Toni Morrison is a great American writer; she is an inspiration for many writers, artists and readers. By the time when the Nobel Prize for literature was awarded to her in 1993, she had already published the six novels, that have been discussed in the present thesis. Morrison, then sixty two years of age captured the attention of the critics and scholars throughout the world and her works were translated in more than twenty different languages. The Nobel committee of the Swedish Academy called Morrison, “a literary artist of finest work,” who “gives life to an essential aspect of American reality” (Lisa R. Rhodes 8).

Alice Walker, another great African American writer said when Morrison was given the Nobel Prize:
No one writes more beautifully than Toni Morrison. She has consistently explored issues of true complexity and terror and love in the lives of blacks. Harsh criticism has not dissuaded her. Prizes have not trapped her. She is a writer who deserves this honor (14).

Morrison has created memorable African American characters who struggled to live their lives as full individuals with their triumphs and tragedies. Her characters overcome the brutality of slavery, racial and economic oppression and sexism; they depend on their own inner strengths, spirituality and love of their African American culture. In her writings, Morrison shows the invisible bonds of the African American community. According to Morrison, her characters go through difficult circumstances. But by adhering to their true self and identity, they are able to shape their lives. By the end of her novels, as Morrison said, “People always know something profound and wonderful” (9).

Toni Morrison’s career is controversial as her novels are. In the late 1980’s, some critics did not like her writing style whereas many other writers wonder why Morrison was not awarded the prestigious prizes. Some readers could not understand her novels easily and complain against her narrative techniques. Political conservatives have also criticized her exploration of the role of racism in American culture and literature. Toni Morrison has written mainly
from neglected history of the African Americans and re-vitalized their identities. Her novels are lively and written lyrically. She has the ability to dramatize realistic situations of the lives of the Black Americans and is capable of holding the attention of the readers to the compelling issues of racism and sexual politics. Her stories are amalgamations of historical, magical, supernatural and imaginative elements of the African Americans’ lives. Her stories are gripping, emotional and often based on the oral traditions of the Black American folk narratives. So, in her works, we can re-discover the history of African Americans and their cultural roots.

The present thesis makes an attempt to explore the concern for identity as Morrison created fascinating stories with a profound sense of history bringing to the forefront, the neglected, hidden and silenced voices of the African Americans. She has a design of constructing the experiences, perceptions and representations of racism in America through the sufferings and agonies of the Black Americans. Her novels probe the individual lives of people, their hopes and fears and the experiences of slavery.

The thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter gives an introduction to the life and works of Toni Morrison as it is necessary for a greater understanding of the characters and the settings. It also includes her family
history, her student career and the impact of racism in her early life. This chapter also highlights the various challenges and traces of her literary career, touching upon her achievements and the remarkable events where she got fame and recognition not only in the United States but to the reading public of the world at large.

The second chapter is devoted to the study of social and literary milieu in which Toni Morrison lived and worked. It gives an account of the socio-political, economic and the cultural background of the period of slavery and the development of racism in America. It has also studied the growth of African American modern writers and the various aspects of Black American movement which influenced Toni Morrison’s career and writing. Like any other Black person, Morrison experienced the impact of racism faced by the Blacks in America. The harsh reality of the poor Black Americans as one of the important sources which influenced significantly her writings has also been highlighted.

This chapter also analyses deeply the influence of her family, books and other major writers on Toni Morrison and her response to them from her personal experiences which are reflected in her works. This chapter also gives a brief account of the history of the Black people coming to America and the period of the development of slavery in different phases – ante-bellum America, the period
of the Civil War and post-bellum. The struggle of the Black Americans for their emancipation from slavery and the awakening to a new consciousness in the phenomenon known as Harlem Renaissance has also been discussed in this chapter. The subsequent movement of the Black Americans for the assertion of their identities in the two great World Wars and the movement of the famous Civil Rights in America has also been highlighted in this chapter. The chapter also discusses the considerable progress of the Black Americans in the social, economic and political areas and the rise of the growing Black middle class after the Civil Rights movement. However, centuries of racism and prejudice continue to haunt the lives of the Black people. Poverty, segregation, poor health conditions and violence are the glaring realities of the Black American people. Their place in American society is characterized by their heroic struggle for survival in the racist white American society.

This chapter has also investigated the development of Black American literature as the inevitable product of the compelling social and political circumstances of American society. Various slave narratives that influenced Toni Morrison have also been analysed briefly in this chapter. In the second half of the twentieth century, we see the emergence of the revolutionary aspirations of the Black Power Movement where the slogan “Black is Beautiful” has also been
discussed in this chapter along with the Black Arts movement. This chapter has also shown that Toni Morrison’s fame comes primarily from her novels with special appeal to develop the stories of the African Americans who are noticeably absent from the mainstream American literature. It also highlights the emergence of Black women writing in American literature which are reflected in Harriet Jacobs, Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison etc. The creation of female characters who liberate themselves and re-modeled the female image through their inner strength, rooted in Black culture has also been discussed. Black American writers argue against racism and sexism and insist on the recognition as Alice Walker said “In search of my mother’s garden, I found my own” and also as Audre Lorde observed that “the difference is a reason or celebration rather than reason for destruction” (Wisker 23). Toni Morrison joins other Black women writers in emphasizing the spirit of communal consciousness in the quest for the self. The chapter has also discussed the moving philosophy of Toni Morrison who was influenced by other great writers like Soyinka and Achebe and her evolution as a writer with deep insights into the world of racism which she explored in her fiction. Thus, this chapter analyzed the myriad threads woven into the novels of Toni Morrison where black people rise to reconstruct their lives against the inhuman exploitation based on race, gender and class.
The third chapter is devoted to the study of racial issues and Black identity in the novels of Toni Morrison. The crisis of identity and racial problems has been the greatest challenge to the Black Americans. This chapter has discussed the question of race and ethnicity among the Black Americans from the point of view of sociology and culture. It is generally believed that a race is an ethnic group that has been socially defined as such on the basis of physical criteria. But the classification on the basis of physical criteria may sometimes be illogical and unreliable because ethnic groups have developed within the cultural contexts. So, according to the variations of culture, ethnic groups may develop certain cultural traits which have not been practiced earlier, when they are exposed to a new culture. Thus, ethnic groups are not inherently, races. The phenomenon of multiculturalism that we find in American society paves the way for identifying people into different groups having distinctive cultural groups. The European slave traders identify Africans having various cultures and ethnicities as a single black race. So, racial categorization is mainly based on wrong notions and perceptions and the purpose of racial classification is to render some ethnic groups as inherently honorable and superior as others are degraded and considered inferior. This chapter has investigated the political and economic aspects of racism in America and the changing Black demography and the rise of the Black Americans and their movement for equality. The increasing
success of the Black Protest Movement in America during the second half of the twentieth century gave birth to a new generation of aggressive Black community with capable leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. With his remarkable ability for mobilizing and the eloquent message of non violence in the Civil Rights movement, Martin Luther King was able to inspire the Black Americans for the assertion of their identity. This movement was a significant phenomenon in American “race issues” and American politics. Toni Morrison considered this movement as a complicated one which can change the economic and political structure of the nation encompassing “all sorts of skill and talents”.

In the larger context, the Black American movement can be regarded as an attempt to justify the American democratic culture and the dynamic nature of the Americans, irrespective of their caste, creed and race. Right from the birth of the American Nation both whites and Blacks have been subjected to a crisis of identity, because the American Dream provides to include all the recalcitrant cultural traits of various ethnic communities into a composite culture. As such, American culture has become problematic with a vague indefiniteness. For any individual in America, the American experience could never lead to a genuine American identity. The Black Americans have to discover their own sense of belongingness to this nation of great dreams and vast opportunities.
But after decades of suffering and slavery and after a continuous struggle for emancipation, they have realized the spiritual emptiness of the nation. So they began searching for their true selves. All Americans in a sense were uncertain with the American culture and all of them were in search of their American identities. They have been uprooted from their past to which they could never return and with which they could never identify. Moreover, the Black Americans could never be a part of the present where their sense of belongingness is not more than a mere slave. Many of the Negro writers and intellectuals were aware of this issue of race in American life. And delineating the true identity of the true Negro in the American context has been a real problem. Toni Morrison said:

Wherever they were from, they would stand together. They could all say, “I am not that”. So in that sense, becoming an American is based on an attitude, an exclusion of me (Guthrie 255).

Toni Morrison considered this attitude of the white Americans as the unifying force among them. Besides, every Black American belonged to America logically and rightfully as other Americans. But most Black men could not claim morally to be at par with other white people. It was a question of segregation against integration. The catchword “separate but equal” has remained a fictitious and unrealistic dogma in the American society. It was the segregation and the
discrimination that ignored Negro individualism and contradicted their self-reliance and identity. Naturally, Negroes became conscious of their self image and dignity.

Yet the future of the Negroes in the process of America’s inevitable progress as envisioned by the Negroes themselves would ultimately obliterate racial distinctions between the whites and the Blacks. However, if such differences would disappear and all races become one, there would be no more Black identity. This is definitely not the future that the Blacks expected to unfold for their future. Whatever discrimination and oppression may be there in the society and no matter how much a Black people suffers, they still felt the need to hold to some distinctive Negro character. Abandoning all distinctions would be a total rejection of the past and a kind of self obliteration. The quality of life which have been developed from the Black roots in the original African soil which they enjoyed could not be easily forgotten by the Black Americans:

Race becomes a matter of concern for the Americans except that of the color of the skin. Moreover an individual may be distinguished from the group level identities by his or her own arbitrary nature. So what is true of the society or a group may not be the marker of determining an identity of an individual. At the individual level, personal thinking or feeling becomes more important as the
dynamics of perceived sense of prejudice overwhelms the ideological racism or institutional discrimination. Generally, a prejudiced person thinks about other groups in terms of stereotypes; and the tendency to generalization is very strong.

Toni Morrison was delving into this question of American identity and the ‘African’ presence in the inevitable assimilation process of the American composite culture. Paradoxically for the Black Americans, segregation against which they have been fighting for its eradication seemed the only means of preserving their identity. This feeling of ambivalence is, thus, reflected in the writings of the Black Americans. Naturally there is a distinctive feature of their writing which is quite different from the American literature. Toni Morrison just saw it as a conflict and not a problem. These two modes of life that exist to exclude and annihilate each other have been united to form Black identity. She also tries to explore alternatives, free from stereotype racist images and concepts in many of her works. She discusses friendships and relationships such as that of mother and son, mother and daughter, and sexual relationships where women make their own choices.

Toni Morrison carefully studied the African elements in American culture and tried to define the concept of ‘American Africanism’. Africanism does not suggest the varieties and complexities of African people or their descendants. It
simply means Blackness with which the African people have been identified; incorporating views, assumptions, readings and misreading that accompany learning about these people. According to Toni Morrison, “Africanism has become, in the Eurocentric tradition that American education favor, both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations and exercises of power, and meditations or ethnic and accountability “(Morrison, Playing 7).

Tony Morrison says that when we investigate American literature with a deeper reading, we find the presence of racism in many discourses. Sometimes, ignoring the race and adopting a liberal gesture helps to promote the dominant culture of the whites. Toni Morrison considered American literature to be the meeting point of the white Americans’ cultural tradition and the historical conditions of the growth of the nation. She calls it encounter with racial ideology.


*The Bluest Eye* (1970) is Toni Morrison’s first novel. The story centers around the tragic story of a young black and poor eleven year old girl called
Pecola Breedlove who desired blue eyes. Rural migrants from the south, the Breedloves were a miserable and poor family who dwelt in a store-front. However, their misery was not so much a result of their poverty as it was from their hatred for themselves and for each other. It was a grim family where the drunkard father Cholly and bitter mother Pauline fought and railed against each other. The son, Sammy often ran away from home. The young daughter, Pecola was ridiculed and shunned by peers, teachers and her own parents for her ugliness. So, she yearned for blue eyes which she believed would make her beautiful and lovable.

The novel tells a simple story but behind the simplicity lies grave and complex issues about black and white race relations. Racism is the feeling of inherent superiority of one race over another. Though racism as an ideology no more holds power, the implicit notion of the inherent inferiority of blacks has survived long enough to perpetuate the justness of power and privilege of white over the blacks. The various institutions of the society, political, legal, cultural, educational manifest this domination. Everywhere in the novel, white-skin, blond hair and blue eyes become the criteria for beauty. Naturally a poor black child like Pecola who is scorned by everyone for her ugliness and blackness must desire blue eyes to be acceptable and loved by those around her. Thus, Morrison’s main concern in the novel is the brutal reality of racism and the
painful efforts of Blacks for self definition in a society which denies them worth. In depicting Pecola’s cultural alienation which caused her tragedy, Morrison focuses on the importance of communal nourishment and acceptance for one’s wholeness.

In her second novel *Sula* (1973), Toni Morrison takes us away from the world of Black young girls to that of the adult world of Black woman and examines the possibilities for the Black woman in the achievement of her identity against the limitations of the society around them.

*Sula* presents the story of two Black women characters whose different views about life and approaches to the achievement of selfhood lead to conflicts resulting in the fragmentation of their lives and relationships, pain, loss and death. Sula Peace is a woman who never finds her place in her community.

Holloway interprets Sula as an ideal of the African concept of female creative potential which manifest a unity with nature, an embodiment of African spirituality within a culture whose survival threatens African values. The thorny, fire-color of her rose, the watery tadpole, earthbound snake which are seen in her birthmark on her forehead manifest the essential African archetypes of fire, water and ground. Morrison sees Sula’s pursuit of such extreme feminine power within the oppressive white culture transforming into a dangerous freedom that
contradict the very essence of Black womanhood rooted in the connection to community and responsibility (Guthrie 68).

Morrison’s story of the unique friendship of two Black women demonstrates the need for the synthesis of imagination with practicality, the struggle for survival with the joy of living, dreams with reality, vision with realization, freedom with responsibility and liberty with boundary in the Black woman’s search of her identity as a Black and a woman in America.

While her first two novels, the *Bluest eye* and *Sula* were works that centred on the lives of the Black woman and her quest for identity, Morrison’s third novel *Song of Solomon* presents a shift of her vision from the Black woman’s world to that of the Black man. Here Morrison continues to dwell on the theme of quest as she focuses on the Black man’s search for the achievement of his black self. *Song of Solomon* centers on story of Milkman Dead, a highly self-centered son of a Black capitalist father who exploits all those around him but not without a growing sense of alienation which disrupts and confuse his life. The later part of the novel takes Milkman into a new world and events which change him forever. The journey to hunt for a lost treasure ends up in the discovery the wealth of his family history. His physical journey embodies a spiritual journey from ignorance to wisdom, from death to rebirth.
Morrison’s novel is a *bildungsroman* which focuses on the theme of the education or initiation of the protagonist into manhood, in this case black manhood. Yet in the opinion of Catherine Carr Lee “the novel reverse the conventional initiation pattern found in American or African American literature. Instead of depicting the conventional initiation process, Morrison stresses on the movement of the protagonist from his isolated urban existence to his rural communal world because:

for the African American community in the twentieth century, however, Morrison suggests that the isolating individualism that erases the memory of the South destroys spiritual and moral identity (Lee 1).

Milkman’s story of achievement of manhood shows a revision of the myth of the Black manhood. Morrison’s celebration of the freedom and mobility of Black men also highlights its contradictions. *Song of Solomon* stresses on the need for the Blackman to transcend the isolating western individualism and embrace his community and culture and heritage for the achievement of his identity.

Chapter V is a continuation of the analysis of the novels and this chapter is devoted to the study of the three later novels viz. *Tar Baby*, *Beloved* and *Jazz*. 
Tar Baby (1981), centers on the tumultuous relationship between two lovers from extremely different and conflicting economic and social backgrounds and its ultimate dissolution. Morrison draws on the African American folktale in the Uncle Remus Tales written by the white American writer Joel Chandler Harris. The novel brought controversial critical views. While critics including John Irving pointed out Morrison’s overdose of dialogues and portrayal of fabulistic characters, others praised her for her beautiful language imagery and forceful message in the novel.

The novel represents the conflict between opposing concepts of Black self-definition determined by tradition and the contemporary present ending without the possibility of a solution. The novel’s ambiguous ending raises a lot of questions. While Jadine’s disconnection from her roots endangers herself, Son is redeemed by his folk-ways. Does it mean we should cling to the past and never look ahead to the future? If so, “how will Son ever be able to function as a modern, twentieth century man?” (Coleman 71). On the other hand, does Jadine’s indictment point to the need for Black women to withhold their striving for freedom and concentrate more on their traditional responsibilities? The inconclusive ending underlines the confusing position of the Black men and women stranded between their past and present.
Jadine’s flight to Paris for a new beginning at the end of the story seem to hint at a positive influence of the women in yellow and the night women. Yet the female ant metaphor reinforces the ongoing dilemma within Jadine between an exclusively female struggle and existence and a life defined by humane passions which Son embodies. The biblical epigraph at the beginning of the novel defines these conflicting contentions within Jadine.

Morrison dedicates her novel, *Beloved* to “the sixty million” of the Blacks who died due to slavery. This novel has been declared as the best novel of the past twenty-five years by the *New York Times Book Review* in 2006.

*Beloved* dwells on the impact of slavery on the lives of the Blacks. Slavery remains the greatest testimony of human cruelty and savagery that the world had ever seen. The dehumanization and degradation of Black people under such a system was of such proportions that it resulted in a complete loss of their selfhood and identity. The psychic consequences of such loss of selfhood is that even after they achieve freedom, they are entrapped in an inner enslavement of the self which render them incapable of living emotionally healthy lives. Sethe’s life illustrates the grim suffering of a Black slave woman. Beloved becomes the embodiment of past guilt and removes which traumatizes Sethe’s present. Her confrontation with Beloved marks the confrontation with the past.
Thus, Morrison portrays in the novel, characters whose past continue to keep them frozen in an inner guilt and pain that prevent them from living life fully. What Morrison insists is that confrontation of the unspeakable anguish and past is the basis for change and healing. The recovery of the self is possible only through collective help and sharing.

In *Beloved*, Morrison has succeeded in bringing out a penetrating study of the psychological impact of slavery on the Blacks which results in a complete fragmentation of their lives and self-worth. The novel centers on the fundamental question of regaining their lost humanity and identity. Morrison explores the need for Blacks of a confrontation of their past, and the ability to transfer their pain and terror into knowledge to empower them in reclaiming themselves.

At the end of the novel, we see a repetition of lines, “It was not a story to pass on”, “It was not a story to pass on” and “This is not a story to pass on” (323-324). It implies that it is not a story to be taken lightly. It is also a story which is too terrible to relate. *Beloved* then stands for those millions who perished unknown and unmourned in slavery. The story which ends with her name ‘Beloved’ becomes a testimony to those ancestors whose presence continues to endure and demand the love and recognition of its progeny in order to survive.
The novel, *Jazz* focuses on a certain period in American history when Blacks driven by “Want and Violence: (Jazz 33) migrated from the south to the industrial cities of the north. Southern Blacks flocked the northern cities of Detroit, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Chicago and New York. Harlem in New York, became in James Weldon Jackson words, “The Negro capital of the world” (Gates and McKay 955). The spirit of exuberance and liberty that permeated all walks of Black life of the period consummated in the great cultural and artistic ferment of the Harlem Renaissance finds its fullest expression in its music, jazz. But beneath the note of optimism, lurked the bleak realities of racism, poverty, the perils of their new life and freedom, anger, violence, sexual license and dislocation of values and identity.

*Jazz* dramatizes the struggle of these people caught in the throes of a conflict between hope and despair, dream and reality, freedom and suppression and their quest, for wholeness as they cope with the contradictions of a new urban experience. Morrison highlights the power of human resilience which enables Blacks to change even the will of Fate. Morrison’s *Jazz* thus captures the essence of the music in the lives and quest for their identity for her characters as a metaphor for freedom, change and originality. The novel is not about Jazz. It gives an account of the period where the Black Americans experience self-consciousness and try to assert their identities in the early decades of the 20th
century. The novel describes the phenomenon of Harlem Renaissance faithfully. Joe and Violet came to Harlem with hopes and aspirations and a vision for a new role where they could find their true identities and discover their own selves. Their quest for a new life is in fact a quest for their identity. Their unhappy past experiences which they got as a legacy from their preceding generations were a great burden and they wanted to get themselves rid of the burden. Jazz is also a kind of music originated from the Black communities and often identified with the blacks. The energizing and life giving force of jazz originates from mystery as the originators conceive it. There are lots of improvisations in jazz and the different musical notes and rhythms are used from various instruments in jazz making it vibrant all the time. That is how the Black Americans wanted to live and enjoy life. Both jazz and their lives are characterized by passion and excitement. Tony Morrison deliberately chooses the title because the term jazz was originally used as a slang word for sexual passion which is symbolically extended in the jazz music and becoming the most famous kind of Black American music that produces pure emotions. Like many jazz elements, the dominant theme of the novel has been broken up into different parts, depicting various stories and voices. There are various motifs, images and relative themes in the novel as there are voices and musical notes in the jazz music. And like the jazz music, Toni Morrison’s novel is also inspired by a whole range of human
feelings and comes back reportedly to the theme of human passions. As in the jazz music, the complicated action of the novel modulates back and forth, sometimes in very unexpected ways, highlighting the creative force of our passions, fantasy and imagination. At the end of the novel, the narrator and we, the readers or the listeners are also the participants. However, it is also confusing whether the narrator has been identified with the book itself, suggesting the open-endedness of life.

The structure of the novel permits the characters of the novel to talk back as the jazz musicians do. It is Toni Morrison’s skill to present a simple story about people who are desirous of living with their own true selves awakening to life and thus fulfilling their quest for identity. The major characters of the novel have become victims of deception, lies and urban life. The novel gives an expression of a specific historical moment where the pains and agonies of the American Blacks searching their own identities are wonderfully depicted.

Morrison’s work clearly shows that the identity of the people are to be found in the community itself and in the communal experience and not in the emergence of a society. And the search for individual self is also to be realized only in the community. The American society or discourse emphasizes the individual spirit and many Americans show respect for those individuals who go
alone against all odds. Such romantic concept of defining the individual self is misleading according to Toni Morrison. She writes:

When a character defies a village law or shows contempt for its values, it may be seen as a triumph to white readers, while Blacks may see it as an outrage (Bjork viii).

This clearly shows that Toni Morrison’s recognition of the difference of sensibilities between the whites and the Blacks. Toni Morrison now at eighty three years of age is still writing and there are many areas to be explored of her remarkable achievements as one of the first fiction writers of the world today. Recently, her interest seems to be inclined towards exploring new techniques and forms in opera. However, it is an undeniable fact that she is sincerely a novelist. Her narrative techniques, style and language are some of the significant areas for further research. And a great writer like Toni Morrison, whose genius extends to all conceivable realms of fiction which are required to be investigated is definitely beyond the limited scope of the present thesis and which I leave to future scholars.
WORKS CITED


