and her desire to transform herself into a White model such as Shirley Temple. Claudia and Frieda can only rescue her momentarily because Maureen turns upon her and taunts her about her father. Pecola desires to vanish from her unbearable rejection by almost everybody around her:

“Pecola tucked her head in — a funny, sad, helpless movement. A kind of hunching of the shoulders, pulling in of the neck, as though she wanted to cover her ears. (BE, p. 56)

Pecola’s father burns down their house and Pecola attempts to stay in idyllic houses in the White community; but the owners throw her out. At one instance, she is attracted by the orderliness of Junior’s house. Junior was a classmate of Pecola. Suddenly, the boy himself becomes mean and sadistic to his cat and throws it towards the window. His mother blames this on Pecola and evicts Pecola: “Get
out,” she said, her voice quiet. “You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house.” (BE, p. 72) Next, Pecola arrives at the Fisher house, which is clean like the first one. Her mother, Pauline, works there and is enchanted by its orderliness too. Pecola breaks something accidentally, in nervousness, but her mother abuses her about it. Pauline demands that Pecola leave the house immediately: “Pick up that wash and get on out of here, so I can get this mess cleaned up” (BE, p. 85). Pecola is once more expelled from the environment which she had liked heartily. The home, like her community, which is supposed to provide her (or, for that matter, to everybody) comfort and safety, offers fear and anger. It further confirms Pecola’s isolation.

Additionally, even among her own community, Pecola was unaccepted, disliked and almost hated. While the Black women accepted the idea of White femininity, they saw themselves through the eyes of White people and their admiration of White beauty also ruined their community. Geraldine hides her Black characteristics which do not fit into White cultural standards of beauty. While Geraldine saw Pecola in her house she imagined that Pecola was the representative of all the negative characteristics of Black females:

...She looked at Pecola. Saw the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head, hair matted where the plaits had come undone, the muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping out from between the cheap soles, the soiled socks, one of which had been walked down into the heel on the shoe.... (BE, p. 71)
Geraldine distinguished between coloured and niggers and clarified to her son the differences between them.

...Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud.... (*BE*, p. 67)

Maureen Peal is a green-eyed, middle-class mulatto. It seems that the only character who successfully achieves the status of disembodied citizen is Maureen Peal. Maureen Peal thinks that in the whole class she is pretty and attractive girl whereas Pecola is ugly and unattractive. Maureen also thinks that because of her light skin everybody should respect her, particularly Blacks:

A high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back. (*BE*, p. 47)

Claudia and her sister were quite satisfied with themselves:

We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness. (*BE*, p. 57)

Claudia individually is different from Maureen. She understands that her disgust of Maureen is not only because of Maureen’s being light-skinned, but also because of all those things that make Maureen beautiful and attractive:

And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to
fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us. (*BE*, p. 58)

Pecola’s behaviour is influenced by all those people who surround her. She desires that if she has blue eyes, maybe others would love her.

She enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn’t trip her in the halls; white boys didn’t stone her, white girls didn’t suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls’ toilets, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids. (*BE*, p. 48)

In other words, Pecola Breedlove feels a kind of guarantee of her the acceptance and love of others for her which she desires in life. This is necessary to reduce the feeling of being solitary and rejected. Blue eyes have long been associated with the White people’s concept of beauty. Claudia, the narrator, opens the narrative by claiming that she is indifferent to either Shirley Temple or White dolls.

The community’s ultimate reaction is to turn away from Pecola in her trauma. Though they pity her, they realise that no one else (in the community) will be able to help her in fulfilling her desire of having a pair of blue eyes. Instead of words of pity or sympathy — “Poor little girl”, or “Poor baby” (*BE*, p. 149) — the people in her community only waged their heads. Faces were veiled rather than anyone showing
concern with creased eyes. Undesired and unaccepted by her own community, Pecola must preconceive of herself as a Shirley Temple doll.

Morrison has stated that the reason for Pecola’s desire for getting blue eyes must be at least partially traced to the failures of Pecola’s own community:

“she wanted to have blue eyes and she wanted to be Shirley Temple … because of the society in which she lived and, very importantly, because of the black people who helped her want to be that....”

Pecola’s community fails to offer the safe haven from the world’s hostilities and instead it rejects Pecola and brings her to the brink of psychic disintegration from which she suffers at the novel’s conclusion. She is mentally fragmented and disintegrated both by the rejection of hers by her community as well as the unspeakable (i.e. her rape by her father). This is what Lyotard called the essence of the sublime — ontological dislocation. Morrison’s central metaphor is the image of the splintered mirror which constitutes both form as well as content.

At the conclusion of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison depicts Claudia’s meditation on Pecola’s fate. Claudia sees Pecola’s shattering as sterility and, finally, death which affects her community also. So the community not only fails to aid Pecola in her distress, but they are also complicit in her destruction. That destruction, as destruction everywhere, has its repercussions on them also. In the last pages of
The Bluest Eye, Claudia realized that the seed(s) of marigolds she and her sister Frieda had planted had not grown. Pecola’s baby and her alcoholic father also are dead.

…it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. The soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. (BE, p. 164)

Morrison’s aim in projecting Pecola as a scapegoat seems to be to depict and show to the world in which miserable conditions the likes of Pecola are made to live. Pecola is symbolically ‘dumped,’ ugly, mad and pregnant by her father, and an object of disgusting nightmares:

All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares…. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. (BE, p. 163)
Analysis of the Themes in *The Bluest Eye*

*The Bluest Eye* deals with a little girl’s identity crisis which is enacted in Pecola’s desire for the blue eyes and also it is a story of America’s national identity crisis.

In *The Bluest Eye*, most of the characters and incidents in the story show how Morrison uses time, space, history and individual Black experiences to desirable how race, racism and poverty are at the same time complex and stable social phenomena. Cholly Breedlove, a drunken man who raped his own daughter and beat his wife, was both a misogynist and psychologically impotent. Cholly himself is a victim of the White society that condemns, dislikes and exploits him. He has had no opportunity to get self-respect. He doesn’t provide any facility or support for his family; on the contrary, he abuses his wife and the whole family. It is not important for him what others think of him. At last he dies in a workhouse.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison employs three narrators, Claudia MacTeer who works both as the first-person narrator as well as the third-person narrator and Pauline Breedlove is the last narrator. Through Claudia’s first-person narrative voice in the beginning of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison narrates the connection between Pecola’s pregnancy by her father and the marigold that don’t grow:

*Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola...*
In *The Bluest Eye*, first narrator, Claudia, tells Pecola's story. Except for a few parts of the novel, Pecola remains silent during Claudia's narration. Claudia is the strongest character in *The Bluest Eye*.

*The Bluest Eye* challenges Western (White) standards of beauty — stating that they are not physical, but social constructs. Morrison realises that if whiteness is a standard of beauty, then the value of blackness is reduced. Therefore, *The Bluest Eye* intends to challenge the very standards of beauty created by the Whites. But Morrison does not stop there. She continues to show the mental and physical damage caused to Black women characters in the novel and, through them, to Black women in real life.

*The Bluest Eye* presents the readers with themes beyond beauty as James Mayo points out. Some other themes in the novel are: guilt, repression, violence, shame, social acceptance both real and ideal, social rejection, racial self-loathing, racial memory etc. To demonstrate the theme of the existence of shame and memory in the novel, Claudia, reflects on her childhood and tells the readers of her shame and guilt over Pecola’s rape.

In this novel, women are the ones who are victimized most. Almost all women in *The Bluest Eye* suffer some or the other attack and assault on their dignity and integrity. Pecola is abused by almost each person in the novel. Pecola’s only weapon against the horrifying cruelty is to
long for a pair of blue eyes, because she thinks the blue eyes will change her life fundamentally and make her look beautiful.

_The Bluest Eye_ is set in Lorain, Ohio, in the early 1940s. After the habit of most writers, Toni Morrison has modelled the community of her characters on her own place of residence and immediate environment. Southern Black women and men were migrating to the Northern USA in search of work and emancipation. In the North, Black population was situated in the lower area and they had less income and did the low-paid and low-status jobs. Furthermore, many Blacks travelled North to flee the harsh racist living conditions in the South. Pecola Breedlove’s family also travelled to Lorain looking for new job(s). Pecola Breedlove lives with her parents, Cholly and Pauline Breedlove father and mother respectively. Pecola’s family is living in one bedroom and there are no separate bath facilities.

There are several restricted areas for Blacks where they are not allowed to go such as White church, parks, and so on. There are certain segregation borders for the Blacks who are not permitted to go beyond those borders, otherwise they will come in conflict with White rule which is hostile to the Blacks and which destroys lives and families of the Blacks by using (or, rather misusing) their racial, social, political, financial and even legal powers.

In _The Bluest Eye_, Toni Morrison's emphasis is on racism. She also explores the influences of the standards of beauty of the dominant “White” culture on the self-image of the African American feminine youth. The novel is strongly influenced by the 1960’s Black Power era
in the United States. It demonstrates the adverse (or, in fact devastating) effects of White racism on the Black community in general and on Black families in particular. In fact, the novel is the story of determination and survival and the first person narrator, Claudia MacTeer, is one of those characters who has survived. Sometimes, she gives a child’s point of view whereas at other times, she also seems to be projecting an adult perspective.

The story happens during one year — i.e. from the autumn of 1940 till the end of the summer of 1941. Throughout the first chapter, entitled “Autumn”, Toni Morrison set up the cruel and harsh situations of Pecola’s family life.

In the third and fourth chapters, entitled “Winter”, and “Spring” respectively, Morrison exemplifies how Pecola was rejected and separated from other children in her society. Only Claudia and Claudia’s sister Frieda seemed to stand by Pecola through difficult stages in her life. Moreover, Morrison describes the background of Pecola’s family and also depicts a variety of social classes among African Americans.

Morrison, in the last chapter, entitled “Summer”, portrays Pecola’s descent into madness and her desire for the blue eyes through Claudia MacTeer’s narration.

Pecola desires seriously to be loved and to be beautiful even though her perspective of love is limited, but she supposes that if she is
beautiful someone will love her. So she wishes to be loved by someone for which being beautiful, she thinks, is a pre-requisite.

In *The Bluest Eye* Pecola is isolated from both the Black as well as the White communities. She is a lonely, victimized, Black girl, who becomes mad by her desire to have White skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes. While her parents physically assault each other, Pecola prays every night for the blue *eyes*. She is the poorest and as a result the most defenceless and weak character in the novel. All the Blacks in the novel feel insecure and even inferior because of their black skin.

Pecola Breedlove never achieved the real beauty because she and blackness are rejected across space and place. She finally went to Soaphead Church, a West Indian mystic/prophet. She requested him to get blue eyes for her and Soaphead Church wrote a letter to God informing God about Pecola’s wishes and about giving her the blue eyes. But nobody is able to see her blue eyes. The other girls also, including Claudia, are perhaps Soaphead’s victims. In his letter to God, written when Pecola meets him, Soaphead tells God about how he lures girls. He entices them with treats they have never had, including ice cream which we come to know children, in this community, long to enjoy and they eat it with their legs open. Mr. Henry, a fellow boarder with Claudia’s family, likewise uses this enticement to keep his own secret from the girls’ parents: he has brought them into the house while their parents were gone out of the house. So, there seems to be a nexus between all the above-mentioned Black characters and food and sex. Thus, both Claudia
and her sister Frieda may have ended at Soaphead Church’s doorstep.

At the end of *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola, a victim of incest, sits in her room talking to herself in a mirror about her imaginary blue eyes. Pecola is the central figure of *The Bluest Eye* and in literary term she could be called a grotesque character.

One feels that Claudia and her sister did not make adequate efforts to save Pecola from the abuse and sexual insult. Even the community didn’t support her in her struggle against injustice and inequality. But there are differences between Claudia’s feeling and the feelings of the Black community towards Pecola. Moreover, Claudia, in the novel, shares Pecola’s misery, sadness, indignity and shame. Claudia states her feelings of guilt that she and Frieda had experience over the death of Pecola’s child and Pecola’s madness. Claudia associates the death of Pecola’s child with the non-growth of the seeds of marigold that Claudia and her sister had planted.

Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, argues about Black girlhood and Black womanhood, and female characters, relationships with their families, men, communities, and with each other. *The Bluest Eye* seems to be a journey down the Black memory lane. This is the story of Black, the love, the helplessness as well as hopefulness.

This novel is an examination of psychology in that it throws light on the one’s awareness of race and colour. In the environment of Lorain, Ohio, the background to the book, its author and racism have both
material and psychological consequences. Among these are both national expectations and standards of beauty. But the characters uphold and contest the social constructs which subjugate them. Pecola’s ‘blue eyes’ represent a specific relationship between a place and an identity — a hybrid of race and racism, hatred and whiteness — to which the critic calls ‘eerie’. It intertwines nation, home, community, mind and body.

Barbara Christian writes about *The Bluest Eye* that it was a startling and gripping tale considering Morrison’s approach to story-telling:

*The Bluest Eye* startles the reader with its straight-arrow aim as well as its experimentation, for Toni Morrison finds the language to describe the psychic trauma experienced by so many black girls growing up in a culture where blue eyes and blonde hair are the culmination of beauty. Because she takes risks with the language, she communicates a link between one’s sense of one’s physical self and the developing spiritual psyche.\(^3\)

David Ron has stated below in his criticism of the novel that Morrison desired to write mostly for the African American reader since she believed that the other Negro writers she studied in college were writing to explain Black culture to White audiences. While in college, Morrison certainly studied Wright, Ellison and James Baldwin.

What struck Morrison as almost more tragic than the literal absence of black people in Western literature was the fact that the black Americans whose books she had
read (mostly men: Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin) seemed as if they were always writing to a white audience, explaining things about black culture that they would never have to explain to her if they were sitting around over coffee…. Toni Morrison wanted to write a book about black people, in the language of black people, without having to look over her shoulder to explain her world to white people…. 34

*Tar Baby*

*Tar Baby*, Toni Morrison’s fourth novel, combines fiction with folklore and the tradition of gregarious storytellers instead of ‘factual’ novelists. Hence, reviewers believe that *Tar Baby* is a mixture of styles and is preoccupied with masks. Morrison herself admitted that:

“The Tar Baby tale seemed to me 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” 35

Son, the African American protagonist of *Tar Baby*, is not exactly the hero of the novel. Judging from his speech and actions, he may be called anti-hero but not a villain. At the out of his appearance in the Streets’ house, Son causes such characters to confront their fears with whom he is in conflict. For Margaret and even Jadine, the fear is ‘rape.’ Only Valerian Street is casual with him and invites him to eat
with them. Son is free-spirited and unbound by man-made laws, especially those made by White people. But Son is anxious to enter a relationship with Jadine whom he loves. Jadine deserts him but he pursues her to the Isle de Chevaliers.

As far as antagonism in *Tar Baby* is concerned, though we can not say that any one character is a real antagonist, they engage in antagonistic situations — confrontations: Jadine with Son, particularly. The real conflicts, as has been mentioned, lie within the characters’ life and psyche and especially within Jadine. Being considerably unlike Son, Jadine argues with Son.

As the title suggests, *Tar Baby* presents an infantile and inert blackness and the negative stereotype of Black character — unresponsive, inactive, sullen etc.

The novel appeared after the 1970s, when African Americans were both creating new and increasingly powerful self-images and contesting any depiction that did not conform to their sense of how the world should be and how the world actually was. Rather than sanitising the presence of race socially and politically, they foregrounded it. Ten years later, Morrison brought the radicalisation of American popular culture into American literary canon.

Toni Morrison actually published *Tar Baby* in 1981 and she seems to be comparing the projections of other racial descriptions with her descriptions of the same. She states that the term “Tar Baby,” refers to Black children in general and Black girls in particular. The words
“Tar Baby” are used by White people to denigrate the Blacks. As Morrison explains in an interview with Tom Leclair:

“Tar Baby” is also a name, like “nigger,” that white people call black children, black girls, as I recall. Tar seemed to me to be an odd thing to be in a Western story, and I found that there is a tar lady in African mythology. I started thinking about tar. At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things. It came naturally out of the earth; it held together things like Moses’ little boat and the pyramids. For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together.\footnote{36}

\textit{Tar Baby} is a novel of audacious, rhythmic, allure and power. The novel is about debates and conflicts that emerge out of discriminations, injustices and chauvinisms.

It appears that \textit{Tar Baby} is written particularly to explore the relationship(s) of the twentieth century Black women with Black men engaged in antagonism rather than in heterosexual romance. The main focus of \textit{Tar Baby} is the relationship between Jadine Childs, a European-educated African American and Son, a Florida-born African. During the first half of this narrative, no relationship is mentioned. But what is most striking is that each of the characters in the novel wants to rescue the other from poverty and an unsafe existence.
In *Tar Baby*, Toni Morrison combines the storytelling with several other techniques: the Southern folk tale Br’er Rabbit and African folklore concerning a powerful symbol for African woman, the tar lady. Assuming that pre-Christian Black woman was a tar lady, what of Black womanhood altogether? In response, Morrison says that both Blacks and Whites reinvent such myths from one period to another and we must uncover their original meaning.

Morrison’s own assessment of *Tar Baby* shows the reversal of things: wit triumphing over authority and cunning over law, for example. While wit is seen as a virtue, cunning is perceived as a vice. Furthermore, weakness of one sort or another triumphs over power. The morality of *Tar Baby* is complicated but not necessarily impossible. However, it cancels any afterthoughts about funny, happy ending.

*Tar Baby* is exemplary fictional work as far as Toni Morrison’s narrative style is concerned, with many storytellers acting as her surrogates. These storytellers create stories so that they can make sense of the (senseless) world. Morrison accounts for this situation by explaining that the storytelling functions as a form of knowledge.

*Tar Baby* opens with the phrase “He believed he was safe.” It suggests that Morrison could have believed that safety was impossible. While explaining this phrase, Morrison commented that if she wanted the reader to believe that safety was possible, she would have used “He was safe.” Safety, being the desire of each character in the novel, creates the unease towards this view of safety.
The unreality of the world we view as real is another theme handled in the novel. This kind of handling is most evident in Valerian Street’s remark about the world:

“What I have lived in it and I will die out of it,” Valerian declares of his “real” existence in social space and historical time, “but it is not the world. This is not life. This is some other thing.”

_Tar Baby_ is a Black novel that illustrates the relationships between Black men and Black women, White men and White women, and Black and White people in general. As a Black novel, _Tar Baby_ is deeply aware of the Black person’s desire to replace the White man’s stereotypes and myths with ones of his own. In this respect, it is definitely a woman’s novel.

The setting of the novel is a Caribbean island. Valerian Street and his wife Margaret are White, very wealthy and live in a trance-like ritual of life. Valerian is retired. Their servant — Sydney and his wife — and their niece Jadine — described as beautiful and dazzling — are Blacks. Sydney is a very fussy man. Jadine is also a friend of the Streets. Jadine, is educated at the Sorbonne.

Margaret’s character is revealed almost shockingly: besides having tormented her son Michael in his infancy, as revealed by Ondine, she was the principal beauty of Maine. She is compared with a character namely Miranda. Her husband dominates her and warps her so that she cannot function as a normal member of her class.
Sydney and Ondine are household servants of the Streets who serve Valerian Street faithfully. They also criticise and advise Valerian Street.

Jadine, the European-educated and sophisticated modern Black woman, can not be identified within the Street household: she is neither a field slave nor a household servant. Nor is she strong and independent like Therese. But she is stronger than her hostess, Margaret. Jadine has neither identity nor culture; or, rather, she has turned away from traditional identity and culture. She is compared with an orphan and Son sets out in the novel to “unorphan” her.

These characters move onward through an easy existence. Then, Son, a ragged and starving Black American, breaks into the Streets’ house. Valerian prefers to invite him to eat rather than to call the police. Everything begins to change. But most notably, Jadine — who, at first, appears repelled by Son — gets attracted to him in due course of time. He represents the type of man she has dreaded: uneducated, violent and contemptuous of her privilege.

Jadine and Son finally collide romantically which they have both feared and welcomed. At this juncture, the novel progresses further. The action moves from Florida and the backwater town of Son’s childhood to the sleek New York Jadine knows. Then it moves back to the island. Jadine and Son attempt to understand each other. Jadine feels that Son’s vision of reality and love is vital to her freedom while Son feels that she is only a lure and the “tar baby” of the title.
In *Tar Baby*, the first debate is that of race. Chauvinism exists between the White and Black people in American society. The White people feel themselves superior to the Blacks. John Irving, a “New York Times” book reviewer, remarked about the book that through this book, Toni Morrison had exposed basic racial fears of the Blacks and the Whites. In the Streets’ house, both the White owners and the servants harboured and faced prejudices. Some of those prejudices were between the servants and others, with the servants — Ondine and Sydney Childs — feeling superior to the poor Blacks outside.

Rather typically, the White house owners — Valerian and Margaret — think themselves to be feel superior to the Blacks. Later, they feel threatened. Margaret’s reaction to Ondine, the cook, is a slur on all Blacks that they remained the same as they were before, devoid of sophistication. Margaret employs every racial cliché White people in America have employed to denounce and denigrate the Blacks. After seeing Son for the first time, apart from mentally accusing him of being a rapist, she thinks that he is also a ‘dope’ addict:

> And if that wasn’t enough now this nigger he lets in this real live dope addict ape just to get back at her wanting to live near Michael. (*TB*, p. 86)

Morrison highlights the servants’ initial reaction to Son too pointing out that even when Blacks elevate themselves, they look down upon those Blacks who have not elevated themselves. Sydney wants to kill Son then and there, suspecting him [Son] of crimes as much as Margaret suspected him of being a thief, a murderer and a wife-raper.
Ondine calls Son various names, such as jailbird or “swamp nigger.”

The central conflict in *Tar Baby* is the conflict within the main character, Jadine. The conflict in *Tar Baby* further could be described as that of a woman who has discarded her former identity (Black) — her heritage and culture — and adopted another (White).

In *Tar Baby* the narrator of the story, Therese, uses the power of the word.

Therese said America was where doctors took the stomachs, eyes, umbilical cords, the backs of the neck where hair grew, blood, sperm, hearts and fingers of the poor and froze them in plastic packages to be sold later to the rich (*TB*, p. 152).

Therese’s words show awareness of the differences that exist between the rich (capitalists) and the poor (labourers) in Western society. Therese also knows what atrocities were committed by this system on the Blacks. Therese’s words indicate the subjugation and oppression of the Blacks by the White capitalists. Morrison uses Therese to express her honest feelings about the ravages of the White capitalism against the Blacks. The White capitalists stripped the life from generations of the Blacks for the sake of money, and, she adds, this desire for wealth has adversely affected the African American culture.
*Tar Baby* questions the concept of equality which most Americans find important. Behind this veneer of equality is capitalism. Success within the capitalist system is bound by and in racism. Africans have shed sweat and blood for the prosperity of the White plantation owners. The African American culture has lost every aspect except its colour.

The following critique offers both lyrical description and a thorough explanation of the plot as well as it echoes the above-stated statement(s) also:

In *Tar Baby*, bodily deformity takes a very different form. Because this novel describes an already sundered black community whose exiles have neither the wish nor the capacity to rediscover the source of black culture, freedom cannot be articulated (as it was in the previous novels) by an individual’s moment of self-affirmation and reinsertion into society. Having no possible embodiment in the real world — not even as a pariah — freedom takes mythic form and defines the text’s alternate, subterranean world, in which, in sharp contrast with the bourgeois world of manor house and leisure, a centuries-old band of blind black horsemen rides the swamps.³⁹

Son jumps off the ship near Queen of France and attempts to swim ashore, but the sea intervenes, setting the scene for the later difficulties in his life. Finding a small boat, he climbs aboard it; but the passengers take him to Isle des Chevaliers. Son disembarks the
vessel and heads for the villa, where he searches for food and water. He lives temporarily near the Streets’ house and creeps into it at night to search for food. Then, he is spotted (caught) by Margaret, Valerian Street’s young wife while he is at his business of thieving.

Margaret is a prejudiced White woman. When she realizes that Son, a nigger, is present in her bedroom closet and she thinks that he had a desire to rape her. This belies the White suspicion that (all) Black men are rapists. This attitude is reflected in Jadine. Jadine's reaction to Son exposes her “racial traitor”. In her bedroom she feels that Son planned to rape her:

“You rape me and they'll feed you to the alligators. Count on it, nigger. You good as dead right now.”

“Rape? Why you little white girls always think somebody's trying to rape you?”

“White?” She was startled out of fury. "I'm not ... you know I'm not white!"

“No? Then why don't you settle down and stop acting like it.” (TB, p. 121)

Jadine is called as a ‘racial traitor’ in Son’s eyes. When she first encounters him, Jadine is shocked by his wild looks and labels him a rapist and a criminal type. She supposes that he intends to rape her. The main reason why Son thinks her to be a ‘racial traitor’ is that Jadine has rejected her culture and her heritage and the woman in yellow sees her as hollow and inauthentic. Jadine prefers the White
Valerian, in a composed manner, decides to feed Son and requests that Sydney and Ondine take care of him. At first, everyone does not agree to the decision but Son calms them. Gideon and Therese, servants in the villa, become interested in Son. Then, on Christmas Eve, everyone — that is, everyone except Therese and Gideon — have dinner together. A debate ensues and continues between Ondine and Margaret. Ondine argues first with Sydney and then with Margaret for firing the original servants. When she reveals to Sydney and Margaret that Margaret hurt her son Michael, the information shocks everyone and it shocks Valerian the most.

Son tells Jadine that he is not only putting her down but also he is demonstrating that he is a part of the community while she is not. The central debate of the novel is, in a way, present in this point. As has been given to understand before, the protagonist, Jadine, has rejected her heritage and culture. In fact, Son attempts to save Jadine from the White world. Moreover, he wants to bring her back to Eloé. Son desires Jadine to live in Eloé, an all-Black city where the Black women do simple domestic things.

He challenges Jadine to remember her funkiness and her ancient properties of tar. He fears Jadine might alienate him from women such as those who sold pies in the church basement. Conversely, Jadine wants to see Son getting education and success in his life. Jadine perceives that Son has a problem about White and Black culture such as Classical music and Picasso’ paintings to her own Black culture.
women and seeks to deliver him from it. She begins to educate him and asks Valerian to pay for a shop or for Son’s education, but Son refuses, claiming that he would be indebted to “one of the killers of the world” (*TB*, p. 205), an allusion that Valerian was one of the Whites who robbed Son — a representative of the Blacks — of his land (i.e. Africa.) Son refuses to adapt to an urbanised lifestyle, but neither he nor Jadine realises that they could be both successful and responsible simultaneously. They visit Eloe and the night women visit Jadine, but she can hardly bear it.

But most of the hurt was dread. The night women were not merely against her (and her alone—not him), not merely looking superior over their sagging breasts and folded stomachs, they seemed somehow in agreement with each other about her, and were all out to get her, tie her, bind her. Grab the person she had worked hard to become and choke it off with their soft loose tits. (*TB*, p. 264)

Jadine feels that she is fighting against the night women rather than against Son, in the final confrontation, because she fears that they have seduced him. They argue, particularly about education and he tells Jadine that Valerian Street owes her an education because of what they (White people) did to her uncle and aunt (representative of the Black people). Jadine insists on defending Valerian in spite of Son’s remarks. Son realises who or what Jadine is and renounces
her European education. However, as we understand from his speech, his emphasis is on himself:

“The truth is that whatever you learned in those colleges that didn't include me ain't shit. What did they teach you about me?... If they didn't teach you that, then they didn't teach you nothing, because until you know about me, you don't know nothing about yourself. And you don't know anything, anything at all about your children and anything at all about your mama and your papa. (TB, p. 267)

In a point-blank manner, Son disapproves of Jadine’s desire to marry a White man by exclaiming that White people do not marry Blacks. He tells her about Ondine and about someone other than Valerian Street who had put Jadine through school. Furthermore, he reminds her of her responsibility and of how she fled after fighting on Christmas Eve. He is enraged at her rejection of native (Black) culture and rapes her after telling her the story of the tar baby.

Jadine makes Son feel shame and he leaves her. When he returns to her apartment later, he finds that she has gone away.

Jadine rejects her native culture and escapes back to Isle de Chaviers. Ondine, Sydney’s wife, reminds her that a daughter requires to care for her origins and care for those who took care of her. Jadine replies that she wants to be different from Ondine. To demonstrate the point of personal maturity, Ondine tells Jadine:

… a girl has got to be a daughter first. She have to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she
can't never learn how to be a woman... a woman...good enough even for the respect of other women.... You don't need your own natural mother to be a daughter. All you need is to feel a certain way, a certain careful way about people older than you are. (*TB*, p. 283)

Jadine has left New York where she meets Alma Estee. Son reaches Queen of France and searches for Jadine. Instead, he meets Gideon, Therese and Alma who tell him that Jadine has gone away from there. Suddenly, Alma tells him that Jadine has left for Paris with a White man. Son decides to return to Isle des Chevaliers and the villa to get her address. Therese takes him there. The boat is lost in heavy fog. Son must climb rocks to reach the shore. Therese suggests that Son live with the legendary blind horsemen of the island because, according to her, Jadine has lost her ancient properties and he should forget her. He reaches shore and begins to run. The novel ends at that point, leaving the reader to wonder whether or not Son finds and reunites with Jadine.

**Conclusion**

It appears Toni Morrison combined both fiction and folklore in her fourth novel, *Tar Baby*. The folklore is presented in the tradition of storytellers rather than in the customary ‘factual’ novelistic style. Furthermore, as Morrison herself exclaimed, the novel is concerned with ‘masks’ in the sense that it deals with peoples attempts at
concealing their identity. The masks are further enlivened and ‘take over the life’ of the donor.

One aspect that makes *Tar baby* different from her other novels is that Morrison has used in this novel the technique of storytelling from several sources such as the folk tale *Bre’er Rabbit* and African folklore, including the powerful imagery of the *tar lady*, among others. Besides that, she employed the concepts of wit triumphing over authority and cunning succeeding against law. While we may view the former as a virtue and the latter as a vice, there have certainly been times when the readers have perceived authority and law as ‘dumb’ — i.e. without any intellectual control. To read of a cunning man or woman, succeeding against a simple law-abiding man, does not always imply that the simple man had been duped. Rather, he allowed himself to be deceived.

Fear too is one more element of the novel. There is the White fear of the Blacks which is expressed in the form of racial prejudice as is seen in Margaret’s calling Son a rapist. All these fears and prejudices occur when Son, like a typical fugitive in a police story, arrives on Isle des Chevaliers and hides in the Street’s house to look for refreshment.

Morrison adds the element of antagonism through the conflicts and disagreements of the characters. Though the primary conflict is within the characters themselves, and particularly within Jadine, there is an open conflict between the servants and Son, Son and Jadine, Whites and Blacks and so forth.
The novel highlighted the turbulence of the time of the 1970s although it was actually published in 1981. African Americans such as those Morrison wrote about created new self-images and challenged any depiction (of themselves) which did not fit into their situations. These Blacks did not sanitise the social presence of race, but rather foregrounded it. In the 1980s, ten years after the novel appeared, Morrison had racialised the American popular culture and literary canon.

In March, 1981, after the publication of *Tar Baby*, Morrison’s photo appeared on the cover page of “Newsweek” magazine in recognition of her appealing literary creations. Her novels have one aspect in common: their technique of narration which has its origins in traditional African culture.

Critics such as David Ron and Trudier Harris have also come forth to acknowledge Toni Morrison as a successful novelist. We find a very descriptive and full-bodied critique of her works in the following response:

A study of Toni Morrison’s use of folklore in her novels is a foray into a texturally rich intertwining of folk, popular, and literary cultures. Through structure, characters, incidents, and events, Morrison uses African-American folk culture to provide the ethos for her fiction.\(^{40}\)
Notes


5. Judylyn S. Ryan, op. cit., p. 64.


9. Ibid., p. xxi.


11. Ibid., p. 23.


26. Ibid., p. 74.


28. Ibid., p. 83.

29. Ibid., p. 86.

30. Ibid., pp. 87- 88.


32. Ibid., p. 56.


34. Ron David, op. cit. p. 39.

35. Maria DiBattista, “Contentions in the House of Chloe: Morrison’s


   All quotations in the body of this thesis from this novel — abbreviated as TB hereafter — are to this edition.

38. Maria DiBattista, op. cit., p. 93.
