

**GATHERING THE FRAGMENTS TOGETHER:
RECLAIMING THE PAST TO REMAKE THE
PRESENT**

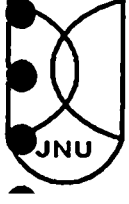
*Dissertation Submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University
in Fulfillment of the Requirements
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MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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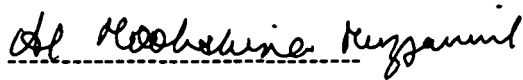
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Contents

Content	Page nos.
Certificate	
Declaration	
Acknowledgements	i
Chapter 1: Introduction Gathering the Fragments Together: A Postcolonial Reading of Toni Morrison's Novels	1-20
Chapter 2: (Re)telling the Forgotten Stories: A Study of Postcolonial Resistance in Toni Morrison's <i>Song of Solomon</i> and <i>Tar Baby</i>	21-37
Chapter 3: Unravelling the Hidden Facets: A Reading of <i>Beloved</i> from a Postcolonial Perspective	38-55
Chapter 4: Toni Morrison's <i>Jazz</i>: Tracing the Racist Ideology in the Harlem of 1920s	56-69
Conclusion	70-76
Select Bibliography	77-80

Chapter 1: Introduction

Gathering the Fragments Together: A Postcolonial Reading of Toni Morrison's Novels

Colonization of new territories by the Europeans started almost five centuries back with the landing of Columbus in America in 1492. Within a span of five centuries it took hold of one-third of the globe, and the overt forms of colonization ended only in the middle of the twentieth century or even later. It was aimed at exploration of the resources of the colonies leading to the siphoning off of wealth from the colonies. The impact of this mercantile expansion was far beyond the material domain; it brought about a change in the social, political and largely the cultural life of the colonies. The dis-juncture that was brought about in the social and cultural life of the colonized people because of the colonial intervention has had repercussions on all spheres of post-colonial¹ life and society.

As stated earlier, the fifteenth and sixteenth century expeditions to discover new lands were the first steps towards colonization. The ideals of Enlightenment² gave the explorers a new confidence to broaden their horizons. Colonization thus got boost from the intellectual environment of the age with its emphasis on individual achievements which could be used as a pretext for their materialistic aims. The so-called virgin territories provided a platform to start life anew. Colonizers could thus

¹ Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, ed. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (New York: Routledge, 1989). They define 'post-colonial' as the term used "to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of the colonization to the present day." p 2

² Perry, Marvin, Myrna Chase, James R. Jacob, Margaret C. Jacob and Theodore H. Von Laue Ed. *Western Civilization: Ideas Politics and Society. 3rd ed.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980). The ideals of Enlightenment was influenced by Renaissance artists and humanist who emphasized on individual achievement and worldly life as against too much emphasis on the other world. It was influenced by scientific discoveries which gave precedence to human interest over everything else. Philosophers like Locke, Montesquieu and Rousseau influenced the ideals of enlightenment by giving reason, inquiry and verification more importance than blind faith in Christian ideals and teaching propagated by the clerics. State, they believed should exist for human welfare and not for exercise of power alone. p 388-414.

explore new territories and practice domination in various ways. Invasion of new lands, settling down in the invaded territories, or displacement of people from their native land and resettlement in new land under the supervision of the imperial powers, were ways in which colonization took place. However, in all its forms, it was aimed at actualization of political power and maximization of economic profits.

The continents of America, Africa, Asia and Latin America, bear witness to the brutal assault that was carried on by the British colonial power in these places.

America, as a colonized country is an interesting case for study. It was the earliest to be colonized and it got its independence from the colonizers in 1776 even before certain nations were colonized. The Europeans settled in America after having pushed its native inhabitants, the Native Americans, to the margins. They ruled over the natives as well as their fellow Europeans. The African slaves, who were brought into American mainland from Africa, also fell prey to European colonial motives. The European settlers consolidated their power with imperialist aims to explore and exploit the vast potential natural resources of the American mainland. The setting up of cotton and indigo plantation was a step towards their profit-oriented aims. The plantations demanded labor, and the need for labor was procured from the African slaves who traded for meagre amounts of finished products like sugar and were brought into America.

Thus the African slaves and the Native American communities were doubly colonized. The Europeans colonized other Europeans who in turn colonized them. Even, after America got its independence in 1776 and set up the United States of America on the democratic ideals of freedom, equality and likely, the sub-nationalities or the minority ethnic communities had yet to face another three centuries of colonization.

For the purpose of this dissertation, I would focus on the special case of African Americans who were enslaved and colonized in the so-called democratic

republic of America. The journey of the African slaves in America starts with the displacement they faced when they arrived from the African mainland to the South, where most American plantations were located. Although, the first few Africans landed in 1526, the formal settlement of African slaves happened only in 1619 in Jamestown, Virginia.³ They were indentured labourers expected to dispense all kinds of services to their masters.

A new land, a new language, new people, chained feet, auction blocks, the sound of the whip cracking on their backs are a few images that encapsulate the arrival and welcome of Africans in America.

The white master could however realize soon that what was required was more sustained instrument of subordination than mere physical coercion. The edifice on which an entrenched power could be exercised was definitely 'language'. Language is the carrier of culture, of beliefs, of faith of life itself. 'Language', the colonists rightly perceived, would be the most viable means of domination as it affected the minds of the slaves, the control over which ensured a thorough colonization and victimization of the colonial subjects.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin explain:

Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conception of 'truth', 'order' and 'reality' become established.⁴

In fact, the Europeans asserted their natural right to rule over the African slaves on the basis of the assumption made by leading philosophers like Hegel, Kant, and

³ Franklin, John Hope and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*. 6th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1988).

⁴ Ashcroft Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. P 7

Hume.⁵ These philosophers provided theoretical foundations as to how the Africans belonged to an inferior stock because they had no faculty of language, they did not have any written literature and hence they had to be by nature under the colonizers' rightful supervision.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. quotes the celebrated philosophers to exemplify their portrayal of the Negroes. In Hume's essay, "Of National Characters" (1748) he writes:

I am apt to suspect Negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites.... No ingenious manufacturers among them, no arts, no sciences.... Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made man our original distinction betwixt these breeds of men.⁶

The projected difference in the mental faculties of the European and the African Negroes on the basis of language, intelligence and culture was thus justified by various ideological treatises of the period when colonization was at its helm. Hegel, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. quotes, too believed that the Africans were inferior. He said, "... in its degraded state, the African is capable of no development of culture, and as we see them at this day, such has always been."⁷

Thus, slaves' inability to project any literature or existent linguistic facilities was taken by these philosophers as absence of culture in the Africans. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explains:

Reading and especially writing in the life of the slave represented a process larger than even "mere" physical manumission, since mastery

⁵ Henry Louis. Gates. *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the "Racial" self*. (New York: Oxford University press. 1987) 18-21. Gates discusses at length about the way in which philosophers the Hegel, Kant, and Hume negatively portray the African people and the Negroes all over the globe.

⁶ Gates. Henry Louis Jr. *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and "Racial" Self*. (New York: Oxford University press. 1987) 18.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 20.

of arts and letters was Enlightenment Europe's sign of that solid line of division between human being and thing.⁸

African Americans were subordinated through language because, adaptation of a new language itself meant an erasure of any cultural input that an African descent of the slaves would ensure. This community was portrayed as a race which had no language or culture. Thus, when the African Americans took to writing it was a conscious effort to dismantle a lot of assumptions that had built biases against them as a community. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. says:

Learning to read...was a decisive political act; learning to write, as measured against an eighteenth-century scale of culture and society, was an irreversible step away from the cotton field towards a freedom larger than physical manumission.⁹

Language was both a medium and mode of subjugation of the African American. It was through language that all other instruments of power gained validation and sanction. Thus hegemony could function only if this life sustaining system of language which is the carrier of culture, belief, faith, rules and rituals and customs could be manipulated.

The most debilitating notion that could even be used for perpetuation of the ideology of domination was the racist ideology. The colour of the skin was projected not just as a physical attribute but as a criterion for gauging the inferiority or superiority of intellect. Racial discrimination differentiated the blacks on the basis of a projected inferior status attributed to their skin colour and race. For legitimizing such claims, the philosophical works of Hegel, Kant, and Hume, were cited. Racial discrimination has had a far-reaching impact, as it sabotaged the entire African American communities' identity. The African Americans are yet to fully recover from the affects of racist ideology that denigrated the entire self image of the community.

⁸ Gates, Henry Louis Jr. *Figures in Black: Word, Sign and "Racial" Self*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 25.

⁹ Ibid., P 4

It was not only language, or skin colour that played a crucial role in the colonization of the blacks. Religion was another medium for the subjugation of the blacks. Faith being a major determinant in the lives of the people, the whites used religious institutions to wield power. Among the texts and treatises which were manipulated to legitimize imperialist aims of the white, religious texts played an important role. Christianity was the new religion that the African slaves embraced. However, the colonizers propagated their divine right to rule through a strategic interpretation of the Bible. The colonizers turned the slaves into conforming subjects who believed allegiance to the master as an unquestionable religious tenet. Since the slaves were prohibited from reading and writing in most cases, they had no access to religious texts. As they could not read the Bible on their own, they were left to believe in the version that the white masters rendered to them. And most of the times the white masters professed allegiance to masters as the governing tenet of the religion.

De-colonization of the colonized minds saw the very same institution of slavery becoming the most crucial site for resistance. Re-reading of the religious text by the African Americans focused on the emancipatory potential of the religious texts. Religion thus, gave the African Americans the strength to thwart all modes and means of dominating that colonization as an institution even put forward. The latent aspects of resistance on the part of the African Americans saw the most overt expressions in sermons, gospels, spirituals which provided the expressive basis to combat the forces of domination.

The abolition of chattel slavery saw the most visible aspects of domination come to an end. Yet there arose even more complex and unyielding problems. Racism in its various forms was the central issue to reckon with. Stereotypes that got formulated as a result of the racist ideology of the whites are still existent in both overt and subtle forms. However, there were many socio-political changes in the United States of America as a result of which the lives of the emancipated slaves underwent transformation.

North became the place where every body wanted to go and savour the fruits of emancipation. There was a gap between what they wished and what was happening in reality.

The glorious future promised to the African American slave during the Civil War was still a remote possibility by the end of the period of Re-construction. Though slavery as a physical bondage was abolished by the means of postbellum law making agencies, oppression and discrimination was still a force to reckon with albeit in subtle hues and forms. Discrimination and segregation was rampant in schools and public places. Employment opportunities were also limited by the policy of discrimination and segregation. Thus the struggle for self-dignity that the African Americans were engaged in, passed on from one phase to another. The brutality ingrained in an apathetic civil and political system that always worked against the African Americans had to be countered all the time.

The African Americans have always shown political resistance to exploitation to white laws and legislations and other coercive practices of the white rulers. Run away slaves were perhaps one of the earliest examples of resistance against physical coercion.

Later on, the African Americans staged organized political revolts against lynching, segregation laws and other stringent laws. The fight for the legal and political rights had received greater impetus and the political arena promised the right platform for revolt against all kinds of dehumanizing practices of the European rulers.

In consonance with the political struggle, literature provided an anchor in the imaginative realms of the community. In the socio-physic domain, literature provided maximum resistance. In a creative engagement with language, the community took recourse to an indigenous tradition which was non-conformist at its core. When the African-Americans took to writing, they were not simply repeating what the western

classical writers had passed on, but were crafting ways of celebrating cultural difference.

The orality inbuilt in the African American cultural forms was consciously engaged to establish a resistant, alternative cultural site. This alternative cultural tradition articulated through songs, myths, legends, folk tales, ceremonies, rituals and dances aimed to refute the dehumanizing stereotypes about the community perpetuated by the white colonialist. It was in appropriation of the orality of their tradition in a written form which was one of the most innovative modes of resistance.

The entire exercise of critically and creatively engaging with the language that the colonizers had imposed, in order to create a certain difference, is an activity that concerns a postcolonial subject. Postcolonialism's central aim is to subvert all institution and practices that are perpetrators of dominance. As an ideology it addresses issues that concerns the exploitative impact of imperialist aims that exist during and after colonization and domination.

In context of the above discussion, it is the aim of this dissertation to explore the kind of engagement with colonialism and imperialism that post colonialist have always shown with specific reference to African American writer, Toni Morrison. It needs to be mentioned here that African American writing has never been included in the mainstream discourse of post colonialism. The writers from the African American community have show resistance to European domination in their literature ever since the days of slavery. However, this resistant attempt has been excluded from postcolonial theory perhaps because they do not fall into the neat geographical demarcation of colonized nations that postcolonial theory has devised. In Morrison's writings we see how postcolonialism is as much a geographical reality as is a psychological reality. It is in the realm of literature, that Morrison subversively appropriates English language to show resistance against the imperialists who are responsible for the traumatic history of the African Americans.

It is the attempt of this dissertation to see how in her novels she uses language in a subversive mode to assert the cultural difference that the African Americans have, from that of the Europeans which informs their works of art. This paper endeavours to study Morrison's novels from a postcolonial perspective as to how and why she qualifies as a postcolonial writer.

It is necessary to explain, at the very outset what is postcolonial literature and to see whether African American writings, in the context of Morrison, qualify as postcolonial writing. Elleke Boehmer, a postcolonialist, defines Postcolonial literature as:

... that which critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship. It is writing that sets out in one way or others to resist colonial perspective. As well as a change in power, decolonization demanded symbolic overhaul, a reshaping of dominant meanings.... To give expression to colonized experience, postcolonial writer sought to undercut thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonization — the myths of power, the race classification, the imagery of subordination.¹⁰

In light of the above argument, for the specific purpose of this dissertation, we focus our discussion on postcolonialism in the United States. As far as post colonial studies on America are concerned, it is limited to the study of the works of mainstream American writers like Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Herman Melville and such other writers. They are seen as the representative postcolonial writers from America. It is interesting to note that theorists like Elleke Boehmer do not include America in the postcolonial discourse itself. She gives her reasons for the exclusion of America from the postcolonial discourse: "it won independence long before other colonial places and its literature has therefore taken a different trajectory."¹¹

The stand that postcolonial scholars take including the one that Boehmer has taken in not involving American literature in the postcolonial discourse has its

¹⁰ Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 3.

shortcomings. This is because, certain sections of literature emerging from the marginalized ethnic communities which would clearly qualify as postcolonial writings are excluded from an important site of study. The view of the postcolonial theorists to exclude the literature of the ethnic minority and the marginal groups as also the institution of slavery which is emblematic of domination and colonization.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, discuss how African American theory and criticism have a pan African influence but there is a major difference between the relative position of the African Americans and African as well as the Carribeans in the postcolonial context. They write that although theorization of black writing:

Worked well in comparing and contrasting black American writing with that from African or the West Indies, it overlooks the very great cultural difference between literature which are produced by Black minority in a rich and powerful country and those produced by black majority population of an independent nation...the latter often still experiencing the residual affects of foreign domination in the political and economic spheres.¹²

This statement brings African American writing into the arena of postcolonial writing, but by emphasizing on the difference among the blacks in America and in other parts of the globe due to its relative position of power in the present day, it almost negates its initial assumption. The economic and political power that America enjoys in the contemporary world works against the understanding of the relative position of ethnic minorities as well as the marginalized groups within an empowered nation. It is however, a truth that the racist ideology that refuses to go away is a living reality of America that is a legacy of the European imperialistic designs on communities like that of African Americans. Even the fact that there is an increasing need to press on assimilation in the American society speaks of the divide (which has its roots in the days of slavery), which is inherently there within the socio-political

¹¹ Ibid., p 4

¹² Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures*. New York: OUP, 1989 pp. 20-21

arena of America. These issues could thus be understood comprehensively in the light of postcolonial theory.

As stated earlier this dissertation aims to examine Morrison as a postcolonial writer. The writer's position as a post-colonialist could be comprehensively understood if we take into consideration Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt's understanding of postcolonialism in the United States. Both these writers maintain that:

While colonialism, may have, in a large measure, ended "officially" in the early 1960s, institutionalized practices such as language acquisition, education and religion remain operational to the degree that previously colonized peoples essentially remain dominated by Western cultural constructs. Hence, the meaning of "postcolonial" could be as diverse as the nations it hopes to give agency to, and many critics have often noted the risk in using the term to homogenize the diverse historical experiences of colonized peoples around the globe.¹³

Having defined the broader implication of postcoloniality. Singh and Schmidt further claim that, "... the U.S may be understood as the world's first postcolonial *and* neocolonial country."¹⁴

This assumption is backed by their understanding of the internal contradiction that existed within the American nation. I quote at length Singh and Schmidt's argument to exemplify the above statement. They maintain:

While the U.S defined itself as world's first independent and anti-colonial nation-state it simultaneously incorporated many of the defining features of European colonial networks — including color-line into its economic and cultural life. Narratives of the world power dating from the era of colonialism informed the way the country

¹³ Singh, Amritjit and Peter Schmidt. *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity and Literature* (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2000) 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p 5

imagined its military, political, economic, and cultural authority as an expanding nation...¹⁵

In the case of colonies, there is always a clearly demarcated centre and the empire, be it an invaded colony, a settler colony or a colonized community like the Caribbean indentured labourers. The center always directed the colonies. In America after its independence, the domination was internal. Singh and Schmidt write that the U.S was not “composed of a home and a set of colonies but instead a nation with an ever-expanding frontier integrating new and mostly contiguous territories into the old.”¹⁶ They further add, ““Europe” and “home” were not only interdependent they were coterminous sharing the same territory.”¹⁷

This kind of colonisation which was centralized within a specific territory was based on what Singh and Schmidt illustrate by quoting Jefferson that U.S was an “empire for liberty” and “not the rise and the fall-into-decadence pattern of past empires.”¹⁸ They continue the argument by saying:

...the very language with which it imagined this exceptional fate was as oxymoronic as its own internal stratifications were contradictory. For example, the founding fathers’ refusal to acknowledge the conflicts between slavery and the nations democratic ideals it at the heart of many contemporary debates centred on the history of color, race, class, and global capitalism.¹⁹

The above debate enables us to understand how the African-American writers endeavor to address the issues of race, colour divide, subversion of language and an eventual resistant effort to creatively incorporate oral forms into the written medium could be understood in relation to the theoretical framework of postcolonialism.

¹⁵ Singh, Amritjit and Peter Schmidt. *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity and Literature*. 2000. p 5.

¹⁶ Ibid.. p 5

¹⁷ Ibid.. p 5

¹⁸ Ibid.. p 5

¹⁹ Ibid..p 5

African American critics and writers have contributed immensely to the development of postcolonial theory. W.E.B DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Houston A. Baker, Jr., Barbara Christian, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and others have formulated understanding of the African American community's engagement with history, social and political situation and above all with language and literature which helps in better understanding of colonization.

The literary production of the African American community too provides means for breaking away from the damaging affects of colonisation. The rupture that the African-American literatures creates in language to bring in the subaltern voice in the language, informed by an engagement with the indegenious oral tradition creates, "a third space that is neither assimilation nor otherness."²⁰

The 'third space' that Singh and Schmidt talk of can be applied to what Morrison is trying to create within the domain of American literature. Toni Morrison, as an African American writer constantly tries to counter, problematize and decipher the various facets of domination and colonization in her writings. Morrison tries to free language from the fetters of colonization through the creative use of language she says:

...I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive "othering" of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work.²¹

Morrison's position as a postcolonial writer thus rightly emerges from her conscious effort at resisting and subverting the language which is laden with racism. She reiterates this point when she proclaims why she tries to do with language:

²⁰ Singh, Anurijit and Peter Schunidt. 2000. p 4

²¹ Morrison. Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1992) 4.

By trying to alter language, simply to free it up, not to express it to confine it, but to open it up. Tense it. Blasts its racist straitjacket"²²

In doing so, she definitely caters to the tradition of African American writers who have always tried to do the same in their language. While W.E.B. DuBois, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, Nella Larsen, Langston Hughes and Richard Wright are the immediate literary predecessors of Toni Morrison, therefore other influences and linkages extend to a longer and larger tradition of African-American literature. Morrison's writings form a continuum with the two-hundred-and-more years of literary tradition that the African American community has produced. The African American tradition of writing which Henry Louis Gates Jr. has described as a "decisive political act"²³, has seen the most diverse and disparate range of expression of creativity and imagination. From the earliest conformist writings, to a radical protest literature, to more mature and self critical resistant literature, the African Americans have constituted a body of writing which offers an alternative historical insight into the paradoxes that lie within the democratic ideals of the American republic.

Phillis Wheatley, was the first African American writer to be published. Her collection of poems titled, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was published in 1773, which laid the foundation of African American writing. Wheatley's writings bore a strong trait of Romanticism. Her writings as well as the one's who immediately succeeded her like Ignacious Sancho, Charles Chestnutt betray the problems they were faced in grappling with a new medium and new techniques of creative expression.

While these writers were struggling their way through the language, their works could only gain validation through the authentication certificates that the white masters attached to their works. The initial phase of writing could be seen as the

²² *Contemporary Literary Criticism. Year Book 1993. Vol.81. Fall 1994. Gale Research Inc. P 266*

²³ Gates Jr., Henry Louis. *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and "Racial" Self.* P 4

community's attempt to make their voices heard, as it had always been absent from the life and literature of America.

The initial phase of writing was more focussed on writing of poetry, essays, articles, and pamphlets. In the middle of the nineteenth century we see the emergence of slave narratives. It can be regarded as one of the most original contributions of the blacks to the world of literature. Although the genre takes heavily from the puritanical autobiographical tradition of the nineteenth century European writing, the stories that they told provided an insight into the lives of slaves and also on slavery as an institution. The earliest slave narratives were Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). While Frederick Douglass was relatively more vocal about the brutality of slavery than Stowe and Jacob's work, yet all these narratives appear quite inauthentic because they were produced under the white man's supervision.

The African American artists took to writing novels around the same time when they wrote slave narratives. The first novel by an African American is *Clotel* (1853) by William Wells Brown, the next one being *Our Nig* (1859) by Harriet Adams Wilson. These novels were trying to deal with issues of African Americans but they were not formulated well enough to be able to authentically represent the community.

Two works which need a special mention among the writings by the community are: Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901) and W.E.B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Both of these works fall into the category of autobiographical writing; the interesting part being that these two contemporary works by two influential African Americans give nearly opposing views on the relative position of the community. While Washington's stand is pro-white, DuBois's appeal is towards resistance against white domination. Washington's conformist stand

has been highly criticised by African American criticism. DuBois' work which emphasizes in evolving and reviving of the indigenous tradition is a work that most influential writers of the community have taken cue from in emerging with a body of African American writing.

African American community has produced some of the finest novelists in the twentieth century. Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) was a seminal work which captured the South and brought in a new dimension to the writings about African American life in slavery. Zora Neale Hurston wrote novels which captured the Southern dialect live in her language. Her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) was path breaking as far as the use of language is concerned. Ann Petry beautifully captured the claustrophobia of the Harlem city life in *The Street* (1946). Richard Wright's emphatic work *Native Son* (1940) shows the assertive voice of the African American. Ralph Ellison's masterpiece *Invisible Man* (1952) is a self-critical novel which explores the darker shades of the racism-inflicted America. From 1960s onwards there were major influx of creative writers like Toni Morrison with her *The Bluest Eye* 1970, Maya Angelou with her *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sings* (1970), Ishmael Reed with *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), Alice Walker with *Colour Purple* (1983) and others. The community has also seen dramatist like Lorraine Hansberry with her *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). It made a great success in the American theaters.

Music is a core element in the oral tradition of the African community; we find great number of poets and lyricist emerging out of the community into the American national scene. Langston Hughes published his *The Weary Blues* in 1926; there were celebrated poets like Sterling Brown, Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, Alice Walker and others.

A critical tradition has also emerged simultaneously. The early part of the twentieth century saw W.B. DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Charles Chestnutt and James Weldon Johnson trying to theorize on African American Literature.

DuBois's 'double consciousness' is a major contribution to the understanding of a hybrid identity of African Americans which can be further used even in postcolonial study of the subaltern's subjectivity. Langston Hughes with his "The Negro Artist and Racial Mountain" (1926), Ralph Ellison's *Shadow and Act* (1964), Addison Gayle, Jr.'s *The Black Aesthetic* (1971), Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s *Blues Ideology and African American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984) Toni Cade Bambara with her *The Black Woman, An Anthology* (1970), Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1984), Barbara Christian's *Black Feminist Criticism* (1985) Henry Louis Gates Jr. with his seminal work *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988) brought in multiple critical perspectives to African American criticism. From feminist criticism to black poetics, from structuralist to post-structuralist study of African American writings and further, the critics evolved a comprehensive body of African American literary criticism.

Two major theoretical formulations that have emerged from African American literary criticism which could be constructively used in postcolonial understanding of literature are 'double consciousness'²⁴ and signifyin(g).²⁵ Toni Morrison's works reflect both of these. DuBois' "double consciousness" which explains the duality in self-perception imposed by the colonizer's gaze and 'othering' are exemplified in Morrison's fictional work. Her fictional characters "...are marginal (liminal) in personalities and lack social, spiritual, psychological, historical, geographical, or genealogical place or center. Their betwixt and betweenness necessarily involve them in a quest for personal and/or communal wholeness and fulfillment."²⁶

A strategy of the excolonised subject, according to Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s theoretical formulation of "signifyin(g)" lies in playing up with language. Gates says,

²⁴ This concept was introduced by W.E. B. Dubois in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903.

²⁵ Developed and explained elaborately in Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s work *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: OUP, 1988).

²⁶ Weems, Clenora Hudson and Wilfred Samuels. *Toni Morrison*. Boston: Twayne Publishers. 19

“Signifyin(g) lies in an uniquely black rhetorical concept entirely textual or linguistic, by which a second statement or figure repeats, or tropes, or reverses the first. Its use as a figure for intertextuality allows us to understand literary revision without recourse to thematic biographical or Oedipal slayings at the crossroads; rather, critical significance is tropic and rhetorical.²⁷

This is a postcolonial attempt at reverting the constricting force of an imposed language. Morrison too attempts the same in her novels by breaking away from traditional European use of language and creates possibilities for African American oral tradition to occupy its place. Signifyin(g) is a theoretical framework used in understanding of the postcolonial exercise of debunking and rupture of language that all the marginal and new literatures endeavour to do. Morrison as a postcolonial writer definitely uses tropes such as signifyin(g) in all her writings. Intertextuality lies at the root of signifyin(g), and Morrison, by talking across to the other writers through her texts, essays her stand as a postcolonial writer.

A postcolonial writer’s engagement with language involves a twin process of abrogation and appropriation²⁸ of language. “Abrogation is the refusal of the categories of imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or ‘correct’ usage and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning ‘inscribed’ in the words”.²⁹ “Appropriation is the process by which the language is taken and made to “bear and burden of one’s own cultural experience.”³⁰

Toni Morrison attempts at both abrogation and appropriation of language. Morrison as an African American writer addresses issues of marginalisation through the use of living and vibrant oral traditions that nurtures the African American

²⁷ Gates, Henry Louis Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the “Racial” Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 49.

²⁸ Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p 38.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p 38.

community. The written medium is fixed, but by investing it with the black idiom through oral traditional elements, the writer invests it with a fluidity that defies fixity of meanings and at a broader level, it resists stereotyping.

By employment of folklore, myths, sermons, the structures of music in her novel, Morrison makes the African American presence felt. Her use of revisionary mode of storytelling in the written medium or the repetition of words, ideas, metaphors to accentuate its meanings as it happens in music, are modes with which she weaves the orality of African American tradition to the written medium. Morrison is a writer who has positively maintained a constructive yet discursive relationship with both African and American aspects of her identity. Her rejection to stick to an essentialist stand of being either African or American emphatically defines her stand as a progressive writer rather than a regressive or a revivalist writer.

Morrison is a writer whose contemplation for “black presence is central to understanding of our (American) national literature.”³¹ She further maintains that the black presence “should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination.”³² Thus, to bring this black presence into her writing, in an attempt to counter all efforts at marginalisation and subordination that the blacks have faced in the hands of the whites, qualifies her as a postcolonial writer.

Toni Morrison has received wide acclaim as a writer. From her first work *The Bluest Eye* (1970) to the subsequent novels *Sula* (1974), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1998) have received both critical as well as commercial success. She has been conferred with award like National Book Critics Circle Awards, Pulitzer and her greatest recognition came in the form of a Nobel Prize for literature in 1993.

³¹ Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 4.

³² *Ibid.*, p 5.

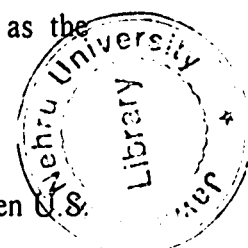
Morrison's works have been received with great adulation in the academic circle. Researchers have shown immense interest in the various issues that form a part of her novels. The most worked area as far as her novels are concerned is regarding the manner in which she portrays women in her novels. Feminist studies on her novels have always been the most focused area. Another area of study of her novels centres round the narrative techniques as also the use of folklore, myths, blues, jazz and other vernacular forms in her novels. Postcolonial study of her novels hitherto is an unexplored area that remains an interesting site or study.

This dissertation aims to see Morrison's engagement as a postcolonial writer in the context of the issues and themes that she deals with, the use various modes and techniques of narration in her works and the revisionary nature of her novels. The first chapter would deal with the manner in which she uses myths and folklores in her novel, *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*. In the second chapter, there is an endeavour to explore the revisionary writing of slave narratives in the context of the novel *Beloved*. Following this, the third chapter would look into the novel *Jazz* to explore how the structure of music (jazz) has been adapted in the narrative technique of the novel. Finally, the conclusion sums up the major arguments that validate my understanding of Toni Morrison as a postcolonial writer.

Chapter 2

(Re)telling the Forgotten Stories: A Study of Postcolonial Resistance in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*

Folktale is a very old traditional story from a particular place that was originally passed on to people in a spoken form.¹ This definition indicates that folktales are basically orally transmitted stories and the general idea goes that they have simple themes and simpler techniques of narration. Thus folklore forms a part of the vernacular tradition and is primarily not a written (literate) form of artistic expression. In the case of the African Americans, folklore constitutes one aspect of the vernacular tradition, the other being, the church songs, blues, ballads, sermons, and so on. Folklore has survived with the African Americans ever since the days of slavery. However, the nature and content of the folktales have undergone major changes. Similar to the situation of the African slaves who have now become the hybridized African-Americans, the folktales too bear a strong influence of both aspects of their identity — the African as well as the American.



Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt in their essay, "On the Borders between U.S. Studies and Post-colonial Studies", maintain that:

Both house-negroes and field negroes under slavery preserved a sense of their human dignity even under the brutal assault of assumed white superiority in their lives, and created in their folklore and "sorrow songs" patterns of resistance and transcendence.²

It is in this context that we see Morrison too employing folklore — both thematically and technically, in two of her novels *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Tar*

¹ Welmeir, Sally. ed. *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary*. 6th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

² Singh, Amritjit and Peter Schmidt. *Postcolonial Theory and the US: Race, Ethnicity and Literature*. (Missisipi: University Press of Missisipi, 2000) 35.

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Baby (1981), to assert cultural difference as also to show resistance towards the traditional use of language.

The novels of Morrison, mentioned above, are structured on the lines of two folklores — the first one being, the story of the flying ancestor, Solomon, and the second, the tale of the ‘tar baby’— a trickster character created to trap others. *Song of Solomon* is an adaptation of the folklore of the flying ancestor employed to tell the story of a young man grappling with the materialistic bourgeois culture of the American society. The second novel, *Tar Baby* is about the complex nature of African-American identity fraught with the legacy of the past.

Morrison explains the function of a folklore — how it began, how it functions and also the manner in which it survives across generations. In her essay, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The African-American Presence in American Literature”, she maintains:

Folklore may have begun as allegory for natural or social phenomena; it may have been employed as a retreat from contemporary issues in art, but folklore can also contain myths that re-activate themselves endlessly through providers — the people who repeat, reconstitute and reinterpret them.³

It is in this context of a folklore having the possibility of being ‘re-activated’, ‘reconstituted’ and ‘reinterpreted’ that we see Morrison investing folklore as the basic theme and structure of her novel. The very act of employing an African-American folklore to contemporary issues can be seen as both abrogation of given codes in a African American experience. It is the in this act of appropriation and abrogation that Morrison’s writings become a postcolonial activity.

³ James. Joy and T. Dencan Sharpley-Whiting. *The Black Feminist Reader* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2000) 52.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin maintain, "... imperialism results in profound linguistic alienation as is obviously the case in cultures in which pre-colonial culture is suppressed by military conquest or enslavement."⁴ The linguistic alienation was initially more so because the slaves were brought in from different ethnic groups of West Africa and they did not share any common language. So, within two or more generations the only language they were left with was the European language of the master. "African slaves could not avoid an awareness of cruel pressure of an imposed language and the loss of their own 'voice', a loss incurred moreover, in an alien landscape. So, subject to a tragic alienation from both language and landscape, the transplanted African found that double psychic survival depended on their facility for a kind of *double entendre*. They were forced to develop the skill of being able to say one thing in front of 'massa' and have it interpreted differently by their fellow slaves. This still involved a radical subversion of the meanings of the masters tongue."⁵

The manners in which folklores have evolved show the similar strategies for a radical subversion of the master's language. The specific folktales which are a part of the analysis of Toni Morrison's novels in this particular chapter are of West-African origin. The Song of Solomon is a folklore which has evolved from the folklore of the flying ancestor.⁶ While the original folklore spoke about how initially all Africans had the capacity to fly because God gave them wings but "owing to their transgression, their wings were taken away... some who had been overlooked, and had retained the power of flight."⁷ The same folklore was reconstituted and re-adapted as the folklore of the flying ancestor in an African American context. Caught up in the cotton plantation

⁴ Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 10.

⁵ Ibid. p 146.

⁶ Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, ed. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company) 103.

⁷ Ibid. p 103.

and no longer being able to take the brutal physical and mental assault, the slaves would dream to fly. The folklore asserted that some of them could actually fly to freedom. This possibility of flight and a freedom to fly away from the unbearable and unyielding contingent situation contained in this particular folklore has been adapted in Toni Morrison in the novel *Song of Solomon*.

Tar Baby, the second novel that is being discussed in this chapter is also based on an African American folklore. It is also a re-creation of an African myth which talks about tar as an element that could bind and build things together.⁸ However, the 'tar baby' folklore in the African American context has 'entrapment' as its basic theme. Tar Baby is thus a negative trickster figure in the African American folklore. It refers to an animal trickster tale where a tar baby, laden with tar, as the name suggests, was used to trap other animals, especially the briar rabbit. The tar would melt in the sun and create a briar patch for the rabbit to come, get attracted to the shining tar and eventually get trapped in it. Metaphorically, it means entrapment, while literally, the African Americans were hinting at the whites who created tar babies out of the black people to trap and cheat the other blacks. In Morrison's *Tar Baby*, we have Jadine, the tar baby who enjoys the attention that the white world gives her. She is a successful model who takes immense pride in her beauty. In course of the novel we realise that she is just a tar baby created on lines of the slogan "black is beautiful", to assert the assimilation of the blacks into the mainstream. Morrison in the course of her novel reveals the weakness of such a character who is not rooted in her own community and history. Marlyn Sanders Mobley in her essay "Narrative Dilemma: Jadine as Cultural Orphan in *Tar Baby*" (1981)⁹ says:

⁸ Mobley, Marlyn Sanders, "Narrative Dilemma: Jadine as a Cultural Orphan in *Tar Baby*" in *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad Press, 1993) 290.

⁹ Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. and K.A. Appiah (ed), *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. (New York: Amistad Press, 1993) 284.

Morrison's dilemma in *Tar Baby* is how to narrate the quest of the contemporary black female hero when she happens to be a cultural orphan, one whose sense of self is based upon a denial of her own cultural heritage and an identification with one that is not her own.

In an attempt to be accepted by the white world, characters like Jadine detach themselves from their own historical reality. Characters like Jadine could be well understood in relation to the theoretical concept of "double consciousness" (Dubois). Their identity gets constructed by the colonial gaze of the whites. And in most cases, the whites' perception of the black overpowers their own black identity. Empowerment, they assume, come from assimilation and dissolving one's identity into the larger identity. Morrison vehemently criticizes that position as is obvious from the narration in her novel. Denial of one's own past is perhaps a peculiar trait of certain ex-colonized subjects whose journey from powerlessness to empowerment, meant forgetting the past.

The tar babies, also in certain ways attract other blacks with their glamorous position in a capitalistic modern America. Thus Son, another important character in the novel initially falls for Jadine. It is in their interaction that Jadine questions her identity and Son too embarks on a journey to understand his own self.

Jadine, when confronted with African American people who are rooted-like Son, like the woman in a yellow dress — feels threatened. The narrator describes Jadine's interaction with a woman "the skin like tar against the canary yellow dress?"¹⁰ Jadine gets totally shaken by the confidence that the women had, despite the fact that she would be totally discarded within the fashion circles that Jadine lives in. The narrator describes Jadine's amazement in seeing that tar skin woman:

She would deny it now, but along with everybody else in the market, Jadine gasped. Just a little. Just a sudden intake of air. Just a quick

¹⁰ Morrison, Toni. *Tar Baby* (New York: Signet Press, 1981) 45.

snatch of breath before that woman's woman – that mother/sister/ she' that unphotographable beauty – took it all away.¹¹

The flashes of this incident appear and reappear in Jadine's memory in the novel indicating that this particular incident is not confined to the physical beauty of the lady. It has a strong bearing, beyond the physical. Blackness has always been seen as the 'other', the detestable 'other' during the days of slavery. There were days when segregation laws discriminated on the basis of skin colour. So, the blackness of the skin always posed as the determining factor for an African American's inferiority. However, mid-twentieth century onwards, with a bid to harp on assimilation and wider acceptance of all ethnic groups, a drastically ambivalent stand was taken. Everything that was different was celebrated as unique. There emerged a slogan "black is beautiful". It has its inception in the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and the 70s. But eventually, the mainstream white America started using the slogan as a ploy to show an increasingly tolerant attitude of the American society. The Jadines are the product of a move where the capitalists used blackness for commerce. African Americans were used for fashion industry and advertisements as models.

Morrison's novel thus throws light on the Jadines that modern America has created. America is the briar patch where the Jadines function. Son too, is initially mesmerized by Jadine. He is attracted to her and although he had always been a drifter, he wanted to settle down with her. Eventually, the novel unearths the manner in which Son realises that Jadine lives in a world of make-belief world. She is totally detached from her true African American identity. She is totally shaken when she confronts the women who had "exceptional femaleness" and the "sacred property that build the world."¹² Son is also shown as a character who although rooted in the black past, yet he

¹¹ Ibid. p 46.

¹² Morrison, Toni. *Tar Baby* (New York: Signet Press. 1981) 183.

lacks stability and is a constant drifter. The novel encapsulates the relative positions of both these characters:

One had a past, the other a future and each one bore a culture to save the race in his hands. Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature.... Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?¹³

This is a very pertinent question in the postcolonial situation, because the impact of colonisation does not cease to exist when the colonized subjects are freed from the clutches of the imperialist. How does an identity shaped by one's own culture whose identity also got defined by the European master, get reconstituted after the days of colonization are over. Despite the fact that there can be no regression back to the past, the past does define the present. The culture and identity of the African American was completely sabotaged during the enslavement. Hence, when they were freed, they did tend to empower themselves by redefining their identity on the lines of the mainstream American identity — assimilation at the cost of losing out one's own distinctiveness. Morrison's concern is to explore the issues that emerged out of the denial of one's own culture.

Song of Solomon, Morrison's other novel, too captures the dilemma of the African-American present. The novel *Song of Solomon* focuses on the life of Milkman, who is torn between two dichotomous viewpoints in life. His father, Macon Dead, offers him a life where owing things and attaining material gains is the ideal way to lead a life. An alternative stand is offered by his paternal aunt, Pilate, who believes in being rooted to one's history as the only attainment that makes real sense in this world.

The folklore of the flying ancestor is fitted into the story. Milkman in a bid to retrieve gold from his aunt's hidden treasure, as directed by his father, confronts his

¹³ Ibid. p 269.

past history. The past offers him the best alternative to be able to fly while grounded.¹⁴ This links the folktale to the story. The possibility and plausibility to fly provides the capacity to relieve the ex-slave from the anxiety to possess and own things. Macon Dead, Milkman's father in *Song of Solomon* is emblematic of a character who wants to own things, he is the perfect product of the individualistic bourgeois culture. In the novel, he tells his son Milkman:

Own things and let things that you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too.¹⁵

This passage not only charts the journey of the community of ex-slaves whose movement from disenfranchisement to ownership was long and tedious, but also brings glimpses from the past days of slavery. The imperialist powers not only 'owned things' but also ventured to 'own people' (slaves) to maximise their profit. In the present materialistic milieu, there is a reversal of the situation. The community of ex-slaves who were dispossessed of all material possessions propagates and yearns to own things. Morrison strategically introduces the dilemma of Milkman to either accept the mindless consumerism which is a legacy of the colonial ideology of profit maximization, or to look for a historical connection to feel rooted not by owing things, but by connecting himself to the community. The anxiety of ownership which leads to ownership of material things definitely becomes a means of asserting one's identity in a consumerist world, but Morrison shows an alternative too. Pilate's identity is not because of her material status but because of her acceptance and assertion of rootedness in her community. Thus, the capability to be free from the clutches of materialism (which in a major way led to the enslavement of the blacks) can be captured in a very apt manner in the folklore of the flying ancestor. The capability to fly even when grounded is perhaps necessary for everybody and more so for a community of ex-slaves because they have

¹⁴ Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon* (London: Clatto & Windus. 1977) 336

¹⁵ Ibid., p 55

to be critical of submission to an individualistic and materialistic culture because they have been the worse victims of colonial materialistic policies.

It is in the self-critical mode of understanding the position of an African American that Morrison creatively employs the folklore. Milkman's journey which starts with owning things, i.e., in quest for gold, shifts from the present to the past, where the true treasure of the community lies, a history which offers a release from the clutches of the present trials and tribulations.

Morrison's works reveal her attempt at a reversal of conventional meanings. This is perhaps a postcolonial attempt of abrogation. Stock figures from the Bible or from history are revised and invested with multiple connotations according to specific situations.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his book *Signifying Monkey: A theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988) maintains:

Slavery in the New World a veritable seething cauldron of cross-cultural contact...did serve to create a dynamic of exchange and revision among numerous previously isolated Black African cultures on a scale unprecedented in African history.¹⁶

Gates speaks of how there has been a transfer and repetition of certain trickster figures from African cultures to the African American cultures through slavery. Such figures become the theme or topos of African American literary moorings. The themes which have been maintained through "mnemonic devices peculiar to oral literature are... recreated from memory preserved by oral narration, improvised upon in ritual —

¹⁶ Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York, OUP, 1988) 4.

especially in the rituals of repeated oral narrative — and willed to their subsequent generation, as hermetically sealed and encoded charts of cultural descent.¹⁷

So, these oft repeated figures become tropes in conveying certain messages across generations and in the novel *Song of Solomon*, Morrison uses the figure of 'Solomon' to encode the possibility of flight that the African folklore had and that got transferred to the African American. 'Solomon' thus signifies freedom in any given context. Yet again, in a revisionary mode, the name 'Solomon' itself is variously presented in the novel, making it open to a lot of interpretations. Solomon — the name itself possesses religious connotations. Solomon appears in the Bible as a wise king of Babylon. Wisdom is an intrinsic quality that the name Solomon carries. Morrison too uses in its conventional sense, the signification of the name 'Solomon'. In the novel, he appears to be both a historical as well as a mythical figure who flies away to freedom. The wisdom contained in the story of his flight to freedom rejuvenates and inspires the African American community. However, Solomon, the pivotal figure of this novel, is invested with multiple meanings. Morrison deconstructs the name Solomon to bring an entire gamut of experience that could come within the institution of slavery. Solomon, the name, appears repeatedly in the novel – sometimes as 'Sugarman', sometimes as Shallemon or at times as Shalimar; the images that these names carry encapture glimpses of slavery. Sugarman builds in a connection to the Southern plantations and images of slaves working in those plantations flash across the reader's mind. Similarly Shallemon — a distortion of Shalimar, a place in the South — too connects the reader to the days of slavery. Morrison's refusal to adhere to conventional monolithic meanings and images, essays her postcolonial stand. She re-interprets other Biblical figures in the novel *Song of Solomon*.

¹⁷ Ibid., p 5

Similar to the manner in which she deconstructs the name Solomon, Morrison also gives new meaning to the name Pilate. Pilate's father names her Pilate after locating the word in the Bible, he could not read and therefore "chose a group of letters that seemed to him strong and handsome, saw in them a large figure that looked like a tree hanging in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees."¹⁸ Thus the "Christ-killing Pilate"¹⁹ was seen as a protective and nurturing figure. This is a classic reversal of the already ordained negative connotation of the name Pilate. The fixed meanings are thus deconstructed by Morrison to accommodate the other possibilities. Christianity was imposed on the slaves. But like all self-sustaining system, religion, provided the platform to the African Americans to fight back colonial impositions. The history of the African Americans is a witness as to how the spirituals, the sermons, the gospels, the church songs were appropriated as the most potent instruments of revolt and resistance. Hence, when Morrison reinterprets and revises the Biblical names, she is exploring the possibilities of resistance embedded in religion itself. Pilate thus, turns from a Christ-killing Pilate to a nourishing Pilate- who helps Milkman connect to the past and attain greater fulfillment through a discovery of his own self and identity.

Morrison dismantles all archetypal images that have been formulated about the blacks, the skin colour being one. Black colour was the sole determinant of their race, as projected from the time they were enslaved. The racist ideology projected blackness as a marker of inferiority. Blackness became the tangible identity of the African Americans during the days when the dehumanizing institution of slavery existed and even after. Morrison revises the ideal of black in her novel *Song of Solomon* to show how blackness itself is an intangible colour and could not be a distinct and fixed marker of a race. Toni Morrison reconstitutes blackness with the kind of fluidity that defies fixity of images and its meanings.

¹⁸ Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon* (London: Chatto & Windus. 1977) 18.

¹⁹ Ibid. p19

You think dark is just one colour, but it ain't. There are five or six kinds of black. Some silky, some wooly. Some just empty. Some like fingers. And it don't stay still. It moves and changes from one kind of black to another. Saying something is pitch black is like saying something is green. What kind of green? Green like my bottles? Green like a grasshopper? Green like a cucumber, lettuce....Well night black is the same way. May as well we a rainbow.²⁰

Morrison extends the colour black to a rainbow – an image which holds within itself all the possible colours. She deliberately describes and delineates black as a rainbow to imply that black is definitely not a fixed colour and hence can never become the only and essential marker of a community and a race.

Thus, Morrison's endeavour is to break away from all the stereotypes and stock images that have become the essential determining factor of the African Americans. Such images have been imposed by the European imperialists to denigrate the African American community.

Imperialists made the most strategic move on the land, the place where they formed their colony — be it a settler colony, or an invaded colony. 'Land' was the source of their material prospects. Mercantile expression that triggered off colonisation was solely aimed at the material benefits from the colonies. Such benefits, as they rightly understood could be procured only through capturing of the political power. Political power, thus, gave the colonizers the unprecedented power to exploit the natural resources, while they plundered most of the invaded colonies, in the settler colonies they exploited the native people who were forced to extract resources for their benefits from the land.

²⁰ Morrison, Toni, *Song of Solomon* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1977) 40-41.

The African slaves too, were forced to work for the imperial economy. The slaves toiled in their homes, their plantations, and helped them build a mighty empire. Thus 'place' or 'land' has a wider connotation in a colonial and postcolonial context. It stands as a living witness to the entire process of colonisation. "Place is also a palimpsest, a kind of parchment on which successive generations have inscribed and re-inscribed the process of history."²¹ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin quote Naipaul from his book *The Middle Passage* to accentuate the point. They maintain:

... he sees the history of the Caribbean signified in the land: "There is slavery in the vegetation. In the sugarcane, brought by Columbus on that second voyage when, to Queen Isabella's fury, he proposed the enslavement of the Amerindians."²²

In a similar process, the African Americans too were colonised, and everything from land to the cotton grown on the plantations were used to further the economic motives of the imperialist.

Morrison, too, sees colonisation from the perspective of land and nature in *Tar Baby*. An alternative insight into colonization seen from nature's point of view brings a more encompassing idea of the process itself. To voice the voiceless is definitely an enhancement of an idea of colonization that has ignored the effects on nature. Nature, which has always been the mute spectator, is invested with a discerning voice. *Tar Baby* opens in the following manner:

The End of the World, as it turned out, was nothing more than a collection of magnificent winter houses of Isle de Chevaliers. When the labourers imported from Haiti came to clear the land, clouds, and fish were convinced that the world was over, that the sea-green of the sea, sky-blue blue of the sky were no longer permanent.... After all, they were part of a rainforest already two

²¹ Ashcroft, Bill, Garth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, ed. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. (London: Routledge, 1995) 392.

²² Ibid. p 392.

thousand years old and scheduled for eternity, so they ignored the men and continued to rock the diamondbacks that slept in their arms. It took the river to persuade them that indeed the world was altered that never again would the rain be equal....²³

Making nature speak out about the trauma gives us an insight into the brutal assault that colonisation makes upon nature. What happened to nature was brutal, and in a similar fashion what happened to the African Americans was dehumanizing. They were displaced, and forcibly made to settle on plantations to serve the needs of the colonisers. The African Americans had nothing to hold on to, no voice, no land and an unfamiliar country. The only way out was to hold on to the land that gave them shelter. Morrison introduces in the form of a Sermon, the idea of the necessity to hold on to the land. Reverend Cooper in *Song of Solomon* says:

See what you can do?... On this planet, this nation, in this country here... grab it, grab this land! I take it, hold it, shake it, squeeze it, turn it.... multiply it, and pass it on – can you hear me? Pass it on.²⁴

Land, thus becomes the only tangible legacy left to African slaves in America. Just as they passed on what remained from their culture similarly they passed on the land. The so-called powerful nation America and its equally potent economy have exploited the slaves in an inhuman manner to extract profits to make itself an indomitable power.

In *Tar Baby*, Son says:

He thought he was rescuing her from Valerian, meaning *them*, the aliens, the people who in mere three hundred years had killed a world million years old... they killed everything they touched including their own coast lines, their own hills and forests.²⁵

²³ Morrison, Toni. *Tar Baby* (New York: Signet Press, 1981) 9.

²⁴ Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1977) 235.

²⁵ Morrison, Toni. *Tar Baby* (New York: Signet, 1981) 269.

This passage captures the irreversible damage that colonization has perpetrated upon the old civilization. The African American too belonged to an old civilization; and there was a forcible disjuncture which was created in their history by colonisation. The community is now a hybrid community with civilizational source neither years old and a relatively new history in America dating back to 1619.

Morrison addresses the central issues of identity, of land, displacement, of the anxiety of succeeding in the New World, which concerns the African Americans. The chequered history that the community had had will affect their present state of being. However assimilated they might feel the ex-colonisers and the ex-slaves cannot see yet to eye. The flashes of the past would come alive the moment any image from the past days of colonisation, enslavement and imperialism shows its face. The relationships that colonisation set to establish like, the master and subaltern, also carry within themselves the pangs of subordination and subjugation.

Valerian Street, the white master in *Tar Baby* shares a good relationship with his black servants, Sydney and Ondine. There seems to be no trace of the master-slave equation in the relationship. However with the arrival of Son, certain hidden and underlying impulses of superiority of the white blood that colonisation set to establish come to the fore. The difference of perspective as far as the understanding of colonization goes in a master subaltern relationship is encapsulated in the revision of the tale. In an ugly fight between Valerian and Ondine, Valerian recalls the tale where he would represent the master. The tale refers to the time when some blind slaves aboard on a slave ship caught in a sea storm were forced to jump in the sea and left to their fate. They somehow managed to reach the shore and their subsequent generations still survives on the island Isle de Chevaliers. This particular tale is recalled by different people belonging to different communities, colonized or the colonizers, from

their own subjective positions.²⁶ The tale recollects the displacement of the Africans, which had been forced through the middle passage, when they were left to their fate in a new land. The story of colonization is recollected with pride by the whites, just as Valerian recalls it in *Tar Baby*:

Somewhere in the back of Valerian's mind one hundred French Chevaliers were roaming on horses... alert but restful in the security of the Napoleonic code.²⁷

The very same incident is seen by Son, the African American, from the perspective of his community. Son celebrates the resistance that the community of slaves (the blind men of the tale) has shown over the centuries and have now empowered themselves against all kinds of subjugations and subordinations. The narrator recounts:

Somewhere in the back of Son's mind one hundred black man on one hundred unshod horses rode blind and naked through the hills and had done so for hundred of years.... They had floated in strange waters blind, but they were still there racing each other for sport in the hills behind the white man's house.²⁸

Thus, while the white man saw history from the perspective of the coloniser, the black man saw it from the subversive eye of an ex-colonized and an empowered ex-slave.

Toni Morrison by investing the folklorian quality, of repetition and reversal of meanings, makes a point of difference. Similar to a folklore which gains new meaning in each rendering of the tale, Morrison's treatment of the folklore in the novels, analysed in this chapter, invests the folklores with new meanings. The folklore gets

²⁶ *ibid.*, p 152

²⁷ *ibid.*, p 207

²⁸ *ibid.*, p 207

reconstituted and recreated at the hands of Morrison – the possibility of flight entailed in the folklore of the flying ancestor gives new meaning and liberates an African American caught in the shackles of modern day materialism. The tar baby myth also helps in unearthing the problems of African American identity fraught with dangers of assimilation. The amalgamation of the oral traditional form of the folklore with the written mode of a fiction, in Morrison's work, in order to emerge with an inherently African American expression of cultural difference may be interpreted as postcolonial exercise. And Toni Morrison's attempt to appropriate English and invest it with elements of African-American vernacular tradition to address the tale of contemporary African American issues and experiences qualifies her as a postcolonial writer.

Chapter 3

Unravelling the Hidden Facets: A Reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* from a Postcolonial Perspective

Freeing oneself is one thing; claiming ownership of that free self was another. (Morrison, *Beloved* 95)

“Post-colonial literary theory”, maintains Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, “has begun to deal with the problems of transmuting time into space, with the present struggling out of the past, and, like much recent post-colonial literature, it attempts to construct a future.”¹

Post-colonial theory and literature emerge from the necessity to understand the present in a discursive relation to the past. The literatures that emerge subsequent to the colonial experience, bring within their purview, the entire gamut of experiences that colonisation bring about in the social, political, cultural and economic life of the colonized people. Slave narratives, which surfaced from the American continent in the mid eighteenth century, qualify as post-colonial writings. It is because slave narratives bear the living evidence of the dehumanizing atrocities that the institution of slavery meted out to the African Americans.

Robert B. Stepto in his essay, “Narration, Authentication, Authorial Control in Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* in 1845”, notes the basic feature of a slave narrative. He says, in a slave narrative:

The strident, moral voice of the formal slave recounting, exposing, appealing, apostrophizing, and above all, *remembering* his ordeal in bondage is the simple most impressive feature of a slave narrative.²

¹ Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Giffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (New York: Routledge. 1989) 93.

² Andrews. William L., ed. *African American Autobiography: A collection of critical essays* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc. 1993) 26

Stepto's definition focuses on how slave narratives are acts of remembering the painful days of slavery. There are certain prominent features of early slave narratives. They border on autobiographical writing because there is often a first person account of slaves life, with the narrator assuming an authority over the narrative as well as asserting the authenticating of the experience shared in the narrative. The slave narrative often has a journey motif which charts the personal experience from slavery to freedom. The slave narratives expose a hostile environment where the slave is forced to stay. Most of the slave narratives show the importance of literacy in attaining freedom from the white master. The narrative recapitulates the physical and mental atrocities – images from auction block, flogging, sexual assault in case of female slaves, and a longing to belong to a family are oft-repeated images and themes in a slave narrative.

The earliest slave narratives were written in the mid eighteenth century. Prominent among them are – Briton Hammon's *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* (1760), John Marrant's *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black, Now Going to Preach the Gospel in Nova Scotia, Born in New York, in North America* (1785), Oloudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oloudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, (1789).

However the antebellum slave narratives of the nineteenth century made a major mark in African American literature. The most famous ones are: Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Harriett Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).³

William L. Andrews in his essay, *The Representation of Slavery and Afro-American Literary Realism (1865-1920)*⁴, makes a clear distinction between antebellum

³ Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, ed. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997) 2612-2616.

⁴ McDowell, Deborah E., and Arnold Rampersad, ed. *Slavery and Literary Imagination* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989) p 62.

slave narratives and post-bellum slave narratives. The above mentioned antebellum slave narratives received more prominence in his discussion while the post-bellum narratives start from Booker T Washington's autobiographical writing *Up from Slavery* (1901). Andrews maintain that antebellum slave narratives dealt with slaves who rejected the authority of their masters, ran away, or violently broke off from slavery. The narratives dealt with deprivations of all kinds – of food, clothing, shelter, and of a family support. They spoke forced religious teachings⁵ and projected South as the 'peculiar institution as a wholesale assault on everything precious⁶ to humankind."

The postbellum slave narratives, especially Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* has propagated the positive impact of slavery in the lives of the African Americans, they compared it to the institution where the slaves got education and purpose of life.⁷ Andrews further adds:

Given the changed socio-political circumstances, it is not surprising to find the postbellum slave narrator treating slavery more as an economic probing ground than an existential battleground for southern black people. The slave past, if effectively represented, could provide the freedman and freedwoman with credentials that the new industrial-capitalist order might respect.⁸

Thus there was vast difference between the earlier slave narratives and the later ones. The earlier ones were more aggressive perhaps because they aimed at abolition of slavery while the later ones were written during the post Reconstruction period when slavery had been more or less abolished. Slave narratives took a backseat for sometime around the 1900s, they were revived again.

Slave narratives as a mode of literature were thus revived all over again in the middle of twentieth century. The new corpus of slave narratives was called neo-slave

⁵ Ibid.. p 64.

⁶ Ibid.. p 64.

⁷ Ibid.. p. 62

⁸ Ibid.. p 69

narrative. Written almost a century after the civil war they contained greater objectivity in narration. Having seen the aftermaths of slavery, the pain of racist ideology, the segregation laws, the rampant racial discrimination around, the neo-slave narrative encompassed a lot of new issues within its fold.

Toni Morrison, as an African American post-colonial writer, in her novel *Beloved* (1987), tries to address and understand the present condition of her community fraught with flashes of guilt and pain. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is a fictional narrative which is written in the form of a slave narrative. In her novel, she deals with the guilt and pain that comes back through 'rememory' (Morrison, *Beloved* 36) because certain unyielding facets of the racist ideology, a legacy of the past days of slavery, bring back those memories that refuse to be obliterated. It is a collective revisitation and resolving of the past that would help the community in moving ahead in future. Thus the slave narrative, *Beloved*, centres around the ordeal the individual slaves have undergone, with broader ramifications. The entire community's experience is rendered through individual narration of the days in slavery.

With the revival of 'slave-narrative' as a popular mode of writing, certain writers took to writing slave narratives: Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) are such slaves narratives. The revival of slave narratives in the 1960s was informed by a lot of social, historical and political reason.

Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, while using the term neo-slave narrative for this kind of writing, explains its emergence in this era. Rushdy explains how Civil Rights movement and Black Power movement which produced black power intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s augmented the writing of the neo-slave narratives. He further adds:

Partly as a result of that cross-fertilization between the streets and the ivory tower, there emerged a new body of historical studies of slavery that look seriously the agency and self-representation of the slaves, their

community-and culture-building energies, and the forms of resistance they exhibited.⁹

Rushdy points in his essay, *The Neo-Slave Narrative*, the major thematic concerns of such kind of a slave narrative. The concerns Rushdy brings out are: firstly, a preoccupation with 'contemporary African-American subjectivity' corresponding to the political movements of the age and secondly, neo-slave narrative is about the 'means of recovery'. He adds, "memory is how the past is recalled; memory is also how we heal from the past" (p 102-103). Finally, Rushdy sums up by saying "...writers of the contemporary narratives of slavery recuperate voice and body, challenge appropriation and commodification, and experiments with the tension between a literacy that captures and an orality that liberates" (p 102).

Morrison's *Beloved*, as a neo-slave narrative, embodies all the elements Rushdy mentions - 'subjectivity', 'memory' and 'use of orality in written form'. Post colonialism too deals with the loss and the eventual owning and regaining of subjectivity of the erstwhile slaves or subjects. 'Remembering' is the mode and the means through which this subjectivity is realised. Morrison as a post-colonial writer shows her engagement with 'remembering' and 'subjectivity' through her use of language. The orality instilled in the written mode through the employment of techniques like the use of non-linear time frame, flashes of memory, gaps, pauses or running sentences without pauses, in order to bring the difference in the language itself, shows a successful culmination of her orientation as a post-colonial writer.

Beloved is a novel based on the true story of Margaret Garner, who, in an attempt to save her child from the ordeal a slave has to undergo at the hands of the whites, kills her own child.¹⁰ Keeping the basic story intact, Morrison recreates through a fictional narrative, the story of Margaret by creating a character Sethe, who kills her daughter to save her from the clutches of slavery.

⁹ Graham, Maryemma, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 88-89.

¹⁰ *Contemporary Literary Criticism. Year Book. 1993. Vol. 81.* (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., Fall 1994) 216.

The story of *Beloved* is a story of guilt and pain, and of owning responsibility of the decisions the slave (Sethe) had taken. Sethe's murdered daughter revisits her after twenty years time in the form of a ghost and places sethe in a position where she is being questioned why she chose to kill her own daughter. Although, *Beloved* is a specific story pertaining to a particular individual yet it has a broader implication as it talks of the entire Black community's fate during the days of slavery.

Morrison, in *Beloved*, repetitively says towards the end of the novel that "It was not a story to pass on.... It was not a story to pass on.... This is not a story to pass on".¹¹ The 'negative emphasis' as used by Morrison in the novel talks of how the community is heading towards a certain phase where the history and slave experiences are being set aside both in life and literature. Such crucial moment that links the Africans to the Americans is something which the community cannot afford to ignore; the reason being that the Black identity gets partly constituted by the momentuous history of slavery. While there is a partial forgetfulness on the part of the larger community, there are still liminal voices which still remember slavery, as they have experienced it for almost two centuries. Slavery is an overarching reality which has informed every Black consciousness, and therefore it has brought upon unspoken communication among the Blacks. In *Beloved*, Paul D empathises with Sethe's plight better because he felt:

The mind of him that knew her own. Her story was bearable because it was his as well – to tell, to refine and tell again. The things neither knew about the other – the things neither had word-shapes for-well, it would come in time: where they led him off to sucking iron; the perfect death of her crawling-already? baby¹²

While most of the slave narratives bring glimpses of the excruciating pain of the past — lynching, torture, rape, flogging. One aspect of slavery which goes unnoticed is 'displacement'. Initially displaced from Africa, this community was transported to a place where there was 'no address', 'no home' and 'no land' to call their own.

¹¹ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved* (New York: Pan Books) 274-275.

¹² *ibid.*, p 99

Beloved begins with the line “124 WAS SPITEFUL”¹³; the second part of the novel starts with “124 WAS LOUD”¹⁴ and the final part begins with “124 WAS QUIET”¹⁵. As the novel proceeds, it is revealed that ‘124’ is but the home of Sethe and Denver, her daughter. In the negative connotations given to the first two lines and the positive attribute given to the third line, there could be seen one commonality among all the three assertions: a vociferous assertion of ‘home’. Morrison herself explains her stance about what an address meant to a slave:

Numbers here constitute an address, a thrilling enough prospect for slaves who had owned not nothing, least of all an address. And although the numbers, unlike words, can have no modifiers, I give these an adjective—spiteful (There are three others). The address is therefore personalized, but personalized by its own activity, not the pasted on desire for personality.¹⁶

The idea of belongingness attributed to a ‘home’ in the context of ‘124’ while juxtaposed with a forcible confinement in the plantations shows the paradoxical aspect – one of position and the other of deprivation. Despite the fact that ‘124’ is loud and spiteful, it still remains their own space. The plantation home in *Beloved* is called Sweet Home, which is contrary to what it stood for. When Sethe says that “I don’t have to tell you about Sweet Home – what it was – but may be you don’t know what it was like for me to get away from there”¹⁷, one can understand the relief that a slave experienced when she ran away from the plantation home. Thus, ‘124’ stands in stark contrast with Sweet Home as it means freedom from slavery.

She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed,

¹³ *ibid.*, p 3

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p 169

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p 239

¹⁶ Morrison. “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” in Joy James and T. Dancan Sharpley-Whiting, Ed. *The Black Feminist Reader* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2000) 53.

¹⁷ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved* (New York: Pan Books) 161

dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe.¹⁸

This statement explicates what the whole idea of freedom from bondage meant to the slaves. The image of being 'safe' as created by Morrison in these particular lines could be understood in the best possible way when it is seen how Morrison foregrounds the brutality of slavery and the need and desire of the slaves to free oneself from it. Morrison projects the dehumanizing face of slavery in the following lines:

The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing – the part of her that was clean. No undreamable dreams about whether the headless, feetless torso hanging in the tree with a sign on it was her husband or Paul A; whether the bubbling – hot girls in the colored-school fire set by patriots included her daughter; whether a gang of whites invaded her daughter's private parts, soiled her daughter's thigh and threw her daughter out of the wagon. She might have to work the slaughter house yard, but not her daughter.¹⁹

The above passage attaches a significance to a place because we see that while '124' meant setting down, Sweet Home had this inherent idea of displacement and being continuously in flux '124' is not just a residential address or a place where they settle but rather a symbol of the transition from a phase of constant displacement to that of a fixity and rootedness that has come to identify them. In this way, address ceased to remain an address and has come to constitute as a defining feature of the African-American identity.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in their collectively edited, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, theorized upon the concept of 'place' in a post-colonial context:

Place and displacement are crucial features of post-colonial discourse. By 'place' we do not simply mean 'landscape'.... Rather 'place' in post-

¹⁸ *ibid.* p 163

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p 251

colonial societies is a complex interaction of language, history and environment.²⁰

In this context, Sethe's home '124' becomes the Place where there is interaction among language, history and environment. '124' is the world for them because it is the site on which the history of slavery gets re-enacted through a revisitation of *Beloved*. The daughter's resurrection from her death and arrival in '124', brings to life the history of slave narrative. Although before the time *Beloved* actually arrives at '124', there "were the thoughts of the woman of 124, the unspeakable thoughts, unspoken".²¹ Unspeakable things refer to those experiences of slavery which were consciously suppressed till the time history confronted them in the form of *Beloved*. *Beloved*'s appearance marks Sethe's reconciliation with the past – the guilt, the remorse with which she had been living in the past. For Sethe, the 'rememory' of the days of slavery not only embodies the exploitation and the oppression, but also meant taking responsibility for all the decisions that she had taken as a slave, the most crucial one being the murder of her own child. When confronted with the questioning eyes of her daughter, *Beloved*, she, filled with anguish, asked her daughter "do you forgive me? Will you stay? You safe here now?"²² The safety she is talking about meant the protected haven that a slave could never provide to her children in the plantation home where they worked.

All this time, the baby still existed in '124' showing its spite and venom much so that everybody around suggested Sethe to leave the house. Leaving or running away is something that always meant a movement away from the clutches of slavery. Running away would also mean an escapist stand of not facing the past where a slave would not only be a victim but also a victimizer. Sethe could not recover from the guilt of being a victimizer to her daughter. Thus she tells Paul D:

²⁰ Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, ed. Introduction. "Place." *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge 1995) 391.

²¹ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved* (New York: Pan Books. 1987) 199.

²² *ibid.* p 215

No more running from nothing. I will never turn from another thing on the earth. I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something Pall D Garner: it cost too much!²³

'Running' is a leit motif throughout the novel. Running away provides the possibility of freedom which every slave in America dreamt of – be it physical state of bondage of being a slave or the entire bitter experiences they had. In *Beloved*, Morrison shows that past is not something that one can easily run away from, it is something that stays in all the physical and mental manifestations.

In the realm of the mind, such a deep-rooted dehumanizing experience could not be easily erased. Any object or symbol that had been a part of their bitter history gushes in their memory and they re-live their past experiences again in the future. Sethe speaks of such an experience in *Beloved*:

Some things go pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory you know some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, its gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world.... Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm – every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there –you who never was there-if you go there-and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again.... Because even though it's all over – over and done with – it's going to always be there waiting for you. ²⁴

Morrison tries to recreate certain silenced aspects of slavery through images. Mental repercussion of all kinds of physical assaults that they had to go through is powerfully brought out. Hazel V. Carby in ““Hear My Voices, Ye Careless Daughters” Narratives of slave and free women before Emancipation” says:

²³ *ibid.*, p 15

²⁴ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved* (New York: Pan Books 1987) 36.

Feminist historiography and literary criticism also need to define the ways in which racist practices are gender-specific and sexual exploitation racialized.²⁵

The female slaves during slavery had always been subject to physical assault but it never got exposed in any historical or literary works. Harriet Jacobs' *The Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* narrates sexual assault by the white master Dr. Flint. Hazel V. Carby says "Dr. Flint was characterized by Jacobs as the epitomize of corrupt white male power... presented as a representative slaveholder, Dr. Flint embodied the evil licentiousness that was the ultimate threat to virtue and purity."²⁶

In the novel, Linda Brent, the protagonist *writes* about how she was sexually exploited. The tone is however very moralistic and involved religious laws and principles to draw sympathy of the reader. She writes:

I was compelled to live under the same roof with him- where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolts against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection?²⁷

The images of sexual exploitation as exposed by Jacobs brings in the picture of what the other female slaves went through as a slave life. However, in Jacobs' novel, *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl*, there is guilt, remorse, a value added judgment in the tone in which she talks of such sexual assault, which is what Morrison works on. Morrison puts forth sexual assault in the most overt manner possible without an introspective or moralizing explanatory voice. It is in the revisionary mode that she delivers the idea of sexual assault which was a rampant during slavery.

²⁵ Andrews William L. *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1993) 70.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p 73

²⁷ Harriet, Jacobs Ann. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. 1861. 22 May 2001 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/jacobs/jacobs/html=p44-45>>.

The image of the Chokecherry tree on Sethe's back signifies a state similar to that of a tree where the past gets entrenched and rooted as time passes by. The Chokecherry tree reminds her of the rape and flogging she was subjected to at Sweet Home and becomes the central metaphor that associates her individual experience to that of the entire African American community shackled under slavery. 'Chokecherry' becomes a central figure in the revision of slave-narrative because sexual assault and rape has always been silenced in the antebellum as well as the postbellum slave narratives. In a revisionary mode, Morrison uses these gaps, pauses and disjointed sentences found in the early slave narratives. As a point of entry into a new mode of writing where she uses those 'closures' to expose the 'silences' that had existed in those narratives. In *Beloved*, Morrison employs archetypal images of slavery, like pictures of chained feet, pictures auction-blocks, whipping, rape and even the binding of the mouth with iron-bits. The lines quoted below captures the pain that iron-bits bore.

He wants me to ask him about what it was like for him – about how offended the tongue is, held down by iron, how he need to spit is so deep you cry for it.²⁸

Iron bits at the physical level means pain while at the mental level, the effect of this pain works differently. Europeans have always tried to gag the voices of the blacks – the voice which is a carrier of the language black identity – whereby their existence itself comes to be negated. Ngugi wa Thiong'O in "The Language of African Literature" talks of the importance of a language:

Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world.²⁹

After the war of independence (1776), the churches — Methodist and Baptist — modified their form of instruction of slaves. The slaves working in plantations were

²⁸ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved* (New York: Pan Books, 1987) 71.

²⁹ Thiong'o, Ngugi wa'. *Decolonising the Mind* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1987) 15-16.

expected both to learn to speak English and also to adopt the religion of their white masters. Christianity as a religion was handed down to the Blacks. It was a mode of colonization which the whites adopted for establishing the superiority of the white religion over the indigenous faith of the blacks. Biblical authority was adapted to endorse slavery and instill allegiance from the slaves. There were segregated sections for blacks and white churches; there are few instances of separate churches.³⁰ However, after a point of time the African Americans became committed to the religion. They gradually got disillusioned with the white church's preachings which asked them to submit and conform to the white masters.

But the very same religion became the site of subversion for the blacks. They appropriated the religion but abrogated the European modes and methods of preaching, delivering sermons, the idea of mass and congregation, and the very mode of worship. The spirituals, the gospels, the singing in the church all come to reconstituted in the practice of Christianity by the Blacks. So, in the re-writing of the slave narratives in the post-colonial era, Morrison incorporates in *Beloved* those very instances of resistance and subversion that have been covertly practiced in the domain of religion. Such resistance and subversion in the mode of their worship which also incorporate the African-American oral modes of expression, music, hollers and dances, in a way, empowers them and gives an outlet to the pain that slavery has infinite upon them.

A contrast can be build up with the manner of preaching of white churches. Harriet Jacobs in her novel, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, gives an exposition of what was preached in the churches. Linda Brent, recalls the proceedings in a white church:

The reverend gentleman knelt in prayer, then seated himself, and requested all present, who could read, to open their books, while he gave portion he wished them to repeat or respond to. His text was "Servants, be obedient to them that your masters according to fresh, with ear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ.... If you disobey

³⁰ Oliver Paul, Max Harrison and William Balcom. *Gospel, Blues and Jazz: With Spirituals and Ragtime*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997) 2.

your earthly master, you offend your heavenly master. You must obey God's commandments.³¹

The slaves developed an alternative way of preaching as they could not find solace in the religious preachings by the whites. The Europeans instead of giving them release from the daily trials and tribulations asked them for further allegiance and submission to the brutality of the European master. Harriet Jacobs gives an exposition the spirituals that the blacks evolved behind the white masters back. Linda Brent the narrator says: "The slaves generally compose their own songs. The songs were such —

Old Satan is one busy ole man;
 He rolls dem blocks all in my way,
 But Jesus is my bosom friend;
 He ropes them brooks away.
 If I had died when I was young,
 Den how my stam'ring tongue would have sung;
 But I am ole, and now I stand.
 A narrow chance for to tread dat heavenly land.³²

These songs can be seen as subversive attempts to resist the religion songs of the whites. In these songs they poured their pain, their tears and their hope to free themselves from the clutches slavery with divine help.

Morrison makes a point of difference in the context of use of spirituals in her novel. Whereas the songs from antebellum slave narratives were structured on lines of the religious songs of the whites, Morrison break away from such structures Jacobs's slave narrative has religious songs as structured on the following:

Ole Satan thought he had a mighty aim;
 He missed my soul, and caught my sins.
 Cry Amen, Cry Amen, cry Amen to God!³³

³¹ Harriet. Jacobs Ann. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. 1861. 22 May 2001 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/jacobs/jacobs/html#p44-45>>. p 105. 106. 107

³² *ibid.*. 108

³³ *ibid.*. 109

An illustration of this alternative form of religious practice could be seen in *Beloved* where Baby Suggs, the mother-in law of Sethe, takes along women in the clearing inside the forest to pray together. Such kind of alternative practice of religion has come to become a regular feature of the Black Church. Morrison revisits the inception of Black Church in *Beloved*. In the novel, Morrison says that Baby Suggs believe that "... the only grace they could have was the grace that they could imagine. That if they could not see if they would not have it."³⁴

The manner in which Baby Suggs invokes spirit of religion and gives a call to the other black women to join her in the worship is different from the practices of white Church. The narrator says, "After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed ahead and prayed silently....then she shouted, "Let the children come!"..."Let your mothers hear your laugh...Let your wives and children see you dance...cry"...for the living and the dead...Here"...in this here places, we flesh; flesh that weeps; laughs, flesh that dances on bare feet is grass. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it.... And oh my people they don't love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty.... Love your hands! Love them... *You* got to love it, *You!*"³⁵

After Baby Suggs called out to people to own and love themselves, the narrator adds that "saying no more, she stood up and then danced with her twisted hip, the rest of her what her heart had to say while the others open their mouths and gave her the music."³⁶

In this particular passage, Morrison brings out the entire picture of the practices of the black Church with its songs, dances and sermons.

³⁴ Morrison. Toni. *Beloved*. (New York: Pan Books, 1987) 89.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p 88

³⁶ *ibid.*, p 89

The discussion so far shows how Morrison has addressed and revised all the major issues that centre around slavery. The revisionary mode extends not only to the manner how she deals the theme but also the techniques she uses and develops in her writing. The orality in the written form has been brought upon by Morrison by the use of techniques such as, pauses, gaps, racy sentences, sentences without pause and also by incorporating Blues songs in the body of writing. The Blues songs which Paul D. keeps singing connect him and the readers immediately to the slave past. Those were the songs which he had learnt from the plantations, “prison farm or in the war” (pg 40). The songs very aptly capture the colonized state of the African-American slaves. They sing out their ‘reality’ in the form of songs which have survived the times. Paul D. expresses his existential reality in the song:

Little rice, little bean,
 No meat in between.
 Hard work ain’t easy,
 Dry bread ain’t greasy.³⁷

Lay my head on the railroad line,
 Train come along.
 Pacify my mind.
 If I had my weight in time,
 I’d whip my captain till he went stone blind.
 Five-cent nickel,
 Ten-cent dime,
 Busting rocks in busting time.³⁸

The Blues songs recapitulate glimpses from the slave part. The deprivation that they had faced made way into their songs and had become an inherent part of their social and cultural life. A repetition of these songs in life and in art keeps alive the idea of resistance and transcendence. The songs become a part of the collective consciousness of the community. By incorporating the blues song into the body of the novel, Morrison reiterates the fact that such songs have been central to the socio-

³⁷ *ibid.*, p 41

³⁸ *ibid.*, p 41

psychic and cultural survival of the community from the days of slavery. This particular song is introduced by the narrator in the following manner:

The songs he knew from Georgia were flat-headed nails for pounding and pounding and pounding.³⁹

The stress on the word 'pounding' shows that, these songs which talk of slavery keep on playing on and on across generation. In their repeated rendering they not only stay alive but also present any kind of national or communal amnesia pertaining to slavery. Imperialist had imposed slavery on this community and the African Americans cannot afford to forget such a brutal history.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, in *The Empire Writes Back* maintain:

The 'intersection' of language which occurs in the literatures of formerly oral societies does not take place simply between two different languages but between two different ways of conceiving the practice and substance of language. One characteristic of the world-views of oral cultures is the assumption that words, uttered under appropriate circumstances have the power to bring into being the events or states they stand for, to embody rather than represent reality. This conviction that the word can create its object leads to a sense that language possesses power over truth and reality.⁴⁰

Therefore, Paul D's rendition of the song brings back the plethora of experience that he had gone through as a slave. This also connects to the history of the community through oral narrative modes. Morrison, as a post-colonial writer, is aware of the power of the spoken world and how it gets transmitted across generations, carrying the stories of their community, hence transmitting the orality into written mode to capture the Black experiences.

Orality being the legacy of the past and Morrison's attempt to incorporate the same in the possible parameter of the 'present' i.e., the written fictional mode of

³⁹ *ibid.*, p 40

⁴⁰ Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 81.

narration, connects to what has been quoted of Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in the beginning of the chapter. They talk of how the present struggles out of the past and constitute the future. Similarly, for the Africans-Americans, their present identity gets constituted in a discursive relation to their past days of slavery. Their experiences have shaped their identity and they have become sensitive to all kinds of racist, exploitative and oppressive machineries that even a democratic state would revert to, during or even after colonization. Morrison's *Beloved* becomes the site where, through the use of language, the writer weaves the past, present and future in order to let 'the story' pass on.

Chapter 4

Toni Morrison's *Jazz*: Tracing the Racist Ideology in the Harlem of 1920s

Post-colonial theories of literature emerge from a view of language grounded in an assertion of the importance of practice over the code, the importance of the 'variant' over the 'standard'.... The interaction of English writing with the older traditions of orature or literature in post-colonial societies, and the emergence of a writing which has a major aim, the assertion of social and cultural difference, have radically questioned easy assumption about the characteristics of the genres we usually employ as structuring and categorizing definitives (novel, lyric, epic, play etc).¹

In the light of this argument, Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz* (1992) fits into the 'variant' form over the 'standard' English genre of the novel. By banking heavily on the oral tradition, Morrison tries to break away from the conventional form of the novel which is in a written mode. The orality brings in elements like non-linearity of the narrative, repetitions, use of elements of music into the form and structure of the novel. By incorporating and adapting traditional oral forms of narrative into the inherited English form of the novel, Morrison wants to emphasize the difference that colonization has brought into the lives of the African Americans.

In a discussion as to how different narrative techniques evolved from different post-colonial societies because of their unique socio-politico-historical situation, African literature comes nearest to the understanding of African-American literary expression. African literature, owing to their rich traditional oral narratives, offers "... a number of alter/native, ways of conceiving narrative structures."² The influence of oral narratives on novels insists on the inclusion of different forms of performative artistic

¹ Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 181.

² *ibid.* p 181

expressions – songs, storytelling, elements of dance, beats of instruments – into the discursive arena of the structure and form of a written narrative.³

This chapter discusses the inclusion of the elements of performative arts within the form and structure of a novel. In this particular case, it is jazz, a popular form of African-American musical expression, that has been adapted as a base and structure of Morrison's *Jazz*. The novel, *Jazz*, like *Beloved*, is based on a true historical event. Morrison based the story on a true-life incident of star-crossed lovers which appeared in Camille Billops' manuscript, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, which contained photographs and commentaries by African-American photographer, James Van Der Zee. The incident revolves around the killing of a young eighteen-year-old girl by her jealous lover in a club. The girl who was killed refused to divulge the identity of the murderer before she died and allowing him to run away within that provided time.⁴

Improvising on the story, Morrison writes the entire fictional narrative of *Jazz*. The story being based in the urban province of Harlem in the 1920s, Morrison employs Jazz, a very urban form of African-American music to capture the pulse of the city-life.

Morrison strategically places the story in 1926, a time which was very special for the African-Americans. Not only did jazz as a musical expression emerge in the first decade of the twentieth century, but there were also other emphatic achievements of the African-Americans in the same age. It was in 1926 that Langston Hughes, the great African-American poet and musician, published his Jazz and blues poems in a volume titled *The Weary Blues*, as well as his manifesto of black criticism *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*. It was the age of Hughes, poet Countee Cullen and the novelist Zora Neale Hurston who launched their magazine *Fire!!* Van Vechten's book *Nigger Heaven* was also published.⁵ Thus, it was an age when African-American

³ *ibid.* p 181

⁴ Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. and K.A. Appiah. *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (New York: Amistad Press, 1993) 53.

⁵ Wintz, Cary D. *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance* (Texas: Rice University Press, 1988) 1.

literature flourished. The period was termed as the Harlem Renaissance period, Harlem being the centre of most of these activities. In the mainstream American history, this age was called Jazz Age, captured beautifully in F.Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The Harlem Renaissance being the centre of the African-American life in 1920s, marks the social intellectual movement in that age. "Harlem played an important role in the renaissance because Harlem itself symbolized the central experience of the American blacks in the early twentieth century — the urbanisation of black America. Harlem housed the first major concentration of blacks who settled outside the south.... The black writers of Harlem Renaissance were in the vanguard of the attempt to come to terms with black urbanization. They lived it, reflected it and through their art endeavoured some of the problems arising from it."⁶

The literature of the age had raised a race-consciousness as their central themes. Woven with all the elements of Harlem and structured on Jazz, Morrison gives an exposition of what city and city-life meant to the African-Americans in the 1920s. Having faced centuries of oppression under slavery, the Harlem Renaissance writers and other contemporaries believed that through achievements in arts, they would upturn the debilitating process of slavery.⁷ *Jazz* captures individual experiences which trace a movement from slavery to freedom, from South to North. North as it appears to be a safe haven to the ex-slaves was not free from claustrophobic spaces, depression, frustration, violence, segregation and marginalisation.

Postcolonial literature engages with colonial past as well as with institutional practices that get carried on from the days of colonisation to the postcolonial era. In the case of African Americans, enslavement was the colonial practice of hegemony white racist ideology carried on in post slavery, post Reconstruction period could be termed as the postcolonial legacy of the days of imperialism. The hope and desire for a dignified life that the blacks fought for during seventeenth and eighteenth century days of slavery was a far cry at the turn of the twentieth century. Racist ideology that

⁶ *ibid.* pp 3-4

⁷ Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. and K.A. Appiah. *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (New York: Amistad Press, 1993) 53.

showed its ugly head in all spheres of public life — be it the use of public places, or in matters of employment — made the life of the ex-slaves miserable.

The fight for abolition of slavery shifted to the fight against racist ideology. A major battleground for this fight for self-determination was Harlem. Harlem produced African American writers who addressed the issues of racism in overt and subtle forms in their writings, making their voices heard. In the midst of race riots, lynching, and segregationist policies, the Harlem Renaissance writers and political activist continued a long battle for retaining the dignity of the African America race. Harlem not only marks the literary renaissance but also signifies a lot of other changes in socio-political life of the African Americans. At the turn of the century, there was a steady denigration of the black race's social and political position in America and secondly it marked the great migration of the blacks from South to North.

There was erosion of basic political rights of the blacks both in the South as well as the North. There was an increase in racial violence and segregation towards the blacks. In North, the theaters, restaurants, hotels and other places discriminated against the black.⁸

Lynching and race riots were rampant both in the North and South. "Lynching targeted "bad" blacks to serve as an example for all blacks. On the other hand, race riots that occurred at the turn of the century were characterized by indiscriminate, wholesale violence directed against all blacks regardless of their actions. A law-abiding, accommodating black could reasonably expect to be safe from lynching, but there was no protection from the random violence unleashed by these riots."⁹

There was an open propaganda against the blacks supported by scientific and pseudo-scientific theories of racism in America at the onset of the twentieth century. Racist ideology was the dominant ideology of the times in America as well as Europe. Certain

⁸ Wintz, Cary D. *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance* (Texas: Rice University Press, 1988) 6-7.

⁹ *ibid.* p 9

prominent writings of the age propagated the inferiority of the Negro race. Thomas Dixon's the *Leopard's Spots* (1902) and *The Clansmen*, were examples of the overt practice of racism in literature. Charles Carroll's *The Negro, Beast or in the Image of God* (1900) was a racist book which was formulated with biblical references as well as psuedo-scientific studies.¹⁰ In the south, the dominant racial theory depicted the blacks as a baser race, a race which is inferior and immoral to the core. "Slavery, it was argued, had christianized blacks and restrained their basic tendencies, but freedom had resulted in a rapid reversion towards barbarism."¹¹ The white racist writers propagated lynching as the ideal way to curb the black's increasing tendency to rape. They argued that the only solution to the problem posed by the blacks was to revert them back to a colonized state or to exterminate them.¹²

The other major importance of Harlem to African American history is that there was an exodus of blacks from rural South to the North. It was called the Great Migration.¹³

The vast migration of thousands of blacks from rural South to the Northern industrial cities was a result of both pulls and push factors. The push factor was the economic depression of South. The increasing poverty among the black farmers and farm workers forced them to seek a better life elsewhere. "One effect of the black migration was the emergence of Harlem as the black metropolis and the social and cultural center of black America."¹⁴

Harlem, thus holds a considerably important place in Africa American history as also the history of America. After the days of slavery, and post Reconstruction,

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p 10

¹¹ *ibid.*, p 10

¹² *ibid.*, p 10

¹³ Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, *ed. The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997).

¹⁴ Wintz, Cary D. *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance* (Texas: Rice University Press, 1988) 17.

Harlem meant both hope and despair. The migrants to North dreamt of making a future out of it — it signified freedom and opportunity. For some, the dreams remained unfulfilled and they ended up feeling alienated, depressed within the claustrophobia of Harlem city's slum. Cary D Wintz writes:

Harlem reflected self-confidence, militancy, and pride of the New Negro in his or her demand for equality; it reflected the aspiration and genius of the workers and poets of the Harlem Renaissance; but Harlem, like the black migrant, like the New Negro, and like the Renaissance writers, did not resolve its problems or fulfill its dreams. Everything, it seemed, fell short of its goal.¹⁵

Toni Morrison, in her writing, engages with all major movements in African American history, Harlem being one. The shift in the political struggle from the fight for abolition of slavery to the fight for restoration of human dignity against the grotesque racist ideology could be understood in the light of what happened during Harlem Renaissance. Harlem not only symbolizes a movement of the African Americans from South to North but also the movement from one phase of struggle to the other. The racism felt in each and every sphere of life, the claustrophobia, the dirt and squalor, the poverty, the unemployment in the city slums is a reality which the African Americans have passed through. Harlem, being the symbol of the flip side of African American life in the early twentieth century needed to be addressed. Toni Morrison, in her attempt to chart out the crucial moments in history, takes up the Jazz Age. 'Harlem' being the center of the Jazz Age, constitutes the theme of her novel *Jazz*. To understand the beat, cadences, the rhythm of the city, Morrison employs Jazz, a music which is a product of the city.

Jazz is a product of the merger of elements from ragtime, marching band music, opera and other European classical musics, Native-American music, spirituals, work-songs and especially, the blues. It developed primarily as a city-phenomena "one that attempted to capture in music, the cadences, voices, and even the rising sky-lines of

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p 29

new urban American.”¹⁶ Jazz, is importantly, an instrumental music, “the sound of Jazz is that of the African-American voice scored as band music, with all of black talk’s flair for story-telling as well as the dirty dozens, understatement as well as braggadocio, whispery romance as well as loud-talk menace, the exalted eloquence.”¹⁷

The novel *Jazz* opens with a dramatic incident where the dead body of a young girl was mutilated by Violet, one of the central characters in the novel. The increased tension induced by such an incident can be compared to a dramatic opening of a Jazz performance on high notes, followed by certain low notes. The beginning of the novel instantly captures the attention of the readers similar to that of a Jazz performance which instantly strikes a rapport with the audience. Having taken the reader into confidence, the third person narrator then introduces the reader to the different characters of the novel. Instead of dwelling on the primary incident, the novel shifts its focus on the city-life of 1926 Harlem. Being left with the hustle-bustle of the city, the reader tries to figure out the link between the incident of the murder and the city. It is the city where Joe Trace and Violet moved in, to make a living. Little did they wonder that the city would engulf them and they would be mere subjects to the city’s desire. The narrator talks of immense independence the city envisages in being able to choose wherever one wants to be. The city offers all the possibilities “because everything you want is right where you are... the church, the store, the party, the women, the men, the post-box (but no high schools), the furniture store, street newspaper vendors, the bootleg houses (but no banks)...”¹⁸, such a situation is very emblematic of a post-colonial subject who thinks s/he has immense amount of independence to choose what they will to choose. Althusser describes such a state as interpellation where the co-opted subject believes that he has free will but in reality, which is not the case.¹⁹

¹⁶ Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, ed. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997) 55.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p 55

¹⁸ Morrison, Toni. *Jazz* (New York: Signet Press, 1992) 10.

¹⁹ Althusser, Louis “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Introduction).” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. (London: NLB, 1971) 121-173.

The life of deprivation and segregation being a living reality of early twentieth century, Harlem, to be able to visit public places at one's own disposal does mean a lot to an African American. The age of Harlem Renaissance saw the heights of discrimination and racism. Public places were not easily accessible to an African American. So, the above passage from the novel showing the accessibility of public places stands in stark contrast to the reality that they face. Morrison indicates through her bracketed expressions that illiteracy and poverty were rampant among African-American in that period. Bracketed expressions refer to "but no high schools" and "but no bank", schools and banks being the marker of education and money. Negation of both schools and bank meant that they lived in illiteracy and poverty.

The beginning of the novel captures the lower cadences of the city that shape people in ways which are unthought of. In the case of Joe and Violet the city had totally alienated them from everything and also from each other. The change is seen when:

Twenty years after Joe and Violet train-danced on into the city, they were still a couple but barely speaking to each other, let alone laughing together or acting like the ground was a dance-hall floor.²⁰

In the complementary relationship between the city and the couple Joe and Violet, we can trace the complementary relation between different instruments in Jazz. Just as the manner in which one instrument is played has an impact on the other performing artist in a Jazz performance, similarly, what constitutes a city — material and social — influences the lives of city-dwellers. By revisiting Harlem and recreating it in her novel in the form of *Jazz*, Morrison endeavors to confront the history of the urban African-American in the early 1920s:

And that is why it (jazz) has been such a balm for modern ennui; and has been the safety valve for modern machine ridden and convention bound society. It is the revolt of emotion against repression".²¹

²⁰ Morrison, Toni. *Jazz* (New York: Signet Press, 1992) 37.

²¹ Gayle, Addison, Jr., ed. *The Black Aesthetic* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1971) 111.

Thus jazz, as a musical form, appropriated in novel becomes the central metaphor in capturing the alienation, ennui, rhythm, happiness as also the claustrophobia of the city.

Improvisation being an important technique in a Jazz performance, in its flexibility, it captures the dynamism of Jazz as a musical form. In *Jazz*, we see the use of this element of improvisation. Although the major incidents in the novel are introduced in third person narration, glimpses into the lives of the characters appear in first person narration. Moreover, each particular incident is described by different narrators from their point of view improvising on the story. Dorcas's murder in the club by Joe Trace is looked at from the point of view of different characters, putting the readers in a position where they will empathise or sympathise or exhibit an utter indifference on the reenactment of the episode. Alice Manfred recalls her niece's death:

Toward the end of March Alice Manfred put her needles aside to think again of what she called the impunity of the man who killed her niece just because he could. It had not been hard to do; it had not even made him think twice about what danger he was putting himself in. He just did it. One man. One defenseless girl. Death. A sample-case man. A nice, neighborly, everybody-knows-him man. The kind you let in your house because he was not dangerous...²²

The nearly objective recollection of Dorcas's aunt, describing the murderer and the murdered as 'not dangerous' and 'defenseless', respectively, puts the reader in an indecisive state. The recollection is not judgemental but rather a detached exposition of an incident that has involved a near one. This particular incident is improvised upon when Joe expresses the closeness that he shared Dorcas. Extreme amount of possessiveness and jealousy leads him to the murder the girl. Joe says:

Dorcas, girl, your first time and mine. I *chose* you. Nobody gave you to me. Nobody said that's the one for you. I picked you out. Wrong time, yep, and doing wrong by my wife. But the picking out, the choosing. Don't even think I fell for you, or fell over you. I didn't fall in love, I

²² Morrison, Toni. *Jazz*. (New York: Signet Press, 1992) 77.

rose in it. I saw you and made up my mind. My mind. And I made up my mind to follow you to.²³

While juxtaposed against the detachment of the aunt and the possessiveness of Joe, Dorcas's own version of her dying projects a trance like state where she feels life oozing out of her. The narration by Dorcas's self brings in the impact of grooving that happens when music engrosses the soul of a person. In this particular improvisational narration, there is neither any remorse nor any feeling of being betrayed. Dorcas narrates her own death in the following manner:

Now it's clear. Through the doorway I see the table. On it is a brown wooden bowl, flat, low like a tray, full to spilling with oranges. I want to sleep, but it is clear now. So clear the dark bowl the pit of oranges. Just oranges. Bright listen. I don't know who is that woman singing but I know the words by heart.²⁴

Finally, comes the version of Felice, Dorcas's friend, who brings to the entire picture the objective observation of the on-lookers as well. Improvisation in this context can be seen in the manner in which a crowd reacts to a particular incident. Just like a Jazz performance, where at times there is a merger between individual response as well as the collective, the responses of the audience, here too, the onlookers react personally as well as in unison. Felice recollects:

Dorcas let herself die... she wouldn't let anybody move her; said she wanted to sleep and she would be all right.... Don't let them call nobody.... No ambulance, no police, nobody.²⁵

This is Felice's reaction to which she adds up the crowd's reaction.

People stood around talking and waiting some of them wanted to carry her downstairs, put her in a carry and drive to the emergency ward... she bled to death. That's all she (onlookers) talked about.... The blood. What a mess it made. That's all they talked about.²⁶

²³ *ibid.*, p 135

²⁴ *ibid.*, p 193

²⁵ *ibid.*, p 209

²⁶ *ibid.*, pp 209-210

The brutality of the incident is dissolved to bring about the humanity of the characters involved, and the improvisational quality of jazz is employed to bring about multiple perspectives to help in the exposition of such humanity. The African American race has always been projected as a wild race, and African American man shown as being sexually aggressive and violent. Scientific theories, philosophical treatises and pseudo-scientific studies have always tried to negatively portray the black race as a race with animal instinct. The age of Harlem Renaissance saw race-riots and lynching against blacks which was seen as a solution to curb the wild intentions of this race. In this context, when *Jazz* as a novel introduces a plot where a fifty year old man kills his eighteen year old girlfriend and his wife mutilates the dead body of the girl, this incident reiterates the white's perspective of the blacks being wild and aggressive. But when Morrison deconstructs the whole incident and brings in multiple voices, the very same, so-called wild and violent incident gets a new perspective. We don't see Joe's murdering of Dorcas as an inherently racial trait of violence and rage, but as an individual act which has a bearing of the city life. The multiple perspectives that we get on the incident expose the influence that the city has upon the lives of the dwellers.

Repetition of a beat or a note is also seen in a Jazz performance. Through the eye of a third person narrator, Morrison recollects the entire episode of Violet's act of mutilation of Dorcas's dead body. This particular episode is recollected in a great detail²⁷ through an emphasis on the phrase "That Violet".²⁸ The repetition of "that Violet" emphasizes the pain involved in the act of mutilation. Such an emphatic exclamation runs parallel to a Jazz performance where a single note is repeated to create a particular effect.

Morrison posits two major historical movements in African-American lives of the 1920s. First, the evolution of Jazz as a popular genre of music, and second, the ethnic violence, segregation and lynching as a part of their social and political life. The third person narrator shows how Alice Manfred despises people dancing on Jazz music.

²⁷ *ibid.*, pp 89-94

²⁸ *ibid.*, pp 89-94

Lower and lower, until the music was so low down you had to shut your windows and just suffer the summer sweat when the men in shirtsleeves propped themselves in window frames, or clustered on rooftops, in alleyways, on stoops and in the apartments of relatives playing the lowdown stuff that signaled. Imminent Demise.²⁹

This description of lowdown music as detestable is further extended to the ethnic violence, the race riots that killed a large number of blacks in Harlem in the early part of the twentieth century. The struggle for jobs, segregation policies, illiteracy, mass killing by whites in race riots was like low down music. There was a lot of pain in the experiences of the black city dwellers of Harlem but it was underplayed in American history. Morrison, through her fiction, attempts to bring those 'underplayed' memories alive. This city, however, was the place where all the blacks came running "from want and violence crested in the 1870s; the 1880s; the 1890s...."³⁰ Although people arrived in Harlem to escape ethnic violence, yet in reality, there was no running away from atrocities because Harlem in the 1920s was equally the hub of ethnic violence against the blacks.

This phenomenon has to be understood in the context of the colonial policies which posited 'race' as the defining future of American life giving way to the propagation of the racist ideology which is carried on even after the days of slavery. What better mode of representation of such an experience could have been done other than through an engagement with Jazz music itself. Emerging out of urban set-up jazz carries within itself the rhythm, the nuances, and the pulse of the city-life. In its variations and improvisations, it provides for the non-fixity that life itself embodies. Addison Gayle Jr. explicates the intrinsic relieving and soothing quality of a jazz performance.

The life spirit of Jazz is the joyous revolt from convention, custom, authority, boredom, even sorrow – from everything that confine the soul of man and hinder its riding free in the air.³¹

²⁹ *ibid.*, p 56

³⁰ *ibid.*, p 33

³¹ Gayle, Addison, Jr. . ed. *The Black Aesthetic*. (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1971) 111.

Similar to a jazz performance where one instrument complements the other, in Morrison's *Jazz*, we find the episode of Golden Gray's³² acceptance of his black blood complementing the acceptance and reconciliation of Joe and Violet's guilt of killing and mutilating young Dorcas. Golden Gray lived a life of denial before coming face to face with a woman who "is not a real woman but a "vision." "When he picks up the reins he cannot help noticing that his horse is also a black, naked and shiny wet, and his feelings about the horse are of security and affection."³³ This vision opens up his eyes to the fact that he himself is black-blooded. This particular incident in the novel has a historical bearing, fraught by the racist ideologies of the age, the African Americans of mixed blood called the *mulatto*, tried to pass off as whites. Just as Golden Gray in this novel, who was a product of miscegenation between the white woman, Vera-Louise, and the black man, Hunter's Hunter. Owing to his light skin and golden hair, Golden Gray always denied his connections to the black blood. His chance meeting with the black woman in the woods led him to a self-discovery and acceptance of his belongingness to his black community. Morrison, by introducing this incident, tries to bring home the point that denial of one's roots is not acceptable, more so in the case of African Americans because they have gone through the entire traumatic history as a community. The individual African American always worked toward the collective emancipatory goals of the community. James Weldon Johnson's *An Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, discusses the theme of 'passing off'. Morrison, by revisiting the idea of 'passing off' hints at the centrality of the issue in African American life and history. Her constant repetition of the idea of Booker T. Washington's dining with the President in White House³⁴ also encompasses the idea of 'passing off'. This incident is taken from a real life incident that happened during the early twentieth century.³⁵ When African Americans were facing discrimination and segregation of the grotesque kinds, Booker T. Washington, a prominent African American, was being wooed by Roosevelt, the President of America. This incident was perceived by the African Americans as

³² Morrison, Toni. *Jazz* (New York: Signet Press, 1992) 137-173.

³³ *ibid.*, pp 144

³⁴ *ibid.*, pp 107-126

³⁵ Wintz, Cary D. *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*. (Texas: Rice University Press, 1988) 7.

unacceptable because white America was forcing racist policies on them, while, their own leader was conforming to the wishes of the whites.

Like an intense jazz performance in which the listener and the artist are equally engrossed in the act of providing and enjoying music, Morrison too keeps her readers glued to the page. By visiting and revisiting the story over and over again by repetition of beats, by the method of improvisation, Morrison builds in a discursive relation with the reader much on the lines of call and response pattern of a musical composition. She says in the novel “say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are Now.”³⁶ Thus, she finishes off the novel on an open-ended note where although her ideas have crystallized in the written form, readers are always open to endless interpretation. One can remake the story in whichever manner he or she wants. Morrison, in an interview, said that her novel *Jazz* incorporates two major elements of jazz as an art — improvisation and artifice.³⁷ This idea implies that *Jazz* as a novel includes both the elements of music — the dynamism as well as the fixity. It is a novel, is a fixed written form and yet incorporating the improvisation quality of music, making it open to multiple interpretations in each particular reading of the text.

In revisiting Harlem of the 1920s Morrison wants to rework history and tell the untold stories of the blacks in a structure of black music itself. Her attempt at telling a simple story about the life of a black couple during Harlem Renaissance era, using jazz as a base marks her assertion of social and cultural uniqueness of the African Americans. Just as reading and writing marked the humanity of the slaves in the post-Reconstruction era. The incorporation of oral forms into the novel also marks resistance to a literal adaptation of the master’s language. Morrison is always in the process of making and remaking of language, as is evident in the novel *Jazz*. Morrison’s attempt to explore the creative possibility of the African American community and to invest it in her novels can be interpreted as an exercise of postcolonialism.

³⁶ Morrison, Toni. *Jazz* (New York: Signet Press. 1992) 229.

³⁷ Elissa Schappell. “Interview of Toni Morrison.” *The Paris Review*, Vol. 35. No. 128. Fall 1993. pp 82-125.

Conclusion

Mixing, upturning, and dismantling negative representations, the strategic line of attack taken by the colonized was to turn the identities ascribed to them into positive image.¹

Toni Morrison, in her fictional as well as non-fictional works, attempts to dismantle the negative images and the stereotypes that have always existed about the blacks. The very first stereotype that had ever existed against blacks was that they had no culture and it is their nature to be devoid of the faculty of reason and imagination. An evidence of the stereotypical colonial mentality of the whites can be seen in the comments that preceded Phillis Wheatley's works. She was the first African American to have got her works published. The declaration said —

We whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the POEMS specified in the following page, were (as we verily believe) written by Phillis, a young Negro girl, who but a few years, since brought an uncultivated Barbarian from *Africa*.... She had been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them.²

This declaration clearly shows the idea, that it was the white man's burden to nurture the African Americans, whose very nature, they thought, was devoid of any reason and intellect.³ The notion of the black's inferiority of intellect was consolidated with ideological treatises by philosophers as mentioned in the introductory chapters. It is in the light of such disintegration of the blacks that African American took to represent the other face of reality. The overarching motive of African American writers has always been to rupture the stereotypical images that have been portrayed about the community from the days of enslavement and imperialism.

¹ Boelmer, Elleke. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)105.

² Ervin, Hazel Arnett. *African American Literary Criticism, 1773 to 2000* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993) 9.

³ *ibid.*, p 10

As a postcolonial writer Toni Morrison too tries to countermand all the stereotypes that have been perpetrated since the days of enslavement and colonisation. One of her first endeavours was to evolve a 'variant' form of the English language to accommodate the African American oral tradition into it. In doing so, Morrison reiterates the fact that African Americans are not a race, which is devoid of a culture but a race that has an indigenous culture that is a million years old. Morrison's literary predecessor from the African American community, namely, Zora Neale, Hurston, Jean Toomer, Ralph Ellison and other writers have also tried to employ the traditional culture elements from the community into their literary productions to assert their cultural heritage.

Henry Louis Gates Jr., quotes William Labov, who says: "Black Vernacular tradition... is a healthy, living form of language..."⁴ In the hands of writers like Morrison this ever evolving vernacular tradition gains new meanings, because she employs them in addressing various issues in her novels. Henry Louis Gates Jr. says, "It is in the vernacular that since slavery, the black person has encoded the private yet communal cultural rituals."⁵ The vernacular tradition, as implied by the above statement, carries within itself the possibility of addressing the concerns of the individual as well as the community. Morrison, as discussed in first chapter of this dissertation, engages folklore in her novels *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby* to bring out the concerns of the individual as well as the community.

In the chapter dealing with the incorporation of folklore into the genre of the novel, we see how the West African folklores of the flying ancestors and the folklore of the tar baby have been appropriated into the written medium in the above-mentioned novels. The importance of folklore is that it evolves with time and space. The migration of this race led to the migration in the folktales as well. Thus, an invocation and adaptation of the folklore of the flying ancestor and the tar baby tale emerge out of the

⁴ Gates, Henry Louis Jr. *The Signifyin(g) Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. (New York: Oxford university press, 1988) xix

⁵ *ibid.*, p xix

American continent and is an amalgamation of both African and American elements. Susan Willis in her essay, "Eruptions of the Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison" says—

Neither Morrison's use of metaphor, nor her general drive to return to origins is rooted in nostalgia for the past. Rather, the metaphoric rendition of past experience represents a process for coming to grips with historical transition.⁶

Morrison's attempt at incorporating oral forms which have an African origin is not a revivalist stand where there is an endeavour to retrieve the unadulterated culture of the African slaves. Her stand as a postcolonial writer emerges from the very fact that she understands that the present always negotiates out of the past and there is no purely retrievable African culture that the community can possibly recover. The folklores have evolved because of a cross-cultural influence, out of the contingencies of time and space through which the African American community has passed. Therefore, in the first chapter the discussion centres around the idea of her trying to understand the modern materialist milieu where an African American is caught in a moral dilemma in the light of a folklore. The African American, as evident in these novels, has to be self critical in joining the materialistic and individualistic institutions because they have been victims of such system during the days of slavery. The denial of the past is perhaps another important aspect that she engages with in her novels. We see how, in *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, she hints at the tragic alienation in the character of Macon Dead and Jadine respectively, which is a product of their severing of connections with the past.

As a postcolonialist trying to subvert all prevailing stereotypes that colonisation has perpetuated, she employs indigenous cultural elements from the communities' reservoir of oral traditions. This art of infusing certain elements from one's own culture and the abrogation of the fixed codes is an effort at resisting the fixity of the given codes of the master's language. Morrison essays her stand in her use of vernacular

⁶ Willis, Susan "Eruption of the Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison." *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad Press, 1993) 308.

medium of the African Americans into the conventional and canonical medium of the novel she maintains:

There are things that I try to incorporate into my fiction that are directly and deliberately related to what I regard as major characteristics of black art.... One of which is the ability to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories can be read in silence, ...but one should be able to hear them as well.⁷

In bringing out the qualities of a folktale, Morrison reiterates her stand of being a representative writer of her community. Her stand is political; she clearly states in the following statement:

It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time.⁸

The beauty of her writing unquestionably lies in her political art of employing disparate elements from the African American community's vernacular tradition into the written mode of expression.

The second chapter in this dissertation deals with Morrison's attempt to rewrite a slave narrative. Slave narratives, especially of the antebellum period, were written under the watchful eyes of the European masters. The style of writing as well as the content came to be shaped by the presence of white readership. Some of these slave narratives were written to further the cause of the abolitionist, and were thus termed as propagandist writings. No doubt, the writing of slave narratives was an overtly political act, aimed at exposing the brutality of slavery as an institution, yet to dissolve their importance and authenticity, by terming them as mere propagandist would be unfair. Taking cue from such writings of slave narratives, Morrison too, in a revisionary mode wrote the novel *Beloved* in the form of a slave narrative.

⁷ Morrison, Toni. "From Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." 1984. *African American Literary Criticism, 1773 to 2000*. Ed. Ervin, Hazel Arnett (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999) 199.

⁸ *ibid.*, p 202

The silence that has been there in slave narratives is voiced in *Beloved*. Without taking recourse to sentimentality and minimizing the puritanical strain in the earlier slave narratives, Morrison writes a slave narrative. The plot of the novel is in itself quite different. Whereas the earlier slave narratives talked more of the pain and atrocities, *Beloved* talks of guilt. As discerning individuals, the slaves too made certain decisions in their lives (like in *Beloved*, Sethe kills her daughter) that were open to a lot of criticism. The killing of a child to save the child from the clutches of slavery was judged as an inhuman act. However, the humanity of the people involved in such an incident was never taken into consideration. Morrison's tone in the novel is not apologetic; it rather brings the human element to the act of murdering a child. She shows in the novel the inhuman atrocities entailed in the institution of slavery that could even force a slave to kill her child to save the child from the pain of slavery. The novel charts the movement from slavery to freedom, giving new dimension to a slave narrative.

Morrison, addresses certain pertinent issues which are central to a slave's experience. Inquiring into such issues, and tracing the inception of resistance in the community can be seen as a postcolonial attempt at tracing the entire journey from bondage to freedom. Postcolonial literature engages with both the past and the present situation of a colonized nation. While the present has a whole body of resistant literature, which emerged out of the past experience, there is also a body of resistant literature that existed within the time frame of colonisation and imperialism. Slave narratives are texts which were written during the period of colonisation and enslavement. They are thus living historical evidence of the historical situation of the African Americans. By probing into that crucial moment of history, Morrison is trying to trace the genesis of the racist ideology that discriminated and segregated the blacks and treated them as a sub-human race. Tracing the colonialist ideology thus becomes a postcolonial endeavour on the part of Toni Morrison the writer. In the third chapter, we discussed how Morrison based her novel on the theme and structure of a form of music, namely, Jazz. As a music form, Jazz, emerged in the early part of twentieth century, was a product of city-life and captures the rhythm of the city. The music as well as the age marks the transition of the African American community. The migration of

thousands of blacks from south to the northern cities saw the shift in the political struggle as well. From the fight against slavery in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, the turn of the twentieth century symbolized the struggle against racism, segregation and discrimination in all walks of life. The ups and downs of city life have been captured beautifully in the high notes and low notes of jazz as Morrison employs the structure of jazz to bring the cultural differences of the community. Just as, jazz signifies the phase of transition from the hollers on plantations, the beat of drums, blues song to jazz music, Harlem too signify the transitional phase of the community, from their concentration in the South to the North.

Harlem Renaissance is a major literary movement that emerged from Harlem in the 1920s. It gave impetus to the political struggle of the African American. Keeping in view, the importance of the age, Morrison's exposition of this age throws light on the different hidden aspects of the age of Harlem Renaissance. The violence and rage at the race-riots, the claustrophobia of the city slums, the poverty and squalor gets amply portrayed in her novel, *Jazz*.

The age is a significant age for the African Americans because of their fight for self-determination and fight against racial violence germinated in that period. Morrison thus takes it up as a theme in her novel *Jazz*.

In the four novels discussed in this dissertation, we can trace a common theme which runs through all of these novels. The subversive appropriation of language is what is common to all her works. Morrison in her use of language draws extensively from the alternative creative source of her community i.e., the vernacular tradition. It is her attempt to introduce the elements of black culture to assert the cultural difference that the community has as also to constructively make way for the amalgamation of both African and American elements in art. Being conscious of the subjective position of the African American race — their emergence in the country through enslavement, Morrison wants to address the issues dating back from the days of slavery in her novels. As a representative writer, Morrison is well aware that her writings should not emulate the white masters' language; it should be subversively appropriated to show resistance

and protest. The use of folklore, the structures of music and the revision of already existing narratives make her work postcolonial. The manner in which she addresses the issues of identity, marginalisation, racism and the dilemma of the contemporary African American community and traces them from the days of enslavement to the present, posits her as a postcolonial writer.

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