

# BLACKNESS IN THE NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON

BY  
JUDITH C. LANG'AT-MUTAH

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**DECLARATION**

This thesis is my own original work and has not been presented for a degree in any other university



JUDITH C. LANG'AT-MUTAHI

(Candidate)

This thesis has been submitted for examination with my approval as a University Supervisor



PROFESSOR NANA W. TAGOE

(Supervisor)

**DEDICATION**

To Bhourdhie whose involvement in this work led to the serendipity of "CHARACTER".

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## ABSTRACT

This study sets out to explore the distinctive features of Toni Morrison's writings. It employs a socio-stylistic theoretical framework which allows us to view Morrison's sociological material from a stylistic perspective as well. This theory conflates the central aspects of the African-American literary theory and feminists literary theory in order to explore the various perspectives and writing traditions which come together in Toni Morrison's works to create a distinctive style.

The thesis begins by looking at the general background to the work of Toni Morrison and the context in which she writes. It then focuses on the African-American experience as presented in The Bluest Eye. Morrison's depiction places the experiences of the black person in a relevant context in which the past and the present serve to outline a future for the often uprooted black individual in America. In this respect, her choice of situation is totally African-American. In chapter three, we explore this experience further to look

specifically at the African-American woman. We use the text of Beloved to conceptualise that the African-American female experience encapsulates yet moves beyond the experiences of white and black males as well as white women. In Morrison's view the black woman's experiences should be seen as something beyond and different from all these experiences because black women experience life in America both as black people and as women - an experience which is unique in America and which has provided its own unique representation in African-American literature. To Morrison, the Black woman's experience is all this and more if one goes beyond the depiction of stereotypes.

In chapter 4, we define 'blackness' as an art form and demonstrate this by examining the language used in the text of Sula. We show the link that Morrison draws between language and the values of a people by identifying varieties of language use in the text of Sula and examining their sociological implications for Morrison's vision. Finally, in the concluding chapter we comment on Morrison's contribution to African-American literature as viewed through her vision and perspective of the black experience and the language.

## INTRODUCTION

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

African-American women have been contributing to American Literature since the eighteenth century, but it is only recently that their contributions have been subjected to serious critical inquiry. Writers like Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Wilson, Phyllis Wheatley wrote in the 1700s without much serious critical notice or recognition. Even Zora Neale Hurston whose writing in the early part of the twentieth century received some critical attention was soon after dismissed for failing "to probe the inner psychology of (her) characters or to provide sharp social analysis" (Washington :1987,290).

As Barbara Johnson (1987) suggests, this lack of critical attention has been part of the marginalisation of the black female voice both as author and character in the social, political and intellectual life of African-American and mainstream American society. This marginalisation not only created partial and inadequate perspectives on the black experience in America but also led to an eclipse of the sensibilities of the black woman.

The current writings of African-American women writers - that is, their input into the existing African-American literature - opens up

whole areas of history, experience and consciousness which had never before been recognised and propagated in the literature. African-American women writers are now exploring with less inhibition, various unacknowledged experiences and complex thought not only from the woman's perspective but also from a much broader angle that includes the history and entire experience of black people.

Fortunately for early women writers like Zora Neale Hurston (and successive black women writers), there is a new generation of scholars re-reading and re-interpreting the critical commentary on the works of African-American women writers. The best among these commentaries focus on Hurston's attempt to acknowledge her protagonist as an articulate voice in the African-American literary tradition. In other words, the black individual articulate that which "extends far beyond the merely individual...a resonant and authentic narrative voice that echoes and aspires to the status of the impersonality, anonymity and authority of the black vernacular tradition, a nameless, selfless tradition, at once collective and compelling"(Gates: 1988.183).

It is to this tradition that modern day African-American women writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, Toni Cade Bambara and Gayle Jones, have contributed their writings (in order to further the study of establishing an African-American literary tradition). Out of this body of common experiences and aspirations, African-American women writers of the tradition

tell the stories of the women that came before them. In particular, these writers are pre-occupied with the ways in which forms of shared memory might support the search for identity and self-esteem.

Their writings, therefore, show similarity firstly in language use and more importantly in their relation to one another in terms of their subject matter of a common black experience (for according to Henry Louis Gates Jr.(1988), the basis of a tradition must be shared patterns of language use as evidenced in texts which bear some relation to each other).

Toni Morrison is part and parcel of this tradition. Her writings display an exceptional consciousness of the people's history showing an embodiment of the tradition's self-reflexiveness. In other words, as in each of her five novels, Morrison draws from within the reserve of black experience as well as from within herself in order to discover a past heritage that she uses to enrich, empower and highlight her works. This literary tradition is very similar to a well-accepted definition of African-American culture.

It is not skin colour which makes a Negro American but cultural heritage as shaped by the American experience, the social and political predicament; a sharing of the *concord of sensibilities* which the group expressed through historical circumstances and through which it has come to constitute a subdivision of the larger American culture (*emphasis added*) (Ellison:1964,11).

For the literary critics, the emphasis needs to be on the "concord of sensibilities" in order that they recognise that this manifestation is found within the text as opposed to any elusive metaphysical feature or a transcending essence found outside the text. The concord of sensibilities sums up the meaning of 'blackness' which for our purposes will denote the total experience of being black. Blackness encompasses the experience of living in a world which relegates one to an inferior position, it includes all the ideas (of both blacks and whites) of the condition which have accrued over time and finally, all the responses (bitterness, hatred, tolerance, acceptance, etc.) that have resulted from the black condition. The above features of blackness go hand in hand with a 'blackness of tongue' since language is part of the total black experience. In conclusion, one can say that "blackness" of black American literature can be discerned only through close readings. As readings Toni Morrison's works prove valuable to the corpus of African-American literature because the widespread critical attention being shown to her texts - and the diversity of theoretical approaches used to explore them readily reveal several depths and dimensions while at the same time sustaining delightfully repeated readings.

Toni Morrison has succeeded in gaining recognition as a writer at three levels: as a black writer, as a woman writer and as an American writer (mainstream American literary circle). There is now a broad spectrum of readers to whom her writing appeals and this

thesis would attempt to prove that Morrison's forte and success as a writer lies in her ability to inscribe a uniquely black and female experience within the larger context of American experience. The definition of "blackness" and "African-Americanness" will be primary to our concerns as we establish the nature and representation of Morrison's unique subject as evident in her writing. Most important to this literary study will be the novels of Toni Morrison: The Bluest Eye (1970), Sula (1973), Song of Solomon (1977), Tar Baby (1981), Beloved (1987). The basis for the selection of The Bluest Eye, Sula and Beloved as the focal texts lies in their appropriateness to the concerns of this thesis: the expression of the black experience, the language, the perspective, the metaphor and the cosmology - all as a part of blackness.

#### RESEARCH PREMISES

This study tests two inter-related assumptions. Firstly that Toni Morrison's impact as a writer is primarily due to her ability to contribute to mainstream American literature a form of writing which is unmistakably 'black' in both its form and its subject matter. In other words, Morrison's use of African-American history and experience gives a distinctive perspective and way of representing experience in fiction. Secondly, this ability is mainly due to her meticulous combination of experiences which are targeted specifically at a black audience and most specifically to black women who have hitherto been marginalised and whose experiences and

feelings had always been presented in a simplistic and stereotypical manner.

### JUSTIFICATION OF STUDY

A study in any area of African-American literature can be justified in the affiliation that exists between it and African literature. Both are literatures of redefinition after a period of colonial conquest and subjugation on the part of the African and enslavement followed by white domination and oppression for the black Americans. Both have been forced into a re-assessment in the wake of such an era. A study of the novels of Toni Morrison open avenues of exploration for the African critic as far as the similarities and differences of these two literatures are concerned.

The experience of African-Americans has been one of defining themselves within the mainstream American culture (their reactions spring from their being in the culture) while the experience Africans has been one of defining themselves against the western culture. Such a study based on black culture and values will sharpen African sensitivities towards the African-American culture and contribute to an understanding of the African-American experience as a whole.

Secondly, this study, seen from the perspective of the African-Americans, needs to be recognised as a contribution to the continuum of the African-American literary tradition. This tradition which goes back to such early writers as Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Dubois, Booker T. Washington and Richard Wright, has undergone much development over time and has been shaped by perspectives and styles of writers within its continuum. As both a contemporary writer and a woman writer, Morrison continues to give the African-American literary tradition wider horizons and perspectives. As Janeway (1979:383) states

In Morrison's work and in that of other black women writers, we find examples of how women's literature can extend itself beyond women's experience. A life without power know to black women (everybody was in a position to give them orders) produces an astonishing capacity to see into other similar conditions. Morrison...also understand(s) the frustrated fury of black men whose identities are falsified and torn apart because the masculine ideal of power and control is both presented to them and denied. To communicate such understanding leads us...toward universality.

Indeed this study which is an excellent reflection of the living body of literature on women is relevant to both men and women's experiences of whatever background.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.

This study adopts a socio-stylistic approach which combines sociological analysis with stylistic explication to explore the distinctiveness of Morrison's subject, perspective and forms. The sociological approach holds that literature is a form of sociology

from which data which is not available to the sociologist can be obtained (Joan Rockwell 1974). On this view, literature is a direct reflection of various facets of the social structure, family relationships, class conflict, possibly divorce trends and population composition. Also it is held by the sociologically oriented conception of literature that literature may affect social change (Leon Trotsky 1960). At the same time, our approach draws from African-American literary theory and feminist literary theory.

To begin with, the African-American literary theory arose out of the recognition that the term 'literature' as it was commonly understood in mainstream American literature referred to "a body of texts written by and in the interests of a white male elite" (Smith:1989,39) Consequently, African-American critics (mostly male) undertook the archaeological work of locating and/or reinterpreting overlooked and misread black writers.

It is from considering Morrison's text from the stylistic and sociological angles that we are led naturally into the African-American literary theory. We have already noted that it is the special history of black people that gives their writings peculiar character and perspective. Such a perspective or critical theory believes that there is a life of customs, beliefs and rituals - both positive and negative - out of which African-American life and literature springs.

Indeed, these aspects distinguish Morrison's writings from that of other mainstream writers. The African-American perspective represents experience in literature from a distinctly African-American context where a particular way of seeing and reacting to experience has developed out of a history of slavery and responses to slavery as well as continued marginalisation in American life. It is a context which stresses community, solidarity and protection from external brutalisation.

At the same time, this study recognises that Morrison explores the female sensibility within this tradition. According to Donovan (1975:76) "the immediate work in feminist criticism must be to develop more fully our understanding of what a female perspective or vision includes...". Indeed, for the black feminist critic, there is a need for specific measures to be taken to articulate the wisdom and experience of womankind as developed and transmitted through the ages. The task, according to Spencer (1982:158) is fourfold. The identification of women's works that are out of print or have been neglected or misunderstood; the analysis of the woman's image as she appears in the existing literature; the examination and reinterpretation of the existing criticism of women writers' books; lastly, the creation of a body of new work, imaginative as well as critical which reveals the particular difference in black women's representation of the American experience. This last objective will be central to our concerns.

This is because black women writers are producing a literature which is expansive and liberating. They are dealing with the sexual beliefs, feelings and actions that black men have maintained towards black females, and their perspective is faithful to the actual experience of black women in America.

According to Andree Nicola McLaughlin (1990:150):-

Black women are not only redefining themselves and society but also the realm of resistance and, ultimately, the future. (They) work across real boundaries of human existence while challenging those which are arithmetical. A survey of how black women...have named themselves and defined their experiences is instructive about their distinct socio-political realities and the diversity and complexity of the Black female experience (Braxton and McLaughlin: 1990,150).

Morrison's unique perspective of the female experience lies in her attempt to give the African-American woman the proper place denied her in history and she does this by moving much beyond a male-centred point of view. Indeed as a woman writer she understands and internalises the black experience more than most male writers because the transmission of black history through the generations was done mostly through women.

Finally, because this study is an exploration of the relationship between the African-American cultural and historical interpretation and its impact on novelistic form, the socio-technical framework presupposes that any stylistic analysis will respond to stylistic features such as language variations and manipulation as well as all visual or para-linguistic elements intended the meaning and total

effect of the novel. For our purpose, in sum, the technical aspect of the theory incorporates the style while the sociological viewpoint includes the socio-historical influences on African-American society.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Willis (1987), much of the criticism of Toni Morrison's work is done from a sociological point of view. Indeed, the emergence of literary texts has coincided largely with the rising consciousness in black women of their exclusion from mainstream American life. In literature this found its equivalent expression in the fact that the black woman seldom appeared in a focal position in any literature whether by whites or by black men. This is due largely to the black woman being denied her rightful place in history.

To fill this vacuum, Giddings (1984) has produced an extensive research which puts the black woman's experience into a historical context. Within this context she reveals the forces which have shaped their lives by giving a picture of American social history seen through the eyes of the black women who lived it.

In the same area of background and the historical context of literature, many critical works have emerged to give relevant meanings to texts and help critics to interpret from a variety of

angles, the literature by and about African-American women. Washington (1974) sums up this development by noting the growing number of contemporary black women writers whose perspective underlines the centrality of women's lives to their creative vision. Smith (1977) calls for a body of literature from a feminist perspective which she believes needs to demonstrate how the literature exposed "the brutally complex systems of operation", (Smith, p.22), that is, the sexism, racism and economic exploitation which affected so gravely the experience and culture of black women.

Christian (1980) analyses the novel form for she believes that through it, a writer can construct a world of her own through a mixture of personal vision, and realistic apprehension, informed by a vision of social change. The three writers she chose to study were selected on the basis of their having written at least two novels. As she argues "a writer's vision would seldom happen in the course of writing one novel and that a novelist would need the opportunity to write at least two novels to understand her craft as well as her ideas" (Christian:1980,X) In studying Toni Morrison, one of her three choices, Christian looks at Morrison's treatment of the structure and themes of the novels, The Bluest Eye and Sula. Her analysis traces the parallel between the destructive limits imposed on the black woman and the inversions of truth in the society.

Bakerman (1981) explores Morrison's mixtures of themes, devices, and events and characterisation to make a statement on the failure of

human values. Her central thesis is the theme of love and of female initiation in The Bluest Eye, Sula and Song of Solomon. Here we find the female characters searching for love, for valid sexual encounters, and above all, for a sense that they are worthy. Through this study, Bakerman uses a purely feminist perspective to give shape to her female characters and the obstacles that these women face.

Willis (1987) deals more with Morrison's treatment of characters. Her terminology 'eruptions of funk' - refers to kinds of experiences that invoke the character's cultural past and repressed emotional lives (Smith:1970,51).

By focusing on the middle-class nature of Morrison's characters, Willis examines the implications of being black and privileged. Her study, based on a marxist approach, focuses on the effect of class hegemony and how this will consciously or subconsciously affect the aspirations of the black individual.

This particular study will differ from the above in several aspects. First it begins by looking into aspects of blackness in Morrison's novels. Blackness here refers to a manner of life handed down to black folk over time and their responses to it in terms of ideas and most importantly, language. While 'blackness of tongue' refers to a more stylistic approach to the African-American novel, the 'African-American experience' refers more to the subject matter of

such writings. The study looks into Morrison's manipulation of a folk language to depict a way of life. Finally, this study looks at the 'female experience' of Morrison's writings and explores how it plays a sub-role within the black experience in general.

## METHODOLOGY

This study explores as its broad context certain relevant background material of African-American history and culture while at the same time seeking its relation to African-American literary theory. Also essential to this study is reading on feminist theory. Because it concentrates specifically on a woman writer and on the female experience and perspective, the study also adopts a feminist reading of the selected novels and identifies ways in which the black woman writer searches for an appropriate voice, language and style to convey the black experience from a female perspective.

## STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

The study has the following format:

Chapter one, the introduction, focuses on the historical background of the Black American situation and its literature. It conceptualises the problem that gave rise to the investigation, justifies the study, and presents the theoretical framework that guides the study and provides a comprehensive literature review.

The next four chapters deal with the development and growth of Morrison as a writer as displayed in the development of her vision and art. Chapter two examines Morrison's portrayal of the African-American situation as one created purely out of unique history and circumstances. The novel of reference for this chapter is The Bluest Eye. Chapter three looks at how African-American women emerge with the weight of both blackness and femaleness acting as a stigma on their lives. Beloved the central text in this chapter, is a historical novel giving the woman a spiritual and emotional presence in society where history gives little but physical account of her. Chapter four identifies the features of writing peculiar to black writers as shown through their literary history. The specific focal interest here is Sula which presents a study of the individual within and in relation to the larger society. Finally chapter five, the conclusion makes an assessment of Toni Morrison's contribution as a black writer to mainstream American Literature.

## CHAPTER II

### THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN TONI MORRISON'S NOVELS:

#### THE BLUEST EYE

A study of Toni Morrison's works becomes part and parcel of the study establishing an African-American literary tradition. This fact is evident throughout her writing which is an embodiment of the tradition's self-reflexiveness and its exceptional consciousness of its history. Rather than create a world beyond their context, black writers attempt to draw from within their reserve of experience as well as to look within themselves to discover the heritage left to them from their past. According to Kimberley W. Benston:

All Afro-American literature may be seen as one vast genealogical poem that attempts to restore continuity to the rupture or discontinuities imposed by the history of the black presence in America (Gates: 1988:123)

In other words, it is not only that African-American writers write in the language of a tradition, employing rhetorical strategies, but the canonical texts in the tradition are related to other black texts primarily in terms of subject matter of the so-called Black Experience. Amongst the discontinuities that the writers try to make up for, are those created by the breaking up of families during slavery. Being mere property, children were sold off to the highest bidder, never to see their mothers again. For spouses, the

story was similar and, hence individuals had no history and had little hope of a future. Later in the post-slavery period, although the family unit was given freedom to develop, the unproductivity of the rural south allowed for a further break-up of families as some members moved to the northern urban areas in search of employment.

Susan Willis refers to this when she states that

the temporal focus on each of Morrison's (writings) pinpoints strategic moments in black American history during which social and cultural forms underwent disruptions and transformation (Willis:1987:85)

Indeed, both The Bluest Eye and Sula focus on the 1940's, a time when there was heavy black migration to the cities and black "neighbourhoods" sprung up on the outskirts of towns which had never seen such numbers of blacks. Sula extends into the 1960's when cultural identity became less of an issue with the passing of the First and Second world wars. Song of Solomon focuses on the sixties when neighbourhoods were called ghettos as perceived from the outside, and a time of urban black political activism and awareness. Tar Baby is a novel of the eighties when finding one's cultural origins becomes a difficult affair, hence the numbers who find themselves culturally exiled.

Finally, Morrison's most recent novel, Beloved, goes back to the era of reconstruction when the shadow of slavery continued to loom over the aspirations and dreams of the black race. For both of

these black women emerging from slavery, Baby Suggs and Sethe, their most immediate concern was to be reunited with their families - their husbands and children from whom they had been separated. Both of them never hear again of their husbands and so they each try in their different ways to deal with this rupture in their dreams of the future.

For the black writer, however, the expression of a subject matter relevant to their lives and an audience of their choice, did not come naturally. It came only after the realisation that the larger western culture in which they were entrenched could very easily flood their minds and language and wipe out their own culture. In the early 20th century, the blacks in America sought, as they began to see necessary, to demonstrate their full humanity and equality with whites. This attempt manifested itself in the Harlem or New Negro Renaissance. Unfortunately, according to Richard Wright, it did not develop into a valid literature, but one in which black writers:

...entered the court of public opinion dressed in knee pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people. For the most part, these artistic ambassadors were received as though they were French poodles who do clever tricks. (Gayle Jr:1978:315).

For the African-American novel, this implies that a necessary dimension had been cut away; this dimension was the relationship

that the people bear to one another, the depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which created a way of life - an African-Americanness. The audience was not yet the black people.

Although Wright in his strident reaction against the Harlem Renaissance aimed to steer black writing away from such an unyielding, self-defensive course, what he advocated did not express the black experience. To the contrary, his novels and essays tended to undermine the vernacular tradition and insinuate an inability to measure up the western tradition.

This absence of experience shared through history is well illustrated in the character that Wright depicts in his novel Native Son (1940). Bigger Thomas is presented to us as a monster created by the American nation. Through sharing his experience, we are able to understand the nature of his life. For him we feel both pity and horror for what can only be his inevitable doom. Effectively, Wright makes Bigger into a social symbol through whom he reveals the social disease of an impending disaster for the black situation.

The novel being representative of the African-American situation, seems to portray more 'Americanness' than 'blackness' in Bigger's circumstances: He conveys no discernible relationship to himself, to his own life, to his own people, nor to any other people. In

spite of all that we are shown of his life, we know as little about him when the journey is ended as we did when it began. Furthermore, we know little about the social situation which made him what he is. In exchange for a more accurate illustration of the way blacks are controlled in Bigger's society and the complex techniques they have evolved for their survival, there is instead Bigger's limited view of them, coated in emotion and sentimentality.

Contemporary African-American writers, such as Toni Morrison, in pursuing characteristics from the black literary history, have successfully demonstrated that the literature of any people has an indigenous quality. Though even white writers have tried to write about the African-American experience, Morrison proves best that personal experience provides invaluable insight. Her novels are distinctly African-American in that she effectively portrays the African-American with the diversity that only one of indigenous origin could. Not only does she present their lives vividly by showing us the black people's loves and hates, their hopes, fears, ambitions and their whole lives, but Morrison goes beyond each character's personal story and shows how their individual story is as a result of circumstances created even before they were born.

This chapter hopes to further establish Morrison as a writer whose works are identifiable by their 'African-Americaness'. This term, coined for these purposes, is closely linked with the earlier

notion of 'blackness' (see Chapter IV), where we show Morrison's writing form to be based on a language and an oral tradition peculiar to African-Americans. In The Bluest Eye (1970), we shall look at the African-Americaness of the subject matter which Morrison illuminates using history. The novel has a history which began over three hundred years ago and that history continues to affect the lives of the characters at present.

In her novels, Morrison never tells of the oppression of the blacks by the whites, nor does she seek sympathy from the reader for the injustices that the black encounters when they confront the white world. Instead she tells a story to the black people themselves, about their inner lives and social context with each other, always with a focus on a specific period in history.

Morrison's choice of themes and their relevance to the period in history she explores is her manner of expressing to her audience that history and all that they have been through must not be taken for granted. Their roots often explain how one's social situation causes one to experience certain things and hence behave as they do - why some aspire yet others concede to defeat and resort to destructive mediums. Morrison creates this very situation in her first novel.

The desire of a young black girl for blue eyes is the Bluest Eye's symbolic statement about the conflict between the good and the

beautiful of two cultures and how it affects the psyche of the people within those cultures. In this novel, Morrison's portrayal of the black experience is distinctly ambivalent. The coexistence in the blacks of conflicting emotions towards whites and towards themselves is a direct response to all that they had been through.

Paradoxically, the black experience is one shared by all in response to slavery and to isolation yet the outcome is often one of imparting to its people a certain brand of strength. African-Americans, a combination of Africans and Americans, are among the minority races in their country. Because they are constantly bombarded with values from a louder voice than their own, their task is to retain their identity through knowledge of who they are and from where they come. With this they would be able to discern and to live up to a certain element of 'Africaness' that they carry in their name.

This conflict principally affects Pecola and her mother Mrs Breedlove, who get caught up in the struggle to live a middle class life - a life of white bourgeois affections. When such values are pursued, the African-American is alienated from their roots and assimilated into the white culture. Morrison gives voice to this in the chapter headings using the words of a white, middle class schoolbook to describe the suburban house and the nuclear family: "Here is the family. Mother Father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy" (Morrison:1970,7).

This is juxtaposed to Morrison's description of Pecola's house.

There is an abandoned store on the south-east corner of Broadway and 35th street in Lorain, Ohio. It doesn't recede into its background of leaven sky, nor harmonise with the gray frame houses and black telephone poles around it. Rather, it foists itself on the eye of the passer by in a manner that is both irritating and melancholy. Visitors who drive to this tiny town wonder why it has not been torn down, while pedestrians, who are residents of the neighbourhood, simply look away when they pass it (Morrison:1970:30).

Morrison in the Bluest Eye shows how the individual characters handle an alienation which implies a loss of history and culture. Because and as a result of this, they are forced to internalise the values of a white culture that rejects them both directly and indirectly.

Essentially, it is the story of Pecola Breedlove, an eleven year old poor, ugly and black girl who prays to have blue eyes - a uniquely caucasian feature - in the wistful hope that this will bring her the love she longs for and also elevate, somehow, the miseries of her hate-filled, quarrel-some, and violent family.

It had occurred to Pecola sometime ago that if her eyes that held the picture, and knew the sights - if those eyes of her were different, that is to say beautiful, she herself would be different....If she looked different and Mrs Breedlove too, maybe they'd say, "Why look at pretty-eyed Pecola? We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes... Each night without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. (Morrison:1970,40)

The definition of beauty, which made some people acceptable, while causing other to be rejected is a malaise which had gripped the Breedlove family by the neck. Because they fit into and accepted completely the societal definition of ugly (a white American definition), they all proceeded thereafter to conform, even in their lifestyle, to all that ugliness pertained to.

..... their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. Except for their father Cholly, whose ugliness was behaviour, the rest of the family wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them...It was as though some ...master had said, "you are ugly people". They had looked about themselves and saw ... support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance (Morrison:1970:34).

Pecola's life evolves around a search for truth, beauty and love. If perhaps she could find acceptance from one person who touches her life, her looks might no longer be of such great significance. But in this society where individuals felt they were more acceptable when they exhibited less of their original blackness in their blood, Pecola becomes a symbol of their "unpleasant" history, a history which linked the darkness of their skin to the coarseness of their lives. Where possible, mothers wanted their children to play with kids more refined in both colour and

lifestyle. Geraldine instilled in her son that he should associate with:

White kids: his mother did not like him to play with niggers. She had explained to him the difference between coloured people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Coloured people were neat and quiet: niggers were dirty and loud. He belonged to the former group:.. his hair was cut as close to his scalp as possible avoid any suggestions of wool...The line between coloured and niggers was not always clear: subtle and telltale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant (Morrison:1973:71).

Geraldine's attitude is a symptom of the madness that will manifest itself in Pecola. she belongs to the distinctive group of women who struggle all their lives to get rid of their niggerism:

They go to land grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the whiteman's work with refinement: home economic to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. Here they learn the rest of the lessons begun in those soft houses with porch swings and pots of bleeding heart: how to behave. (Morrison: 1973:68)

Morrison shows the internalisation of bourgeois societal values to be a negative step for the black individual who on losing his spontaneity becomes alienated and repressed. Both black men and women were affected although the situation for the woman was somewhat different. Because black women were more often than not employed as house maids, alienation for them was the result of striving to achieve the white bourgeois social model - a model world in which they worked but did not live.

Pauline Breedlove and her husband, Cholly, like many city blacks, had to use whatever adaptative methods they had in order to

survive in the capitalistic wage labour system which was unlike the livelihood they had practiced in the south, living off the land. What aggravated the situation was the state of unemployment in the cities for many black men, which often made women the sole bread winners in the family. Given insight into Cholly's circumstances through Morrison's portrayal of his relationship to himself, his own life, his own people and to other people, we see the other side of his story. We are able to view as more than mere male aggression his drunkenness, his brutality to his wife and his final pathetic raping of his daughter (which he actually felt was an act of 'love'). These are but the symptoms of and repercussions from the socio-economic situation which created him.

The best example of alienation is Polly Breedlove. She deals with her situation by leading a type of double life. At home she tolerates her ugly family and manages to repress her desire to live as the "sugar-brown Mobile girls" (Morrison:1970:68), whose husbands are more successful and therefore better assimilated into bourgeois society. She finds escape in her job from her unfulfilling life with her drunkard husband for whom she plays the role of breadwinner. There, she can satisfy her artistic need to arrange things and find "beauty, order, cleanliness and praise". From this private world she excludes her family.

She also goes to the movies where she watches a world of beautiful white people leading beautiful lives. This leads to her separation from her own kinky hair and decayed tooth and her general inability to accept herself. This has its terrible effects on her daughter Pecola who, unlike Cholly who drinks and her brother who regularly runs away, has nothing with which she can relieve her pain and confusion.

Having relegated her daughter Pecola to the lowest ranks of ugliness, Mrs. Breedlove proceeds to console herself of this fact by ignoring her daughter's need for love. Hence, to Pecola, love was something only others could experience:

What did love feel like? she wondered. How do grown-ups act when they love each other? Eat fish together? Into her eyes came the picture of Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove in bed. He making sounds as though he were in pain, as though something had him by the throat and wouldn't let him go...(and) no noise at all from her mother. It was as though she was not even there. Maybe that was love. Choking sounds and silence (Morrison;1970:49).

The incident where Pecola overturns and breaks the freshly baked blueberry pie at Mrs. Breedlove's employer's house, illustrates further her mother's subconscious preference in children. She slaps Pecola and comforts the little white girl, her employer's daughter, who is agitated by the events. Hence, Pecola equates love with beauty because of being constantly excluded and rejected wherever beauty is found.

This is reminiscent of how Geraldine, "the pretty milk-brown lady in her pretty gold and green house" (Morrison:1973:76) expels Pecola from her presence with a threatening "You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house"(Morrison:1973:75). Geraldine dislikes Pecola, whom she believes killed her cat, because to the older woman, Pecola represents the little girls

...she had seen...all of her life...Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt. They had stared at her with great uncomprehending eyes. Eyes that questioned nothing and asked everything. Unblinking and unabashed, they stared up at her. The end of the world lay in their eyes, and the beginning and all the waste in between. They were everywhere (Morrison,1973:75).

Polly Breedlove, in this very manner, dismisses her own daughter from her life. Her education of what was beautiful and desirable came from her frequent visits to the movies.

There in the dark, her memory was refreshed and she succumbed to her earlier dreams. Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another - physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in security, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, collected self-contempt by the heap ...she was never able after her education in the movies to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen (Morrison:1973:97).

Polly Breedlove's restricted spirit as she identifies with what she cannot have and withdraws from all that is hers, is not very different from Geraldine's fear of that which will link her to her black roots, a fear of "funk"(See 'eruptions of funk - p.13).

Both these women's ideal is to learn

how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range emotions(Morrison:1970:68).

As a black writer, Morrison upholds that which her people should stand for. She contrasts Claudia, another little girl who maintains her spontaneity to life (because she wholly identifies with her African-American roots), with Mrs. Breedlove who has lost her "funkiness". For the latter, the "wide range of human emotions" that she has denied herself includes her inability to respond to her husband sensuously - she finds sex increasingly indecent - as her ideas alienate her further and further from her family and roots.

Claudia's desire to be whole and to know the truth makes her and her sister Frieda go through painful moments of questioning society's ideas of beauty and self-worth. After the light skinned and beautiful Maureen had called her and Frieda "Black and ugly black e mos" they have a moment of self-evaluation:

we walked quickly at first, and then slower...we were sinking under the wisdom, accuracy and relevance of Maureen's last words. If she was cute - and anything could be believed, she was - then we were not. And what did that mean? What did we lack? Why was it important? Guileless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfort in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness...And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The Thing to fear was the thing that made her beautiful, and not us (Morrison:1970:61-2).

Claudia and her sister exhibit a stubborn strain when what they lack interferes with who they desire to be. Unlike everyone else, Claudia cannot be hypnotised by the plastic smile and the glassy blue eyes of a white christmas baby doll. Claudia destroys them - dismembering the doll and poking its eyes out - to rebel against the symbolic beauty of the white model.

I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs - all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured (Morrison:1970:20).

The dismembering of the doll further implies the rebellion against what it stands for - a horrible dehumanisation of the black who wears it as a mask. To Claudia the doll is a measure of her own undesirability.

Claudia and her sister Frieda have an innate pride which allows them to appreciate that which was beautiful without thinking less of themselves because they did not have that which by nature they could not have. Their attitude could be evidenced in their relationship with their neighbour who considered herself most privileged as:

...she sits in (her father's) 1939 Buick eating bread and butter. She rolls down the window to tell my sister Frieda and me that we can't come in. We stare at her, wanting her bread, but more than that wanting to poke the arrogance out of her eyes and smash the pride of ownership that curls her chewing mouth (Morrison,1973:8).

In writing for an African-American audience, and creating for them a world with which they are familiar, Morrison achieves a universality in her novels by choosing, every time, a very specific subject matter. In her writing, she examines not only what it means to be black in twentieth-century America, but also what goes into the making of Black American men and women. In depicting a totally African-American situation, her writing weaves patterns in which all characters - male and female, young and old, rich and poor, powerful and insignificant - are irrevocable bound together.

Rather than use her writing as a tool of subversion, Morrison remains faithful to the role of the writer which is to present reality in a manner which will inform and entertain, using an inspired perspective. She draws each character's life to portray an embodiment of a past which she believes to be necessary to both the present and the future. For the individual, she realises that absence might be as significant as presence. The absence of roots in one's lives is threatening as it can cause destruction and disarray in the individual's life. Some of the destruction and disarray is reflected in the lives of Pecola and Claudia - both searching for validating roots. Pecola searches for answers in her family which she finds unsatisfactory and ultimately finds solace in a background which has no roots in her own ancestors.

The insanity, in a sense, is the conclusion of a story of the unfulfillment of Pecola Breedlove's hunger for a forefather who could confer meaning and dignity on her life. Morrison's depiction of an African-American situation where she deploras the loss of "funkiness" in the black men and women is her attempt to restore continuity to the rupture imposed on the people's lives by history.

Her writing allows the black individual to look within himself and recognise an unexplored treasure. In fact, a world he can share in. Morrison is a master stylist in drawing the character's:

loves and hates, his hopes and fears, his ambitions, his whole life, in such a way that the world will weep and laugh.... forgetting completely that the hero and the heroine are God's bronze image, but knowing only that they are men and women with joys and sorrows that belong to the whole human family (Gates:1988:175).

## CHAPTER III

### THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN FEMALE IN THE NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON: BELoved

Not only is Toni Morrison a distinctly African-American writer, she is also very much a chronicler of women's experience. African-American women writers - Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, to mention a few - to this effect tell the stories of their mothers. Although not specifically their mothers, it is the women who came before them. Like Toni Morrison, they are often preoccupied with the ways in which forms of memory might support the search for identity and self-esteem. Their writings have become the literary counterparts of their community's oral traditions, which have increasingly become the domain of women. Although these women writers don't always display the same concerns, they do write out of a body of common experiences and aspirations.

Re-interpreting roots, and looking for the past, places Toni Morrison within an important vein in the developing tradition of black women's writing in American. It is a tradition that has always carried with it a sense of opposition or of writing against the general current for two reasons: On one hand, any kind of self-assertion by black women was always identified as an act of defiance by the repressive white culture. On the other hand, there is the aspect of oralness (discussed in "Blackness" of chapter 4)

which makes the process of their writing seem out of tune with a culture that has for many years been accustomed to the written rather than the spoken word.

Evidence of the success of black women writers is in the awareness they have created. Indeed, the status of African-American women writers is no longer relegated below the status of the black male writers. The era when black male writers dominated the literary scene with works in their own image was instrumental in presenting to the world works that dismissed, blamed, victimised or stereotype black women. To counter this, the initiative is now being taken by these women writers whose writings are both expansive and liberating. They are dealing with:

the sexual beliefs, feelings and actions that black men have maintained towards black females - in the street, in the family and in the bedroom. Their perspective is faithful to the actual experiences of black women in America (emphasis added) (Braxton and McLaughlin, 1990:206)

This 'faithfulness' refers to the fact that black women writers write primarily for themselves, as a means of understanding their experiences and observations, and as a means of discovering deeply hidden truths about themselves as well as others. For this purpose the main characters, by and large, are black heroines who, like the authors themselves, fight against discrimination and for the uplifting of the race. For the most part the setting is in their natural environment with the emphasis on dramatising character motivation and explaining how and why an incident occurred.

Critics across the United States have tried to account for the rising tide of women's work, both black and white. One of them, Le Anne Schreiber of the New York Times, states that women writers are witnessing

a new sense of legitimacy...writing by women about women is no longer seen as a distaff literature...(they are) blessed with an awareness that they have a huge, uncharted territory to explore - their own experience - and an avid audience for whatever they discover (Topic,1980:59).

For the black women writers in particular, writing meant new frontiers of their own choosing and a freedom to select their own subjects. They are unique in that they are not merely reporting stories, but are creating fiction in an imaginative style used by their respective communities to manifest their experience.

While popular for depiction of an unusual type of woman, another reason for their increased readership is that contemporary black women writers strive toward female self-affirmation as opposed to the self-destructing anger depicted in the works of the earlier part of the century. One such example is Nella Larsen's Quicksand(1928) which vividly portrays the emotional anguish her heroines experience in a racial no-man's land. Instead, contemporary black women writers work toward an assessment of the black female expression that is no longer dominated by the painful encounter with a white and male world. In fact, Beloved, as all of Morrison's novels, places the 'white world' on the periphery of

the black people's existence. The issues they deal with have to do with reconciling their past to their present and their present to their future.

Morrison's writings probe into the inner life of both black womanhood and manhood: Her works are in the category of those that have laid the foundation for the black female perspective which now pervades contemporary African-American literature. They examine what it means to be black and female in nineteenth and twentieth century America. However, Toni Morrison is also concerned with what goes into the making of black American men. Priding herself as a 'black woman writer', Morrison from the beginning has moved to explore the depth and breadth and the diversity of the black female experience.

Through her presentation of unpredictable and never shallow women, Morrison calls the reader to attempt to understand who they are and what shapes them. One might chance to glimpse a reflection of the "complicated, extraordinary survivor life (Ms Magazine, 1980:60) that they led and lead. In her most recent novel Beloved, this aspect of surviving through most extraordinary hardships characterises the novel's central character. This novel, more than any other written by Morrison, is centred around the African-American female experience. Central to the aims in this chapter, therefore, is to identify the ways in which Beloved explores the issue and the state of African-American womanness. More

specifically, through the life of her protagonist, we shall see how Morrison has portrayed, explored and demonstrated Sethe's womanhood.

The story of Sethe is one of a woman who endures the ravages of slavery and on freeing herself from its grip, suffers the rejection of her people because she believed that killing her daughter was a better end for her child than to live in slavery.

And though she and others had got over it [slavery], she could never let it happen to her own. 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 a gang of whites invade her daughter's private parts, soiled her daughters's thighs and throw her daughter out of the wagon. She might have to work the slaughter-house yard, but not her daughter...Sethe had refused - and still refused(Morrison:1987,251).

Hence, Sethe's trials are of a different form in her life as a free woman. Because of her unflinching ability to murder her own child, Sethe is isolated in her community. On the death of her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, she and her surviving daughter have not a friend in the world. The pace of their lonely lives is disrupted, in the course of the novel, by the presence of, first, Paul D, a former co-slave, and soon after, Beloved, a young woman of no apparent roots whose age coincided with that of Sethe's murdered daughter - had she lived.

Beloved is set in the aftermath of the American civil war.

Morrison uses the life of a black woman to re-live the horrifying experience. A proud and beautiful woman, Sethe embodies the total exploitation that a human could experience in slavery. Because she is a woman, and therefore can breed, her value was assessed as higher than that of a man's. When she escaped, one

wasn't surprised to learn that they had tracked her down in Cincinnati, because, when he thought about it now, her price was greater than his; property that reproduced itself without cost (Morrison, 1987:228).

Just as her value was higher so were the levels of her trials and sufferings. Indeed, the black woman emerged from slavery with an anguish that was both physical and mental:

It amazed Sethe because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable...the hurt was always there (Morrison, 1987:58).

Toni Morrison's perception of the African-American womanness in Beloved is portrayed through a number of key female characters. Besides Sethe, there are Baby Suggs (Sethe's mother-in-law), Beloved (the girl-woman who overturns Sethe's life and nearly destroys it), and, finally, the women of the community to whom Denver (Sethe's daughter), turns to at the peak of their domestic crises.

'Womanness' as perceived by Morrison does not imply an absence of the male world and its perspective. On the contrary, according to Dinah Birch

The bond between men and women with a shared history is the foundation of the community and communication that have the potential to sustain Morrison's characters. Neither men nor women are able to thrive alone, and a common knowledge of the past is what draws them together (Birch:1991,84).

Morrison testifies to this view in her depiction of Baby Suggs.

Bought out of slavery by the tireless labour of her son, Halle, Baby Suggs in her life as a free woman chooses to make life better for others. She

decided that, because slave life had "busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue," she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart - which she put to work at once....she became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it....(F)ollowed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the clearing....she sat in the clearing while the people waited among the trees(Morrison:1987,87).

The African-American woman is remarkable for her ability to retain the human traits of love and hope despite the life of slavery which was a manifestation of all the cruelties that mankind is capable of. Recognising that the institution of slavery encouraged the breaking up and the distancing from one another of the black family, Baby Suggs, with her gospel of love taught her fellow blacks to love themselves because everything they had been about

themselves was to the contrary. Baby Suggs gave them back their humanity.

...in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face `cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you!...For this is the prize(Morrison:1987,89).

From despising oneself, the blacks had to advance to a point of loving themselves, then to loving and belonging to one another. As a woman, Baby Suggs had understood this very subtle truth and she strove to relay the fact to the people. They needed the strength of one another to love the self and then the community. However, even before a community or neighbourhood could come into being, there was need for a 'oneness' amongst these folk whose lives had been denied the expressive outlets of laughing, dancing and crying whenever they desired to laugh to dance or to cry. Baby Suggs believed she had a calling to fight the repression and instil spontaneity into the lives of the black folk.

Her formula was to "lay it all down": To the children she ordered, "Let your mothers hear you laugh", to the grown men, Let your

wives and children see you dance" and to the women, "cry, for the living and the dead. Just cry". Then,

women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried, until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart(Morrison:1987,87).

Indeed, slavery left a life-long branding on the life of every black - regardless of the capacity of their heart, of their ability to forgive. Before dying, Baby Suggs announces to Denver and Sethe,

the lesson she had learned from her sixty years a slave and ten years free: that there was no bad luck in the world like white people. "They don't know when to stop" (Morrison:1987,104).

This perception of the whites was to manifest itself in forms of both covert and violent racism, a burden the black woman placed atop that of sexism. As in the case of Beloved, the girl who appeared from nowhere, her state of physical and mental abuse is most probably as a result of her being both black and female. Sethe extends open arms to her because in her she sees a woman who

had gone through the trials, rejections and endurance which so many black women share:

(Sethe) told Denver that she believed Beloved had been locked up by some whiteman for his own purposes, and never let out the door. That she must have escaped to a bridge or some place and rinsed the rest out of her mind...Sethe thought it explained Beloved's behaviour around Paul D whom she hated so (Morrison,1987:119).

Central to Sethe's understanding of herself and her coming to terms with the experiences she had undergone, is the act of assessing in her mind her past and its relevance to her present. This would reveal to her hidden truths about herself and others. Unfortunately, Sethe does not have the strength on her own to face the past.

The problem of Sethe's isolation from the community is compounded by her obsession with pleasing Beloved. Having been forced to face situations alone so many times in her life, learning to rely on others for help is a hard lesson for her. In the early days of freedom from slavery, her fellow ex-slaves "taught her how to wake up at dawn and decide what to do with the day" (p.95).

Morrison does not underestimate the role of the community in any way but instead highlights its importance. Indeed, it is the folk of the community who later step in to help rid the family of Beloved. At the end of the novel, the life in Sethe's household totally degenerates because the three women close themselves off completely from the outside world. Sethe, feeling she is indebted

to Beloved because of what she did to her daughter years ago, lays her life open to the selfishness of the younger woman.

This submission costs Sethe her job, her health and nearly her life. It is the chilling exchanges between Sethe and Beloved that prompts Denver to seek help from the unknown world outside their home. Not only do the women of the community offer Denver food on behalf of Sethe and Beloved, but when they learn of the extent of Sethe's suffering under Beloved, they know they have to do something. Although some felt Sethe deserved to suffer for having slain her child - "You can't just up and kill your children" -the strongest opinion felt, "What's fair ain't necessarily right...and the children can't just up and kill the mama" (p.256).

Morrison, in her essay "Rootedness: the ancestor as foundation" expresses what to her is an important practical ideal for her work. For her it is an art capable of expressing both individuality and communality. This role which she calls a 'chorus', defined here as a body of response or opinion other than that of the characters themselves, is present in Beloved in the form of the neighbourhood/community which came to Sethe's aid. Although they found Sethe's crime staggering and her pride even greater, they were sorry for her.

Maybe they were sorry for the years of their own disdain. Maybe they were simply nice people who could hold meanness toward each other for just so long and when trouble rode bare-back among them, quickly, easily they did what they could to trip him up (Morrison:1987,249).

Morrison's 'chorus' in Beloved expresses her sense of a rooted community and reaffirms her perception of black art. (See 'Blackness' in Chapter 4).

Having looked into the roles of the secondary women character of Baby Suggs, Denver and the women of the community, this last section of this chapter looks into the novel to examine Morrison's exploration and depiction of Sethe's womanhood, and in the final analysis explore the author's perception of African-American femaleness.

As a black woman, Sethe plays the not unusual roles of wife, mother and lover. It is, ultimately, both her background as a slave and her experience as a free woman which calls into play the many and mixed responses she often displays. Morrison's story, therefore, is not about slavery. It is about the interior life of people, a small group of people, whose every action is impacted on by the horror of slavery and their history.

For Sethe and any other slave woman, the role of a wife could bring little promise of happiness or fulfilment. Since slaves were denied command over their destiny, a husband could never live up to his role of loving and caring for his wife. For black men and women, therefore, their contact was usually only of a physical nature and hence not emotionally binding. As Baby Suggs summarised, "A man ain't nothing but a man...but a son? Well, now,

that's somebody " (p.23). To attach oneself emotionally to a man or husband was to merely court heartache: wisdom taught aloofness in these matters.

It made sense for a lot of reasons...men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody [that one] knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby (Sugg's) eight children had six fathers (Morrison:1987,23).

Hence, being a wife was a role the African-American woman did not find natural to play for lack of role-models to emulate. Sethe's fate, however, was different from that of the vast majority of slave women because the type of slavery practiced at Sweet Home (her master's home) encouraged her and her fellow slaves to make decision for themselves. She

had the amazing luck of six whole years of marriage to that "somebody" son who had fathered every one of her children. A blessing she was reckless enough to take for granted, lean on, as though Sweet Home really was one (Morrison:1987,23).

Nevertheless, the limitations of slavery on Sethe and her husband Halle's lives would not allow the wife-husband relationship to expand to its full potential. There was no room for love or passion, just interest:

Halle was more like a brother than a husband. His care suggested a family relationship rather than a man's laying claim. For years they saw each other in full daylight only on Sundays...so looking at each other intently was a Sunday morning pleasure and Halle examined her as though storing up what he saw in sunlight for the shadow he saw the rest of the week (Morrison:1987,25-6).

The turning point in the lives of the Sweet Home slaves is when their exceptionally forbearing master dies and is replaced by the cruel Schoolteacher. Sethe's role as a wife ends when she escapes from slavery with her children - never to hear from Halle again. For the first time in her life, she is hit by the sheer cruelty surrounding their lives. Her training in slavery had not prepared her for a life dictated to by individuals irrelevant to her life. She is even confused as to what her response should be:

Other people went crazy, why shouldn't she? Other people's brain stopped, turned around went on to something new, which is what must have happened to Halle. And how sweet that would have been: the two of them back by the milk shed...smashing cold, lumpy butter into their faces with not a care in the world...what a relief to stop it there (Morrison:1987,70).

Because she played the woman's role, Sethe was not allowed the luxury of stopping her brain. Her children needed her to survive. Halle was gone, "but her three children were chewing sugar teat under a blanket on their way to Ohio and no butter play would change that" (p.71). In Sethe, the "extraordinary survivor" had made its debut.

For Sethe, now fully into her role as mother, her attempt to live up to the responsibility vested upon her, culminates in her slashing her infant daughter's throat rather than see her child in chains. In Morrison's own assessment, "It was absolutely the right thing to do, but she has no right to do it" (Muncie Evening Press:1987,26). Sethe was trying to be a parent and a mother and

have something to say about her children's lives in a slave system that said to blacks: "You are not a parent, you are not a mother, you have nothing to do with your children." Sethe's defiance shocks and horrifies not only the whites, but the blacks as well, who understood the cruelty of slavery, but not that of a mother to her own child. Paul D who had known the younger, gentler Sethe realises she has become a stranger to him.

He was wrong. This here Sethe was new...This here Sethe talked about love like any other woman; talked about baby clothes like any other woman, but what she meant could cleave the bone. This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw. This here Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began...more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him (Morrison:1987,164).

Paul D concludes these thoughts by telling her "Your love is too thick," and that it achieved little in the end. "Your boys gone you don't know where. One girl dead, the other won't leave the yard. How did it work?"(p.165). As far as Sethe is concerned, however, nothing and no one could convince her that what she did as a mother was wrong because she had achieved her goal:

They ain't at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain't got em...It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that(Morrison:1987,165).

Sethe's unique act, like everything else she does, has its roots in her condition as an African-American woman. Without a sense of rootedness in her community, Sethe, the free woman, is in danger of falling into the same pitfalls all her life. Because of her past action, Paul D leaves her. For the second time in her life,

Sethe finds herself alone and isolated after a happy but brief interlude. She begins to question her life.

Was that the pattern? she wondered. Every eighteen or twenty years her unlivable life would be interrupted by a short lived glory? Well, if that's the way it was - that's the way it was. (Morrison,1987:173).

Sethe's despair is central to her understanding of herself.

Morrison tells a story of a black woman searching for the relationship between her personal life and the social spheres of life. Sethe's philosophy of life that "there is no world outside my door" (Morrison,1987:184) leaves her isolated in the community. Yet her happiness and her future are both curtailed by her calling upon her past to justify the suffering of her present. To this, Morrison's response is in her purpose for writing:

I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection(Birch:1989,86).

As a mother, Sethe made mistakes in the past and as their present life showed, she had not learnt from these mistakes. If anything, one gets the impression that she would repeat them if necessary. In some ways, Morrison desired Beloved to give the impression of a ghost story: A young woman suddenly appears eighteen years after a child's death and the characters believe she is the slain infant returned to earth. As Morrison explains,

I want it to be our past, which is haunting - the way memory never really leaves you unless you have gone through it and confronted it head on (Muncie Evening Press:1987,26).

Before Paul D had stepped into her life, after so many years, Sethe's problem was precisely one of refusing to face up to the past. When he moves in as her lover, her whole life changes:

She knew Paul D was adding something to her life - something she wanted to count on but was scared to. Now he had added more: new pictures and old memories that broke her heart. Into the empty space of not knowing about Halle...that empty place of no definite news was filled now with a brand-new sorrow and who could tell how many more on the way. Years ago - when 124 was alive - she had women friends, men friends from all around to share grief with. Then there was no one...But now there was someone to share it (Morrison:1987,95-6).

To a certain extent, Sethe allows Paul into her life and shares her past with him. But, even with him, she continues to hold on to some memories. Because Sethe's past haunts her daily existence, the presence of Beloved becomes a reincarnation of this intolerable past. Sethe deals with the return of the dead as though it were a second chance to do things right, to explain. As the plot reveals, Sethe does the wrong thing all over again. A combination of her days with Paul D, (which shakes up her past), and her self-denying service to Beloved (as a way of justifying her past actions), become a mental exorcism of the past which had gripped her life and cut off her chances of a future.

While the women of the community come together to physically rid Sethe's household of Beloved, it is Paul, (who has his own overwhelming past to confront), who opens up for both of them avenues for future possibilities. On leaving Sethe, because of what he sees as a past atrocity, he soon questions his motives:

How fast he had moved from his shame to hers. From his cold-house secret straight to her too-thick love (Morrison:1987,273).

At a moment when all hope had gone for her, it is Paul D who uplifts her.

Sethe, he says, "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody, we need some kind of tomorrow...You your best thing, Sethe. You are (Morrison:1987,273).

For the African-American woman it is not romance per se which is central to their relationship with men. Toni Morrison as a black woman writer does not emulate the traditional staple of women's fiction in the western world. Instead, Morrison is more interested in what men and women of different generations and experiences might have to give each other through the process of growth and education. The needs of the black community rotate around their learning to lean on one another.

In all her novels, Morrison gives her female characters the diversity benefiting a woman's nature. They vary in the degree to which their sensibilities have been damaged by their internalisation of stereotypes. Some are powerful people, others shadows and totally powerless. Some are risk takers, others safety-seekers. Through the issues raised of power, love, and life, Morrison asks of the black woman, and anyone else in similar circumstances, the ultimate question - How do you define yourself? The point of awareness that this should lead to is - How does being black and female constitute a particular perspective of your world?

## CHAPTER IV

### "BLACKNESS" OF TONGUE IN TONI MORRISON'S NOVEL SULA

The impact Toni Morrison has made on American literature can be best perceived against the background of both the black experience and the black woman's experience. African-Americans today, recognising the effect that the written word can have, greatly value writings which they can call their own. As Assata Shakur asserts, (we) black people

have got to constantly make positive statements about ourselves. Our desire to be free has got to manifest itself in everything we do and are (Shakur: 1987, 175).

The purpose of black writing, at the same time, was for a long time that of revealing the black people to the rest of the world, written with the hopeful aesthetic intention of presenting

The negro world in its diversity and richness..and as a living culture of men and women who, even when deprived share in the emotions and desires of common humanity (Howe, Dissent Magazine: 1963, 28).

Indeed, African-American novelists, in arising to fulfil this mission, invariably present the trauma of black life. After a history of enslavement and being equated to animals, it was not easy to restore blacks to the level of humans, especially in the minds of the whites. We see this in Morrison's novel Beloved when

Schoolteacher educates his nephew on the right way to punish a slave. Moderation was essential:

...just think what would (your) own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education...suppose you beat the hounds past that point that way. Never again could you trust them in the woods or anywhere else(Morrison: 1987,149).

Even today, blacks are oppressed through discrimination on the job and education front, they have been and are denied civil rights as a minority group and are even physically brutalised because of their skin colour. This aspect came out strongly in black writings.

Toni Morrison, a long time ardent reader, felt that a particular style, evident in the music and poetry of black artists, was missing in the fiction. As a teacher of literature and an editor for Random House, she felt that what was missing about the black experience were books that explore

some of the most complicated, interesting, mysterious people in the world, a whole group of them, and revealed them and what their life is like (Ms Magazine: 1988,60).

Her first novel was published in 1970, a time when African-Americans as a whole were struggling to create for themselves a place in society and at the same time revive what had been crushed of the people's spirit. To make her personal contribution, Morrison stepped in, not creating situations of 'plight and protest' whereby characters were drawn one-dimensionally, wishing

all blame and all wrong be affixed on whites. Instead, she desired to and succeeded in capturing the nature and feeling of and the specificity about the culture in which she grew up in.

In a 1983 interview, Morrison made clear her intentions in writing novels:

I am simply trying to recreate something out of an old art form in my books - the something that makes a book 'black' (Contemporary Lit, 24;1983,425).

Morrison wanted her language to reflect the way black people talk which, as she explains, is "not so much the use of non-standard grammar (dialect) as it is the manipulation of metaphor". In other words, there is a persistent drive towards evoking the rhythms of what the people she is interested in might say and how they might say it. Morrison wants to tell stories as the folk would tell them - meanderingly, constantly retold, constantly imagined within a framework. This is an important part of Morrison's attempt to create a direct route of entry for the reader to participate in her writing. The spoken quality of her work refuses closure. We are invited to complete the books ourselves, as though in conversation with the author.

With depth and subtlety, Morrison makes the folk tradition the impulse behind her creative approach and her means of sharing crucial messages for the black community. Her novels show a willingness to trust black folk roots, worlds where people mask pain with laughter, ward off evil with broomsticks across doors

and conjure women dealing in magic and store shoe strings, dust and fingernails parings. Her folk preserve naming rituals, maintain annual family reunions, and have jokes explaining why the blacks are where they are - assuming the level of a myth.

Morrison moves authority into her voice, her own structure, her own cosmology...(T)he reader is ever aware that her imagination straddles the real world and the world of the supernatural....It is the process of black and unknown bards who sang and joked and lied and scandalised (Braxton and McLaughlin: 1990,260).

Morrison's discomfort with the black classics of the day - Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright's - was due not so much to the sense in which the novels were not speaking to and informing her, but more so the sense in which they were revealing something about blacks to others, to white people, to men. In other words, the novels employed not only a western style of writing, alien to the black manner of expression, but they also presented a totally male-centred point of view which painted only half the picture of the black expression. In order to write truly black literature, this white audience had to be cleared away by writing in a distinctly black style - a language which allows one to express that which is felt and meant. By having a black audience in mind (her own characters in the books), Morrison is able to put together words, metaphors, rhythm and music to create a language she can hear.

It is no wonder that Morrison calls her novels "village literature" and "peasant Literature" for they do indeed portray an

exotic fantastical world, derived from her childhood, in which even the everyday black life of ordinary towns comes alive in folklore, magic, superstition, fable, poetry, song and myth. Yet as Morrison subtly weaves in rituals, manner, myths and customs that make these people and places so real, her approach to the tradition incorporates a clear-eyedness.

By refusing to be sentimental about and to idealise the tradition, she avoids the mistake of attributing all that is good to it. In her second novel, Sula (1973), the so-called collective wisdom of the folk is queried, and instead collective ignorance often appears. Nevertheless, Morrison, in the final analysis, convinces the reader of the effectiveness in adopting the elements of folklore to tell, enrich and deepen her story. Her use of vernacular informs and becomes the foundation for a formal black literature. This can be contrasted with Western cultures which have privileged written art over oral or musical forms.

With special reference to Sula, this chapter will assess Morrison's claims to being a black writer by looking at her use of metaphor, "to recreate an old art form in my books". This examination should reveal ways in which Morrison employs these and other factors to inject blackness into an otherwise western art form. Further, this chapter in examining Morrison's expression of "blackness", will also explore the voice in the African-American literary tradition whereby the oral and the written literary

traditions comprise separate and distinct discursive universes which, on occasion, overlap.

The presence of the black people in America was as a result of the slaves who survived the dreadful "Middle Passage" and made it to the New World to become part of an African-American culture. This, in essence, was an African culture with a difference - one which had the English, Dutch, French, Portuguese or Spanish languages and cultures acting to create a New World Pan-African culture. Characteristics of it were devices peculiar to oral literature - music, myths and forms of performance - which continued to function as evidence of the new culture and as traces of an African origin.

According to William Labov in his National Science Foundation study released in 1985, Black English vernacular is described as a "healthy, living form of language (which) shows the signs of people developing their own grammar" as well as manifesting various linguistic signs of "separate development". When pitted against Standard English he reveals that

There is evidence that far from getting more similar, the black vernacular is going its own way...(it) is reflecting [a larger social] picture [of segregated speech communities]. The blacks' own grammar, which is very rich and complicated, is developing its own way. It looks as if new things are happening in black grammar (Gates:1988,XIX).

In sum, Labov's study shows the black vernacular as having stood apart as the black person's ultimate sign of difference - what might be called a 'blackness of tongue'. The use of "blackness" here refers to specific uses of literary language shared, repeated, critiqued or revised. Two aspects of literary language central to Morrison's writings are; one, the creation of metaphor and two, the representation of the voice of the oral black tradition.

Sula is the story of two African-American girls, Sula Peace and Nel Wright, who grow up in a black community. Their experiences together bring them into a life-long friendship broken only by Sula's leaving the black neighbourhood of the Bottom, to return many years later. The time apart preserves Nel and the community, but it is Sula who changes immensely. Her lifestyle shocks, angers and saddens the black folk who know only one code of conduct. The story is about Sula's apathy to the people's value and her determination to live her life in an environment hostile to her every move. Although the subject matter looks deeply into the lives of black folk, it is Morrison's form which engulfs the reader into the essence of blackness.

Firstly, in creating her metaphors, Morrison draws continually upon black sacred and secular mythic discourse. Much of her imagery is drawn from elements of nature. Whether describing emotions of fear or joy, Morrison draws a likeness from the

environment - as in describing Nel's elation on Sula's return to the Bottom. She

...noticed the peculiar quality of the May that followed the leaving of the birds. It had a sheen, a glimmering as of green, rain-soaked Saturday nights (lit by the excitement of newly installed street lights; of lemon yellow afternoons bright with iced drinks and splashes of daffodils) (Morrison:1873,94).

This imagery very clearly expresses how Nel's world once again becomes magical and interesting because of Sula's presence. Nature is inseparable from the expression of blackness. Wherever and whenever it is used, there is an implication which can be instinctively understood by a black audience and those familiar with its tradition. A particular metaphor can refer to nature's quality, its harshness or its destructive/creativity, as exemplified in fire and water. In the community of the Bottom, nature is also the consistency and the predicability of elements that can be either read or distorted. All these interpretations of nature are the folk's manner of understanding life and its signs. For this reason, whether it brings goodwill or evil, nature is to be embraced for the meaning it gives to individual and communal existence. One such instance is the accidental death of Chicken Little at whose funeral the old women

danced and screamed, not to protest God's will but to acknowledge it and confirm once more their conviction that the only way to avoid the Hand of God is to get in it (Morrison:1973,66).

It is not only these figures of play which makes Morrison's novels examples of especially rich and complex vocal texts. There is the second aspect of the narrative technique which places her writings within the category of works characterised as "speakerly texts". These are texts which privilege the representation of the speaking black voice (Gates:1988,112). Indeed, Morrison's narrative strategy seems to concern itself with the possibilities of representation of the speaking black voice in writing. Gates has termed this as a double-voiced narrative mode to express the union of the direct discourse of the novel's black speech community and the initial standard English of the narrator. It is this mode of narration used in Sula which makes it aspire to the status of oral narration. The narrative commentary is rendered in the third person omniscient and the third person restricted voices.

Meanwhile, the discourse of characters manifests itself as direct speech whereby Morrison employs elements of dialect (depending on the status and nature of the character talking). Whereas other writers of the black experience had attempted to capture "blackness" by using either of the two extremes of narration and discourse, Morrison's innovation is to be found in her blending of the texts two extreme and seemingly opposed modes of narration: the narrative commentary which is written in the diction of standard English, and the character's discourse, which is always foregrounded by quotation marks and by its black diction. The following, full of repetitions in the manner of a tale,

exemplifies the black diction. In this incident, Morrison gives Eva, Sula's grandmother, the traditional powers bestowed on a mother. As a mother who had given life to her son, rather than watch him destroy himself, she chooses to put an end to his life. She tells Hannah, her daughter, :

After all that carrin' on, just gettin' him out and keepin' him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well....I ain't got the room no more even if he could do it....He was a man, girl, a big growed-up man. I don't have that much room. I kept on dreaming it. Dreaming it and I knowed it was true (Morrison: 1973,71-2).

This new narrative space uniquely represents the black experience in that it allows for a play of voices which combine to make Morrison's novels especially powerful examples of multiple vocal texts. Morrison's preference of multiple vocal texts has much to do with her belief that the artist has a heavy responsibility towards the nurturing culture. Her perception of black art is an art capable of expressing both individuality and communality. This being an important practical idea in her work, Morrison is suspicious of the idea of the singular hero or heroine. This aspect in her writing is well-illustrated in Sula.

In her essay "Rootedness: The ancestor as foundation" (Birch:1991,868), Toni Morrison comments on this second aspect of a speakerly text. Besides its emphasis on the spoken voice (a distancing from the primacy of the written word), it also allows for the role of the 'chorus' defined here as a body of response or

opinion other than that of the characters themselves. In *Sula*, this narrative function is undertaken in the neighbourhood or community. It is from this background that Morrison finds the rootedness and tradition for her works. Hence, in totality, *Sula's* style should be seen as a rhetorical strategy ordered to represent an oral literary tradition, designed "to emulate the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of actual speech and produce the 'illusion of oral narration'" (Erlich:1969,238). The speakerly text is primarily concerned with imitating one of the numerous forms of oral narration to be found in classical African-American vernacular literature. We find this narrative voice is:

a lyrical disembodied yet individual voice from which emerges a single longing and utterance, a transcendent, ultimately racial self, extending far beyond the merely individual....a resonant and authentic narrative voice that echoes and aspires to the status of the impersonality, anonymity, and authority of the black vernacular tradition, a nameless, selfless tradition, at once collective and compelling, true somehow to the unwritten text of a common blackness(emphasis added) (Gates: 1988,183).

Morrison's usage of a black literary language defines the search for the self. In fact on the broadest level, *Sula* depicts the search for identity and self-understanding of the African-American woman. Though *Sula's* search is legitimate in a country of voiceless black women, the tragedy lies in that her humanity is achieved only at the expense of her fellow blacks. She stands clearly apart in a community which believes that selfhood can only be selfishness. Physically, she was different because of a

birthmark "that spread from the middle of the head toward the eyebrow, shaped like a stem rose." But this variance was most pronounced in her character:

Sula was distinctly different. Eva's [her grandmother's] arrogance and Hannah's [her mother's] self-indulgence merged in her and, with a twist that was all her imagination she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her...hers was an experimental life (Morrison:1973:118-119).

The story of this individual can be contrasted with the black autobiographical tradition as exemplified by Fredrick Douglas's three autobiographies. Douglas generally depicts "a resplendent self as representative of possibilities denied systematically to one's voiceless fellow blacks" (Gates:1988:182). In other words, just as the blacks had common sufferings, any possibility of hope and nobility of spirit should belong to the black people too. The black voice had authority when it spoke with impersonality in order to include all people in its consideration. Individual life did well to be a voice of general need rather than a personal desire for fulfilment. Sula's class of ideal individual black self, however, seems to include only Sula - much to the chagrin of her grandmother:

"...When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies, it'll settle you."

"I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself."

"Selfish. Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without a man."

"You did."

"Not by choice."

"Mama did."

"Not by choice, I said it ain't right for you to want to stay off by yourself."

Sula sat up. "I need you to shut your mouth." (Morrison: 1973: 93-3)

Sula's quest for wholeness and self-knowledge alerts Eva's concern when her grandchild develops an unconventional attitude to sex which she uses as a vehicle to her goal of selfhood rather than for intimacy with another person. What is unusual is that she derives no pleasure at all from the act, but for her it becomes the moment when she feels her full strength and power. At the same time she experiences complete aloneness. Sula's story is tragic because she finds herself in a community that believes in a selfless tradition, as well as the "unwritten text of a common blackness". Hence, her efforts to grow and expand are stifled in an environment which cannot accommodate her unharnessed energies:

In a way, her strangeness, her naivete, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous" (Morrison: 1973: 121).

Indeed, Sula was regarded as dangerous in a community which was used to the compromise of the individual but was instead given an unusual dose of self-absorption. On returning home to the Bottom after an absence of ten years, Sula is a stranger to her family

and even to her closest childhood companion, Nel. Having followed the pattern for her life that society had laid out for her, Nel is no longer able to relate to Sula and this puts a strain on their relationship. Nel is the society's ideal because she conforms to their definition of a woman: By marrying Jude, she brings together the people of the Bottom in feasting and renewal. The danger she poses leads the community to deal with Sula in the only way that they know how and that is by labelling Sula a witch. They commence to act righteously to show themselves better than this woman who sleeps with men indiscriminately - even with white men, which is the worst crime of all - who boldly sends her grandmother to an old people's home, and thoughtlessly causes the end of Nel's marriage by having an off-hand affair with Jude. These actions, unheard of and yet unseen in the community are regarded as symptoms of death brought by Sula. They fight this evil the 'black' way - not as individuals, but as a united whole:

Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst.  
(Morrison: 1973: 117)

As is apparent, the community has its way of dealing with evil and in this case, evil serves to enrich their existence and, temporarily, unity is achieved. Morrison's narrative strategy is to pit the individual voice of Sula against the impersonality and

authority of the black tradition. This juxtaposition of the individual and the community is consistent in Morrison whose narrative strategy, we saw, presented a union of two unlike modes of discourse - one as formal speech, the other free use of dialect. The final product is always unity.

Earlier we placed Morrison in the literary tradition of Frederick Douglass in his depiction of the individual self. A clearer picture of that which *Sula* represents is better seen in the context of this still developing tradition. Just as Morrison's first voice, the community of the Bottom, represents the voice of the black oral tradition, *Sula* personifies individual black talent. It would seem that for the black writer, the issue of the balance of individuality within the community (which upholds the common good before personal gain), became controversial as blacks found themselves searching within a western culture that had strong views supporting individuality. This dual presentation is not unique with Morrison, but had earlier featured in Richard Wright's Black Boy (1945). Their views of the individual and the community, however, puts them in very different schools of thought. His protagonist, Dick, deeply oppressed in the white racist society, emerges from the depths of his black culture - which is depicted as being chaotic - to achieve his humanity.

This discovery of self is achieved (like *Sula*) only at the expense of his fellow blacks. Wright contrasts his "noble" hero with the

rest of the black folk who are characterised as pitiable victims who have not yet recovered from slavery and are undergoing racial segregation. Their presence surround and suffocate Dick.

Wright uses foregrounding of one sensitive individual against the struggling and defeated black whole. This individualistic point of view was to cause debate as to the presentation of blackness in black literature. Whereas Wright upheld the principles of "the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a low down dirty deal", (Hurston: 1928) Morrison, instead took to creating a narrative voice that aspired to the status of all that the black vernacular tradition stood for. On the one hand she celebrates blackness in her detailed and metaphor-laden description of the Bottom which becomes the perfect setting for the oral narrative.

Yet, on the other hand, Morrison seems to recognise that this 'world' cannot remain untarnished by its environment. It could, in fact, benefit from a limited and controlled amount of what Sula represents in terms of standing apart. Morrison implies this in the character of Nel who, having sampled with Sula the life of living for self, then proceeds to become one of "them", and ends up being miserably unhappy. This is not because the life of the folk is unfulfilling, but rather, having put her emotional security in one human being, she is crushed totally by Jude's unfaithfulness. She is unable to find within herself the strength

to cope with the knowledge that "her thighs are forever empty":

That was too much. To lose Jude and not have Sula to talk to about it because it was Sula that he had left her for (Morrison: 1973: 110).

Another important difference in Wright's and Morrison's view of the subject of blackness was that he saw it as the subject of a great and terrible burden and so presented it and nature as ruthless and unutterable. Morrison, of course, used both blackness and nature to heighten her subject matter.

Morrison stands far from Wright in the tradition. Ultimately we understand Morrison saying of her heroine that as long as Sula's search for self is outside that of the common blackness, it cannot be carried out at the Bottom where the language of the people clearly dictates the nature of the self to be found. To survive in the community, Sula must recognise that there is some beauty in what the people carried over since time immemorial. Similarly, the community needs to give options and chances for creativity to each individual, recognising that all human needs cannot be harmonised. Morrison is unique in that she calls for the cultivation of self within the environs of a nurturing and self-preserving community.

Morrison's black community fits into the general framework of what other black writers feel the community should be:

a network of persons through which their major characters receive their sustenance and their belief systems, and these communities vary according to their age, location, size, and past. The particular community in each work has its own style, legends, and rituals, although it also contains basic elements that it shares with other black communities. Instead of defining itself in contrast to white culture, it emphasises its own past, its own forms. (Christian: 1980: 240)

Sula in this respect, is a novel grounded in mythic beliefs. The community's philosophy is based in a history of struggling to survive and in their world, the signs of nature relate closely to human events: time and events hold either good or evil for good men or bad. Throughout Sula Morrison presents images of fire, water, wind, and earth which are closely linked to the presence of the symbol of death. The way in which her characters perceive of nature is crucial to an understanding of their universe:

In spite of their fear, they reacted to an oppressive oddity, or what they called evil days, with an acceptance that bordered on welcome. Such evil must be avoided, they felt, and precautions must naturally be taken to protect themselves from it. But they let it run its course, fulfil itself, and never invented ways either to alter it, to annihilate it or to prevent its happening again. So also were they with people. What was taken by outsiders to be slackness, slovenliness or even generosity was in fact a full recognition of the legitimacy of forces other than good ones. They did not believe death was accidental - life might be, but death was deliberate. They did not believe that Nature was ever askew - only inconvenient. Plague and drought were as "natural" as springtime. If milk could curdle, God knows robins could fall. the purpose of evil was to survive it and they determined (without ever knowing they had made up their minds to do it) to survive floods, while people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance. They knew anger

will but not their despair, and they didn't stone sinners for the same reason that they didn't commit suicide - it was beneath them (Morrison: 1973,107).

This unquestionable view of life is, in effect, far too well grounded and communally supported to show signs of concession to any life, determined as one might be to change it.

Morrison depicts Sula's philosophy of life with its disregard for nature and her lack of sympathy with the natural and contrasting it with the Bottom's philosophy which is based on their history of struggling to survive and their belief in nature's signs which relates to the course of human events. The plague of robins which everyone is subjected to must mean something and, indeed, when Sula returns to the Bottom after her long absence, they found her presence to be the answer. "I might have known them birds meant something."

Sula to them is just another life-taking force, an embodiment of evil. Death in the book, though, is not only present because of Sula, but it had always been there with the people as a way of focusing experience. In the opening scenes, death is pervasive at the Bottom when the home of the community of black folk is being torn down to make room for a golf course. Yet, as in all their difficult situations, they are able to laugh and see it as a moment of self-reflection - to look back to the origin of the Bottom - a similar painful experience but one which had become a "nigger-joke": The Bottom, the negro neighbourhood of the town,

was a white man's gift of land to a slave who had performed some heavy duties for him. Although the Bottom was really tough land with harsh weather, the master had persuaded the slave that this land was more desirable than the valley land. He called it the "best land there is" because it was the Bottom of heaven. Though this was not the truth, the name became a legend of how the Bottom came to be on top. Indeed for the community, laughter rather than bitterness was a better way of dealing with pain.

Morrison, in portraying the community as a strong force and as consistent in its patterns and beliefs, is on the one hand exposing other individuals folly in standing alone. Sula eventually dies apart, depending on none - not even able to depend on herself. On the other hand, Morrison questions the superiority of the culture of the Bottom where simply because patterns have been formed, people often act without questioning. Often equal treatment is meted out where more individual attention is needed. This case is seen in the treatment of the five adopted Deweys who are of different ages and experiences yet are given identical treatment.

Eccentricity, however, is permitted so long as it can be justified by the codes of the community. Two examples are Shadrack's obsessive observance of National Suicide Day, which somehow became recognised by all. Hannah, too, takes the law into her own hands and murders her son - as an act of maternal love. The Bottom, on

the rare occasion, closes its eyes on individual madness and Sula is quick to use this weakness during her argument to support her way of life. Nel, too, finds out that living one's life totally for others can result in waste and emptiness.

Her choices leave her incomplete, just as Sula will not dare admit she is incomplete without Ajax and without Nel. In the end it is plain to see that Sula and Nel are two halves which are of value to each other. The union of the two are an ingredient that the community is missing. By extension, Morrison offers the community enrichment by careful acceptance of values from outside their world.

In this chapter, we have identified within Sula two aspects of 'blackness of tongue' that characterise Morrison's writings. Firstly, we looked at the voice of the black oral tradition and the manner in which Sula exhibits its selfless and collective aspects. Secondly, by juxtaposing her work with that of other black writers, we looked at Morrison's text as a vehicle for representing the black culture and all the values that it upholds for the black community. Morrison's use of a double-voiced narrative technique - the combination of standard English and the use of dialect - merge well with her ultimate assessment that the life of the folk of the Bottom could be enriched by some values suggested in the person of Sula. Simultaneously, that which Sula lacked and which caused her to die alone "like a redwood" could



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

By distinguishing her works with its key element of 'blackness', Toni Morrison gives back to her black audience (for whom she writes), a legacy which forms their identity as black people who, undeniably, have a culture of their own. Because the culture of a people is inseparable from their traditions, the author, in establishing a literary tradition, must use the code of language to reach back in time and act as threads connecting its people and the lost memories carried on by word of mouth. In Sula, we saw how legacies of the past were passed from generation to generation through use of myth, folktale and jokes. In Beloved, there is also the use of the words 'rememory' and 'disbelieve' (p.119), (words which lie somewhere between a noun and a verb), and not found in the grammar of standard English.

It is not necessarily because the characters using the words lack a word to express that particular thought. Rather the folk resort to invention of language where necessary to enrich a thought. The evocative and colourful language of the black community gives the language an oralness which when combined with standard English, produces what can only be defined as a speakerly text - elements of both the written and the spoken word.

An equally important factor of 'blackness' evident in Sula is the theme of communality versus individuality. Although Morrison recognises the viewpoint of the individual characters, an important element in her approach is that of the body of opinion other than that of the characters themselves. We admire Sula for her ability to question the values and beliefs held towards a young woman by an uncompromising and often suspicious race, but in the final analysis, we question her destructive path which ends up in mere folly. This theme is also present in Beloved.

In our attempt to define 'African-Americanness', we shifted the focus from that of the form of the novel and looked at the content. The theoretical framework equally shifted from a stylistic approach to a criticism employing the African-American literary theory (with its stress on establishing a black literary history). In The Bluest Eye, that which became central to our concern was the embodiment of a past which Morrison believes to be necessary to both the present and the future. Without a sense of one's roots and one's ancestors, the absence of stability in an individual has been seen to be detrimental. In assessing other black writers of the tradition - Toni Cade Bambara, Henry Dumas, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin - Morrison feels than:

It was the absence of an ancestor that was frightening, that was threatening, and it caused huge destruction and disarray in the work (writing) itself (Birch:1991,87).

In The Bluest Eye, some of the destruction and disarray is reflected in the fictional lives of Pecola and her mother – both searching for a validating ancestor. Never fulfilled in this quest, the lives of the characters – except Claudia and her sister – are devoid of meaning and dignity. They can only strive to attain the values of a white culture which rejects them, leaving them alienated. Indeed, for the African-American to despise their 'funkiness' (see The Bluest Eye) simply implies a denial of their history and their culture. Their identification with the black heritage would not leave them yearning for unattainable "blue eyes", but would give them a pride in their colour – whatever shade.

The view of Toni Morrison as an African-American woman writer brings to light important facts about her feminist persuasions. The feminist literary theory is useful insofar as it envelopes women's concerns (see chapter 1 – theoretical framework). For instance, the brief look at Zora Neale Hurston is an attempt to examine and reinterpret existing criticism of women's writings, which is an objective of feminist critics. Also, this study into the work of Toni Morrison fulfils yet another feminist objective – that of black women creating a body of new work, imaginative as well as critical.

Yet, having assessed Beloved as a section of African-American history seen largely from the woman's perspective – Sethe's,

Denver's, Baby Suggs's, and Beloved's – Toni Morrison stands clearly apart from other North American women writers. The point of import to note here is that Morrison's firm commitment to the community and to the art of the community sets her at odd with feminist writers and critics who seek to celebrate a language of their own. What women have to say is given its full weight in Beloved (and for that matter also in Sula and Song of Solomon) but Morrison has no interest in a specifically or exclusively feminine discourse.

Her vision of the language in which we might best speak to each other includes men. Though Morrison also wishes to assert the role, often overlooked, that women have played in history, she is suspicious of the idea that gender might be all inclusive as a means of categorising human experience. The ancestor, for Toni Morrison, is not to be defined by either masculinity or femininity.

In targeting an audience which is black, Morrison's writings become very specific. She exhibits aspects of language use which can clearly "label" her pen as black. Yet as one reads of the black experience, one cannot help recognising the universality of their plight. For indeed, we need an ancestor in order to recognise where we are going; we all need to come to terms with ourselves before we can be of use to the society. Toni Morrison in writing the black experience gives a faithful account from a



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