Chapter I

Introduction

"The Bench by the Road" Project of the Toni Morrison Society in 2006 on the occasion of the author's seventy-fifth birthday is "a tribute to her recognition of the role of art in the life of the community" (Denard 3). The project is not only a great celebration and an acknowledgement of the "extraordinary achievements" of Morrison but also a remarkable step to evoke a lost memory for African Americans (5). Its mission seems to be an extension of Morrison's artistic vision, to borrow phrases from the "Epigraph," of paying homage to those "Sixty million and more," "Disremembered and unaccounted for" (*Beloved* 274). About the cultural function of the novel she states:

> There is no place that you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presence of or recollect the absences of slaves. . . . There is no suitable memorial, or plaque, or wreathe or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby. There is no 300-foot tower, there's no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or better still on the banks of the

> Mississippi. And because such a place doesn't exist . . . the book had to. (qtd. in Denard 3)

Carolyn C. Denard, founder and board chair of the Toni Morrison Society, says that the goal of the project is to affirm that in the future such "places do exist." She further explains that the Society will install ten wrought iron benches over the next five years "with historical inscriptions at sites that have meaning in her fiction and in the lives of African Americans in the United States and abroad" (3). Such productive mission of the project seems to be effective in activating the lost memory of African Americans whose cultural identity is almost at the ebb because of the mainstream culture. In the global network of the present era "active remembrance" (Huyssen 249) in the traditional forms of collective and interactive narratives is being replaced by instant deliveries of market-oriented sponsored programmes that hardly provide any scope of remembering and contemplating on the issues related to the history/ancestry of a nation. The problem that arises about the "origin" of a minority group remains unsolved as memories, individual or collective, are either buried in the cave of oblivion or repressed. So it is hoped that the project will be most fruitful in recollecting the African American ancestral past, remaking it and then reconstructing a history that can counter "the

construction of a history and a context for whites by positing history-lessness and context-lessness for blacks" (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 53). Morrison says enthusiastically that the project will bring her work "full circle" (qtd. in Denard 3).

In her interviews, essays and many other non-fictional writings, Morrison has been eloquent about the art of her narrative, and what role she performs as an "African American and a woman writer" in a "genderized, sexualized and wholly racialized world" (*Playing* 4). A regular idea, noticeable in Toni Morrison's statements on African American fiction, is its inexplicable relationship to black culture. She believes that the loss of "classical, mythological, archetypal stories" and the appropriation of traditional black music by the dominant culture and its commercial force necessitate the development of a fictive discourse to fill up the contemporary cultural void. She argues for the significance of black fiction:

> For a long time, the art form that was healing for Black people was music. That music is no longer exclusively ours; we don't have exclusive rights to it. Other people sing it and play it; it is the mode of contemporary music everywhere. So another form has to take that place, and it seems to me that the novel is needed by African-

> Americans now in a way that it was not needed before--and it is following along the lines of the function of novels everywhere. . . . But new information has to get out, and there are several ways to do it. One is in the novel. I regard it as a way to accomplish certain very strong functions--one being the one I just described. ("Rootedness" 340)

The foregrounding of African American culture through the inscription of the present and reinscription of the past is what Morrison wants to perform as a Black woman writer. She says that she writes for black people and she calls her work "village literature." Her fiction is "for the village, for the tribe," and it is through her novels that she wants to identify those things in the past that are useful and . . . ought to give nourishment" (Interview with Le Clair 121). About the art of her narrative, Morrison says that she tries to incorporate into her fiction the qualities of both printed and oral literature, which she thinks characterize Black art. Her novels register "discredited knowledge," in which she can, as she says, "blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world" in such a way that neither takes precedence over the other. "It is indicative of the cosmology," says Morrison, "the way in which Black

people looked at the world." She adds, "That kind of knowledge has a very strong place in my work" ("Rootedness" 342). For Morrison, artists are the "truest of historians" ("Behind the Making of *The Black Book* 88) to keep the memory alive for the construction of a better future of her community. It is not by detailing the "historical facts" that she wants to perform her role of a creative historian, but by exploring the "interior" life of her people she likes to reveal a kind of "truth" about her people, particularly that of black women. According to the author, "the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time" ("Rootedness" 345).

The art of Morrison's fictional modelling of black life is "at once difficult and popular." On close scrutiny, these "densely lyrical narrative textures" (Gates and Appiah x-xi) bring out Morrison's insights into her poetics and politics. She desired a kind of criticism prompted by the context of her literature rather than the theories forced upon it, "based on criteria from other paradigms" ("Rootedness" 342). In "Memory, Creation and Writing," Morrison points out that the "discussion of black literature in critical terms is unfailingly sociology and almost never art criticism . . . (386)." She seems to be much careful about not being evaluated merely as a writer

of race and gender, while at the same time she is aware that "[a] criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only "universal" but also "race free" risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist" (*Playing* 12). A powerful catalyst for her work is what Howard Winant calls "the pervasive crisis of race" facing contemporary United States: "a crisis no less severe than those of the past" (qtd. in Grewal 2). The cultural and political meaning of race, its significance in shaping the social structure and its ambivalence seem to be blurring in twentieth-first century US. Lucille P. Fultz notes, "Race was and continues to be a physical and mental space: places set aside on the nation's physical terrain and within the black psyche, a constant reminder to African Americans of their *difference* and *otherness*" (20; emphasis mine). In her fictional reconstruction of blackness Morrison has addressed these "differences" and "otherness" in such a manner that they are not only different from but also seem to be more "real" than their representation by dominant ideologies. As an African American writer, Morrison attempts to "convert a racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home" ("Home" 5). She has a great deal of faith in her power of imagination to make her fiction "true" to the life African-Americans live everyday. Pecola's tragedy calls our attention to such "differences"

that also project the "otherness"/"uniqueness" of black women's daily confrontation with a male-dominated racist society.

The Bluest Eye (1970) explores what it is to be a little black girl in a white world. The author explains to Gloria Naylor, "It wasn't that easy being a little black girl in this country--it was rough. The psychological tricks you have to play in order to get through--and nobody said how it felt to be that. And you knew better. You knew inside better. You knew you were not the person they were looking at" (Interview with Gloria Naylor 199). The novel is a stinging critique of the hegemonic forces that lead a little black girl to desire a pair of blue eyes at the cost of her sanity. Morrison's narrative strategy in this novel is to dismantle the hegemonic discourses that force a minority group to collude with their oppressor by internalizing an alien culture as "original." While doing so, Morrison is actually foregrounding the distinctiveness of black people, particularly, though not exclusively, of black women's power of withstanding the opposition by creating a space for them in the face of a racist culture. Fultz says, "Aunt Jimmy's deathbed becomes the site of memory and loss--a moment for recollection and release" (51). The narrative voice registers the strength and perseverance of black women:

> Then they were old. Their bodies honed their odor sour. Squatting in a cane field, . . . they had carried a world on their heads. . . . They were through with lust and lactation, beyond tears and terror. They alone could walk the roads of Mississippi, the lanes of Georgia, the fields of Alabama unmolested. . . . And the lives of these old black women were synthesized in their eyes-a puree of tragedy and humor, wickedness and serenity, truth and fantasy. (*The Bluest Eye* 110)

While rewriting the history of black women, Morrison destabilises the historical position of "knowledge," that determines certain criteria for defining the cultural disposition of a minority group according to its conveniences. Morrison says that for her, as for other writers, "imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purpose of the work, becoming." She is critical of certain discourses, widely accepted and "circulated as 'knowledge'" (*Playing* 4) that determines "Truth." Morrison notes: "Such knowledge assumes that the characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular 'Americanness' that is separate from. . . the overwhelming presence of black people in the United states" (*Playing* 5).

For the formation of such "knowledge" and for making a certain "rationale" for such formulation "an American brand of Africanism emerged." Speaking of "Africanism" in American literature, Morrison discusses how the construction of a certain "Africanist persona" has long been used as a surrogate for meditations on the nature of white social identity (*Playing* 6). By the time black characters enter the mainstream story their race has already become "metaphorical"--"a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological 'race' ever was" (*Playing* 63). "In matters of race," Morrison continues, "silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse" (*Playing* 9). The rewriting project of the author seeks to focus on this "silence and evasion" in order to recognize, to borrow phrases from Foucault, "what effects of power circulate among scientific statements." According to Foucault, "the real political task in a society. . . is to criticize the working of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them" (qtd. in Rabinow 55, 6). Morrison, in her attempt to unmask the "metaphorical and

metaphysical uses of race" in daily discourse, depends on her new story that will provide a "differential knowledge." While rewriting the history of black women, she likes to uncover the effects of the "discursive regime" in order to show how the regimes of power and knowledge are at work in a society in the overall production of meanings. Her project is concerned with what Foucault would call the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" (Foucault "Lecture" 130) by paying attention to "local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchise and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects" ("Lecture" 131-132). Thus Morrison wants to reveal in her fictional truth "the ruptural effects of conflict and struggle" that the functionalist or systematizing thought wants to mask (Foucault "Lecture" 130). The author takes care to explain that this in no way should be understood to imply that Africanism has lost its "ideological utility," but the fact is that the metaphorical/metaphysical necessity it has created over the years "offers in historical, political, and literary discourse a safe route into meditations on morality and ethics" without much reference to the lived condition of the black community (Morrison, *Playing* 64).

In her fictional reconstruction of the history of black women Morrison has interrogated the discursive constitution of black American subjectivity which is a constantly repeated process. In one article Morrison explained how popular culture in America is heavily engaged in "race talk" in order to create "negative appraisals of the native-born black population." American blacks are deliberately used for controlling immigrants, fighting for job or space. She says, "Current attention to immigration has reached levels of panic, not seen since the turn of the century. To whip up this panic, modern race talk must be revised downward into obscurity and nonsense if antiblack hostility is to remain the drug of choice, giving headlines their kick" ("On The Back of Blacks" 4). Thus power works within discourses (read: racial discourse) in which it constitutes and governs individual subjects not as a property and possession of a dominant class but as a strategy, and the effects of the domination associated with power arise from manoeuvres and tactics, and are felt within a "complex strategical situation" and "multiplicity of force relations" (Foucault, qtd. in Smart 77). Morrison's project questions the subject position of black Americans, especially, though not exclusively, that of black women within discourses concerning race, gender and class. In her rewriting process she questions and yet

foregrounds the subjectivity of black women and thus destabilizes the traditional identity of her people in general and black women in particular. Thus the author in her rewriting project proposes a new, resistant discourse, a "reverse discourse."

Morrison's novels foreground black suffering and struggle in order to rewrite black "history-as-life-lived" ("Behind" 88). She suggests that the fictional account of the interior lives of her people, particularly of black women, might be more historically "real" than the actual documents, written from the perspective of the dominant culture. Her rewriting project is "re-doing the past" and "throwing it into relief" from its timeless suspension in such a manner that she is almost constantly in the process of "rediscovering the past." Past is very important for Morrison because "it is living history," she tells Bessie W. Jones and Audrey Vinson (Interview with Jones and Vinson 171). The source of this "living history" is her "own recollections" and her "own insights about those recollections" that enable her to recreate/reclaim it in her fiction. As a creative historian, Morrison wants to "rip [the] veil drawn over" the chocked representation of a traditional slave narrative in order to explore the "interior" regions of her people, especially of black women, to reveal "a kind of truth" ("The Site" 110,

115). For Morrison, the difference between fact and fiction is not as much crucial as the distinction between fact and truth because "facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot" ("The Site" 113). Confident of her imaginative power as a writer, she likes to fill up the gaps of choked representation in slave narratives so that the "local/subjugated knowledges" may be accessed. Morrison notes that in order to get into the "interior" region of her people she has to depend largely on her own recollections as well as on others'. But "memories and recollections," as she says, "won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of the imagination can help me." The author explains how she would reconstruct the world of her people in her fiction:

> It's a kind of literary archaeology: on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image--on the remains--in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of truth. By 'image,' of course, I don't mean 'symbol'; I

> simply mean 'picture' and the feelings that accompany the picture. ("The Site" 112)

Through such rewriting Morrison offers her black women a new kind of cultural positioning. They seem to be rewriting their history themselves, a (her)story which is not the history of passive forbearance, but one of dynamism in which they not only meet all challenges and build up resistance but also create their unique individuality within the "circles and circles of sorrow" (*Sula* 174). By telling and retelling their stories and by articulating those "proceedings too terrible to relate" ("The Site" 110), these black women come far away from their "defined" status and redefine themselves. It is not difficult to dismiss Pecola and Violet as troubling characters, but their situation deserves deeper understanding of it. Morrison's representation of black women in their suffering and struggle makes us read their condition, as Fultz observes, "within two life worlds: the real and the imaginative" (49). Morrison articulates the pain of the "broken voices" (qtd. in hooks 146) through their tales, sharing of memories, in such a manner that their pain within that brokenness can be heard. Thus her new history opens up a possibility of subverting the modes of dominance, which further serves to "illuminate and transform the present" (hooks 147). Henderson in her

essay, "Speaking in Tongues," asserts that black women writers encode "oppression as a discursive dilemma" and use "silence as an important element of this code" (24). Morrison has made an attempt to disrupt such "silence" so that her black women's voices do not sink down. Her characters create a space for themselves: they are able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that transform present reality. Sethe's inscription of "Beloved" on her daughter's grave, at the cost of her "ten minutes," seems to shape the silence at the heart of the history of slavery. The seven-lettered word "Beloved" is the last proof not only of Sethe's motherly love but also of her spirit, which haunts the readers long after the reading is over.

Morrison's position as a creative historian may sound problematical to a group of postmodernists who question the authenticity of historical facts. John N. Duvall notes, "For Jameson, postmodern narrative is ahistorical, playing with pastiches and aesthetic forms and thus producing a degraded historicism while for Hutcheon postmodern novels remain historical by problematizing history through parody and thus retaining their potential to cultural critique" ("Troping History" 1). Jameson views the contemporary moment with its material production of pastiched images as devoid of history, which encourages a breakdown of the

temporality necessary to focus on the subject and "make it a space of praxis" (*Postmodernism* 27). Countering such controversial stance, Linda Hutcheon, in her two studies on "historiographic metafiction," has suggested that much of postmodern fiction is strongly invested in history in revising our sense of what history means and what it can accomplish (qtd. in Davis, K. C. 75). Morrison's rewriting project draws our attention to its problematic status since it addresses disputes on fictionality of history, authenticity of fictional/representational "truth," blurring of past and present, grand historical metanarratives and the like. In both her fictional and nonfictional writings Morrison has put in opinions and agendas that seem to agree with the concerns of both theoretical camps of postmodernism but her relationship to this discourse is affected by her position as a black woman writer, committed to write "black-topic texts" in order to pass on agency to her black readers ("Living" 11). Black feminists have often dismissed postmodernism's questioning of foundationalism/essentialism as being incompatible with their socio political criticism (Fraser and Nicholson 20-21). Morrison herself acknowledges such rift; however, her novels seem to present a hybrid cultural work, a dual process that socialist feminist Donna Haraway calls for. Morrison's novels, particularly *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise*,

add a fresh voice to the controversial issues of postmodern history and we should not forget that history has not been over for African Americans, who are still struggling to write their genealogies. K. C. Davis in her thought provoking essay "Postmodern Blackness" has noted, "A rigid demarcation between postmodern texts and African American texts merely perpetuates a false dichotomy of academic theory and social protest, ignoring that they emerged in response to a similar set of lived conditions" (77).

As a novelist, Morrison seeks to be loyal to the textual representation of the past, yet she questions its authenticity because history is accessible through discourses (which are always shifting) and dominated by those who have control over textual production. Being aware that historical knowledge is available through representation, the author foregrounds her fictions to confront "historical truths" and establish her "fictional truth." She demystifies master historical narratives and attempts to raise a "true" history of her people by her fictional reconstruction. Morrison deconstructs "official history" while reconstructing her own by tapping the well of African American "presence." Past/ historical knowledge (for African Americans) is already encoded in discourse, inscribed in social and cultural practices. Foucault has also argued that it is irregularities that define discourse

and its interdiscursive network in culture. Morrison's position as an "African American" and a "woman" writer as well as a "creative historian" makes the historical contexts important, out of which she writes and which have usually been ignored in traditional literary studies. Her fictional rewriting seems to share a Foucauldian urge to unmask the "pretended" continuities of African American discourse that have been taken for granted by the mainstream culture. And she does so first by using and then by abusing those very continuities in her fictions. Morrison's narratives attempt to approximate "true" history while remaining aware of the limit of "truth" of any historical metanarrative. Thus Morrison's novels bear, as Anthony Hilfer writes, a "both-and" (91) dialectical, indeterminate character, and it is this "doubleness" which, for Hutcheon is, distinctly postmodern (qtd. in Davis, K. C. 78). Back in 1974, Morrison expressed concerns that would be echoed by Jameson, a concern that real history was being replaced by historicism--the textualizing of time as a mere representation, as a simulacrum. But later she acknowledges that all history is imagined and that all knowledge of the past is derived from representation. Her novels offer a different theory of "postmodern history" than does Jameson. Instead of being the playful tricks of pastiches or exhibiting historical "depthlessness"

(Jameson, *New Left Review* 58), Morrison's novels rather aim to be "authentic" because they attempt to reconstruct a stable sense of self for her characters, particularly of black women. Race signifies more in her novels than Hutcheon locates as the politics of postmodernism in Morrison's novels. Hutcheon sees indeterminacies and deconstructive motif in Morrison as typically postmodern but she seems to ignore agency and the subversive political content in Morrison's as well as in other African American writers' novels (qtd. in Davis, K. C. 87).

As an artist the author has full confidence in her power of representation to determine our perception of reality. In her interview with Gloria Naylor, Morrison explains how she reclaimed the dead child of Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave woman about whom she read in a newspaper clipping. She says, "bit by bit I had been rescuing her from the grave of time and inattention. Her fingernails might be in the first book; face and legs, perhaps, the second time. Little by little bringing her back into living life. So that now she comes running when called . . . she is here now, alive" (193). In her re-representation of the history of black women Morrison situates a new and better "her-story" that would empower her people for forging anew their issues. Such a stance aligns itself not just with feminist/womanist discourses

but contributes largely to the African Americanist social protest. By collating materials for her new (her)stories from the traces of the past contained in folklores, narratives, myths, memories, official histories, photographs, slave narratives and the like, Morrison records everyday lives of the "disremembered and unaccounted for" (*Beloved* 274) and reshapes/reinterprets the past in a different manner so as to affect the contemporary world of "real." The readers of *Beloved* get confused in the scene where Paul D "discovers" the newspaper's representation of Sethe's face as being not her face: "This ain't her mouth. I know her mouth and this ain't it" (156). Also Morrison's choice of two epigraphs in this novel calls our attention to the reality/representation dialectic. This is how Morrison focuses on the vast gap between "reality" and reproduction/representation. It is through her fictional account that she seeks to recreate the everyday lives of former slaves that may appear "true" to life. Though Morrison attempts by her story telling to fill up the gaps of "proceedings too terrible to relate," the gaps can not be totally bridged. In *Beloved* both the author and Denver, Sethe's daughter, seem to weave a porous net by their story telling and let many unspeakable and mysterious bits of past escape. The author thinks that her representational

"truth" would bring healing for her people while she admits of the limitations of representation. Hutcheon finds this dual response to narration as postmodern: "Simultaneous desire for and suspicion of such representations are both part of the postmodern contradictory response to emplotment" (*Politics* 68). The art of Morrison's fictional reconstruction acts 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 and agency, of keeping the past alive in order to envision a better future for her people. The goal of her fictional "truth" is not 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 live a "livable life" in the present and future (198).

In her project of "literary archaeology" (Morrison, "The Site" 120) Morrison gives the past a different reading to represent black American experience as it has emerged in terms of multileveled and differential struggle over meaning and subjectivity since slavery. On May 29, 1997 Morrison, at a well-attended lecture in Rockefeller Chappell, expressed her concern for the "future of the past": "What future might the past have if the boundaries of humanist disciplines were challenged and penetrated?"

The significance of the question was made more emphatic by the following iconoclastic question: "Does our past have a future if moribund disciplines yearning for immortality have their way?" She suggests that it is the responsibility of fiction writers to undermine the persistence of racial difference within an imaginary space that gives not just expression but credibility to those experiences because race is almost an "unmitigated force." With the metaphor of a "lock and key" Morrison explains how she writes her fiction. It is "finding words that turn locks" and her fictional excursions into the realmless realm of difference are enormously "instructive and exciting" (qtd. in O'Neil 2). Henry Louis Gates jr. has also pointed out "how attitudes towards racial differences generate and structure literary texts" and there is no denying the fact, as Gates further observes, that race is both a "persistent" and "implicit" presence ("Writing" 15). Morrison herself has acknowledged the inescapability of race as a category of literary critique. She is aware of the fact that race is a powerful image, layered with many preconceptions and prejudices. In her fictional rewriting Morrison wants to offer a new and different interpretation of race discourse that brings out suppressed realms of social experience, "engages rather than suppresses difference," and which aims to focus on ". . .

a more diverse conception of ethnicity" (Hall 29). In her desire to represent African Americans not as an invisible entity but as an active presence that shapes the choices, language and culture of America, Morrison, in her rewriting project has dismantled the appendages of racial discourse and posited a different cultural disposition for her racialized subjects. *Tar Baby* (1981), Morrison's fourth novel, exposes the struggle over the cultural definitions and identifications in a postmodern world, faced by Jadine, an educated, middle class black woman. The scene of the Christmas dinner that appears to be an occasion for "de-hierarchizing" (Fultz 43) race, class and gender demarcations is shattered by an explosion of accusations and revelations. With Son's suggestive remarks later in the novel, "white folks and black folks should not sit down and eat together. . . . They should work together sometimes, but they should not eat together or live together or sleep together."(210)--the author seems to uncover the fact that it will take more than an occasional dinner to overcome the age-long prejudices and preconceptions that racial discourses are overloaded with. For Morrison, "[r]acism cannot produce knowledge. It can only regard itself over and over again. It is an empty power" (qtd. in O'Neil 3). In reference to this point comes to mind the author's delineation of the birth

scene (Sethe's delivery of Denver) in *Beloved* (1997). The scene describes two women--one white and another black, who are of the same age and share the same fugitive status. At first they do not have any language to explain their situation other than the predictable, racist language. The white calls the other "nigger." Later the child is delivered with the help of Amy, the white fugitive. The scene ends with the image of these two women, completely alone in the wood, tearing rags off their bodies and winding them around the new born. There is an implied sense of gratitude without a tinge of sentimentality and the placement of the white hand on the black body signals a revision of the existing cultural models.

An instructive parallel to such complex issues of race, Morrison maintains, "is the centuries-long, hysterical blindness to feminist discourse and the way in which women and women's issues were read (or unread)" (*Playing* 14). But the author's feminism partakes of the black cultural resistance to white feminism. She refers to the conflictual power relationship between white and coloured women in several of her works. "Black women have nothing to fall back on", she notes, "not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything" ("What the Black Woman Thinks about Women's Lib?" 14). The histories of black and white women are different, and therefore they

have different agendas. While a feminist point of view is clearly evident in Morrison's work, it is always contextual and relational, articulated with her utmost concern for class and community. With *Sula* (1998) we enter into a fictional world deliberately inverted to reveal a complex reality that positions black women beyond the boundaries of conventional social standards. Though concerned with the history of a segregated community, the novel mourns the cultural death, "the social death of the female self" (Grewal 43). While chronicling the history of the Bottom, *Sula* reveals the bitter truth that if collective marginalization brings about a group's cohesiveness, it also makes the group critical of radical deviation from its norms, especially when such deviation is made by the women of the society. Sula's refusal to play a stereotype creates the portrait of a young woman suffering and fighting for the right to choose her own life: "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (92). Sula, "a woman of force," cannot create turmoil in the community's self-complacent outlook on life (Morrison, Interview with Betty Jean Parker 63). The early and unexpected death of Sula uncovers the reality that women's causes, especially black women's, remain under the veil not only because of the oppression by white males but also because of the cultural politics of black males. The

tension between Sula's autonomy and the restrictive community is expressive of "the counterpressure exerted by black nationalist ideology on a feminist articulation of black femininity" (Gates jr., 20). While critiquing the historic erasure of feminist concerns by the politics of nationalism, the novel does not, however, replicate the errors of nationalism by advocating the priority of feminism over other concerns. The feminist concern in *Sula* includes the collective concerns, the dissipated desires and aspirations both at individual and collective levels. On this issue Morrison refers to Toni Cade Bambara in her essay, "City Limits, Village Value," when she talks about anti-urbanism in black fiction: "A devotion to self assertion can be a devotion to discovering distinctive ways of expressing community values, social purpose, mutual regard or . . . affirming a collective experience"(38). In Sula's "unusualness"/ "experimental life" Morrison has depicted an idea of constructive evil that is needed when a sense of dislocation takes place in a community. It is because of her radical departure from the law of the Bottom community that Sula is identified as a total evil. Her outcast role seems to have generated a moral standard for other people in the community. Perceived as an evil, she serves to make other people appear relatively good. Teapot's mamma, once an "indifferent mother," suddenly

becomes a devoted mother when she can blame Sula for hurting her son (*Sula* 113). Being a personification of evil, Sula relieves others of the burden of their evil. The narrative voice says, "Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. . . . 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" (117-118). Her death brings a "restless irritability" among the people of Bottom who expected that a brighter day would dawn now that Sula was dead. But there was something wrong: "A falling away, a dislocation was taking place" (153). For most of their lives these people failed to realize that what was there was not really their own, but it could have been theirs if they had been there. It was Sula who had occupied these "absences" (McKee 40) and maintained cohesiveness for the community of Bottom. Morrison, in her fictional representation, has subverted the conception of a rebellious heroine in order to create a new black female subjectivity that would stimulate a static community into its renewal.

For Morrison, as for other contemporary African American women writers including Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gloria Naylor, to name a few, gender is not separate from racial identity. Both race and gender inform

Morrison's novels; for the author, being both black and female, seems to have a sort of privileged access to some special knowledge of that particular world, the world/cosmos of black people. She writes what her imagination provokes her to do--drawing on the culture of black people and on the sensibility of black women. But she does not write women's literature with an absolute focus on gender. However, the feminist discourse in her novels is always relational and contextual. She celebrates "otherness" but also resists the evaluation of her art as belonging to the category of "artistic tribalism" and "the cult of otherness" (qtd. in Rigney 2). In her interview with Rosemarie K. Lester, Morrison notes:

> I am valuable as a writer because I am a woman; because women, it seems to me, have some special knowledge about certain things. [It comes from] the ways in which they view the world, and from women's imagination. Once it is unruly and let loose, it can bring things to the surface that men--trained to be men in a certain way--have difficulty getting access to, although I can think immediately of several exceptions to that. I don't dislike the writing of women who write for women and about women exclusively, because some of it is quite powerful and quite beautiful.

> I just don't do it myself because it is a narrowing. It's like putting blinders on. When I write I want to feel as though all things are available to me. (54)

The black women in Morrison's work demand a special critical attention. Morrison, in her fictional reconstruction of black women's history, depends largely on the projection of their everyday lives that they confront both inward and outward. "Her use of nonrealist modes of characterization" (Dubey 2) seems to unsettle the model of black feminist criticism. She has foregrounded black women's suffering in order to show how they challenge and create their uniqueness through their interracial, intraracial and interpersonal relationships and confrontations. But such projection not only focuses on their predicament but exposes problems faced everyday both by black men and women in their daily encounters. Morrison's characters do not have an identity distinct from the community. Rigney points out that in Morrison's fictions "there can be no isolated ego striving to define itself as separate from community, no matter how tragic or futile the operations of that community might be. Individual characters are inevitably formed by social constructions of both race and gender, and they are inseparable from those origins" (38). Shadrack identified

his selfhood in blackness when he saw himself in toilet water (*Sula* 13). Even Sula's search for self identity eventually turns out to be a force required for the purification of the whole community. For Morrison, community itself is a force, a power to be reckoned with. Terry Otten says: "In all Morrison's novels alienation from community, or the 'village,' invariably leads to dire consequences, and the reassertion of community is necessary for the recovery of order or wholeness" (93). Unlike Alice Walker's ideological disposition, "committed to [the] survival and wholeness of [the] entire people, male and female" (xi), which "oscillates between her identity as a 'Black feminist' or 'woman-of-color' and a generalized feminist position in which race is subordinated" (Evans 13), Morrison's aesthetic seeks betterment of the community through the creation of her experimental black women. This is an investment in agency, in African American social protest for the well being of her people; and for the novelist, "the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time"("Rootedness" 345). The identity of her characters, instead of being whole and unified, is rather "multiple, shared, a form of membership in community" (Rigney 38). Morrison's characters are manifested with physical marks (Sula's birthmark, Eva's

missing leg, Pauline's crippled foot, Pilate's navel-less body, Son's rastafarian dreadlocks, choke-cherry tree scars on Sethe's own back) which are greater clues to a culture and a history than to individual identity. The distinctiveness of their physical and psychological traits metaphorically seems to make them recognizable in the race specific yet "race free" society of America.

In her fiction Morrison has explored the possibility of creating healthy and sustainable man-woman relationship which further envisions a better future for the whole community. Morrison points out in her interview to Anne Koenen, "Contemporary hostility to men is bothersome to me. Not that they are not deserving of criticism and contempt, but I don't want a freedom that depends largely on somebody else being on his knees" (73). Sula and Ajax might have developed a healthy man-woman relationship if Sula had not reduced herself to a stereotype for the time being, standing before "the mirror finger-tracing the laugh lines around her mouth and trying to decide whether she was good-looking or not" (*Sula* 131). Ajax is a strong personality in the sense that he can make his own life himself. He does not treat Sula as an extension of himself and he is not terrorized by her oddness. Rather he feels interested by her unusualness. Sula's "unusualness" is attractive to Ajax and he treats her "as a whole person" (Morrision,

Interview with Stepto 18). In the intercourse scene of Sula and Ajax, Morrison pictures Sula on top of him (Ajax) "like a Georgia pine on its knees" (*Sula* 129). Ajax feels himself much secured instead of feeling subordinated to her. Modifying in her own way the heterosexual norms, Morrison seems to celebrate Ajax's personality as a rebel against the traditional notion of manhood. Pilate's "unusualness" both in her physical appearance (her lack of a naval) and lifestyle (she runs a wine house) may make her appear eccentric by common parameters, but through her "anomalies" Morrison attempts a revision of conventional morality as well as a restoration of cultural treasures which are fast diminishing under the pressure of cultural commodification. As Pilate is able to examine herself and her world, "What do I need to know to stay alive? What is true in the world?"(*Song of Solomon* 148), she can dig out the hidden treasure of African Americans by decoding the language of blues and the stories of flying Africans.

Morrison is equally mindful of the dilemmas many aspirant blacks are facing in their striving for success and recognition. As Grewal has pointed out, "In *Sula*, the community was reproved for failing to appreciate a feminist position; in *Tar Baby*, Jadine is reproved for repudiating the counternationalist project of cultural resistance" (88). In the figure of Jadine, Morrison has shown the

predicament of an educated and privileged black woman, who, in order to avail herself of the benefits of capitalist economy, abandons her blackness and comodifies it in the fashion market of New York and Paris. The novel is not so much about the problem of a black woman in search for her self authenticity as it is about the contemporary problems of African American identity in the relation to the dominant culture and its institutions. The author is no less concerned with the deteriorating relationship between black man and woman in present day America. For her the conflict of genders is "a cultural illness" (Interview with McKay 147). The Kenyan writer /critic Ngugi wa Thiong'o noted in *Decolonising the Mind*,

> The effect of the cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment . . . and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland . . . makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other people's languages rather than their own. . . (3).

Morrison's depiction of the relationships in the plantation household of Valerian streets significantly tells of the

ways imperialism wields its weapon, "the cultural bomb," to construct a self-alienating materialist world-view, which in turn creates class and gender conflicts between black men and black women. By way of adapting to white culture Jadine comes far away from her own people. "*Tar Baby*. . . presents the bitter fruits of assimilation: an ignorance of black history, an alienated and alienating sense of individualism, and the breakdown of any notion of responsibility," writes Grewal. "Education does not allow a politics of return to the people," Grewal continues, "producing instead an educated alienation from the working class" (90). Morrison's bitter criticism of both Jadine and Son in their role of "rescuing" each other hardly escapes the attention of a sensitive reader:

> Each was pulling the other away from the maw of hell. . . . Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be. One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands. Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing? (269)

Neither Son nor Jadine realizes that it is possible for them to be successful economically as well as remain faithful to their rich cultural heritage. In the introductory essay to *Racing Justice, En-gendering Power*,

Morrison notes, "the problem of internalizing the master's tongue is the problem of the rescued. Unlike the problems of survivors, who may be lucky, fated etc., the rescued have the problem of debt. If the rescuer gives you back your life, he shares in that life" (xxv). The benevolent rescuer (Valerian) does not only succeed in eroding the self identity of the rescued (Jadine) but also makes her an active agent to entrap those who are left unrescued. Jadine's euro-centric education, instead of being used for the cause of her people, is used rather as a means of integrating herself into an alien culture. Though Son does not want to succumb to white hegemonic ideals of commodity consumption, his romantic idealization of black womanhood cannot escape the authorial contempt. Through Jadine and Son Morrison wants to make her readers aware that neither the self-alienating cultural view of Jadine nor Son's provincial, nostalgic and romantic sensibilities can be adequate for "real" African American experience. Considering the complexity of the contemporary world, Morrison thinks that it is neither proper to "stay right where we are" nor "pretend that there was no past;" for her, "[t]he ideal situation is to take from the past and apply it to the future, which does not mean improving the past or tomorrow. It means selecting from it" (Interview with Ruas 112).

Because Morrison began writing in the sixties, she was greatly affected by the turbulence that characterized the decade. She felt uneasy about the losing of roots, caused--for example--by the mass migration of black people. Referring to the attitude of blacks in the late fifties and early sixties Morrison says, ". . . in the legitimate and necessary drive for better jobs and housing, we abandoned the past and a lot of truth and sustenance that went with it . . . . In trying to cure the cancer of slavery and its consequences, some healthy as well as malignant cells were destroyed. . ." ("Rediscovering Black History" 14). In her fictional reconstruction Morrison wants to retrieve those healthy cells of the past that would contribute to the cultural heritage of African Americans. In order to resist blind imitation of an alienated culture one must acquire the knowledge of black cosmology through a benevolent ancestor, as the author says, because "they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" ("Rootedness" 343). She also says, ". . . if we don't keep in touch with the ancestor that we are, in fact, lost . . . nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection" (344). Pilate is such an ancestor who initiates Milkman into the search for "roots"—

his own, his family's, and his community's too. *Song of Solomon* reassesses the ancestral legacy from Pilate's perspective, a daughter's perspective--so to say, though the protagonist of the novel is a male. Milkman's tutelage under his aunt Pilate does not only turn him toward the past to help him redefine his values but also teaches him to reread/reinterpret the world and understand the true meaning of blackness.

In her new representation of black woman Morrison has destabilized the norms of womanhood. In the interview with Charles Ruas, Morrison says:

> The contemporary woman is eager; her femininity becomes sexuality rather than femininity, because that is perceived as weak. The characteristics they encourage in themselves are more male characteristics, not because she has a fundamental identity crisis, but because she wants to be totally free . . . which includes self-sufficiency and adventurousness. . . . The impetus of the culture is to be feminized, and what one substitutes for femininity is sexuality. (105)

Jadine's character is a site for reconsidering the conception of liberal womanhood in black culture. In the name of equality of sex she is actually celebrating her

outward image of a fashion model; she detests the traditional female world and so rejects her blackness in the name of sexual parity. The woman in yellow dress, women hanging from trees or the women in Eloe appear to her "essentially" feminine and therefore restrictive for her self-exploration as an educated woman. But for the author, they are the epitome of "real" and "complete individuals" who have not become something for somebody else because they are already what they are. These ancestral figures represent group consciousness, history, and they are the "transmitters of culture and the inventors of language" Rigney 45) whose relationship to the characters are "benevolent, instructive and protective . . . [and who] provide a certain kind of wisdom" (qtd. in McKay, "Introduction" 2). Morrison has never discouraged Jadine's education or her adventurous spirit, nor has she condemned Sula's experiments with life; but they must be "both safe harbor and ship," as Morrison says in her interview with Claudia Tate (161). Morrison seems to have imagined an "ideal" black woman's picture in the amalgamation of whatever is unique in the characters of both Sula and Nel. An "ideal black woman" for the author must be committed to both her domestic and communal responsibilities (like Nel) and to her own drive to make her "own" space (like Sula). In her interview with Denard, Morrison says, "There's a

certain type of Black female adventurer that has nothing to do with going to war--or the big male type adventures. In order to function at the front lines you have to break rules, cross boundaries." But she must fulfil the expectations of the small community to which she belongs. Morrison adds, ". . . an ideal person--would have put those two expectations together, but I don't know who those people are. I don't know people who can be a success in the fashion world in Paris and come back and be comfortable in their small community. I'm sure they exist" ("Blacks, Modernism, and the American South" 5). The character of Pilate seems to be an image of "true" black womanhood. She knows how to nurture and sustain things. She is the symbol of both freedom and rootedness ("origin" of blackness), who serves as a spiritual guide for Milkman. It is Pilate who teaches him the art of flying and finding/knowing names. In his journey from ignorance/stupidity to epiphany Milkman discovers the original names of his ancestors that are buried beneath their family name, "Dead," as recorded in the white agents' register book. By going through the regenerative process of self-discovery, Milkman now learns how he can commit himself to the needs of his community. Pilate, his aunt, exemplifies the combination of both self-recreation and responsibility, which Milkman realizes at her death: "without ever leaving the ground, she could fly"

(*Song of Solomon* 336). Though Milkman initially starts his journey to find out gold, buried with the white man his father had killed, later this journey is transformed into a spiritual quest for his ancestral past. This is how he learns the lesson of resistance which consists in not succumbing helplessly to "rootless consciousness" (Jung 157). It is Pilate who guides him all along, and "Milkman followed in her tracks" (*Song of Solomon* 258).

Morrison wants to accomplish certain functions through her novels. There must be "something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe" (Morrison, "Rootedness" 341). She has, for example, portrayed the friendship between Sula and Nel in such a manner that it offers quite a different outlook on female bonding--a kind of sharing and identification in the face of all "differences." In her interview with McKay Morrison says: ". . . friendship between women is not a suitable topic for a book . . . . But I have made women the focal point of books in order to find out what women's friendships are really all about" (154). The friendship between Sula and Nel was formed on the basis of a common self, a construction of identity in relationship. The

stability of that relationship is at stake when Sula slept with Jude. The author, by inverting the notion of fidelity in friendship through Sula's betrayal, shows "how violent violence is" (Morrison, Interview with Nellie McKay 146) and how things crumble if people do not share theirs and remain loyal to each others' possession. Sula had realized long before Nel came to know that "a lover was not a comrade and could never be--for a woman" (*Sula* 121). The novel ends with Nel's belated recognition, "We was girls together" (174).

Morrison is a writer with a firm grasp of the lived dynamics of class experience, a subject that has received less critical attention from feminist scholars than the issue of gender. Her novels may be read as anti-Bildung project that subverts the dominant middle class ideology. Walter Rodney defuses the myth that racism is the initial cause of the enslavement of African people, thereby effectively repudiating the argument that racism explains the oppression even today. Eric Williams also points out that slavery had everything to do with "the cheapness of labor," and racial differences only made it easier to justify/rationalize slavery. As race should not be underplayed as a factor in the exploitation of African Americans, it should not be overemphasized to conceal or distort class conflict. "Diversity" is now being used as a

strong cultural weapon of power tycoons to lessen racial and ethnic conflict. In an article, "Diversity May Not Be the Answer," published first in *Los Angels Time*, Gregory Rodriguez has made a thoughtful analysis of political scientist Robert Putnam's observations that "Diversity is turning us into a nation of turtles, hunkered down with our heads in our shells." While doing so, Rodriguez quotes Putnam at length:

> ". . . residents of diverse communities 'tend to withdraw from collective life, to distrust their neighbors, regardless of the color of their skin, to withdraw even from close friends, to expect the worst from their community and its leaders, to volunteer less, give less to charity and work on community projects less often, to register to vote less' and to spend more time sitting in front of the television." (*Kathmandu Post* 24 Aug 2007)

So it is not just by celebrating and promoting "diversity" that it is possible to sell the idea that America is a race free, class free society. Morrison, in her interview with Bonnie Angelo, remarked, ". . . black people have always been used as a buffer in this country between powers to prevent class war, to prevent other kinds of real conflagrations" (255). By mid-twentieth century a sizable

working class and a small middle class of blacks had emerged, and these new classes began to seek their class interests, finally bringing about civil rights reforms. But the benefits won over remained confined only to those two classes of the black community and did not come down to the underclass. Ironically, this in turn helped the dominant upper class whites highlight the idea that race was no longer a cause for inequality but lack of marketable skills. In fact race and class are inextricably linked in a racist-capitalist power structure that also has its impact on the issue of gender. Gender is a product of human thought and culture, a social construction that makes biological males and females internalize a pattern of human behaviour. *The Bluest Eye* best explores the collusion of race, class and gender. Unaware of the combined forces which mystify feminine beauty and make black women its prey, Pauline becomes a consenting victim of the existing power culture by surrendering the best of herself, her home and her children. In *Song of Solomon* Macon Dead is the representative of the upper middleclass blacks with his sole object of owning things and gaining in material prosperity. His obsession with money and status affects his relationship with his wife and daughters. His creed is juxtaposed with Pilate's lack of ownership of anything or anyone except her own "name," enriched by the wealth of her

familial history as well as that of her people. The power and wonder in the story of flying Africans that the novel emphasizes is undercut by the question Sweet puts to Milkman, "Who'd he leave behind?" (332). Grewal notes that the question is "a reminder of the burdens black women had to endure alone because men, preoccupied with their own escape, could not or would not shoulder them" (68).

For Morrison, as for many other black writers, race, class and gender make up the "triple jeopardy" that the black woman finds herself caught in. In her novels she exposes the damage that the racist-sexist-classist oppression, both inside and outside of the ethnic group, has done to black women. Following the War coupled with the Great Depression, many black men could not find jobs on racial grounds and the black women had to take the role of "bread-winner" for their families. Black men took it as an insult to their pride, which corroded their bond with their women and eventually resulted in sexual exploitation. Black men not only saw their women as wanton creatures but also accepted the converse white male myth around the black woman as an Amazonic superwoman--strong, uncomplaining, and all-accepting. The situation is still more complex. Phyllis Palmer points out in her article, "White Women/ Black Women: The Dualism of Female Identity and Experience in the United States," that white feminists were no less

attracted to the myth. The strong black female figure corresponds neatly with the image of the "black mammy," disguising the fact, as Barbara Smith argues, that "the black women have been recipients of the lowest pay, the worst poverty, the least access to child care and the most frequent victims of all kinds of violence, including battering, rape and involuntary sterilization." They were seen as an enemy not only by their men but also by white women for "robbing" them of their men. Smith says, "An ability to cope under the worse conditions is not liberation, although our spiritual capacities have often made it look like a life" ("Some Home Truths" 13-14). But, for Morrison, political feminism cannot be the answer to the wretched condition of black women; a different strategy must be adopted for healing their wounds. The qualities that Morrison rediscovers in black women through her reconstruction of their history are traditional beauty, strength, resistance and integrity--the unique cultural values that black women have developed in spite of and often because of their oppression.

Linda Myers notes that in the twenty-first century's "digitized," "globalized," and "time compressed" world, with its "political thrust" to make people share in its economy and power, Morrison likes to retrieve the nourishing and sustaining qualities of black art and

culture (par 1) She has also explained to Thomas LeClair that her novels

> should clarify the roles that have become obscured; they ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not; and they ought to give nourishment. . . . There is a confrontation between old values of the tribe and new urban values. It's confusing. There has to be a mode to do what the music did for blacks, what we used to be able to do with each other in private and in that civilization that existed underneath the white civilization. (121)

In order to resist the transformation of black values started by the mass migration, Morrison likes to affirm their cultural heritage and customs with their rich sources in blues, lores, mythologies and folktales. In their blind imitation of the dominant culture middle class blacks have drifted away from the blues tradition. The author has interpreted such "freedom" as cultural deprivation. The "spiritually sustaining world" of Pilate's home (Grewal 6), which is filled up with the resources of black culture and enriched with the blues tradition, is a site of resistance to middle class bourgeois values embodied in the figure of Macon. Macon cannot ignore the hypnotizing effect of the

blues Pilate sings with her daughter and granddaughter; he stands hidden outside of her sister's home because the "melody that Pilate was leading . . . pulled him like a carpet tack under the influence of a magnet"(*Song* 29). *Tar Baby*, in its fictional interpretation, demytholizes the western version of the plantation story of the Tar Baby and redeploys it in revealing black women's strength and power to come out of the internalized pattern of violence, commodification and bondage. For Morrison, "the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together" (Interview with LeClair 122).

The gravest danger in today's world is, as Morrison says, "the dissolution of public and private memory, the substitution of a faux memory for a more nuanced one." Repeating a phrase from her 1998 lecture, Morrison told the audience during her second public lecture,

> We live 'in the age of spectacle' in which the reigning images promise to mediate between us and the spectacle, but they have forfeited that promise. We're not engaged, we're distanced when confronted with rapid visions of catastrophe. Rather than concretize the nation's identity they damage, alter, distort time, language, the moral imagination and access to knowledge. (*Cornell Chronicle*)

For the author, the "true" identity of her people can be recreated by re-inscribing the African American past through fictional rewriting. The master narrative of the history of slavery avoids it as much as it can by deleting certain records and highlighting others according to its conveniences. The "produced" meanings of the historical/cultural artefacts shaping the identity of those people, fail to focus on their "selves," because the way the master narrative "naturalizes" them as components of their grand design writes them off as "subjects" with their claim to "themselves." Morrison's rewriting project aims to reclaim the ownership of the selves of her people by focussing on their interior lives as they live(d) everyday, thus denaturalizing the master narratives with its deterministic closure. In *Beloved*, Morrison takes stock of the slave past and offers a new story/her story of a slave mother, that deconstructs the stereotype of the black woman as a submissive and subservient breeder of slaves and reconstructs her image as a bold and violent, and, at the same time, a loving and caring mother, who is not subjugated by the dominant power when the security of her children is in question. The fictional world in *Beloved* (the source of the text is an actual event concerning the life of a slave woman named Margaret Garner that Morrison came to know of while editing *The Black Book*) speaks of the

"unspeakable" stories of a slave mother. In this novel Morrison, by her power of imagination, creates "a public space of trauma" (qtd. in Grewal, 14) in which the traumatised past of beleaguered people is charted through an amalgamation of multiple voices for healing the wounds of her race and thus offering a "kind of truth" (Morrison, "The Site" 115).

Beloved deals with the place of history, the authenticity of historical truth or the fictionality of history and memory, in postmodern culture. Walter Clemmon rightly evaluated the masterpiece in *Newsweek*: "The splintered, the piecemeal revelation of the past is one of the technical wonders of Morrison's narrative. We gradually understand that this isn't story telling but the intricate exploration of trauma. . . . I think we have a masterpiece on our hands here. . . (David 123-24)." Remembrance of slavery, for Morrison, is "national amnesia" (Interview with Bonnie Angelo 257); people, black or white, hardly want to remember it. It is in her rewriting project that Morrison likes to make the horror of slavery "real" by letting her characters confront their hideous past, but in such a manner that memory does not overpower imagination in a destructive way. Sethe wants to avoid confronting the past: "she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately her brain was devious" (*Beloved* 6)

and it would not allow her to forget though "every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost . . . the hurt was always there--like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left" (58). Thus it becomes very difficult for ex-slaves to remember the horrible past; instead they want to forget it for the purpose of survival. Historically a beleaguered people cannot look backwards; they must keep going to meet the demands of the present. But the past, in spite of being repressed intentionally, can never be effaced totally as it remains latent and occasionally comes up to take its hold on the present. In relation to the people who undergo trauma, Cathy Caruth observes, "it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; the survival itself, in other words, can be a crisis" (*Trauma* 9). In the novel it takes Sethe eighteen years to counter her buried part, and when she finally does she is devoured by it. The ghost child Beloved is Sethe's repressed past and now she "made demands" (*Beloved* 240). Beloved's "eating up" Sethe's life and becoming "swelled up" seems to suggest metaphorically that the sources of information on slavery and its painful experiences lie buried and must be dug out in order to be represented in a new manner. In her new manner of dealing with the history of her people Morrison sticks neither solely to a

teleological historical remembering, nor to a postmodernist forgetting of the past, but to both. The author thinks that both processes are necessary for paving a better way to the future. The ambiguity in the repetition of "It was not a story to pass on" (274) at the end of *Beloved* seems to endorse both remembering and forgetting, since "passing on" bears two meanings: sharing the tale with the future generations and walking on and forgetting the story. For the author, the past must be processed and sometimes be forgotten in order to function in the present and then to "pass on" (proceed) to the future. The ending of the novel, as K. C. Davis observes, is similar to Hutcheon's historiographic matafiction. According to Hutcheon, "the past is not something to be escaped, avoided, or controlled. . . . The past is something with which we must come to terms and such a confrontation involves an acknowledgment of limitation as well as of power (*Politics* 58). Sethe's deliberate way of creating a "timeless present" (*Beloved* 184) in order to "get to the no-time waiting for her" (191) can never be a solution for the demands/complaints of a repressed past. Though she thinks that she has created an idyllic "no time" present in 124, the timeless present must be broken; otherwise she will be strangled as she had almost been in the Clearing Scene, and her history, namely the history of all black women, will be

erased from the cultural memory of African Americans, of America—so to say.

Sethe's "timeless present" in her home from which she likes to escape is echoed in Jameson's discussion of postmodernism. In an interview he summed up the thesis of his book, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* with the remark "time has become a perpetual present and thus spatial" in postmodern culture" (qtd. in Stephanson 46). Jameson regrets the postmodern "spatial" time and argues that it deprives people of a "true" sense of history, of the cause-effect relationship, of "deep phenomenological experience" (*Postmodernism* 134). Morrison's concern for "authentic" history seems to have spurred her for collecting materials for a "true" history of African Americans. K. C. Davis notes that Morrison, in her essay "The Site of Memory," has used "the metaphor of archeological site to refer to memories of the past, as if they were a place that one could visit to mine for bits of history" ("'Postmodern Blackness'" 89). Rather than aspiring for historical accuracy or exhibiting "historical depthlessness," Morrison's works can be read as a "true" record of cultural memories of the ancestral past to which we can have access only through other texts and imagination. By rejecting a modernist diachronic view of history, Morrison's "history" embraces the idea of a more

synchronic, spatial experience of time in order to reconstruct the temporal experiences of her people who were often denied a future and therefore relegated to oblivion. Sethe is "boxed in" time because she cannot construct an ordered/teleological sequence in her life.

Beloved lends a new direction to the postmodern debate on history. Morrison's investment in history is for learning from the lesson of the past but not to be paralyzed by it, for forging an (other) alternative history out of it, by reaping the benefits of both synchronic and diachronic senses of time in order to enlarge our understanding of black women's history. While looking backwards and sharing their tales with each other, the characters never experience time in a linear manner. A journey back from the free present to the slave past, the novel reverses the progressive movement of the slave narrative and thus creates a space which, according to Lawrence Kirmayer, provides "a consensual reality and collective memory through which the fragments of personal memory can be assembled, reconstructed, and displayed with a tacit assumption of validity" (qtd. in Grewal 14). Unlike Fredric Jameson's criticism of "time" being "a perpetual present" and therefore "spatial" in postmodern culture, Morrison's *Beloved* claims to represent an "authentic" account of the history of a slave mother by

using time to explore the interiority of experience. The narrative represents disjointed stories, psyches and memories that must be interwoven to make a single story for an individual as well as to effect collective healing. Morrison's theoretical conception of temporality is best expressed in *Beloved* through the figure of the "wheel," a circle that moves on and on but never reaches out to the centre and the "rememory" process always remains unfinished. Like Sethe's wedding dress that is made by stitching together scraps of clothes, Morrison wants to rewrite the history of slave women by joining the fragments of memories shared by her people. But it is not a total reclamation of the past of her people that Morrison aims at; she rather experiments with the new ways of representing the history of black people, particularly that of the black women. For this purpose, she denaturalises the master historical narrative so that she can raise hers alongside a competing version of African American history. As a creative historian, she reconstructs by deconstructing the grand narratives. In her 1988 interview Morrison said, "One of the things that's important to me is the powerful imaginative way in which we deconstructed and reconstructed reality in order to get through" (Interview with Marsha Darling 252). It is for the purpose of weaving "an interior life of people that

have been reduced to some great lump called slave" (253) that Morrison writes her new story that changes our perception of historical reality.

The "unspeakability" of slavery that has made her people voiceless and thus "absent" in the enlightenment tradition, is a challenge for Morrison, who in her new representation wants to make them powerful by giving them back their own voice. Sethe's raw act of defiance runs counter to the policy of the dominant power that interferes with a mother's choice. Morrison has lent speech to the speechless to express the harrowing pain and anguish of black women because the emotional pain of a slave mother cannot find any articulation in the master's language or in constrained slave narratives. *Beloved* investigates the cost of Sethe's resistance. Her infanticide is registered as a heroic act of resistance that Morrison defines in an interview as a "desperate strategy" (qtd. in White).

Morrison has reconstituted the history of black women by letting them tell their own tales in their own manner, making their claims identifiable and by creating a bond between "black sisters" in order to confront collectively the trauma occasional remembering brings to them. The concept of sisterhood in Morrison's writing, as in other black women's, takes a different turn from the white women's conception of sisterhood. Her fiction is

determined by two modes of domination: racism which is for her an issue of (re)defining the colour of her people in a society, run by white power; and patriarchal oppression, through which black men exercise power to control black women. The projections of her women characters help us evaluate the quality of human relationships under the constraints of historical processes and social relations. Her emphasis on the interiority of her women and her acknowledgement of their desires point to a strategy of countering racist, sexist and classist America, of foregrounding their unique cultural values.

Black sisterhood for the author is healing up each other's wounds by sharing their tales and by passing on the rich cultural heritage of African Americans. *Jazz* lays bare the woes of black women, caused by the traumatic effects of geographical and emotional dislocation. Dorcas's death brought both Violet and Alice closer to each other. As Alice stitches up the torn linen of Violet's coat, she listens to Violet minutely and seems to repair her own tattered self. The narrative voice says, "By this time the women had become so easy with each other talk wasn't always necessary" (*Jazz* 112). Thanks to her growing sense of sisterhood, Violet finds out her "me" inside; Alice is no longer scared of Violet, whom she categorises as one of the women "with knives" (*Jazz* 85) Joe is no

longer stuck in the tracks and trails of "faint hoof marks" (130); Felice is not anybody's "alibi or hammer or toy" (222). By the end of the novel the wounded triad of Joe-Violet-Dorcas is replaced by the healing triad of Joe-Violet-Felice. Thus Morrison's rewriting project, by giving voice to the voiceless, seems to demonstrate agency for African American social protest. Her representation of the history of black women thus empowers the "powerless" who recall the "disremembered and unaccounted for" (*Beloved* 274) and "sixty million and more" (v) who died as captives in the Middle Passage and who have never been presented in the canon of American history. Like the ghost child called Beloved, the tragic stories of slavery cannot be forgotten. *Beloved* is the buried frustration of the black people who are racially, sexually and economically marginalized. Morrison has created her stories to make them a "present presence" rather than an "absent presence" due to people's amnesia. In the ending of *Beloved* the narrative suggestion, "This is not a story to pass on" (274), implies not forgetting the past, however unbearable it might be. A people's trauma can be exorcised through remembering and hearing, which does not mean plain forgetting. Like *Beloved*, *Jazz* is also inspired by a real document Morrison had read in Camille Billop's manuscript, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*. Morrison is no less faithful

to the traces of the past but she resists any unitary or determined meaning that a grand narrative of history aims at. In her *Paris Review* interview Morrison said: "It is important not to have a totalizing view. In American literature we (African Americans) have been so totalized--as though there is only version. We are not one indistinguishable block of people who always behave the same way" (Interview with Elissa Schappell 117). The danger of the master narrative is its grand resolution, in which the outcome has been preconceived and the individual players do not have any role unless they contribute to its predetermined resolution. An attempt to expose the wounds inflicted on black women as well as to "right" their history, the narrative voice in *Jazz* creates a space for agency so that the "Wilds" would not remain speechless any longer. The novel ends with this readerly/writerly desire: "Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now" (229). The speaking voice is an appeal to the readers to lay hands on the past so that a new interpretation can be accomplished by the joint venture of the reader and the writer.

In this manner Morrison has celebrated the traditional beauty, strength, resistance and integrity that black women possess or have developed in spite of and often because of

their oppression. "There is no need to be nostalgic about the good and old days because they were not," Morrison warns, "but to recognize and rescue those qualities . . . that was so much a part of our past and so useful to us and the generations of blacks growing up" ("Rediscovering" 16).