Preface

Since her winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, Toni Morrison has become a most celebrated, widely taught author. Her novels and essays have sparked illuminating discussions of the vexing and contradictory cultural conditions of late twentieth century America. Of course, it was not possible for readers and reviewers about thirty years ago, Nancy Peterson rightly observes, to think of Morrison's works in these terms (1993). The dramatic shift in the critical assessment of Morrison as author is registered in the difference between the evaluation given to *Sula* in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1973 and the glowing tribute paid to *Playing in the Dark* in the same venue in 1992. Sara Blackburn said in 1973 that Morrison was "far too talented to remain only a marvelous recorder of the black side of provincial American life."

Interestingly, in 1992, Wendy Steiner began by praising the very quality that Blackburn had condemned Morrison for: "The fact that she speaks as a black *and* (italics mine) a woman only enhances her ability to speak as an American, for the path to a common voice nowadays runs through the partisan." What becomes clear by juxtaposing these comments is that Morrison's rise to national and international recognition has been motivated not only by the magnificent body of work she has produced

but also by the rethinking of the relevance of race, class and gender to all areas of culture and aesthetics.

An overview of the readings of Morrison's work over more than the last three decades demonstrates the shifts in the critical evaluation of black writing in general and of Morrison's in particular. The first scholarly article on the author did not appear until five years after the publication of *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and nearly two years after the publication of *Sula* (1973). But even in those studies, critics like Joan Bischoff compared Morrison to "great" canonical authors to suggest that her books speak to more than "just" a black audience (1975). Bischoff even went on to invoke the problematic language of universalism to "promote" Morrison. In a 1983 interview to Nellie McKay, Morrison asked for the development of a criticism rooted in black culture to make profoundly intricate readings of her novels and those by other writers possible. It was Philip Royster and Odette Martin who first carefully laid the groundwork for a criticism that locates Morrison specifically as an African American writer (1977). By 1980 there was a further paradigm shift influencing the reception of Morrison's work as well as the work of all black women writers. While Barbara Smith in 1977 had to argue for the recognition of the category of black feminist criticism by demonstrating the inadequacy of criticism by

white reviewers and black male commentators, Deborah McDowell in 1980 was able to define the practice of black feminist criticism. As the decade unfolded, Morrison's works were discussed in book-length studies of African American literature. Of those mentionable are Mari Evans's *Black Women Writers* (1984), Barbara Christian's *Black Feminist Criticism* (1985), and Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spiller's *Conjuring: Black women, Fiction and Literary Tradition* (1985). It was not until 1985 that the very first book devoted entirely to Morrison, Bessie W. Jones and Audrey L. Vinson's *The World of Toni Morrison: Explorations in Literary Criticism*, was published. From Jones and Vinson's book onward, scholarly work on Morrison has increased exponentially in terms of the sheer number of articles and books, as well as the variety of approaches taken. Trudier Harris's *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (1991) has placed Morrison in the line of black writers who have drawn on the folk tradition for their themes. Harris also points out how Morrison has transformed this folk tradition by using "reversal folklore" as a deliberate strategy. Barbara Rigney's *The Voices of Toni Morrison* (1991) focuses on the role of gender in her act of writing, conceptualized within various poststructuralist frames of reference. Doreatha D. Mbalia's *Toni Morrison's Developing Class Consciousness*

(1991) views Morrison from a universal Marxist frame, tracing her development of a strong class consciousness. *The Dilemma of "Double-Consciousness"* (1993) by Denise Henize discusses Morrison's doubly conscious negotiation of black and white ideas of beauty, family and society. Gurleen Grewal in *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle* (1998), has picked up the theme of "internal colonialism" in order to articulate the postcolonial concerns of Morrison's literary production. Another book published in the same year by K. Sumana, *The Novels of Toni Morrison: A Study in Race, Gender and Class*, is a study of the interrelationship of race, gender and class in Morrison's novels, but lacks theoretical depth. Morrison scholarship has taken new critical directions since the beginning of the present century. Nancy J. Peterson's *Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crisis of Historical Memory* (2001) focuses on the works of Louis Erdrich, Toni Morrison, Joy Kogawa and Irena Klepfisz and shows how these writers have appropriated postmodern skepticism to access the past but restore in their counter histories what national history had distorted. Peterson has discussed Morrison's *Beloved, Jazz* and *Paradise* to show how the author has incorporated historical fragments to reverse the amnesia of black as well as of white culture in the US. *Toni Morrison's "Beloved" and the Apotropaic Imagination*

(2002) by Kathleen Marks examines Morrison's "masterpiece" on the basis of African American experience, of women's in particular, emphasizing the issues that are rather "pre-sociological." Marks has done her study from the angle of "early Greek religion, Greek mythology and underworld images, psychology, the Bible, African American Criticism, anthropology, and poststructuralist thought," as she herself has acknowledged (ix). Lucille P. Fultz's *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference* (2003) is an in-depth study on Morrison's works as reflections of "multivalent" experiences of African Americans as both marginalized individuals in US in general and within their own community and shows how one "impacts" the other. Fultz has used the word "playing" in all its multiplicity of meanings and thus offers, as she says, "a different way of reading and understanding Morrison's fictional texts as technical achievements and as models of storytelling" (8).

From this brief survey it is clear that not much attention has been paid to how Morrison attempts to rewrite/ re (dis)cover the history of black Americans, especially of black women in North America. Though a few critics have focused around this issue, their studies remain limited to one or two of Morrison's novels as they are mostly essays. If Susan Willis's "Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison" examines the author's

problematic relationship to an Afro-American cultural heritage stretched thin over distance and generations, Valerie Smith's "'Circling the Subject': History and Narrative in *Beloved*" discusses the problem of representing the "real experience" that the novel draws on. Another essay by K. C. Davis, "Postmodern Blackness: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the End of History" is a much more comprehensive study of Morrison's treatment of black history but then again restricted to *Beloved* alone. Hence a fresh, full-length study of Morrison's novels is still very much possible so far as her reconstruction/ rewriting of black women's history is concerned.

Morrison makes use of the novel to foreground black suffering and struggle and to rewrite (black) "history as life lived" suggesting that the fictional account of the interior life of her people, especially of black women, might be more historically "real" than the actual documents, which are mostly written from the perspective of dominant culture ("Behind the Making of *The Black Book*" 88). The desire to uncover the historical reality of the African American past fuels Morrison's fictional project of "literary archeology." ". . . you journey to a site to see," the author writes, "what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply" ("The Site of Memory" 112). The authenticity of historical facts

remains controversial for postmodernist who do not believe in teleological metanarratives, and argue that contemporary culture has lost a sense of historical consciousness of cause and effect. In an interview, Fredrick Jameson summed up the thesis of his book, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, with the remark that "time has become a perpetual present and thus spatial" in postmodern culture (qtd. in Stephanson 46). Such a controversial stance has provoked numerous antagonists to speak out. Linda Hutcheon, for one, has suggested in her two studies of "historiographic metafiction" that much of the postmodern fiction is still strongly invested in history, but more importantly in revising our sense of what history means and accomplishes qtd. in Davis, K. C. 75). Morrison's treatment of history bears some similarity to Hutcheon's postmodern "historiograpic metafiction," but her relationship to this discourse is affected by her aim to write "black-topic" texts. In her desire to fill up a gap, neglected by historians, to record the everyday lives of the "disremembered and unaccounted for" (*Beloved* 274), Morrison demystifies master historical narratives because she wants to raise "real" African American history in its place. She sees herself as a creative historian who reconstructs while deconstructing "official history," by tapping the well of

African American "presence." Thus Toni Morrison's novels show a "'both-and' (Hilfer 91) dialectical, indeterminate character, a doubleness that Hutcheon would argue is itself a distinctly postmodern strategy" (qtd. in Davis, K. C. 78). Back in 1974, Morrison expressed her worries that a real history was being replaced by historicism; the same was echoed by Jameson years later when he regretted the textualizing of time as a mere representation, as a simulacrum. But acknowledging later that all history is imagined and that all knowledge of the past is derived from representation, Morrison offers a different theory of postmodern history than does Jameson. While working on *The Black Book* in the early seventies, Morrison seemed to have been occupied with the idea that the documents would bring forward the three-hundred years history of African Americans as "life lived" and therefore "real." But later she realizes that no totalizing truth can ever be reached. Unlike Jameson, Morrison thinks that "history" and "historicism" are one, and questions the assumption that there is a knowable reality behind the "inauthentic" simulation or representation. She makes us aware of the slippage between the signifier and signified but also calls our attention to the fact that the past is only available to us through textual traces like *The Black Book*. As an artist she has a great deal of faith in the power of new

representation to redefine our perception of reality. Her novels are a fictional reconstruction that might uncover "proceedings too terrible to relate" in order to "find and expose a truth about the interior life" of her people, black women in particular ("The Site" 110, 113).

Based on the above problematic, my project will try to examine how Morrison--in her novels, interviews and essays--expresses agendas "that resound with the concerns of both critical camps--both postmodernist theorists and African American and feminist critics seeking social agency" (Davis, K.C. 77). Black feminists have often dismissed postmodernists' questioning of foundationalism/ essentialism as being incompatible with their sociopolitical criticism (Fraser and Nicholson 20-21). Morrison herself has often acknowledged this rift. However, I have observed that her novels offer a hybrid cultural work, a dual process that might empower black women but that is still informed by poststructuralism's denaturalizing critique. Her narratives attempt to approximate "true history" while remaining aware of the limits of truth or of any historical metanarrative. Since my study examines Morrison as a creative historian, I will try to investigate her art as a counter discourse that questions any fixed referent and yet foregrounds an African American political commitment to the crucial importance of

deep cultural memory, of keeping the past alive in order to construct a better future (Davis, K.C. 75). Morrison's mediation between these two theoretical and political camps--between postmodernism and African American social protest--has enabled her to draw the best from both. The goal of her fiction has not been just to recover details of African American history, as she notes in "Memory, Creation, and Writing," but to choose which details are useful to create a past that can enable black women to have a "livable life" in the present and future (198).

I express my deep gratitude to those without whom my thesis would have remained an unfulfilled dream. First of all I would like to bow respectfully to my late parents, Dhirendranath Mukhopadhyay and Nilima Mukhopadhyay, who have made me what I am today. I recall Mr. Rejaul Karim, my mentor, who fuelled in me an interest for English literature when I was a student of Intermediate Level. I would like to thank Emily, a Peace Crop volunteer for Nepal for introducing me to the world of Toni Morrison.

Special thanks go to my supervisor Dr. Ashis Sengupta whose valuable comments and conscientious supervision helped me to formulate my thesis. It is his tireless, thorough, insightful readings and re-readings of each chapter and painstaking editing that have helped me with my final draft. I am indebted to Mrs. Mitra Sengupta, Dr.

Sengupta's wife, for her warmth and sincerity that always made me feel at home during the brainstorming hours spent with my supervisor.

I am grateful to Professor Shreedhar Prasad Lohani who helped me a lot in my project by supplying me constantly the most useful materials and thus keeping me up-to-date. I acknowledge my thanks to Professors Sunil Jha, Padma Prasad Devkota, Sukhbir Sing (Hyderabad), Madhav Raj koirala, Puspa Raj Sharma and Dr. Arun Gupto for their incessant encouragement. I express my sincere gratitude to IACIS, Hyderabad and American Center, Kolkata, for a number of books and other necessary materials that I collected from their libraries.

I owe a great deal to the University of North Bengal for granting me affiliation and also to the University Grants Commission (Nepal) for providing me the funds needed for the project. I am indebted much to the Director and stuff of American Center, Nepal for the funds they gave me to participate in the UGC Refresher Course in American Studies (Literature) in 2003 when I just began my project. My sincerest gratitude also goes to Tribhuvan University for the study leave that I have tried to utilize in the best possible way.

I would like to thank several of my colleagues and friends: Dr. Ambika nath Pathak, Gunaraj Dhungel, Amrita

Parajuli, for giving me their wise counselling and fruitful suggestions; Dr. Yadav Raj Koirala, Dr. Shyam Bahadur Katwal and Dr. Ramesh Prasad Adhikari for sharing their own experiences and thus sustaining me; Dr. Nagarjun Sharma, Mr. and Mrs. Surojit Das for encouraging me throughout the writing of my thesis; and Mr. Somedev Chatterjee who has always supported my endeavours with all his inspiring and friendly suggestions.

My thesis would not have been "completed" if I did not have such a warm and supportive family. Special thanks go to my only child Sourish Talukdar, my dear son, for his interest to see his mother achieve a doctorate. He in fact prodded me to undertake this project. Finally, I want to thank my husband Mr. Chandan Talukdar, who guides me, revives me, sustains me and makes all things possible.

Lastly, my apologies for any unintentional errors and typos.

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Date: 13.5.08

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